

THE CORNELIUS ARMS

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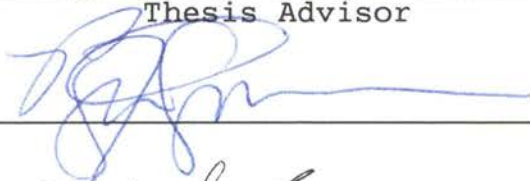
THE CORNELIUS ARMS

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## CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

### The Genre Which Is Not One:

#### The Short Story Cycle and The Cornelius Arms

Discussions of genre commonly attend to questions of definition. What is an epic, a romance, a poem, a novel? Aside from length, how does a short-short story differ from a short story, a short story from a novella? Where and how do we mark generic boundaries? How does history redraw those boundaries? The issue of definition has proven especially vexing for the short story cycle, a mode which seems to exist *between* more accepted genres, namely the short story, the short story collection, and the novel. The difficulty in defining the short story cycle is suggested by the many labels critics apply to the mode. Of the four published, book-length studies of the mode, two critics, Forrest L. Ingram and Susan Garland Mann, call it a "short story cycle." Ann R. Morris and Margaret M. Dunn adopt the term "composite novel," while J. Gerald Kennedy prefers "short story sequence." Other terms which critics have offered up include Dallas Lemmon's "rovelle" (a hybrid of *roman* and *novelle*), Joanne V. Creighton's "short story composite," Pleasant Reed's "integrated short-story collection," Joseph Reed's "short story compound," and

Kathryn Etter's "short story volume."

The difficulty in defining the mode implied by this lack of consensus over terminology is further complicated by the figurative language which critics often use to describe it. Forrest L. Ingram compares the short story cycle to tapestries, wheels, and, finally, mobiles: "because the interconnected parts...seem to shift their position with relation to the other parts" (13). Robert M. Luscher talks about bubbles within a "thematic current" (152), Joanne V. Creighton describes Faulkner's Go Down, Moses as "a collage, a pastiche of dissimilar pieces" (85). Such figurative language suggests the challenge to critical discourse in coming to terms with the slippery, ever-shifting nature of the mode--its *betweenness*. Such language seems to say that the short story cycle can approximate something, be *like* something--or a combination of things--but never something definite unto itself.

Despite such thorniness in discussing the short story cycle, critics nonetheless manage to agree on aspects of the mode's general history as well as various formal characteristics. In tracing back to antiquity the impulse to combine separate tales to create a larger effect--a consensus trait of the mode--Susan Garland Mann cites The Odyssey and The Iliad, works which "were originally composed of individual stories sung by different bards and passed on orally from one generation to another" (1). She traces the modern short story cycle back to framed tales such as A

Thousand and One Nights, Boccaccio's The Decameron, and Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales. From the nineteenth century, she establishes the continuity of the mode in works such as Ivan Turgenev's A Sportsman's Sketches (1847-51), George Eliot's Scenes of Clerical Life (1857), and Arthur Conan Doyle's The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes (1892). Yet, after the nineteenth century had brought the coming of age of the novel and the short story, the short story cycle, in the twentieth century, began to achieve its own generic integrity--not through critical attention but rather a proliferation of works in the mode. Hamlin Garland's Main-Traveled Roads (1891) and Sarah Orne Jewett's The Country of the Pointed Firs (1896) anticipate the trend in America. Two works, though, James Joyce's Dubliners (1914) and Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio (1919), are commonly recognized as inaugurating the interest in the short story cycle which has extended throughout the twentieth century.

The increased interest in the short story cycle among Modernist writers (Anderson, Faulkner, Hemingway, Joyce, Kafka, Stein, Toomer, to name a few) stems from the crisis these writers perceived in traditionally stable forms of order and meaning. As Malcolm Bradbury claims, "the shock, the violation of expected continuities, the element of de-creation and crisis, is a crucial element of the style" of Modernist writers (24). In the early twentieth century, Modernist writers worked to break down the inadequate literary forms left over from the nineteenth century while

experimenting with new forms which would allow them to create and sustain meaning into the new century. Out of this project, Ferdinand de Saussure's recasting of the conventional concept of language, from one of representational symbols to one of "sets of relations" or "paradigms" among linguistic signs, provides a model for what Modernist writers were attempting with genre through the short story cycle (Cohen and Shires 12). While individual stories in a cycle contain signs which create their own set of relations, each maintaining a fairly independent narrative structure, each story also functions within a broader set of relations that is the cycle. The processional nature of these paradigms, as they operate with and against one another, resist the kind of static, one-dimensional meaning which Modernists feared in the established, representational forms of the nineteenth-century novel and short story. Robert M. Luscher paraphrases the paradigmatic nature of short story cycle when he explains that "the artist who creates a short story sequence...draws a wide circle which contains a number of smaller ones, introducing another dimension into his geometry. He takes advantage of the fact that [quoting Henry James] 'really, universally, relations stop nowhere'" (154). Meaning in the short story cycle derives as much from the processes in which the mode engages as from the product resulting from those processes.

In addition to the literary tradition of the modern



short story cycle, critics usually agree on several, basic characteristics of the mode. Mann points to the title as the first generic signal, explaining that the title "is used to emphasize that a [short story cycle] is not a miscellany or a 'mere' collection" (14). The title often underscores the work's source of unity, according to Mann, who gives as examples Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio (place), Evan S. Connell's Mrs. Bridge (character), and Russell Baker's Success Stories (theme) (14). Beyond the title, Morris and Dunn outline several additional characteristics of the cycle, beginning with the basic definition of it as "a literary work composed of shorter texts" (8). These shorter texts, or "text-pieces," are "individually complete and autonomous" and, at the same time, "interrelated in a coherent whole" (8, 12). Mann also recognizes this dual quality, referring to it as "simultaneous self-sufficiency and interdependence" (15). According to Ingram, the element which make the short story cycle coherent/interdependent is *pattern*, which is derived from either a static, external structure such as a frame, or from a dynamic, internal structure established through *recurrence* (of narrative technique or thematic presentation) and/or *development* (of chronological action or motifs) (20).

Conceding that the mode is an elusive one, Ingram further defines three types of short story cycles. The "composed cycle," which tends to be the most unified, is conceived by its author as a whole from the very first

story, as with John Steinbeck's Tortilla Flat. The "arranged cycle" is one which the author or editor brought together, after the stories were written separately, with the intention of having the stories illuminate or comment upon one another by juxtaposition or association, as with F. Scott Fitzgerald's Tales of the Jazz Age. Finally, the "completed cycle" is neither strictly composed or arranged; rather, it is begun as independent stories which the author starts to arrange as patterns of unity emerge with each subsequent story. For this type, Ingram cites James Joyce's Dubliners (19). In addition to these categories (which many critics dismiss as far too reliant on authorial intention), a continuum exists for the short story cycle with the novel and the story collection at either pole. Toward the novel end is the most unified cycle, such as Alice Munro's The Beggar's Maid (1979), a *Bildungsroman* which traces the chronological development of a single protagonist across stories resembling chapters. At the least unified, story collection end is J.D. Salinger's Nine Stories (1953), in which the stories are loosely united by "the Zen koan epigraph that prefigures the unresolved mysteries in these finely nuanced tales" (Kennedy, "Introduction" *xiii*).

Of Ingram's three types of short story cycles, The Cornelius Arms falls into the "composed cycle" category. From its outset, the work was conceived as a series of interlinked stories, which, like Tortilla Flat, had setting as the primary unifying element. While the stories in The

Cornelius Arms were composed separately, my intention was always that each story serve the larger purpose of the cycle. The only exception to the original plan is the story "The Cyst," written independently of The Cornelius Arms project. Yet, the fact of its protagonist's residence in a low-rent apartment building in downtown Seattle, along with the story's overall representation of the city (to be discussed later), made its inclusion in the overall work very fitting.

Beyond its status as a composed cycle, The Cornelius Arms shares other common characteristics of the short story cycle mode. The work's title, following Mann's criterion, provides an important generic signal. Like Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio or Baker's Trailer Park, the title emphasizes setting as a central source of unity for the work. Meanwhile, the image of arms is re-enforced by the use of the two-part title story, "The Cornelius Arms," as a frame for the entire cycle.

From the project's inception, I strived, in Mann's terms, for "simultaneous self-sufficiency and interdependence" (15). Each story was written to stand (and to be published) on its own. This is to say that each story should have the kind of integrity typically associated with short fiction: a well-defined time frame, a manageable cast of characters, a limited point of view, dramatic tension and rising conflict, and, finally, a sense of closure. At the same time, I wrote each story conscious of its potential

relation to the other stories. I knew that, for instance, in order to accurately represent Seattle, the cycle would have to include characters from diverse social, racial, and economic backgrounds, so I tried to keep the characters as different from one another as possible. Also, by having characters occasionally move through one another's stories, I tried to weave into each story the means to tie them together once they were gathered. For example, Tom, the protagonist of "Partners," appears at the end of "Rising Moon in the Stairwell." In "Smitty and Dolores," Smitty refers to a woman named Mona, the protagonist of "The Cornelius Arms."

Building upon Ingram's elements of recurrence and development, Morris and Dunn outline five primary principles of organization for the short story cycle: setting, a single protagonist, a collective protagonist, pattern, and storytelling. Any one, or combination, of these principles helps to "establish interconnections" between the stories of a cycle, according to Morris and Dunn (14-16). Of the five, setting figures most prominently in The Cornelius Arms. As geographic location, background color, and thematic orientation, setting has a long tradition within the modern short story cycle, from Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio to Gloria Naylor's The Women of Brewster Place (1983). Because setting can assume a highly complex role in a short story cycle, the term *place*, for its literal as well as figurative connotations, is more applicable. As Morris and Dunn point

out, the emphasis on place in the short story cycle is more than just attention to the physical details of location. Borrowing Wolfgang Iser's term "referential field," they discuss how "setting is not only place but also the *effect* of place" (40). It becomes the manner in which "place and people reflect and define each other"--in other words, how *community* functions (44). In works such as Anderson's and Naylor's, in which each story offers its own central character so that no single character dominates the entire work, community often becomes the protagonist. Notable, contemporary American short story cycles foregrounding community in this manner include Stuart Dybek's The Coast of Chicago (Chicago's southside), Edward P. Jones' Lost in the City (African-American neighborhood of Northwest Washington, DC), Greg Sarris' Grand Avenue (northern California shantytown), Louise Erdrich's Love Medicine (North Dakota Chippewa reservation), Armistead Maupin's Tales of the City (San Francisco's Russian Hill), Russell Banks' Trailer Park (New Hampshire trailer park), Rille Askew's Strange Business (rural Oklahoma town). These works exemplify Kennedy's notion that by "[a]ssembling narratives about diverse characters to form a composite text, such collections curiously resemble the gathering of a group to exchange stories that express its collective identity" ("Semblance of Community" 194). This collective identity becomes synonymous with the sense of community established by people of diverse backgrounds through their association with a

particular place. The stories in The Cornelius Arms-- arranged to avoid clusters of any one type of character by gender, age, or level of eccentricity--rely especially on place to emphasize their communal identity.

Place--as community and as setting, both regional and residential--was a preeminent concern in my writing of The Cornelius Arms. Without sounding like a state tourism brochure (an early workshop critique), I wanted Seattle's diverse neighborhoods and dramatic geographical environs to play an important role in the characters' lives. For this reason, the characters get around the greater Seattle area quite a bit: from the small fishing village of Poulsbo in "Leathers" to the Queen Anne Hill neighborhood in "The President Walks Home," from the view of the Olympic Mountains in "Magnus Opus" to Pioneer Square and the Waterfront in "The Pearl of Puget Sound." In subtle but significant ways, the characters are defined by how they interact with place. Puget Sound and the Olympic Mountains remind Magnus Olafson, in "Magnus Opus," of "the serene *Romsdolsfjord* of his homeland" (129). The skinhead Lloyd, in "Bald Heads and Broken Glass," grows bitter over the gentrification of the Capitol Hill neighborhood which displaced his father's TV repair shop. In "Smitty and Dolores," the two title characters, the oldest Seattle residents in the work, recall with fondness and regret the various neighborhoods where they have lived and worked as they face relocation yet again. And finally, every

character must deal with the immediate conditions, good and bad, of life in the Denny Regard and in particular the Cornelius Arms apartment building.

The shared public spaces of a neighborhood or building --the parks and sidewalks, lobby and hallways--are highly instrumental in creating any community, including the one in The Cornelius Arms. In addition to the public spaces, the institutions, from the convenience store and the corner tavern to the Employment Office and the local soup kitchen, help establish a common ethos among local residents. Both public spaces and institutions combine to provide shared experiences of leisure and commerce, as well as shared spatial and temporal relationships (the walk from the lobby and to the store, the wait for the elevator or bus). R.D. McKenzie points out that the "ecological organization within a community serves as a selective or magnetic force attracting to itself appropriate population elements and repelling incongruous units" (78). He then goes on to observe "appropriate population elements" that belong to the downtown Seattle community, elements which, despite McKenzie's 1925 terminology, still apply today:

the settler type of population, the married couples with children, withdraw from the center of city while the more mobile and less responsible adults herd together in the hotel and apartment regions near the heart of the community... The downtown section and the

valleys, which are usually industrial sites, are populated by a class of people who are not only more mobile but whose mores and attitudes, as tested by voting habits, are more vagrant and radical. (78-9).

Although McKenzie's language sounds somewhat skewed today, exhibiting his own class biases, the demographics to which he refers remain basically the same and are shared by most residents of Cornelius Arms and Denny Regrade. J. Gerald Kennedy sees this kind of population as a common focus of the short story cycle, resulting in a "convocation of misfits, outcasts, and other marginalized types...a cast of loners and losers gathered to create the semblance of community" ("Semblance of Community" 195). All of the short story cycles mentioned above have "marginalized types," to one degree or another, as their central cast of characters.

Attention to such demographics, and the kind of locales signified by them, translates into a distinct concern with urban life in The Cornelius Arms. As America has become an increasingly urban nation, contemporary short story cycles have reflected this development. Stuart Dybek's The Coast of Chicago (1990) and Edward P. Jones' Lost in the City (1992) stand out as examples of story cycles which focus on the city as an "active organism" (Preston and Simpson-Housley 10). Place names figure prominently in both works ("they reached 8th and H streets Northeast, and after they had crossed East Capitol Street, Cassandra pulled over to



ask directions to Anacostia of a young man" [Jones 48]), and so do the historical events ("our neighborhood was proclaimed an Official Blight Area.... Richard J. Daley was mayor then" [Dybek 42]). In both of these works, the city (Washington, DC or Chicago) becomes the protagonist. The manner in which the various characters move through the city defines them, as illustrated by Eddie and Manny's quest, in The Coast of Chicago, to visit a Catholic church in every neighborhood of Chicago during one of their drug and drinking binges.

In many contemporary short story cycles, the different perspectives on the city afforded by the multiple narratives of the mode replace the single, shifting perspective of the "peripetactic" protagonist in many Modernist novels. In such Andrei Bely's Petersburg and Alfred Doblin's Berlin Alexanderplatz, "rambling heroes become readers of the haphazardly juxtaposed signs whose chain makes up the modern metropolis" (Barta 16). The dissolute city becomes an "empty center that oppresses characters by fostering a desire that is never to be filled" (18). By contrast, in Dybek's and Jones's work, although the city poses many threats, a reassuring sense of community emerges from the separate but interlinked stories. The single alienated protagonist is replaced by the community as protagonist, as illustrated by Jones' title, Lost in the City, deriving from a father's admonition to his young daughter to always return to her own neighborhood, where people know her and she'll be

safe. Both Jones' and Dybek's works, about an African-American community and a Polish community respectively, reinforce Kennedy's view that "ethnic and minority sequences often affirm an ongoing sense of community, [whereas] collections portraying main-stream, middle-class life [such as Raymond Carver's Cathedral] typically emphasize the precariousness of local attachments" ("Introduction" xiv).

Although the characters in The Cornelius Arms tend to keep to themselves, avoiding the kind of community activities in which Mona, the tenant organizer, tries to engage them, they nonetheless form a community. They do so through what Vivian Gornick calls "the landscape of marginal encounters" (72). The characters may rarely speak to fellow tenants, and may even go out of their way to avoid one another (as in "Smitty and Dolores"), yet they remain aware of one another's presence in the apartment building. The protagonists of "Leathers" and "Marta," for instance, both acutely self-conscious individuals, can not help but register the scrutiny of the old men who sit every day in the lobby watching who enters and leaves. Throughout the stories, the characters are united as a community simply through their status as Cornelius Arms tenants, people who reside at the same address and who must deal with, at one time or another, building management. Community also derives from the differences The Cornelius Arms characters share. Like the pluralist urban text Paterson by William Carlos Williams, as Kevin R. McNamara interprets it, The

Cornelius Arms, as an urban short story cycle, attempts to have "an understanding of the uses of apparent disorder and a recognition that the often unconscious negotiation of differences is what constitutes an urban polity" (6).

The focus on community in The Cornelius Arms is closely tied into the two principles of organization from Morris and Dunn which involve the protagonist. Morris and Dunn associate the single protagonist principle with works which follow a central character through a rite of passage, whether Qfwfq in Italo Calvino's Cosmicomics or "the narrator-protagonist, whom we take to be Kingston herself" in Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior (56). They define the "collective protagonist" as "either a group that functions as a central character...or an implied central character who functions as a metaphor" (59). To illustrate the former, they cite the tribe in Louise Erdrich's Love Medicine, and for the latter, Ike McClasin in William Faulkner's Go Down, Moses. In The Cornelius Arms, Mona Jabaly comes closest to being the work's central protagonist. Because hers is the title story, as well as the frame story for the entire work--plus the fact that her story establishes important themes throughout for the work--Mona becomes the work's most representative character. Her struggle is a rite of passage, of sorts, although not in the coming-of-age sense Morris and Dunn prefer in their examples. Her name, more than any other character's, comes up most frequently in the other stories, suggesting she is

the building's best known tenant. The work's collective protagonist, on the other hand, is comprised of the tenants themselves. As disparate, isolated, and unorganized as they may be, their collective experience as residents of the Cornelius Arms and citizens of Seattle provides the thematic center for the work. Not unlike the unconnected characters in Joyce's Dubliners, the characters in The Cornelius Arms share the experience of being "trapped by limitations in the environment and in their own personalities" (Mann 31). Collectively, according to Mann, the stories in Dubliners depict "the archetypal Dubliner" (30). Similarly, the stories in The Cornelius Arms depict the archetypal Seattlite, which, according to Seattle's diversity, means characters highly atypical in respect to one another, from the former college professor in "The Cyst" to down-and-out roommates in "Partners."

Additional sources of unity for The Cornelius Arms derive from the recurrence of thematic presentation and narrative technique throughout the stories. The themes do not recur so much from a deliberate effort to infuse the stories with specific meaning (an effort which would result in highly tendentious fiction); rather, they arise from the narrative focus on a specific place at a specific time and the people who inhabit that place and time. In this respect, the work participates in M.M. Bakhtin's notion of the "chronotope," which Michael Holquist defines as "an optic for reading texts as x-rays of the forces at work in

the culture system from which they spring" (425-6). While, as Bakhtin says, "Art and literature are shot through with chronotopic values of varying degree and scope," I have tried to be particularly conscious of such values in writing The Cornelius Arms (243). This means that I have made every effort toward "the weaving of historical and socio-public events together with the personal and even deeply private side of life" in regard to my characters (247). Fair housing, for example, factors significantly into how Mona Jabaly conducts her life in the title story "The Cornelius Arms." It is a theme which the work returns to in "Hybrid," "Rising Moon in the Stairwell," "Smitty and Dolores," and "The Pearl of Puget Sound." Cultural diversity and, by implication, cultural tolerance are themes developed in "Hybrid," "Rising Moon in the Stairwell," "Leathers," "Magnus Opus," "Bald Heads and Broken Glass," and "The Cyst." At least three stories--"The Cornelius Arms," "Smitty and Dolores," and "Bald Heads and Broken Glass"--directly address political issues. Characters in the first two stories must reckon with the city's efforts at "urban renewal," while in "Bald Heads and Broken Glass," skinheads attempt to assassinate Norm Rice, Seattle's mayor from 1988 to 1996. The central character from each story in The Cornelius Arms, as representative of his or her segment of the community, whether the elderly or mentally ill, drug-addicted or gay, immigrant or Native American, brings issues into his or her story concerning that segment of the

community. Since social themes are inevitable in even the most "domestic" fiction (an Ann Beattie story, for instance), social themes take on a more prominent role in a short story cycle, in which community factors so significantly. Bakhtin comprehends this inevitability for prose-fiction in general when he states: "The prose art presumes...a feeling for its participation in historical becoming and in social struggle and hostility, as yet unresolved and still fraught with hostile intentions and accents" (331). This holds particularly true for prose realism, in which, as Erich Auerbach observes about Stendhal's The Red and the Black, "the general historical situation reappears as a total atmosphere which envelopes all" (473). The stories in The Cornelius Arms attempt to achieve this "total atmosphere" of their historical time and place through a vigilant attention to how the private lives of the characters enmesh with the public and historical present.

In order to invest the social themes in The Cornelius Arms with a sense of the personal--and further unify the stories within the cycle--each story (with one exception) is narrated in the limited third-person mode. While maintaining a moderate interpretative distance, this mode offers intimacy with the central characters. It reduces the reader's experiential distance from each point-of-view character and, in turn, helps readers better sympathize with that character. This is not to say that the reader will

approve of each point-of-view character, a result nearly impossible to achieve in a story about a skinhead ("Bald Heads and Broken Glass") or a violent alcoholic ("Partners"). As Wayne C. Booth explains, though, the inside view achieved through a limited and effaced third-person narration transforms the point-of-view character, in effect, into the narrator. This inside view grants the point-of-view character (the ostensible narrator) a degree of unreliability not allowed an obtrusive or omniscient narrator. According to Booth, "the deeper our plunge [into the point-of-view character's consciousness], the more unreliability we will accept without loss of sympathy" (164). For instance, Marta, in the eponymously titled story, is a very confused character in her relations with men. To convey this aspect of her personality, the narrator serves as a mere reflector of her thoughts. When she declines the doughnut shop clerk's offer of another doughnut, doubts flood her mind: "Had she been too impolite? Should she have accepted the second doughnut? Perhaps when he returned she would tell him her name, and maybe where she worked, and ask him what he planned to study at the university. He must be interested in her. Why else would he introduce himself, and tell her those things, and offer her another doughnut?" (45). Through this method of indirect discourse, sympathy arrives not despite her unreliability but because of it. Throughout the stories, this effect helps the reader to understand and care about

the characters no matter how unattractive or reprehensible they may be.

In addition to Morris and Dunn's five principles of organization, another important factor helps to unify the short story cycle. In assessing the role of the reader in bringing a sense of unity to the cycle, Robert M. Luscher states: "Compared to that in other genres...the unity of the short story sequence will ultimately be a looser one, involving us in a more wide-ranging search for patterns of action and meaning--a more cooperative venture between reader and author than less open forms demand" (157). Taking advantage of formal aspects of both the short story and the novel, the story cycle merges the reader's desire for brevity (a quick read, a sudden insight) with the need for continuity (a sense of history, community). Yet, in splicing these two effects, narrative gaps occur. Through these gaps--more expansive than those in the most enigmatic short story or the most decentered novel--readers must negotiate their way. According to Wolfgang Iser, in discussing levels of indeterminacy in all literary texts, "These gaps give the reader a chance to build his own bridges, relating the different aspects of the object which have thus far been revealed to him" (11). Within the short story cycle, associative relationships tend to replace traditional unifying aspects of the novel such as linear chronology or extended plot or character development. Nor does the cycle enjoy the extratextual designation of *short*



*story collection* to exonerate it from expectations of whole-text unity. Rather, the short story cycle invites readers into a more active "free-play of meaning projection" than either of these genres. (Iser 12). As Luscher observes, readers of the short story cycle will accept this invitation because "Our desire for unity and coherence is so great that we often use our literary competencies to integrate apparently unrelated material" (155).

This "unrelated material," in fact, proves essential in establishing the degree of unity which the reader finds in the short story cycle. Iser claims that "The indeterminate sections or gaps of literary texts are in no way to be regarded as a defect; on the contrary, they are a basic element for the aesthetic response" (12). In attempting to define the short story cycle, critics have consistently and erroneously imposed a unity (or determinacy) imperative upon the mode, as if critical legitimacy could only be achieved through evidence of certain unity. With this tendency, though, the dynamic which *disunity* contributes is often overlooked. Short story cycles frequently contain anomalous elements which do not accord with either the work as a whole or any of its constituent parts. Both the vignettes in Hemingway's In Our Time and "Paper Pills" in Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio, for instance, challenge the self-sufficiency criterion agreed upon by the mode's redactors. The dilemma posed by the unrelatedness or inconsistency between parts of a short story cycle is partially reckoned

with by Austin Wright's concept of "recalcitrance." As Wright says, "The notion of formal recalcitrance may rescue formal unity from some of its disadvantages" (115). In other words, recalcitrance--which Wright defines as "simply the resistance offered by the materials to that form as it tries to shape them"--exempts the notion of unity from the critical imperative under which it always seem to labor (116).

The tension created by the form/anti-form dynamic, while active in both the short story and the novel, is particularly strong in the short story cycle. This tension stems from a process of differentiation which results from the Saussurian "sets of relations" at play in the cycle. J. Gerald Kennedy recognizes this process when he states that, within the short story cycle, "signs may be distinguished from other signs both by their tendentious, often self-conscious nature and by their capacity to embody ambiguous, even contradictory meanings" ("Poetics" 20). Every element of the short story cycle, Kennedy seems to say, need not fit precisely with every other element. Beyond the surface elements of unity which Ingram, Mann, and Morris and Dunn observe, a deep narrative structure based on a process of recognizing similarities as well as differences holds the cycle together. From this perspective, the term "unity," in its suggestion of stasis, becomes misleading in discussing the mode. Instead, critics of the short story cycle should settle, as Hemingway did in his assessment of In Our Time in

a letter to Edmund Wilson, for simply "a pretty good unity" (128). As Kennedy claims: "One must concede at last that textual unity, like beauty, lies mainly in the eye of the beholding reader" ("Introduction" ix).

In the manner of most short story cycles, the looseness of The Cornelius Arms invites its own potential inconsistencies. The representation of the character Ellen in the story "The Pearl of Puget Sound" followed by her reappearance in "A Solace of Ripe Plums" offers a good example. No intertextual references exist between the two stories, making her reappearance in "The Solace of Ripe Plums" disorienting. Although Ellen works as the office manager of the Cornelius Arms building in both stories, the circumstances of her life seem considerably different from one story to the next. In "Pearl," she is recently sober, learning anew how to negotiate her world and especially the men in it, all the while staving off a deep-seated habit of self-doubting. In "Plums," on the other hand, she is sure of herself, direct with the man in her life (Scott, the protagonist), and steering clear of past behaviors. To account possibly for this change, the last scene of "Pearl" could suggest Ellen was already developing in this direction; and further, a reader might infer that with the passage of time (implied by the sequence of the stories) she has gained new emotional strength. Otherwise, no clear continuity in regards to her character exists in the two stories. Although her character does not contradict itself,

there is no explicit accounting for the changes in Ellen, the kind of accounting readers might normally expect from a novel.

The relationship between "Pearl" and "Plums" creates a tension in The Cornelius Arms characteristic of the short story cycle in its generic balancing act between the novel and short story collection. Its struggle is between the centripetal and centrifugal forces (one unifying, the other multiplying, stratifying) which Bakhtin identifies in his highly inclusive definition of the novel (270-72). "Any utterance," Bakhtin says, speaking of the nature of discourse, can be exposed "as a contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies in the life of language" (272). On the level of genre, the short story cycle uses these tendencies to advantage: to unify the whole text with its novel tendencies and invite multiplicity with its story collection tendencies. Even though there is no clear accounting for the changes in Ellen, readers will venture their own conjectures simply because, if for no other reason, she is a recurring character.

Several anomalies in respect to narrative technique also arise in The Cornelius Arms. The most subtle appears in "Smitty and Dolores," in which the limited and effaced third-person mode of narration is expanded from a point of view limited to a single character, standard throughout the work, to a two-person point of view. As the title suggests, the point of view in "Smitty and Dolores" belongs to both

title characters, octogenarians who have been married for more than 50 years. The dual point of view allowed me to illustrate the kind of life the two characters have shared through their enduring union. In "Rising Moon in the Stairwell," the split between the effaced third-person narration and the first-person interior monologue is meant to emphasize Kathy's conflict with her immediate environment, having been evicted from her apartment as she has. Since the interior monologue sections are italicized, this story aberrates visually from the others. Technically, it provides a connection to the full first-person narration of "The Cyst." The narrative mode of each of these three stories differs from the limited and effaced third-person narration used consistently in the remaining eleven stories. In choosing to leave these stories as they are rather than rework them to fit the others, I wished to preserve a degree of anomaly in The Cornelius Arms--something to keep readers' attention and activate their "free-play of meaning projection."

Any Resemblance to Persons Living or Dead is Not  
Coincidental: The Story Behind the Stories

The Cornelius Arms has been my attempt to present the city of Seattle during the period from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s. A transplant from New Jersey, I lived in

Seattle for most of the 1980s, residing in an apartment building on which the Cornelius Arms apartments is based, in the neighborhood of downtown Seattle known as the Denny Regrade. This neighborhood covers an area of approximately ten blocks (north/south) by seven blocks (east/west), bordered by the downtown business district to the south and running north to lower Queen Anne Hill. To the west, the Denny Regrade neighborhood both encompasses and ceases with the small area known as Belltown, which runs along First and Second Avenues between Stewart Street and Denny Way, with its seamen's taverns, junk stores, flophouse apartments, which since the '80s have been upscaled to night clubs, vintage clothing boutiques, and condos for the "alternative" crowd. At Western Avenue begins the Waterfront, which, while extended into the bay through the sluicing of Denny Hill in the early part of the century, is now separated from the Denny Regrade by the Alaskan Way Viaduct and the railroad tracks.

Unlike other neighborhoods or sections in Seattle (with the possible exception of little-known Georgetown in South Seattle), the Denny Regrade has a unique combination of the residential, commercial, and industrial. The commercial element consists of small businesses: diners and taverns, a hardware store, a framing shop, mom-&-pop groceries, banks, and several office buildings. Industry is light: small goods manufacturers, printing presses, distribution warehouses. While high-rise condominiums (as depicted on

the television sitcom Frasier) have proliferated in the 1990s, the residential element of the neighborhood in the 1980s was still primarily low- to mid-rent apartment buildings, ranging from the sleaziest flophouse-type buildings (such as the Olympic in "Partners") to the more established and well maintained. Among these old brick buildings (with names like the Wyndham, Castlegate, Virginia, Rivoli, and Claremore) stood the Cornelius. At nine stories, the L-shaped building, at the corner of Blanchard Street and Third Avenue, was the tallest, most massive apartment building in the neighborhood, rising four to six stories higher than any of the other apartment buildings. Its size, as well as its centrality in the neighborhood, made it the heart of the Denny Regrade. It served the most transient and dissolute populations (addicts, prostitutes, criminals) as well as the most staid and established (retirees, manual laborers, shop owners)-- and all types in between. For its location and reputation (somewhat notorious), the Cornelius seemed the site best suited to represent the Denny Regrade. Similarly, because of the centrality and diversity of the neighborhood, the "Regrade" seemed to me to be Seattle's most representative neighborhood.

I intended The Cornelius Arms as a kind of ethnographic study in stories of a building, a neighborhood, and a city-- which is to say, the inhabitants of these. Although fictionalized, with details grafted from other lives or

invented, most of the characters in The Cornelius Arms are based on people I knew--people I would pass in the hallways, speak to on the elevators, squabble with in the front office, drink with in the taverns. The stories aim to capture their lives behind their apartment doors, as well as when they make their way out and about the city.

Unfortunately, there are more characters for whom there are stories than can fit into the work, including one about a oversized man who makes candles, a black man who wins custody of his child, a woman refugee from Vietnam who marries the building manager, and an arsonist from Canada.

In focusing on character and place, I wanted The Cornelius Arms to embody a concept of the city that is best expressed by Robert Park, the Chicago School urbanist, who writes:

"The fact is...that the city is rooted in the habits and customs of the people who inhabit it. The consequence is that the city possesses a moral as well as physical organization, and these two mutually interact in characteristic ways to mold and modify one another" (93).

To achieve this, the stories try to show characters in their day-to-day lives interacting with their urban environment--walking the sidewalks, getting on freeways, boarding buses, going to parks, encountering panhandlers, hanging out on street corners, and so on. Characters are portrayed by how they engage the city, and, in turn, the city is depicted by how it appears to them.

To a considerable extent, I began writing The Cornelius



Arms, in 1992, to keep me close in spirit to Seattle, after having moved to another state three years earlier. Although the setting for the stories was written almost entirely from memory, the details of the characters' lives--their jobs, preoccupations, obsessions--had to be researched, especially if the stories were to obtain the degree of authority I wished for them. The characters of several stories made me venture into areas I would never have approached otherwise. Considerable research went into such desultory subjects as: lepidoptera for "Hybrid," American Indian masks for "Rising Moon in the Stairwell," Norway during WWII for "Magnus Opus," skinheads and white supremacist groups for "Bald Heads and Broken Glass," heroin use for "Partners," and the British writer John Cowper Powys for "The Cyst."

The stories have also undergone five years of revision. Under Dr. Gordon Weaver's instruction, I began to understand that voice is "the single most important formal element of a fiction because it's the most pervasive" (Weaver 5). So in workshops at Oklahoma State, I strived to make the voice consistent in each story, which usually meant eliminating passages in which the narrator interrupted the otherwise effaced narration with suddenly florid prose--usually infatuated descriptions of Seattle scenery. Under Dr. Brian Evenson's instruction, I began to make the prose as lean as possible by working to edit out all verbal excesses. This process often involved casting aside any sentimental attachment I retained toward the characters and setting.

Eventually, I began to submit The Cornelius Arms stories to literary periodicals, and they began to be published.

The literary influences for The Cornelius Arms include all of the modern short story cycles referred to above. Regrettably, there are few novels or short story collections which treat Seattle in the manner I intended. No-No Boy by John Okado (1976), about an American-Japanese man right after WWII, is a great Seattle novel. More recently, The Point by Charles D'Ambrosio (1995) is a collection which includes several of the best short stories about life in Seattle, including "American Bullfrog" about a teenage boy's nighttime romp through the Capitol Hill neighborhood.

In respect to representations of city, though, an important non-literary influence has been the Seattle Cityscape books by the architect Victor Steinbrueck (mentioned in "The Cornelius Arms"). In these two works, Steinbrueck combines drawings of Seattle's many neighborhoods and environs with text which describes and evaluates these areas. Steinbrueck characterizes the Denny Regrade, for instance, as "a mixed-up no man's land of used-car sales and parking lots, motels, and punchcard-facade sterile office buildings... Park and residential development would be ideal here in helping to breathe life into downtown" (38-9). While this kind of stern assessment of Seattle's urban planning enters into The Cornelius Arms, it is always voiced by a character, such as Smitty, in "Smitty and Dolores," who bemoans the dislocation which resulted

from the construction of Interstate 5 through the middle of the city.

More influential than his text, though, have been Steinbrueck's pencil and brush drawings, through which, as he says, he tries "to know better the world around me" (jacketcover). The drawings depict views of the city which an average pedestrian might take in: a busy intersection, a sloping street, a row of houses. Some views include wide horizons with buildings and mountains in the background; others are close-ups of courtyards, market stalls, store fronts. The drawings are detailed yet never forced or overly precise. Foremost, they are personal, suggesting an intimacy with the city, conveying a sense that it is a vitally human, albeit problem-ridden, place. What Steinbrueck achieved through his drawings--"I wanted the citizens to look at their city"--I have tried to accomplish in The Cornelius Arms stories (6).

I also wished to give non-Seattle citizens a view of the city different from the idyllic version often presented in the popular media. Beyond its regional distinctiveness, though, The Cornelius Arms tries to depict the American urban experience in general. Without promoting any particular social positions, the work aims to allow average, middle-class readers to identify with people whose lives they may not ordinarily connect with--and, by means of the short story cycle, to do this through a dynamic, participatory reading experience.

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## HYBRID

Gene took the apartment on the spot. Something about the nine-story, L-shaped, brick building appealed to him. People could live there undisturbed, he thought--no one to interfere with their lives.

Last week his father, who'd immigrated from Korea 23 years ago, forbid Gene to breed butterflies in their home. "What a crazy idea," his father had berated him in Korean. "No, not even in the basement."

So Gene moved out. It was simple as that. He was eighteen, he had a job. Such decisions were his to make.

"Careful there," he told his buddy Al, the same afternoon after signing the lease that morning.

Al bumped the twenty-gallon fish tank against the doorframe as he negotiated it through the Cornelius Arms front entrance. The iron gate of the freight elevator was propped open with a blue milk crate full of books so they could load Gene's belongings. He watched as Al set the tank down, and thought how people were always commenting on what a pair the two of them made: Al, big and bulky, blonde-headed, pink-skinned, with scraggly eyebrows over blue eyes and a tiny goatee on his chin; himself, lithe and tall, especially for a Korean, black-haired, clean-shaven, with

pasty-beige skin, high cheek bones, and flat eyes.

"What's that smell?" Al complained and screwed up his face. The building had an unsavory odor, something between old bacon grease and industrial cleansers.

"It's not so bad upstairs," Gene reassured him, and dropped a bulky, twin-sized futon onto the elevator. "I think that's it. Let's take it up."

They closed the gate and the freight elevator creaked and groaned its way up the elevator shaft. When it reached the sixth floor, Gene propped open the gate and sprinted down to his apartment at the building's southeast corner. He let himself in and right away opened all three windows, allowing a cross-current of air through the empty room. Then he hustled back to help Al.

As they unloaded the elevator and hauled boxes, a lamp, a couple of framed poster, and other assorted junk into the apartment, a man carrying a paint can stepped out of an apartment down the hall and stopped to watch the goings on. His navy blue t-shirt, greyish hair, and weathered-brown face, arms, and hands were speckled with white paint. He put the can down and approached, his head tilted to one side as he scrutinized them. "You two moving in?" he said.

"Just me," Gene answered.

"I see. Just you. So you two are just friends?"

"That's right," Al said. "Just friends."

"I'm the manager."

Gene hefted up the futon. "Good to meet you," he said.

"I'm Gene."

The manager didn't bother to introduce himself. Instead he continued to watch them carefully, until finally he said, "You from China?"

Gene stepped off the elevator and looked the man straight on. "Seattle," he replied. "Northgate. Born and bred." The question didn't surprise Gene. He got a lot of that: What country you from? How long you been here? Do you like it here? And if by odd chance someone believed he could be a U.S. citizen, they guessed he was Chinese or Japanese or even Vietnamese by origin--rarely Korean.

The manager grunted. "Just wondering," he said and pointed to the fish tank. "Are you going to keep fish?"

"Butterflies. Or at least try to."

"Insects?" The manager's eyebrows pressed together. "You aren't serious, are you?" He looked at Gene a moment and added, "'Cause I'll tell you right now, we've got all the bugs we need around this place. And what's more, there're no pets allowed."

Still holding the futon in his arms, Gene stood before the manager. They seemed similar in size and build, around 5'9" and sinewy. The manager was much older, though, probably in his forties. Gene noticed on each of his arms a tattoo: on the left a coiled and hissing cobra with Regiment 36 beneath it, on the right the unfurled stars and stripes of the American flag over a bluish outline of Vietnam.

"I checked with Ellen in the office," Gene said, "and I

guess butterflies don't count as pets. She told me go right ahead."

The manager glared at him, snorted, and said, "Whatever you say." Then he turned away and strutted back to the apartment he'd come out of.

Wishing he'd been less snide, Gene looked over to Al, who was wheeling Gene's mountain bike off the elevator.

"A real darling," was all Al said before stepping on one of the pedals and coasting the bike down the hallway.

Gene's grandfather, whom Gene visited in Taejon when he was fifteen, had also collected butterflies. The old man was a Buddhist, which annoyed Gene's father, who'd joined The Assembly of God church prior to immigrating to America. Gene, for his part, remained indifferent to the family's religious quarrel, or if anything, he admired his grandfather for holding-out, for neither converting nor immigrating. A diminutive, straight-backed man who rarely laughed, but smiled a whole lot, he'd shown Gene where butterflies lay their eggs, and then had shown him the large clear glass bowls in which he bred a dozen *Sericinus Telamon Koreana*, a beautiful mid-sized butterfly with yellow and black wings and inch-long wing tails.

After the family--father, mother, younger sister, and Gene--returned from Taejon to Seattle, Gene went to the library and checked out an armful of books on butterflies.

That same week he began collecting. Yet his father wouldn't let him keep live butterflies, as he wanted to, but insisted he restrict his collection to dead ones, suspended by pins above cardboard in rows of five, which to Gene's mind looked like some tidy diorama of insect torture. Nonetheless, he went ahead and built up his collection and finally, two years later, after winning First Place at the Ingraham High School Science Fair for it, including detailed entomological information on 5x4 index cards, he gave up the hobby, donating his whole collection to the local Wildlife Center. Something about it had become too morbid for him. Then just last year, not long after his father told him that his grandfather in Taejon had died, he once more set his heart on collecting. This time only live butterflies.

One week after moving into his apartment, Gene rode the bus with Al to Discovery Park. Finding butterfly eggs, he told Al, especially on such a warm day and with all the wildflowers and weeds in the huge park, would be a cinch.

The bus let them off just inside the park entrance, and from there they walked the dirt paths that led through stands of cedar, past rhododendrons the size of small houses, to the large open fields where on weekends people flew stunt kites and hang-glided off the sand bluffs that looked out over Puget Sound.

"Okay," Gene said. "We're looking for nettles, hops,

fennel, milkweed, and Queen Anne's lace."

"Milkweed's got the pods with the white gunk oozing out, right?"

"Right," Gene said and handed him a jumbo-sized mayonnaise jar he'd gotten from a restaurant the night before and had scrubbed clean. Air holes were punched in the lid. "And fennel's this thin, reedy plant that smells like licorice. Over there's some Queen Anne's lace...with the bunches of white flowers." He pointed to a cluster of Queen Anne's lace about twenty yards away. "The eggs will be on the underside. Just tear the leaf off and lay it in the jar. Simple as that."

Each with his jar in hand, Gene and Al began wandering through the fields inspecting different plants, checking the underside of leaves, and occasionally tearing off a leaf or stem and placing it in the jar. The sun warmed the loose, sandy ground, while a mild sea breeze with a fresh and pungent scent blew across the field from the Sound. Every now and then Gene looked over the bluffs at a cargo ship out on the bright blue waters and thought what a luxury it was to be hunting butterfly eggs in a park while the rest of the world slaved away at jobs. Fortunately, he didn't have to work again until the next afternoon.

"Butterflies, Al..." he began saying, making his way through some tall heather toward Al's broad shoulders and blonde head, "...are like people. They're metamorphic *and* polymorphic. They go through big changes all at once, and

they change a little all the time. And if they're lucky, a bird doesn't swoop down and eat them."

Al handed over his jar. "How's this?"

Gene examined its contents. "Some of these don't have eggs," he said. "Those must be leaf warts or something." He unscrewed the lid and removed several leaves. "The eggs are kind of conical or roundish," he explained, "usually a soft whitish color," and handed the jar back.

Al tucked the jar under his arm, tipped a cigarette out of a pack of Marlboros, and lit up. "You're not turning into some kind of mad scientist on me, are you?" he said and laughed at this idea. "*Help me. Help me,*" he squeaked out in a tiny voice and began choking on the smoke he exhaled.

"Blow your smoke away from the jar, okay?" Al's kidding around sometimes really ticked him off. Collecting was a hobby, like any other, so why did people have to make such a big deal out of it? Nobody would get sarcastic if he kept goldfish or birds or even snakes for that matter. Something about insects just didn't sit well with people. He'd read The Collector years ago--and it was terrible. Then Silence of the Lambs came out, which was the same idea but worse: lepidopterist-turned-psycho. What was the point?

He waved off Al's joke and headed off across the field to keep looking. A full hour passed before Al began complaining about burrs sticking to his pants' legs and his hay fever acting up. By that time, though, both jars were about a quarter filled with leaves specked with dozens of

butterfly eggs that looked like tiny dew droplets, and Gene was satisfied.

Deciding to take a break and eat the lunch they'd packed, they hiked a cut-back trail down the bluffs to the pebbled beach, sat on a bleached-out piece of driftwood not far from the lighthouse at the end of the rocky spit, and ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, fig newtons, and ripe red cherries. They talked about different bands for a while, new C.D.s they wanted to buy, about the new cafe around the corner from the Cornelius Arms, and then Gene said, "That manager dude...remember him?" and popped a cherry into his mouth. "He's got a real grudge against me." He spit the cherry pit into the water and watched two screeching seagulls vie for it.

Al was using a penknife to carve his initials into the log they sat on. "What makes you think so?"

"Last week, you know, I asked him to fix my bathroom sink because it leaks. But then the whole week passes and nothing happens, so I go down to his apartment to see what's up and he gets all pissed off at me, tells me he's got a whole list of things to do and can't get to me for a while. Then he says--get this--`You're all so good at making things, fix it yourself.'"

"Wooh," Al blurted and reached into the bag for more cherries. "Sounds like the man's got a problem with Asian people."

"Sounds like," Gene said.



Al put his penknife away. "My advice is, Stay clear. Close the bathroom door and let the damn sink leak."

They dropped the topic and finished off the cherries. After skimming stones over the Sound's calm swell for a while and imagining people's faces and animal figures in the driftwood, they gathered up their things and started back up the bluffs and across the fields. When they reached the parking lot, the bus downtown was pulling away and they had to sprint after it, shouting at the driver to stop.

Gene had all he needed within a week. Another twenty gallon tank and two additional ten gallon tanks that he picked up at the Goodwill store, plus several more mayonnaise jars from neighborhood restaurants, crowded the efficiency apartment. As soon as the first eggs hatched in the jars, Gene transferred the hungry larvae to the glass tanks, making sure they had plenty of leafy matter to feed on. He even went out and dug up a few aphids for the carnivorous Harvester caterpillars.

After another two weeks, the larvae began forming the chrysalises in which they would eventually metamorphose into the imago--the broad-winged, sexually mature adult butterfly. Yet to Gene's disappointment, the first chrysalis failed to molt. Days went by during which the hard pupal casing dangled from the small twig propped slantwise in the tank. Gene tapped it to see if the half-formed

butterfly within would react, but nothing happened. It remained half-formed and finally began to soften and rot, at which point he flushed it down the toilet. Since there were already three more fully developed chrysalises, though, he decided not to worry, and to let nature take its course. He had to get to work.

The Mariners had a late afternoon game with the Toronto Bluejays, a team that always drew big crowds, and so as soon as Gene got to Kingdome he was scampering up and down the aisles, a tray slung around his neck, hawking peanuts first and then hot dogs, until his voice nearly went out. The game was a wash out. The Mariners got behind early and never caught up, and by the time the last out was made, half the crowd had already left and Gene was ready to do the same. He cleared his take-in with the cashier and walked down the winding Kingdome ramps. A flush of evening light hung over the city as he hurried across the parking lot, past the two totem poles in Occidental Park, and, at the cast-iron pergola in front of the Pioneer Building, hopped a bus up First Avenue.

When he got back to the Cornelius Arms and reentered his apartment, he flicked the overhead light on and immediately searched the tanks. Where there had earlier hung two chrysalises, there were now two moist-winged Monarchs suspended upside down like bats. Their copper wings opened slowly, then leisurely folded back. A mild, ammoniac odor, barely detectable, emanated from the tank.

He removed the screen lid and instantly one of the butterflies flitted out and landed on the windowsill. The second quickly followed, rising toward the overhead light and perching on the dusty glass cover. Gene hopped onto a chair, rescued it with a small butterfly net before it singed itself, and returned it to the tank. He then went after the other.

"Here *danaus plexippus*," he called to it. "Come to papa."

Before he could scoop it off the windowsill, it wafted up and flew straight back into the tank on its own. After quickly setting the screen back on top, he squatted down to examine the restless butterfly more closely--and just as he suspected, a black spot like a dab of ink marked the male scent organ on its hind wings. The other Monarch, without the spot, was obviously then a female, which meant that with any luck, the two would soon mate.

He straightened up, checked his pockets for a quarter, and, leaving the apartment unlocked, bounded down the stairs to the lobby payphone to call Al with the good news.

By month's end Gene had a small menagerie of sixteen Monarchs, four Black Swallowtails, two Harvesters, and one Regal Fritillary--the Fritillary a rarity so far north. At the Goodwill and Salvation Army stores, as well as garage sales around town, he bought five more tanks, bringing his

total to nine, and with Al's help he constructed two four-foot-square cages from wire screens and molding boards. He also borrowed a space heater from home to help incubate the eggs and chrysalises on overcast days when the temperature dropped. To keep the butterflies fed, he bought potted flowers from the Pike Place Market nursery--geraniums, chrysanthemums, and primroses--and sowed marigold seeds in Dixie cups filled with potting soil.

One day, among all this commotion, Gene welcomed his father, who had finally agreed to visit the apartment five weeks after Gene had moved in. The stern 49-year-old man--several inches shorter than his son and more compact, his straight black hair clipped short while Gene's was tied in a shoulder-length ponytail--inspected with great suspicion the jars, tanks, cages, and plants along the baseboards and on every available surface in the small apartment.

"What's all this?" he addressed Gene, giving up his stilted English for fluent Korean. "You call this a hobby?"

Gene could hardly make sense of his father's rapid-fire pronunciation. Raised to speak Korean at home, he preferred using English since age four when he started school--though admitting such a preference would be to invite swift and certain scorn from his father, who despite his success in America still resisted much of the culture, including the language.

"I don't understand," his father complained, sweeping his arm about the room. "Why?"

Gene had explained his enthusiasm for lepidoptera many times over. It was different. It was science. But it was myth too. He'd explained the intricacies of the butterfly's life system. He'd cited Chuang Tzu, the "Butterfly Philosopher", and quoted Walt Whitman: "Those beautiful, spiritual insects!" He'd even evoked the memory of his grandfather--but nothing convinced the stubborn, bull-dogged man. So he let his father vent.

"You've been accepted to Harvard, Columbia. Do you know how many students wish to go to these universities? I raised my only son with all the advantages. I worked night and day so he can improve himself and be better than the rest. Not so he can lead this aimless, grubby life--A bug man!"

"There's plenty of time for college," Gene said, having picked up the gist of his father's meaning. Despite graduating high school as a National Merit Scholar a year ahead of his classmates, and in total disregard of his father's prompting him from age two to become a surgeon, he couldn't see the point of going to college right now: he was learning plenty on his own.

His father stooped to peer into a tank filled with 20 or so Monarchs. He shook his head and straightened up, facing Gene. "Come to work for me, one year," he said, and seemed to assess his son's appearance. Gene knew his father couldn't be pleased by his baggy jeans, Pearl Jam T-shirt beneath his faded purple and brown plaid shirt, ratty

Converse, blue bandanna, and beaded leather necklace a girl gave him last year.

"I got a job already," Gene answered, in English. His peddling peanuts in the Kingdome, he knew, humiliated his father, founder and owner of Kim Soo Heating and Air, which employed 20 people, mostly Koreans, and held major contracts with the City of Seattle. "Maybe I'll enroll at the U.W. next fall," he suggested, a peace offering, seeing his father scowl at him. "And take some biology courses"--or entomology, he thought to himself.

"Pre-med courses are good," his father rejoined in English. "Good idea. You can take summer school courses. I know you..." His father began to smile, which reminded Gene of his grandfather, his father's father. "You'll catch up fast and pass everyone in no time."

"Maybe even summer school, Dad."

Apparently relieved by this prospect for his son, Gene's father zipped up his tan golf jacket and put on his baseball cap, the company logo stencilled across its dome. Seeing that the visit was coming to a end, Gene hoped his father would return his peace offering with a gesture of his own--say \$40 or \$50--but his father only dropped a firm hand on Gene's shoulder, nodded twice--proud nods--and stepped toward the door.

"You should get the manager to paint in here," his father advised. Without looking back or saying another word, he opened the door and headed down the hallway.

"Later, Pops," Gene called after him, "Thanks for coming by," and watched his father, straight back and squarish head, board the elevator.

He stepped back into his apartment and closed the door. From his knapsack he took out the latest copy of American Entomologist and lay down on the floor to read. A feature article by a leading lepidopterist discussed cross-breeding, the pros and cons, the do's and don't's. Gene read the lengthy article carefully, rereading several key passages and glancing up occasionally to consider his multiplying legion of butterflies. When he finished the article, he began flipping through the back-page ads and announcements. That's where he spotted the little box with three lines that instantly got him excited. He read it several times.

*Exotic breeds shipped direct. All varieties, from Ornithoptera Paradisea to Sericinus Telamon Koreana. Larvae Guaranteed. Write for Catalogue.*

He tore the notice from the magazine, went to work writing the letter, and ten minutes later was heading down the stairwell to deposit the envelope in the mailbox around the corner.

When the catalogue came, Gene wasted no time in ordering the Sericinus Telamon Koreana, the breed he

remembered his grandfather showing him when he was only fifteen. The next two weeks for Gene passed in great anticipation, and when the Koreana larvae at last arrived by mail, he immediately placed it in its own tank and began carefully feeding it. Not long after that, the larvae formed into chrysalises, a half dozen or so, and then another week after that, to his amazement, the first imago emerged with sunlight yellow wings swirled through with black extending down into matching hind-wing tails.

When several more adult Koreana dropped their pupal casings, assuring his stock, he set about cross-fertilizing. Using a flat-sided toothpick, he transferred a sperm sample from a Monarch butterfly to the ovum of a Koreana. From all he'd read, cross-breeding between the Papilionid family (which the Koreana belonged to) and the Danaidae family (the Monarch's clan) rarely succeeded--though nature was known to pursue such aberrations from time to time. While admittedly the Swallowtail, another Papilionid, may have worked better, Gene favored the Monarch since it seemed to him the all-American butterfly.

When, days later, the cross-fertilized ova hatched, the result was a small green-and-white striped caterpillar with black speckles. Gene was beside himself. "Damn," he muttered as it crawled toward the closest food source, shortening and lengthening its abdominal segments in wavelike motions. He watched it feed for several minutes, and then once again, checking to see he had a quarter, he



scrambled down to the payphone to call Al, who told him he would zip right over on his scooter.

Fifteen minutes later, Al was knocking at the door. "What are you going to call it?" he wanted to know as soon as Gene let him in. He squatted down at the tank to check out the voracious new caterpillar.

"I don't know," Gene said. "People usually put their last initial after the scientific name when they discover a new breed."

"You didn't discover it, man...You *made* it."

After a few moments of considering this, Gene decided he wouldn't worry about it, the name didn't matter, at least not at this early stage, and especially since the other cross-fertilized eggs had not yet hatched. "I'll wait until it molts," he said and crouched next to Al in front of the tank.

They were watching the inch-long tube of flesh edge up a twig when several hard, startling knocks came at the door. Startled, Gene sprang up to answer it. In the hallway, in a rayon shirt with the cuffs rolled up, the manager stood holding his toolbox. He had a bothered look on his face.

"Hey, Lonnie," said Gene. He'd finally learned the manager's name two days ago when, fed up with the leaky sink, he reported the problem to Ellen in the office.

"You want that bathroom sink fixed?" Lonnie said and brushed past Gene. The bathroom was straight to the left, but he walked past it and right into the apartment.

"Jesus," he seethed. "What've you got going here?"

"I told you already," Gene said. "Butterflies. I'm breeding butterflies."

Lonnie gave Al a nauseated look, as if he were some kind of an accomplice, and then glared back at Gene. "It's a bit weird, don't you think? Or is it some kind of Oriental thing?"

"A hobby," Gene said plainly. "Just a hobby." He pointed behind him to the bathroom. "The sink's in there."

Lonnie shook his head and, scoping out the rest of room as he went, stepped into the bathroom. A moment later he was banging away at pipes. Gene closed the bathroom door and glanced over at Al, who looked back at him, smirking, and mouthed out Lonnie's words--" *'Oriental thing?'* "

To his great delight, Gene witnessed the entire molt of the hybrid larvae. He watched as it peeled back its skin, exposing a fluorescent green blob underneath, and then hooked its abdomen to the silk button which it had earlier attached to the thin willow branch inside the tank. The transformation completed itself around midnight when a fully formed chrysalis, as smooth and opaque as an emerald, hung motionless from the twig.

For the next week and a half Gene kept the space heater on low in front of the tank whenever it rained or was overcast. On the eleventh day, the Mariners had an evening

game, so he asked Al to watch the hybrid chrysalis while he was out, which Al agreed to, although he said it was a bizarre way to spend an evening--babysitting a butterfly cocoon. Gene explained that if the chrysalis cracked and the imago couldn't shed its casing, it would die unless someone helped it. Then, taking one last look at the hybrid chrysalis, he left for work.

The high-scoring game between the Mariners and the Baltimore Orioles went into extra innings, which meant Gene didn't make it back to the Cornelius until after midnight, by which time he was exhausted and barely able to keep his eyes open. Still, after getting off the elevator, he hurried down the dark hallway anxious to find out if anything had happened with the chrysalis. He took his key out and was inserting it into the lock when he saw the notice taped to his apartment door. He tore it off and took a quick glance, but the 60-watt bulb in the hallway was too dim to read by.

"Anything happen," he called to Al as he entered.

Al sat on the futon with a set of headphones on. He clicked his Walkman off and pushed the headphones back.

"It's an insect, dude. Not some damn baby. Relax."

Gene went straight to the tank. "So nothing happened?"

"Nothing happened. It just hung there, like it's hung there all week."

Gene bent down to examine the chrysalis. A day ago the shell had turned from light green to teal-blue and become

nearly transparent. The folded wings were visible, yet the opaque shell blurred their exact pattern and color. Still, nothing new had happened in the five hours he was gone, and it began to occur to him that Al might be right: maybe this so-called hobby was getting out of hand. He straightened up.

"Who won?" Al asked.

"Baltimore."

On the other hand, he thought, the fact remained: the hybrid hadn't emerged and he was disappointed. He plugged the space heater into the wall and turned it up to medium. Then he remembered the notice in his hand and began to read it.

"Shit," he let out after a moment and waved it in front of Al. "Get a load of this. It was on the door. It says that tomorrow, between eleven and noon, they're going to spray the entire floor for cockroaches and everyone should be out of their apartment for a minimum of four hours after the spraying."

Al didn't respond at first. Then he said, "There are roaches, man. Just turn on the kitchen light and watch them scurry."

Gene ignored him, worrying already what this meant. What about the jars and tanks and cages filled with his butterflies--scores of them--and their offspring? What would he do with them?

"I'll talk to the manager tomorrow," he said. "Maybe

he can skip me. I'll tell him I already sprayed the place myself."

"Maybe," Al said, sounding rather disinterested and looking tired. "But right now, I'm heading out."

Gene watched him gather up his C.D.s. Even if the manager skipped his apartment, the spray might seep in. And if the stuff killed roaches, it would wipe out his butterflies for sure. It would be wholesale slaughter--ovum, larvae, pupae, and imagos all. The hybrid included.

"Hey." He stopped Al by his jacket sleeve. "Could you come over tomorrow and help me move this stuff?"

Al slung his knapsack over his shoulder and opened the door. "I wish I could, Gene. But I'm meeting Lydia--you remember her, Lydia of the Red Locks--for a matinee at the Neptune." He shrugged. "It'll work out, man, don't worry. We'll come over as soon as it's out."

"What if it doesn't work out?" Gene said, pissed at Al for being so casual about the situation.

"It will, you'll see. And if worse comes to worse--which it won't--you could just let them go. You know, born free and all that." Al smiled, gave Gene the thumbs-up, and stepped into the hallway. Then he turned and said, "But if you really need help, call me in the morning. I'll see what I can do. We can maybe catch a later show." He waved and walked down the hallway.

The first thing in the morning, Gene told himself, he would go downstairs, talk to the manager, and get him to

promise not to spray his apartment--simple as that! And if Lonnie gave him any flack, he would go to Ellen. The asshole listened to her. Then he would carry every single tank, jar, and cage down to the basement on the freight elevator and as soon as the spraying was over he would return to his apartment and open all the windows to air the place out. It's what he had to do--no matter what.

Confident this plan would work, he turned the space heater down low and placed a bottle cap of sugar water in the hybrid's tank in case it molted while he was asleep. Then he laid out the futon--which during the day served as a chair--pulled a blanket and pillow down from the top closet shelf, and stretched out to sleep.

No sooner could he rehearse his plan again in his head than he was out fast--color-rich dreams, vivid and lively, crowding his sleep.

His father, in gas mask and white protective suit, dragged behind him a metal canister with a long spray nozzle which he aimed at Gene as he rested quietly beneath a willow tree watching giant cumulus clouds roll by. As his father squirted the sticky, toxic substance at him, Gene watched him transform into his grandfather, who wore traditional red and saffron Buddhist monk's robes and had several butterflies on each finger like fancy jewelry. When a loud crack of a baseball bat sounded somewhere in the far

distance, Gene turned and, standing way back in the 3000-level seats in the left field bleachers, he saw the empty Kingdome spread out before him, astro-turf and all. A baseball soared toward the cavernous concrete roof and sailed over the left field wall, where it instantly turned into a butterfly, half Monarch and half Koreana, before plummeting between the seats. Gene frantically made his way toward it, stumbling over the rows of folded plastic seats, a small creaking noise, like a rusty door hinge, growing more steady as he advanced. When he reached the spot where the butterfly should have been, he found instead hundreds of cracked peanut shells scattered across the concrete floor.

The room was hot and bright when he awoke the next morning. He got up, gulped several handfuls of water at the bathroom sink, then turned off the space heater and opened all the windows.

When he bent down to glance in at the hybrid chrysalis, it was gone. In its place, a large butterfly, smaller than a Monarch yet larger than the Koreana, rested peacefully on the small twig where its chrysalis had dangled the night before. The butterfly unfolded its wings slowly and folded them again. For an instant Gene wondered if he was still dreaming. Unlike the divided imago in his dream, though, the true hybrid blended the two breeds perfectly. It shared

the Koreana's waves of yellow with the Monarch's solid patches of orange, as thin ribbons of black swirled through each wing and small white specks dotted the delicate peripheries. Its wings had the well-defined venation of the Monarch and the long tear-shaped tails of the Koreana. Twice more the hybrid opened and closed its wings in synchronous muscle contractions, drying itself off.

Gene squatted on the floor and sat cross-legged before the tank. He gazed at the new butterfly in awe. Truly, a new breed. His breed. Koreanus-Americana G. A hybrid of two totally opposed types, a perfect synthesis. Then, reaching for his watch beside the futon, he glanced at the time--already 11:16--and returned to admiring the hybrid, when it struck him.

Scrambling to his feet, he threw on his pants, t-shirt, and sneakers, and raced out of the apartment and down the stairwell to the lobby. When there was no answer to his fierce banging on the manager's door, he tried the main office, but the door was locked and a sign on it said: *Closed for Lunch*. He began to panic and ran across the lobby and knocked hard at the second manager's door until Joe, the fifty-year-old co-manager, the one who drank himself stupid every night, opened it and stood there, his shirt tail hanging out and his pants fly down.

"Where's Lonnie?"

"You can't find him?"

"No, I can't." Gene pushed back his hair. "Tell him



if you see him not to spray my apartment." He turned away, thinking he should call Al, but realizing it was too late, and headed back up the stairwell. On the second floor he began to smell something, a severe odor, different from the day-to-day stench. This was sharper, harsher on the eyes and nostrils.

Just as he reached the sixth floor, he saw Lonnie exiting an apartment at the opposite end of the L-shaped hallway, at the opposite end from Gene's apartment. A white paper mask covered his mouth and nose. He wore goggles, gloves, a long-sleeved shirt, and pants tucked into work boots. Lugging a galvanized-metal canister behind him, he stopped and removed the mask as Gene sprinted up to him.

"Listen," Gene said, out of breath, "skip my apartment, okay?"

Lonnie put the cannister down, grasped the handle on top, and started pumping it. "Sorry. Got to," was all he said.

At the end of the hallway, midday light filtered through the glass half of the fire escape door, directly onto the frayed carpet, drab walls, and darkly lacquered apartment doors.

"What do you mean?" Gene asked. He wanted to pick up the cannister and slam it over the back of the stooped figure before him, squash it out and rid himself of the menace once and for all.

"Hey," Lonnie snapped back, "I put that notice on your

door a week ago. That's all the notice we've got to give. The inspectors say we've got to spray, we spray."

"That notice wasn't on my door until last night," Gene said. "You know it."

Lonnie didn't flinch. He finished pumping the cannister and dragged it down to the next apartment. "Pets aren't allowed," he said, and after knocking at the apartment door unlocked it with his master key.

"They're not pets, for christsake," Gene shouted. Then, calming himself, "Just give me till tomorrow."

"Sorry."

Gene glared after him as he entered the apartment. Lonnie turned around from inside and looked at Gene standing in the hallway. "It'll take me about a half hour to get down there." Then he pushed the door closed.

For several seconds Gene stood there, almost paralyzed, stupefied, unwilling to do what he had to do next--whatever that was. He could hear Lonnie inside the apartment knocking about with the cannister full of insecticide. This brought him back to his senses. He kicked the wall beside the door and left a small dent in the plaster, then hurried back to his apartment.

He let himself in and looked about. He couldn't possibly carry everything to the basement in the 30 minutes, there was no way. It wasn't even worth trying, not with over a hundred butterflies in the all tanks and cages. Still, he had to do something.

Calmly but hurriedly, he began to remove the lids from the tank and to pull back a side of wire screen from each of the three cages. When done, he turned the space heater dial to the bright red mark, extra high--and as soon as the small coils began to glow the butterflies started moving their wings to try to absorb the heat. He anxiously watched them a moment and then sat down on the futon to wait. Wrapping his arms about his knees, he could feel a balmy breeze come in though the open windows.

Within seconds, several of the more adventurous Monarchs, after exploring the edges of their containers, began to fly out, five or six at a time, landing in different places about the room. Swallowtails, Viceroy's, and Mourning Cloaks soon followed. Several butterflies sought the direct sunlight that poured through the windows onto the floor. Some sunk close to the space heater and quickly fluttered away from its severe heat. All the butterflies moved their wings steadily to warm their blood and gain the strength to fly. The room gradually filled with them, a colorful kaleidoscope, Gene felt, a 3-D collage of wings in multiple shapes and patterns and shades of blue, yellow, orange, red, brown, and black, adorned with various speckles and stripes. They crowded every surface in clusters, mulling about together as if waiting for a signal. Several found the chrysanthemums, marigolds, African violets, and primroses about the apartment and probed them with fuzzy proboscises. Some landed on Gene, his shoulders,

chest, legs, and head, which made him wonder what kind of ultraviolet light he might be giving off, a light that wrongly promised nectar or a mate. The tanks and cages emptied quickly. Like confetti, lepidoptera littered nearly every inch of the room. Gene could almost feel the air rippling about him from the combined wing movements. Oddly, though, not a single butterfly escaped through the open windows.

Down the hallway a door slammed closed--Lonnie was getting closer. Since the Koreanus-Americana remained in its tank, Gene got worried. Perhaps the hybrid was just hesitant, or maybe it was an invalid? Maybe its dual evolutionary instincts were sending it mixed signals, confusing its impulse to capture the air with its wings and take off. Maybe, he thought, it had lost its aerodynamics in the cross-breeding, grounding it as a freak. Gene crawled to the tank and tapped at the glass. The hybrid didn't stir. Yet when he reached his hand in to give it a nudge, it quickly fluttered past his fingers, lifted out of the tank, and flew straight for the nearest window.

Gene scrambled over to the window on his knees, a wake of butterflies spreading away before him, and leaned out the window as far as he could without falling. The Koreanus-Americana G. glided up, six-, seven-, eight-stories high, then began to drift downward toward the parking lot, then suddenly fluttered up again, mastering the wind currents, rising higher and higher until it perched atop a lamppost.

It rested there only an instant before it wafted off again, this time circling southeast toward the highrise hotels and office towers that crowded the downtown. Gene leaned even farther out the window, his arm wrapped around the center post of the window frame, and followed his hybrid as it flew across the street, around a building, and out of sight down Fourth Avenue.

As if on cue, other butterflies began flying out the open windows. Gene ducked back in, stood up, and swung his arms about, urging them on, shooing them out, until scores of butterflies were billowing from the side of the building. They rushed through the windows, tested the air currents, ascended briefly, sank, then rose again before dispersing across the neighborhood. Gene watched, amazed, and within minutes all his careful breeding had taken wing. As he coaxed the last butterflies out the windows, he heard Lonnie enter the next door apartment. He retrieved three trash bags from the kitchen and hastily filled them with the remaining eggs, chrysalises, and larvae from the jars. He put a twist-tie around each bag, pocketed his keys, and headed out.

It was great to get outside, he thought. In front of the Cornelius Arms, dozens of butterflies still flitted about. Many appeared as specks in the sky, high above the street or far off on the horizon. Many had found the flower beds and blossoming azaleas that bordered the grounds of the office highrise across the street.

Gene walked to the corner to wait for the bus to Discovery Park, and as he waited, watching his butterflies with equal regret and delight, he knew his grandfather would be pleased.

## MARTA

The phone on her office desk rang just as Marta was removing her scuffed, navy blue flats. "Should I let it go?" she asked and withdrew a pair of tennis shoes from a bottom drawer.

"Didn't you switch the phones over?" asked Jerri, her voice sounding weary from the desk behind Marta's.

The phone kept ringing.

Marta shook her head no, wedged her feet into the tennis shoes, and picked up the phone. "Puget Mortgage Customer Service. How may I help you?"

As an irate mortgage holder on the other end of the line launched into an exhaustive complaint about receiving two bills in one month, Marta began tapping at the keyboard on her desk and reassuring the man that any errors would be promptly corrected. As a file flickered across the green computer screen, she stroked the pink fuzz of the inch-round, plastic pig glued to the lower corner of the monitor and all the while tried to ignore the fact that her co-workers were gathering near the elevators to depart for the night. Once again, it appeared, she would be last to leave the office.

Twenty minutes later she solved the customer's problem,

thanking him for his patience. She clicked off her computer screen, turned the phones over to the answering service, and prepared to go home. Two cleaning women shuffled between the long rows of Steelcase desks in the half-acre office emptying waste baskets and dusting the tops of filing cabinets. It seemed to Marta that ever since she had landed the job last fall--with the help of her mother, a 23-year Puget Mortgage employee--she regularly got stuck doing busy work long after the office had closed. It apparently made no difference that she, unlike most of her co-workers, had earned a B.A. in Office Management after eight years of night classes. She was still the office grunt.

Waiting for an elevator, listening to the country-western music from the cleaning women's radio, she reconsidered Jerri's earlier invitation to join some of the girls at Cory's for drinks after work. Usually she declined such invitations, preferring to return straight home, but tonight, perhaps because the last customer had been so cranky or maybe because she was feeling so out of sorts about being last to leave the office again, she decided to take Jerri up on the invitation. If she went back to her apartment, she knew too well, she'd simply pass another night reading the latest Book-of-the-Month club selection, eating Rice Chex from the box, and wrangling with her mother over the phone. And such evenings were not why she had moved out of the boxy frame house in Ballard where she grew up and her mother still lived. To be honest with herself,



though, she wasn't sure why she'd moved out. Maybe to be closer to work, as she first told herself, or maybe, as she now sometimes thought, to be rid of her mother, who night after night sat at the kitchen table working crossword puzzles, swilling White Zinfandel, and driving her crazy with her pestering.

Outside the office building, a dry wind blew down Fourth Avenue, scattering parched leaves and scraps of litter. Between several high-rise condominiums, Marta caught sight of the sun, an orange blur, sinking behind the snow-capped Olympics. She buttoned her light blue rain coat to her chin and clutched her canvas satchel bag. In the four blocks she had to walk, she crossed the street twice, steering clear of strange-looking men on the sidewalk.

When she reached Cory's, it looked nothing like what she had expected. Instead of a cozy restaurant with glass-enclosed patio seating, the building was a windowless, concrete structure painted salmon-pink with brilliant neon coils flashing over the entrance. She entered reluctantly and looked about for her co-workers. The interior was as dark as a movie theater, and a sharp smell of gin and floor wax stung her eyes and nostrils. She groped along a brass rail at the edge of the dance floor and past the bar, where a waitress, leaning between two chrome handrails at the waitress' station, touched her elbow and asked if she would like anything to drink.

Marta jumped. "Do you have club soda?" she stammered.

"Lemon?" asked the waitress.

"Lemon?" Marta repeated. "Yes, lemon, thank you."

The waitress gave the order to the bartender, who promptly squeezed the top off a tiny bottle and poured its fizzing contents into a glass. Squinting toward the shadow-dense rear of the bar, Marta located her co-workers at a large oval table and made her way toward them.

"Marta!" Caroline, the buxom assistant supervisor, was the first to spot her.

"A miracle sent from heaven," chirped Donald, the only male among the seven women from the Customer Service Department. Jerri called him Studly Doright because he flattered himself a ladies' man, wearing double-breasted suits with silk designer ties, sporting a thin moustache and layered haircut, and alluding routinely to his sexual exploits. The fact was he was fresh out of high school, and his father--a V.P. down at the bank--had secured him the job. He still had pimples on his chin and forehead, and laughed too loudly. "Take a load off, Marty," he said and pushed a chair toward her.

She sat down as the waitress placed a cocktail napkin and club soda in front of her.

"Did you get rid of that last asshole?" asked Jerri.

"He swore he paid already," Marta said.

"I hate that type." Jerri looked disgusted and took a sip of her tawny-colored drink.

Marta noticed how Jerri's tight black skirt rode up her

lean thighs and her loose blouse billowed out revealing a lacy white bra underneath. Donald leaned to one side of his chair, pressing his body close to Jerri's. Composed as ever, Jerri just ignored him.

Tasting her club soda, Marta carefully tried to conceal her gnawed fingernails by holding her glass near the bottom. When she put the glass down, she placed both hands in her lap.

"I heard Becky went out with O'Connell in Appraisals," Jennifer, who wore only gray suits, announced.

"You're kidding," Caroline groaned. "He's such a lush. And probably a pervert too."

"He's not so bad," said Lisa.

"Tell me 'bout it, girl. Would you let him near you?"

"I wouldn't outright say no," Lisa said, then added, "But I'll tell you what, I'd jump Lew Trendell's buns in a flash."

"Sweet action there," Jerri confirmed.

"Lew ('Sir Bulge') Trendell," Jessica boasted, causing a peel of screams to break out around the table.

Caroline and Jerri then teased Donald for having to listen to their girl talk.

"It only proves what I've known all along," he came back. "Women have the same thing on their minds men do."

Then Lisa blurted out, "Men's bodies?" and the women all burst out laughing again.

Marta, head bowed and shoulders hunched, pressed her

thin lips into a weak smile and glanced toward the door. She took her keyring from her purse and began rubbing the small pig-shaped piece of leather beneath the table. She couldn't help wondering if her mother had behaved so crassly when she worked for the company.

Donald placed his arm across the back of Marta's chair and asked if she'd like another drink. "Something a little stronger perhaps," he said and shifted the red swizzle straw from one side of his mouth to the other.

"No thank you, Donald. Actually, I'm kind of tired." She waited several moments, then began buttoning her coat. Looking around the table, she signaled the others with a slight wave, thanked Jerri for inviting her, picked up her bag, and started to leave. As she cut across the dance floor to the front door, she sensed they were already whispering about her.

Later that night a tall, rugged man--the type one saw in L.L.Bean catalogues--came to the door of her apartment on the sixth floor of the Cornelius Arms. He stood in the hallway and pleaded with her to be let in. The solid wood door was locked with both the latch chain and dead bolt, yet she saw him vividly, shirtless, standing directly before her, close enough, if she dared, to slide her hand over his smooth, muscled stomach, down the waist of his jeans. She understood then that this was Jerri's boyfriend, the one who

picked her up in his BMW outside the office building nearly every day. Now he was lingering just outside her door, begging to be let in. She struggled to rise from her bed but couldn't move. The door remained locked, and before long he drifted off.

When Marta awoke, the wind was lashing a light, morning rain against the large picture window that framed the ebony-glass office tower across the street. Her gaze slowly surveyed the apartment and when it reached the door, she stared, trying to recall the figure of the man in her dream.

Slipping out of bed, she tiptoed to the door and peered through the peep-hole. When she saw only the bone-white hallway walls and the faded flower-pattern of the hallway carpet, she quickly returned to bed. Already she felt headachy. Someone like Jerri would call in sick, she thought. Other people were always calling in sick.

She agonized another half hour and then, surprising herself, took the phone off the small night stand and dialed the main office number. When she reached Gloria at the receptionist's desk, she told her she wasn't feeling well and wouldn't be coming in. She hung up then, and went into the bathroom.

On the toilet, she looked about and took inventory of her pig collection--soap dish, soap, handmirror, towels, wash cloths, shower curtain, all in the shape of a pig or

imprinted with a pig design. Some of the items she'd purchased herself, but others, most of them, had been bestowed upon her by her mother. Since she could remember, her mother had been giving her pig presents, beginning with a stuffed pig doll in overalls and straw hat when she was just six. At fourteen, she received a pig-shaped desk lamp. She never quite understood her mother's fascination with these items. She simply thought it quirky and went along. The house in Ballard was crammed with small plastic or ceramic pig figures, pig dolls, pig potholders, pig calendars, and so on. There was even a life-size brass pig in the corner of the living room. When Marta had once asked about it, her mother told her she'd gotten it shortly after Marta's father had walked out on them. "It seemed much less messy than a dog or cat," her mother had added, and left it at that.

Marta splashed water on her face and patted her cheeks dry with a towel. She looked in the mirror and wondered if some blush might give her cheeks more arch. Her face was too round, too lusterless. Nor did she like how her dull brown hair hung straight and limp over her ears and forehead. Turning from her reflection, she abandoned the bathroom and went to the small, walk-in closet.

She put on a pair of baggy corduroys, a sweat shirt, and the old loafers she'd had since high school. Pulling on a blue windbreaker over her sweatshirt and taking her purse off the floor, she left the apartment. It was only when she

was on the service elevator riding down to the lobby-- because the main elevator was out of service again--that she wondered whether she should risk going out when she should really be at work. In the lobby, in one of the vinyl-covered chairs chained to the floor, the old Norwegian man sat inspecting everyone who passed in and out of the building, as he did every day. When he nodded to Marta, she felt grateful for his approval.

Out on the front sidewalk, she squinted up at the sky. The dull light filtering through the pewter-grey cloud cover made her shiver and yawn. She started down the sidewalk toward the business district hoping no one from Puget Mortgage still heading into work would spot her. At the Bon Marche, security guards were unlocking the double doors, as shoppers waited outside to enter. She made her way beneath the department store's wrought-iron awning of seahorses and scallop shells, and at the corner crossed the street to the Winchell's on the other side. If anything could help her settle down, it was a doughnut and coffee.

She entered the brightly lit shop, sat on a stool at the far end of the counter, and ordered coffee and a Bavarian Cream doughnut. When the dark-skinned man behind the counter brought them to her, she quickly took a bite and washed it down with several quick sips of coffee. The man behind the counter waited, and when she put her cup down he topped it off.

"Thank you."

"You are very welcome," he said. "Do you take cream with your coffee?"

"No, thank you," Marta answered, and glanced up at the lean man standing before her, skin as dark as the coffee he poured. His apron was stained with jelly, his face and hands dusted with flour. He was remarkably clear-eyed, lean-cheeked--handsome, she thought.

"Hello," he said.

"Hello," Marta said back.

"My name is Sahil. In case you need anything else." He paused, then added, "I'm from Pakistan and work here for my uncle while I go to the university."

Marta did not reply, did not know how to, and thought him rather forward with this information. But then, she thought, perhaps people behaved this way from Pakistan, polite, and she began to feel flattered by his small attentions.

"Would you like another doughnut?" he asked when she had finished the first.

"No," she stammered and glanced at her hands. "One was plenty, thank you." She looked behind her and saw two haggard men at an orange table smoking cigarettes. She felt a thin film of perspiration break out on her brow, and wondered if she should use her napkin to wipe it away.

"Are you sure?" Sahil asked again. "I make them myself." He raised the coffee pot from the counter to refill her cup.



Marta waved off his offer, smiled faintly, then watched him as he moved to the other end of the counter. Had she been too impolite? Should she have accepted the second doughnut? Perhaps when he returned she would tell him her name, and maybe where she worked too, and even ask him what he planned to study at the university. He must be interested in her. Why else would he introduce himself, and tell her those things, and offer her another doughnut?

Yet when Sahil drifted back toward her end of the counter, she lost her nerve. Flustered, she gulped her coffee and burnt her tongue, then fumbled for something to say.

"Are you Hindu?" she blurted out as he was about to retreat to the back room where the ovens were.

"No, no," Sahil answered, chuckling. "I am Muslim. And you...?"

"Oh, nothing really," Marta said. "My mother never took me to any..."

"Excuse me," he said, cutting her short and scurrying up front to where a customer had entered and rung the small bell near the cash register.

Marta watched his back--a straight, lean back, tapering off at a high, narrow bottom like a boy's. Ashamed, she quickly diverted her gaze out the window. On the sidewalk, a stout older man in a seaman's cap removed an accordion from its case, heaved the instrument to his chest, and began squeezing out a slow harmonic melody.

Sahil returned, carrying a doughnut. "Old Fashioneds," he announced, setting it beside her cup. "Fresh from the oven. Very good. Lots of buttermilk."

"I was going to have only one," Marta tried to explain. "I'm too fat already."

"It's on me," he said and urged her to eat. "Please."

Marta hesitated, looked at Sahil's face, and after taking a bite from the doughnut nodded her approval.

"You like them?" And once again he returned up front to attend to a customer.

Marta finished the doughnut and the rest of her coffee, all the while watching Sahil move behind the counter. Again she pictured his dark body, slender limbs, even shoulders, chest, waist.... When she spotted him coming back, she opened her purse and began digging through it. She slid a dollar bill and some change onto the counter and got up. Would he even let her pay? she wondered.

"Thank you," he said, taking up the money and counting it.

"I always pay," she replied quickly, and glared at him.

Sahil looked up from his counting. "Thank you again," he said. "Please come back."

What did he mean, come back? Come back because he wanted to see her again? Come back so they could talk? Come back to arrange something, a date? Or just come back, something store people said all the time to customers?

She blushed, and seizing her purse, hurried toward the

door. Brushing past a couple entering the doughnut shop, she reached the sidewalk, but then, swinging past the accordion player and not watching where she stepped, she stumbled over his open accordion case, lost her balance, and fell to the concrete.

Both Sahil and the accordion player were quickly at her side helping her to her feet. Sahil handed her back her purse. "Are you all right? Do you wish to come inside?"

Marta steadied herself, and brushed off the bits of gravel embedded in her palms. "I'm fine. Thank you. Really. Thank you again."

"You sure, ma'am?" asked the accordion player, picking up the case she'd knocked over.

"Yes," she insisted, "fine," and without looking back rushed across the street against the flashing red DON'T WALK sign. On the other side, again beneath the wrought-iron awning of the Bon Marche, she reproached herself for having been so abrupt with the two men. She could still feel Sahil's fingers on her elbow, his gentle touch. Why didn't she go back, apologize to them? She could be as friendly as the next person, couldn't she? She could get another doughnut and a coffee to-go, toss some change into the accordion case.

As she reached the next corner, though, the opportunity seemed lost. They would think her silly anyhow, she told herself, and hurried back to her apartment.

The rest of the afternoon she alternated between crying jags, staring at herself in the mirror, and cleaning her apartment in manic bursts. Occasionally she sat on the beige toiletseat cover in the bathroom and surveyed her collection of pig objects. Around three o'clock, just as she was undertaking a new needlepoint project, the telephone rang, and grateful to talk to anyone she quickly answered it.

"Hello, Mother," she said, disappointed to hear her mother's high-pitched voice on the other end.

"Dearest, I want to ask if you would like to come home Friday night to play Scrabble."

"I don't know, Mother."

"What's the matter? Are you ill?"

"A little bit, yes. Let me think about Friday night. You didn't call the office, did you?"

"Of course, I did. That's where I thought you would be. This staying home business won't ruin your attendance record, I hope. Have you seen a doctor yet?"

"It's not that serious, Mother. I wasn't feeling well so I stayed home. People do it all the time." Marta paced in front of the nighttable as far as the cord would reach.

"I was only worried about you," her mother said, feigned hurt in her voice. "You went out this morning, didn't you?"

"That's right, Mother. I needed some Tylenol."

"Then you'll feel better tomorrow and be able to catch the bus after work. Didn't you tell me it stops in front of that building you live in?"

Marta had been living in the Cornelius Arms for nine months and not once had her mother visited her, insisting she could not approve of her daughter living in a downtown flop house with drug dealers and prostitutes.

"Well?" her mother asked after there had been a short pause.

"I'll think about it, Mother," Marta repeated. "It might be best, though, if I stay put this weekend."

"Okay, then," her mother said. "Have it your way. But call me tomorrow and let me know."

Marta said good-bye and returned the phone to the nighttable. Putting her needlepoint aside, she lay on top of the bed and tried to rest. Yet when she couldn't fall asleep, she got up, retrieved her hardback copy of *Ruling Desire* from her canvas bag, took down the Rice Chex from the kitchen cupboard and, fully dressed, crawled under the covers.

The next morning, her first impulse was to phone in sick. She dismissed the notion, though, and climbed out of bed, knowing that people who called in sick on Friday looked like they were taking a long weekend--and she didn't want a reputation for being slack.

After leaving the apartment and making her way to the office, she detoured in the direction of the Pay-N-Save Drugs, having discovered earlier she was out of pads. As always, it was an awkward errand, one that made her extremely uncomfortable. She always picked up something else as well, a distraction item, so she wouldn't have to face the check-out clerk with just the one embarrassing purchase. This time, as she moved up and down the drug store aisles, she picked out a package of dental floss, then headed quickly to the next aisle and picked out a medium-sized box of MaxiPads. As she moved back down the aisle, she noticed out of the corner of her eye the small display rack of condoms next to the sanitary napkins. Looking about to see that no one was watching, she paused for a closer look. Ribbed, Ultra-thin, Lubricated, Spermicidal, Extra-large, Multi-Colored--she had no idea there were so many kinds. Then, as it occurred to her that she was studying each little box, she hastened to the checkout counter, quickly paid the grey-haired clerk, and rushed from the store and onto the busy rush-hour street. She double-bagged her pads in the extra sack she'd brought along for just that purpose, dropping the first upside-down into the second, and rehearsed how if anyone asked she'd tell them it was extra tissues for the bad cold she'd been suffering from.

Once at the office, she settled right down to her work. Yet because the day had gotten off to such a troubled start, it seemed to drag on interminably. At lunch when all she

wanted to do was escape, she had to listen to more of her co-workers' gossip in the employees' lounge. Later in the afternoon, when Lew Trendell walked past, she involuntarily darted a glance at his crotch and remembered the rack of condoms in the Pay-N-Save. Once again, shame settled over her. Even though the sweater she wore became too warm, she refused to take it off. She locked her eyes onto her computer screen and refused to look away for the longest time.

During the three o'clock coffee break, Jerri joined her in the employees' lounge. Sitting across a table from her, she asked Marta if she'd like to join some of the girls after work at Casa U-Betcha for margaritas. Marta wanted to shout No, but instead she pretended to consider the invitation so when she did decline she wouldn't be thought rude for saying no too quickly. This delay, though, only gave Jerri time to coax her.

"You should, Marta, it'll be fun. And what the heck, it's Friday, right? This place is a lot more fun than that dungeon we were in the other day. You'll see."

"I don't know, Jerri. I'm just not very good at going to bars, and I really should..."

"I know," Jerri interrupted her. "You should wash your hair or scrub the tub or read that juicy novel you've been wanting to read. For heaven's sake, girl, it's Friday night. Come on!"

Marta never could resist others' cajoling very well.

If a co-worker asked her to find a customer file, she put her own work aside and found it; if a panhandler stopped her on the sidewalk, she gave him whatever change he asked for; if her mother implored her to come home for the weekend, she complained some, but caught the next bus to Ballard. And now Jerri was pressuring her to go out for drinks when she didn't want to. She knew she should want to go, that her co-workers probably thought her an old maid--which, she suspected, she probably was--but such evenings never turned out to be the carefree occasions they were promised to be.

"What time are you going?" she queried hesitantly.

"Right after work. Five-thirty or so."

"Okay then," she acquiesced. "Should I meet you there?"

"Great," Jerri replied. "It'll be a blast. Do you know where it is?"

Marta shook her head in the negative and Jerri proceeded to give her directions. Fortunately the bar was close by, an easy walk from work, and she wouldn't have to worry about a ride home.

For the remainder of the afternoon, to her mild surprise, she actually began to look forward to the get-together with her co-workers. Maybe she only needed to give it a chance, to loosen up, as Donald always told her. At five o'clock, after the phones had been turned over, she was one of the first people to the elevators, and since the bar was only a few blocks away she turned down a ride from Joyce



and decided to walk.

When she reached Casa U-Betcha, one of the new upscale bars in Belltown, most everyone from Customer Service was already there, including those who had left work early to get a jump on the weekend. She peered around the bar, awed by the outlandish interior--jet black ceiling embedded with sparkling silver-specks, sharp angular partitions separating tables shaped like boomerangs, walls splattered in swirls of colorful paint, and full-length mirrors behind the chrome-plated bar. Music thumped from multiple overhead speakers, and people as fashionably attired and groomed as the slickest fashion models mulled about in small groups chatting with one another. Some of the unmarried girls at Puget Mortgage called the place a meat market, but on Monday morning they all raved about their adventures there the previous weekend.

As people ordered margaritas, Marta hesitated, but then gave in and ordered one too. When the wide-rimmed glasses filled with frothy green liquid arrived, she sipped hers cautiously, screwing her face up at its bitterness. Donald, sitting beside her again, showed off what he called his "tequila-slamming technique," licking salt off the back of his hand, tossing back a shot-glass of tequila, and sucking a lemon wedge.

Whenever anyone said anything racy, Marta put her glass down and folded her hands in her lap. After a while, though, as she finished her first margarita and started on

her second, she began laughing a small tweedy laugh at anything remotely amusing. When someone mentioned Lew Trendell's bulge, she blushed at first, but then bobbed her head approvingly. She even wondered aloud why Mr. Trendell didn't come to these get-togethers, and Jerri had to explain to her that he was engaged.

"Aw" she mumbled. "Too bad."

After three or four more shots of tequila, Donald leaned over his chair and started pressing her with a series of suggestive questions. Had she seen "Basic Instincts?" What did she think of Michael Douglas? Who did she think was the sexiest actor? Had she ever been to the nude beaches in Vancouver? Would she like to go?--making her more uneasy than she'd been the entire evening.

She tried downplaying the questions as best she could, stuttering through several vague half-answers, looking away, trying to change the subject or latch onto other people's conversations, but nothing worked, and he only persisted. Finally Jerri came to her rescue.

"He's a wolf, Marta. You have to be careful. You've seen how I've had to fight Studly off. He gets wild when he scents new prey."

This suggestion, the idea that Donald was making a pass, putting his moves on her, made Marta flush. Why hadn't she seen it? To her his behavior had just seemed a worst case example of the general crassness all her co-workers indulged in.

Marta smiled at Jerri and held her glass to her lips, forgetting to conceal her chewed fingernails as she licked salt from the rim. If Donald was interested in her, should she be interested in him? Should she respond? Was he really so bad?

"Let me buy you another drink," he offered, and signaled the waitress to bring the entire table another round.

When the drinks came, he turned to her and asked, "Marta, do you have a boyfriend?"

She stared down at the table, rotating her glass in her hand, and pretended not to hear him.

"Well do you?" he cackled.

"No, not really," she conceded finally, blushing, but then after a moment said, "Well, there is a man, from Pakistan, a graduate student, I'm interested in."

"Is he interested in you?"

She fidgeted, "I think so," and raised a fingernail to her mouth, nibbled at it, and quickly withdrew it.

"What's he study? 'Cause, you know, I'm thinking of going to the U.W. next year too. Maybe I'll see him." Donald raised his dark brown bottle of Dos Equis beer to his lips and took a long swig.

"I don't know," Marta admitted, adding anxiously a moment later, "I honestly don't know him very well. Really it's nothing."

Donald leaned back in his chair and watched her. She didn't know what to make of this strange attention or where it was going. Her fib about Sahil had shaken her. She didn't dare meet Donald's eyes or even turn her face toward him now.

"Marta," he said purposefully, moving his face toward hers until she could feel his sour breath on her cheeks. "I'm interested in you, whether this Pakistan guy is or not."

Marta quickly raised her glass to her mouth and gulped down her drink. Some of the liquid went down wrong, and she began coughing. She felt dizzy, perhaps even drunk, and began to panic. "Excuse me," she muttered, trying to catch her breath, "I think I have to leave." She began pulling on her rain coat, which was draped over her chair, and then without so much as waving to the others or saying goodbye she rose from the table and began weaving her way through the partitions.

"Wait up," Donald called to her and began to follow as she hurried toward the door.

She walked out of the bar. This was the last time, she vowed to herself. The last time.

"This is a rough neighborhood," Donald said once they were out on the sidewalk. He put his hand on her elbow, causing her to flinch. The sky had darkened to a deep blue since they had entered the bar. Cars moved up and down First Avenue, their bright headlights and glowing taillights

blurring into a red and white ribbon. As Donald and Marta stood in the middle of the sidewalk, three men in double-breasted suits, one with his hair slicked back, the other two with short ponytails, nudged past them.

"You shouldn't be walking down here alone," Donald warned her.

"It's okay," she said. "I only live a few blocks away."

"Let me walk you." He took her hand and turned a fawning look on her. "Please, Marta. I'm worried about you. And I meant what I said in there. Honestly."

She was confused. He seemed sincere. But maybe he was only mocking her. She was at least ten years older than him. And he was probably drunk. The whole thing was wrong, impossible. She only wanted to go home.

"It's okay, Donald, really," she repeated, pulling her hand away and beginning to walk up the incline from First to Second Avenue.

He continued to follow her, and when they reached the corner and began crossing the street he sidled up close and rubbed his body against hers.

She stepped up her pace. "Donald, please. Stop following me," she protested as he caught up again.

"I just want to see you home safely's'all," he slurred.

By the time they reached the corner of Third and Blanchard, he was still at her heels. Marta hurried across the street, stepped into the front foyer of the Cornelius

Arms, and began searching through her purse for her keys as Donald waited right beside her.

"Donald, this isn't right," she said, turning to him after she'd pulled out the pig-shaped keyring. "You had a lot to drink. And so did I. You should go back and get someone to drive you home."

"Can't I come in for a cup of coffee? It'd help sober me up."

"I don't know, Donald. My apartment's a mess. And I told my mother I'd call her. I appreciate you walking me home, I do, but I think you need to go back now." Her voice quivered and she almost felt like crying.

"Then I'll just use the bathroom, Marta. I've got to go bad. It'll just take a minute."

She didn't know what to do. Why couldn't he hold it? What would he say when he saw all the pigs objects in her bathroom? She wanted to stand firm, tell him no, yet she dreaded sounding rude and offending him as she likely had those two men yesterday morning.

Donald began to bounce from foot to foot.

"Alright," she said, and put her key in the door. "But just to use the bathroom."

"Crash my heart," he said, and followed her into the lobby.

Already she felt she'd made a mistake. How had she gotten into this? she wondered, and pressed the button to call the elevators. As they waited, Donald took her hand

again, but this time she snatched hers away without saying a word. She wanted this episode over as quickly as possible, with as little said as possible. When an elevator arrived, they boarded it in silence.

Marta pressed the sixth floor button and the metal door scrapped closed. As the elevator jerked and began to rise, Donald, without any warning, reached out and placed his arms around her. With his full weight, he suddenly backed her into the corner of the small elevator and began forcing kisses on her neck and face.

"Donald, stop," she pleaded, squirming, turning her face from side to side, trying to push him away. When the elevator reached the sixth floor and the door opened, she tried to slip past him and run down the hallway. Yet before she had taken two steps, he grabbed her wrist and jerked her back toward him. Then, his arm around, he guided them both off the elevator.

"I want you, Marta. And I know how hot you are for me. Everyone does." He tried reaching for her purse, but she held it behind her at arm's length.

"Don't, Donald, don't." When she tried to twist her wrist free, he squeezed it tighter. "Just go home, Donald. You're drunk."

They tussled down the hallway several feet and stopped. Tugging her body toward him, he slapped one hand over her rear, released her wrist, and with his free hand began to paw at her breasts. She started screaming, but he took his

hand off her chest and clamped it over her mouth.

"Sssssshhhhhh," he ordered, and then breathed, "Feel how hard I am, Marta? That's for you." He started moving her slowly down the hallway toward her apartment, at the same time reaching again for her purse.

This time he managed to get his hand inside and pull out her keys, yet as he did so they fumbled through his fingers and jangled to the floor. As soon as he stooped to pick them up, Marta pushed him as hard as she could, knocking him to the floor like a rickety piece of furniture, and scrambled to the end of the hallway where she stopped at the fire escape door and turned to see if he would chase her. At the other end of the hallway, Donald tried getting to his feet.

"I'm sorry," she called down to him, holding her elbows and choking back sobs. "You shouldn't have come up."

Donald rose to one knee, lost his balance, and fell to the floor again. When he managed to get to his feet with the support of the wall, he squinted down the hallway toward her.

"Fuck you," he swore at her. "You're a goddamn tease, ya know that? Ya can't come on t'a guy like that and get away with it. S'just forget it." He staggered toward the stairwell next to the elevators. "Fuck," he swore again, and shambled down the stairs.



Trembling, ready to flee in an instant, Marta waited until she felt positive he was gone. After edging away from the fire escape door, she raced down the hallway, grabbed her keys up from where they lay in the middle of the carpet, and hurried to her apartment. Once inside, she firmly locked the door and drew the curtains closed. Throwing off her raincoat and stepping into the bathroom, she began sobbing, her face buried in her hands.

When the phone rang, jarring her nerves even further, she looked about in near panic, half expecting Donald to reappear. Then as the phone rang a second time, she reached for a towel and tried composing herself by patting her eyes dry. She knew who it was and scurried to the nighttable before the phone rang a third time. As she answered, her voice sounded hoarse and quivering.

"Marta, dear? Is that you?" her mother asked. "I was worried when you didn't call like you said you would."

"I'm sorry, Mother. I'm very sorry. Something happened, something terrible." Marta struggled for breath and felt the tears welling up again behind her eyes.

"What, Marta? What happened? Tell me." Her mother's tone was severe, imploring.

Marta tried to explain. "This man from work, he followed me home, he said he was worried about me walking alone, and then he wanted to come up to my apartment, to use the bathroom, and I said no, but I let him anyhow, and then in the hallway, he..."

"Did he hurt you, Marta? Tell me. Did he hurt you?"

"No," she answered, lowering her voice. "I don't think so. Just my wrist some. I pushed him down and he left. He was so drunk, and he kept..."

"Marta," her mother interrupted, her voice full of resignation, "let me tell you something. That's how men are. They're no good." Then, more solemnly, she warned, "Stay away from them, Marta. That's my advice to you. Plain and simple. They're pigs. All of them. Pigs. Just like your father."

These last remarks failed to register with Marta right away, but when they did, she stiffened, her body went numb, and she was unable to answer.

"Marta, they're pigs. Or worse. But don't you worry about that. You come right home."

"Mother," Marta whimpered, confused, and wiped her eyes and cheeks with the heel of her hand.

"I know, dear. You just come home now."

Marta did not reply.

"Do you hear me, Marta? You've had a terrible experience. You need to come home. Don't be foolish."

Still she said nothing.

Her mother then asked if she was still there, if they hadn't been disconnected.

Marta dropped the receiver on the bed and returned to the bathroom. After filling the sink with warm water and washing her face, she heard the sharp tone that signaled the

phone was off the hook. She ignored the painful noise as long as she could, then stepped over to the bed, yanked the cord from the wall, and stood back to wonder at herself.

## BALD HEADS AND BROKEN GLASS

Collin clean-jerked the cinderblock over his head and in one heaving motion dropped it through the windshield of the Honda Accord, shattering glass into a storm of fragments over the front seats and dashboard. He stepped back, shot the angled, stiff-armed salute at his three buddies, and hooted wildly down the dark street.

"Let's find a fag and de-dong him," said Lloyd, the oldest, the only one who shaved regularly, the one who taught the others to throw the *Sieg Heil* salute back when, as he put it, they were just a bunch of playground punks. "True skins got a mission," he lectured them last month, and told them they needed to get some ideology and organize. "Wiley here needs initiating," he now yelled, and yanked the skinny kid with cropped blond fuzz by the collar of his faded Levi's jacket and wrestled him into a headlock.

"Skins night out!" Truck spat out and glared at the others.

Collin saw Truck eyeing him, waiting for a response to his call to action. Only a few weeks ago he went through his own initiation, under Lloyd's insistence, even though he'd started shaving his head long before and still bore the nicks and scabs from the last time he scraped the straight-edged razor across his scalp. He remembered the initiation

night well, the man's side collapsing under the force of his steel-toed boot as he kicked him behind the dumpster in the alley. There was something intense about it all, something disturbing too, the way the four of them overcame so fast the man's weak efforts at fighting back. At first it was exhilarating, but then as they walked away he became sick to his stomach and his legs got so shaky he could barely keep up with the others.

"Come on, Wiley," he called now. "Time for a little gayboy bashing."

From the edge of Pioneer Square, the four of them headed up James Street past brick warehouses, parking garages, and old pioneer-era buildings toward the freeway that cut through the city. Their glossy black, industrial-leather boots crunched the sidewalk as they marched up the hill. Lloyd and Truck wore combat-green bomber jackets and tight black Levi's, while Collin had on a T-shirt with the sleeves torn off, a pair of red suspenders, and fatigue pants. Bigger than the others, he liked to show off the bulk of his shoulders and heavy arms. Before being expelled from high school for a scrap with the football coach, he played right guard on the varsity team and pressed weights for an hour every day. He liked the pumped-up feeling in his chest, arms, legs, and groin, like confidence in every muscle--the kind of physical charge that heaving the cinderblock reminded him of now that he no longer lifted.

"Still shook up, Wiley? Forget it. One of us had to

get the action going. Ain't that right, C-Man?" Lloyd slapped Collin on the back.

"Right," said Collin and stepped away. "Whatever." He got tired sometimes of Lloyd always prodding everyone on. He was worse than his old coach--Coach Johnson, or C.J., as everyone called him--never giving you an inch, but grinding away at you every second. Lloyd was the one who found the cinderblock at the construction site near the bar they were bounced out of after he hurled himself into the mosh pit and started pushing people around. He spotted the Honda and started in about Japs taking over America and how another bomb would get them in line. He did it all--everything except hurl the cinderblock.

"Those bouncers are just more Jew hires," Lloyd went on. "We'll be back. Skins always get theirs back."

"Damn yeah," muttered Truck, as moody as ever, always ready, it seemed to Collin, to go along with Lloyd. He read White Aryan Resistance and White Patriot, the newspapers Lloyd brought to the apartment, and even started handing out Aryan Youth Movement fliers in the U-District last week. "Got that right. Fucking Jew conspiracy," Truck said and pulled from his jacket pocket a can of spray paint he'd stashed outside the club before they were patted down, and sprayed a large, black swastika on one of the concrete pillars supporting the freeway.

Collin walked up to the next corner and waited. What the big deal was with these swastikas, he couldn't figure.

Lloyd and Truck wanted him to get one tattooed on his arm, the way they had. But he kept telling them he wanted an eagle, one that spread across his chest so he could flap its wings when he flexed his pecs. And like the swastikas tattoos, the rest of this Nazi crap got to be too much too sometimes. All this talk about Jews and Aryans and race purity that this Metzger guy harped on--he just didn't get what the big deal was. Beating up queers was one thing. Keep the pervs with all their diseases in line. But as for the rest--though he never said anything--he didn't really give a shit.

Once on Capitol Hill, they made their way down Broadway. They walked past Swedish Hospital toward Pine. It wasn't yet midnight and traffic on the main streets was still fairly busy, people still out and about. They crossed Pine and were walking past Seattle Central Community College, a long building made of new brick and tinted glass, when Lloyd started up again.

"Ever seen them brown flat-faced munchkins pouring out of this place in the afternoon, scurrying around like rats on a ship?" He looked around at the others. "Boat People University. That's what they should call it." He hurled the green beer bottle he was carrying and watched it shatter against the brick wall.

Wiley sniggered and then threw his bottle against the wall too, while Truck watched, curling his upper lip in a snarl.

"They got lots of deaf people here too," Wiley let out. "My sister went for a while because the teachers do sign." He shuffled beside the others to keep up.

"Your sister a mute?" Lloyd asked him.

Wiley darted a quick, nervous look at him, then to Truck and Collin.

"Da sheaa taaa liii diissss," Lloyd mocked, and went into fast, twisted gestures with his fingers just inches from Wiley's face.

Wiley laughed, pushed Lloyd's hands away, and mumbled, "Get lost."

"Watch it prick," Lloyd snapped back and gave a sharp shove to his chest, which sent him stumbling into Collin.

"Hey," Collin yelled and shoved Wiley back toward Lloyd.

As they were horsing around, a police cruiser slowed down parallel to them and a young cop with a tight blue collar rolled down his window.

"Cop," Truck warned underneath his breath.

Lloyd stared straight ahead and kept walking, while Collin and Wiley glanced over at the patrol car.

"You boys behaving tonight?" the cop called out to them. "Not breaking any car windows, are you? Or looking for trouble?"

None of them said anything. Finally Collin hollered back, "Just walking around, officer. Not looking for any trouble."



"Keep it that way," the cop returned, more serious sounding. He watched them for a few yards, then bleeped the lights on the roof of his cruiser, and sped to the corner and made a sharp turn toward the reservoir.

"Pig," Truck sneered. "Since that bitch a couple years back, they've been on our ass."

"What bitch?" asked Wiley.

"The one some skins' freaky girlfriends locked up in a basement for a week. Some kind of lesbo thing probably."

"I knew one of the guys that smoked that African dog down in Portland," Lloyd threw in. "The bus driver one in all the papers." He waited for a response and seemed annoyed when none came.

"That cop might come around the block," Wiley whimpered.

"Screw him," Collin said. "We ain't done shit."

Lloyd flipped his middle finger in the direction of the patrol car. "Ain't yet," he sneered, and tried to karate kick Wiley.

They combed the Capitol Hill streets but couldn't find anyone for Wiley to beat up--at least no one walking a deserted side street or alley, a good hit--so they ended up sitting on the concrete wall next to the 7-Eleven, watching the Friday night action along the busy strip of Broadway.

A neatly dressed gay couple chattered it up as they

passed, then a lesbian pair walked by arm-in-arm, and a yuppy man and woman stopped every few yards to gawk into all the shop windows. Down the block, several punks and long-haireds clustered about smoking cigarettes and acting goofy. Three black dudes, wearing black L.A. Kings caps, sauntered past, bumping people out of their way, snorting at Collin and his buds when they passed. In front of the old stone church a few blocks up, a street guy grubbed change and chugged wine. Three old people waited for a bus at the bus kiosk, while at the corner someone played a recorder, his hat at his feet for change. In the street a customized El Dorado went by booming salsa music, five or six Mexicans slumped down inside. Then a pack of Harleys, engines roaring, went past, and a Metro bus with the interior lit up, the three old people inside. Two lady cops on mountain bikes pedaled past, then a young hippie chick zipped by on her hand-painted Vespa.

Collin snatched a skateboard from a junior high kid and made off with it into the 7-Eleven. He rode down between the candy and chips racks and up past the beer and pop coolers. When the kid grabbed the skateboard back from him and ran out of the store and down the block cussing him, Collin pretended to give chase. The kid bolted across the road through traffic, nearly got hit by minivan, and darted around the corner.

"See that little turd run?" Collin called to the others. "That's what we need, man. Skateboards. Call

ourselves Skins on Boards."

No one paid him much attention. Lloyd was looking in the opposite direction down the sidewalk. "Give me an Uzzi, or an AK-47, one clip, and I'll clean this fucking block up good. My old man, you know, had a TV store on this street before the fags and Jews took over. Now look at it." He signaled with his chin at all the fancy restaurants, vintage clothing boutiques, specialty shops, and espresso cafes along the busy avenue. He spat across the sidewalk and hit the fender of a car parked at the curb.

Wiley gave Lloyd a side glance and looked away, while Collin hopped back up onto the wall next to Truck, who was busy tugging on his boot laces. He and Truck knew each other since grade school, back when Collin was fat and breasty and Truck had a face full of pimples. Tits and zits, kids called them. Their freshman year in high school, Truck was expelled for stealing a pick-up truck from the faculty parking lot--which was how he got his nickname--and after that disappeared for a good long stretch. Collin ran into him three years later right after he got expelled himself. Truck was already a skin, and after a couple months of hanging out, Collin became one too.

"My old man offed himself," Truck let drop after tugging at his laces and tying them into a knot.

No one said anything. Then after a couple of minutes, Collin said, "That sucks." His own old man drove rivets into the aluminum fuselages of 757's at the Boeing plant in

Renton, just south of Seattle. His mother lived somewhere in L.A. last he heard.

"Why'd he do it?" asked Wiley.

Truck leaned forward and glared at him. "How the fuck should I know, dickhead?"

"They're making white people weak," Lloyd answered and popped open a can of beer he'd lifted from the 7-Eleven.

"Fucking Jews and niggers teaming up. Then the fags. Just look around. Just look who's mayor of this liberal-assed city. That's the nigger needs offing, you ask me." He seemed to consider this a few moments, while Truck leaned forward on the wall, looked at him, then straightened up, rigid, and stared out across the street. Wiley, meanwhile, looked down at his boots, bouncing the back of the heels off the wall. "You ask me, he's got it coming," Lloyd added.

"But no one's asking," Collin said abruptly, tired of sitting around doing nothing, tired of Lloyd's big talk all night, talk he never backed up. "You want to waste him, go ahead."

Lloyd leapt off the wall right up into his face, so close their noses touched and Collin had to turn away.

"Screw you, shithead. You got a problem? Maybe you're some kind of nigger-sucking queer yourself? Or maybe you just want to take a pop at me, huh? That it? Come on. Let's see what a tough little football player you are." Lloyd jabbed at Collin's shoulder. "I'll nail you faster than you can poke your pencil prick up Wiley's buttohole."

Collin gripped the concrete wall hard with both hands and stared down at the sidewalk.

"Come on," pleaded Wiley.

"Like I thought," Lloyd snickered and stepped back. "A big pussy."

Truck didn't say a thing, hardly seemed to notice, all the while staring across the road. Collin waited for him to cut in, to back him up, but when he realized it wasn't going to happen, he slid off the wall, brushed past Lloyd, and started down the sidewalk.

"Later, faggot," Lloyd called after him.

"Collin. Come on, man, hang a while," came Wiley, his voice all full of worry. "What about my initiation?"

"Don't fret it, Wiler," Lloyd said to him, "It'll happen," and then yelling down the sidewalk at Collin, "Remember what happens, pussy. Don't betray the Cause."

Collin kept walking, waiting for Truck to call him back, to say they would meet up later back at the apartment-something. When he got a block away, almost out of earshot, he finally heard Truck's yell to him.

"Collin."

Collin turned around and saw Truck hop off the concrete wall.

"We could do it, man. We could get him." Truck spoke each word calmly, then shot his right arm out like a board sprung from his shoulder. Collin returned the salute, though without the same force, and cut across a bank parking

lot, heading back down Capitol Hill.

After leaving the Pay 'n Pak near Green Lake where he worked afternoons as a stock boy, Collin took the bus back to the Denny Regrade and the apartment he shared with Truck. Six months ago when they went to check the place out, they both wore hats--Collin a Mariners cap worn backwards and Truck a black beret--because people sometimes got antsy about renting to skinheads. The manager, though, a woman in her thirties with sexy legs and bloodshot eyes, after showing them the apartment, took their deposit and a month's rent, let them sign the monthly lease, and handed them a set of keys--no questions asked.

When he got off the bus and ran up the four flights to the one-room apartment, it was past six o'clock and getting dark outside. He threw off his jacket, crouched down on the worn carpet, and did 40 rapid push-ups. Then he grabbed the coiled handgrip off the floor and squeezed it until his forearms felt taut as cable. Opening the closet door, he stood in front of the full-length mirror turning his wrists and raising one arm, then the other, inspecting his biceps. Since his last time in a weight room eleven months ago, he'd lost the tight peak his biceps had gotten--though they each had a good bulge still.

He swung the closet door closed and slumped to the floor against the wall. Except for the gutted, burned-out

couch, the room was bare. Most of the furniture that came with the apartment they trashed the first week, broke it down and chucked it out the window. Now only a couple torn sleeping bags they used, a radio/tape player, and a bunch of WAR and White Patriot papers lay scattered about the floor. Collin was starting to nod off when he heard someone shouting out his name from outside. He crawled to one of the side windows next to the large picture window, pushed it open, and leaned half way out. Lloyd and Wiley stood below in the alley, their heads tilted back as they looked up at the apartment.

"Throw down the keys, dickface," Lloyd yelled through cupped hands. "Hurry it."

Collin pulled from his pocket two keys held together with a paperclip and dropped them out the window. When they fell through Lloyd's hands and bounced off the pavement, he could hear Lloyd cuss. He got to his feet and flicked on the overhead light, the glare from the bare bulb making him wince. Stumbling into the narrow kitchen area, he opened the refrigerator and took out a beer.

Lloyd entered the apartment first, with Wiley close behind. The right side of Wiley's head had a gouge in it crusted with blood. While he ducked into the bathroom, Lloyd went to the refrigerator and got himself a beer.

"What happened," asked Collin.

Lloyd walked across the room, sat down on the radiator beneath the picture window, and grabbed the tape player from

off the floor. He took a cassette from his jacket pocket, inserted it in the tape slot, and pressed the PLAY button. A fast, raw sound suddenly blurred from the speakers, and then a rough voice screaming lyrics.

*This is my country  
I'm taking it back  
Stop the damn boats  
Send 'em all back.*

Lloyd downed his beer in two pulls and threw the empty can against the door. "You missed it," he said to Collin.

Wiley came out of the bathroom bunching a brown towel to the side of his head. "This Chinese chick, right," he started in, "is walking along with this white guy, one of those little side streets, you know, so Lloyd tells me, 'Go for it.'"

"Gotta keep the blood pure," Lloyd threw in and nodded to Wiley to go on.

"I run up behind the guy and whack him across the back with this broom handle I got from a dumpster. The guy turns around and starts kicking me like a fucking bitch, man, and he tries to grab my hair." Wiley runs his hand over his close-cropped scalp. "Thank God for buzz cuts, eh?"

"I had to hold the bitch off," Lloyd said, turning up the volume on the tape player.



*Take 'em to the station  
Put 'em on the train  
It's the one solution  
That'll work again.*

"I finally had to poke him," Wiley finished. "Left him with his slit-eyed freak soaking up his blood with her pretty pink sweater." He checked the towel to see if he was still bleeding. "The son-of-a-bitch got me in the side of the head with his keys."

"Show him what you used, Wile," Lloyd told him, and Wiley drew from the inside liner of his denim jacket what looked like a switch-blade, but which Collin then recognized as the thin stainless steel letter opener he swiped last month from the office supply aisle at Pay 'n' Pak.

He couldn't believe it. Three nights ago Wiley was a tense, scrawny punk--a hanger-on. But after Collin left them in front of the 7-Eleven--or so Truck told him later on--they went prowling again and roughed up some old wino they found sleeping in a doorway. Afterwards Lloyd made it official and declared Wiley a skin, and the next day Wiley went and had each finger on both hands tattooed with a single bluish letter just below the knuckles, so that all eight fingers, when lined up, spelled out SKIN on one hand and HEAD on the other.

"You stabbed him?" Collin asked, staring at him. Even during his own initiation, when roughing up the guy they all

pegged for a queer, he knew he held back some, that he wasn't going to hurt him too bad, some bruises at most. He probably could have killed him, hospitalized him for sure, but he didn't--despite Lloyd's goading from the sidelines. When it was over he kept thinking to himself, Let someone else rot behind bars for the Cause. If Lloyd was so big on whites getting organized in prison, as he always said, then he could do time in Monroe.

"He had it coming," Wiley said.

Lloyd watched him from the radiator. "You're a skin now, Wiley. You did your duty. Now have a beer."

Wiley headed into the kitchen area and was about to grab a beer when without any warning, the apartment door flung open, banging into the wall, and Truck appeared in the doorway in his camouflage field jacket. He stepped inside, kicked the door closed with his boot, and marched into the apartment. He hailed each of them with the rigid, straight-arm salute.

Surprised by this entrance, Collin just stood and watched, without returning the salute as the other two did. It seemed to him that lately Truck was saluting every other minute and talking more bullshit talk about the racist revolution than even bad-ass Lloyd.

Truck grabbed Wiley's beer from him, swigged it down, and hurled the empty out the open window. Collin knew he was up to something. It was just like him to hold back until the last minute, work out the details in his head, and

then let you in when he wanted you to do something. He gave each of them an intense look, and then, just as it seemed he was going to say something, he sucked in his breath through his nose, about-faced, and entered the walk-in closet. A moment later he stepped back out weighing a .32 caliber handgun in the palm of his right hand.

*To God's chosen race*

*All others must obey*

*When the end comes*

*There'll be Hell to pay*

There was a last screech of guitars, a long scream, and the tape player clicked off.

"It's time," Truck announced, his mouth set, his eyes small and cold. "We're done taking shit. This country's ours, and either we take it back now or lose it."

Lloyd slowly got up from his seat on the radiator and took several steps forward.

"Time for *what*?" Collin asked, trying to keep any worry from his voice--worry that actually began two days ago when Truck first came back with the gun and stashed it in the closet.

"The nigger mayor of Seattle, remember? The Honorable Norm Rice, butt-licker to Jew bankers, queen of the queers, remember him, Lloyd, remember Wiley, what we talked about?"

"What d'you have in mind," asked Lloyd, sneaking a

glance at the gun.

Truck shouldered past Lloyd and shoved his face right up into Collin's. "We have to clean up our city, Collin. Know what I mean? The Northwest here is our nation, Seattle's the capital, and we can't have some nigger running the capital, can we?" Truck backed off and moved to the window where he looked out, scanning the streets, before turning around and facing them again. "They got a rally starting up down by the Westlake Mall, some kind of vigil for AIDS scum. It's going to be coming this way, heading up to Seattle Center, and some faggot told me our pal Norm's leading this little parade." Truck grinned, "It's fuckin' fate," and did an eye check with each of them as if testing their response, trying to catch any twitches of doubt, any hesitation. "It's our moment."

"Operation White on Rice," Lloyd blurted and threw another salute.

"That's right," Truck answered.

For the first time since pulling on his Doc Martens, shaving his head, and beating up the guy in the alley, Collin knew they were into something heavy for sure now, something that was really starting to scare him. He waited for someone to call Truck's bluff. But it didn't happen. Things were out of hand. Gay bashing and getting into fights, some vandalism here and there were one thing. But then Wiley stabs some guy, and now Truck wants to off the damn mayor. That was something else altogether. "You

serious, man?" he said.

"We'll get in there and distract them," Lloyd said, getting excited like he was trying to make up for Truck taking away some of his tough-guyness by having the gun. But then he backed off. "Maybe we should check it out with the commanders first in Portland."

"Screw that," Truck sneered. "We act now." He looked at Lloyd. "Unless you want to pussy out..."

Lloyd and Truck glared at each other, and then just as Lloyd lowered his eyes away, Wiley piped in, "We'll just do it, okay? There'll be so many people around, no one will even know it's us."

"We can meet up back in Portland," Lloyd returned. "Or up in Idaho at Butler's church. Lots of skins up there." He started pacing. "Fuck," he shouted under his breath. "This could set the whole fucking thing off."

Collin kept quiet the entire time. The room felt full of some kind of a force, something none of them could stop, that was pulling them forward, no chance to look back or catch their bearings. He didn't know what to do. Truck and Lloyd looked over the gun a couple minutes and then banged foreheads, while Wiley slipped the letter opener back into the lining of his jacket. Then they stepped back and saluted one another, while Collin went to the refrigerator for a beer and pretended like he didn't notice.

Truck leaned out the window again, peered up Fourth Avenue, and declared, "There. They're coming, a whole

fucking swarm of them. About two blocks away."

Collin glanced out the window beyond the tar-papered roof of the warehouse across the alley and saw several hundred marchers slowly moving up Fourth Avenue, most of them holding candles above their heads, some carrying signs. Leading the marchers, several people, probably the mayor and some other officials, carried a white banner the width of the road that read, "Fighting For Our Lives." A few blocks ahead, two cops on motorcycles and a patrol car blocked traffic on the side streets from turning onto Fourth Avenue.

Truck put his beret on while Lloyd covered his head with a red bandanna. Collin went into the closet, found his Mariners cap, and put on with the visor forward. Only Wiley was still bareheaded.

"When we get close enough," Truck began, "you three start something a few feet away. I don't know, anything. And then I'll move in and pop him. We'll meet up in the train tunnel by the waterfront. If anyone's not there in an hour, then we split."

"When things cool down, I'll get my old man to pick us up," Lloyd said. "He hates the niggers as much as us."

Truck tucked the gun into the waistline of his pants and covered it with his jacket. Then everyone saluted again and they headed out. Once in the hallway, though, pulling the apartment door closed, Collin held back. Lloyd and Wiley went bounding down the stairwell, but Truck stopped and turned around. Collin glanced up, and stuttering a

little bit, said, "I want to get my knife. Just in case," and added, "I'll catch up."

Truck looked hard at him a moment. "You weaseling out?"

"No man, fuck that. I just want my knife--you know, in case something happens."

"Something's going to happen alright, and you're either with us or not." Truck just kept staring at him.

"I'll catch up," Collin told him again.

Truck spat onto the wall beside the door. "Have it your way," he growled, and banging open the fire exit door pounded down the stairwell after the others.

A few seconds later, Collin heard the heavy steel door leading from the basement to the alley crash open and slam closed again. He went back into the apartment and waited for someone--Truck, Lloyd or even Wiley--to shout up to him from the alley. Instead he heard nothing. No one shouted any command, as he was expecting, for him to get his butt down there and join them. All he heard was the noise, a few blocks away, of the marchers chanting and someone shouting into a bullhorn, and it occurred to him that Truck probably told Lloyd and Wiley that he'd chickened out--betrayed the Cause--and what was there to say he hadn't?

Collin found his bowie knife in the cabinet above the kitchen sink, took it out of its leather sheath to inspect

the blade, then returned it to the cabinet. He didn't know what to do. Should he stick around, wait for someone to return, and then make up some lie about how he'd looked everywhere but couldn't find them? Or should he bug out, hop a bus to another part of town, get as far from the scene as possible? He clasped his hands behind his shaved head and paced the room.

Less than half an hour later, in which time he swigged two beers, Lloyd exploded back into the apartment. He was out of breath and wild.

Collin gaped at him. "What?"

Lloyd closed and locked the door behind him, and then moved to the window and leaning against the frame peered out. Turning around, he began to tell what had happened. "It went down fast, man. That faggot we beat up a few months ago, the one you did a number on, remember? He was there. The motherfucker saw us and started screaming. Truck tried to push his way up front but the faggot jumped his back and all the queers piled on. They got Wiley too. Just swarmed them both under, man, like fucking ants. Truck got one shot off, missed everything, and that was it. Cops everywhere. We never even saw Rice. The whole thing was fucked." He pounded his fist on the window frame, rattling the glass.

"So what did you do?"

Lloyd was watching out the window again. "I just hope that Wiley shit doesn't open his mouth. Truck won't, but



fuckin' Wiley..." He stepped away from the window, went to the refrigerator, and took out a beer. When he returned he looked straight on at Collin and said, "What do you mean, what did I do?"

"Where were you? Weren't you with them?" Collin was suddenly wondering why Truck and Wiley were right then being carted off to the county jail while Lloyd stood in front of him drinking a beer, telling him all about it.

"I'm not stupid enough to get caught, asshole," Lloyd sneered.

Collin looked away, but then looked back at him. "Right," was all he said and turned away. He saw out the window that the AIDS march had resumed, undaunted, and was nearly at the gates of the Seattle Center.

"What's that mean?" Lloyd challenged him. "How about you? Where the fuck were you?"

Collin came away from the window. He decided to just take off, but when he bent down to pick up his jacket from the floor, Lloyd stuck his boot out and stepped on it.

"You know what we do to traitors? Drive big old nails through your hands." Lloyd moved in on him.

As Collin let go of his jacket, straightened up, and headed toward the door, Lloyd jabbed at his shoulder, just like last Friday night in front of the 7-Eleven, but harder, much harder. Collin stopped, his back to Lloyd.

"You're a traitor scum, you know that?" Lloyd hissed at him. "I knew it all along too. A goddam queer-loving

traitor."

Lloyd's taunt, like all his taunts, reminded Collin of all the times Coach Johnson, whistle in his mouth, the school mascot, Pete the pitbull, growling across the front of his T-shirt, shoved him into position by the shoulder pads and screamed into his face--"Hit the bastards like you mean it, make 'em pay, lay some hurt on 'em, goddamn it"-- then smacked the side of his helmet and called him "momma's boy" or "pussy" because he wasn't tough enough and shouldn't be playing a real man's game. But this time Lloyd's taunt was different, more like the time when, fed up with C.J.'s shit, Collin hauled off with his right arm, landing his taped fist across the coach's square head, and shattered the sonofabitch's right cheek bone.

"Where the hell were you?" Lloyd shouted at him and slapped the back of his head. "Huh? Where were you?"

Collin sucked in his breath and held it. Glancing over his shoulder and scoping out where Lloyd stood, he pivoted, spun, and barrelled into him like he was a halfback in the open field. He lifted Lloyd's weight off the floor and drove him forward, and when the back of Lloyd's knees hit the radiator, he released his hold from his mid-section and pulled back. Carried by the momentum, Lloyd's body kept going and crashed, shoulders and back first, then his whole body, through the large picture window with a blast of glass shards falling to the pavement after him.

Collin fell back from the shattered window, got to his

feet, stumbled sideways, and lurching toward the door,  
frantically shook splinters of glass from his hair, chest,  
and bare arms.

## THE CORNELIUS ARMS

### *Warranties*

"After I deduct from my rent, sweetie, he'll owe me." Mona laughed into the phone, tucked several stray wisps of grey hair into the loose bun on her head, and nodded as her daughter replied. She wanted Gemma to say what she had to say so she could finish explaining everything. A nervous *uh-uh-uh* echoed from the back of her throat--a tic which, she knew, appeared whenever she got worked up.

"Darling, sweetie," she interrupted her daughter at last. "Of course I don't want trouble. I document everything, down to the last penny. Let him sue me. I'll sue right back." She took a sip of chilled Chablis from her wine glass. "You know, dearest, we've got none of those really good laws here, not one. You'd think rent control was unheard of west of the Hudson."

When Gemma declared she had errands to run and couldn't talk any longer, Mona hesitated, then said, "Of course you do, babygirl, of course. I'll call in a few days. Okay, sweetie. You know I love you." She let loose a loud kiss into the receiver--"Bye-bye now"--and returned the phone to its wall mount.

Suddenly the small, two-room apartment became very

still. It felt as if the whole distance between her and her daughter, a wide continent of cities and suburbs, plains, mountains, rivers and lakes, were settling back between them. At such times, missing Gemma so much it made her ache, she wondered why she ever decided to move out west and settle out on this wet, ragged, always-cloudy corner of the country, so remote, seemingly, from everywhere--and everyone--else.

She pictured Gemma, her wide eyes and full cheeks and plump lips like her own, just as all her daughter's features were like her own, though younger of course, and not so mannish as hers had become. A face impossible to look past, Mona thought--a virtue she hoped Gemma's husband, Rick, adequately appreciated. It was her opinion that Rick was just far too temperamental, though it did seem he and Gemma got along well with one another. In the fall and winter months, they produced and performed in Off-Broadway musicals, and from June to August ran a summer stock company in upstate New York. Manhattan housing being what it was, they were beside themselves when Mona turned over to them the lease to the spacious apartment on the corner of Tenth Street and the Avenue of the Americas. Who wouldn't be? The place was gorgeous, its like unattainable these days unless you were prepared to dole out a few cool thousand every month.

Still, in all, she had no regrets about giving it up. Or about moving to Seattle. She had only to look out her

window: clear blue evening sky, a few wispy clouds, sailboats on Lake Union, the woodsy slope of Capitol Hill with the dome of Saint Mark's rising over the trees, and in the far distance, 60 miles or so beyond the city limits, the white peak of Mount Baker poking up from the horizon. All this--after the appropriate deductions, she reminded herself--for under \$300 a month.

*All this*, she kept bragging to herself when the doorbell buzzed. She hurried a last sip of wine, slid the glass onto the kitchen counter, and sidestepped the couch in the middle of the room to get to the door. Squinting through the peephole, she called out, "Who is it?"

"It's me," a voice answered, even as she recognized who it was. "Jared."

"Oh, oh, oh," Mona squealed, letting herself get excited all over again, the back of her throat fluttering as she unlocked the door and pulled it open. "Jared, Jared, Jared, just the somebody I wanted to see. Come in, come in. Hurry."

As soon as Jared, a skinny young guy in a black leather jacket and a black-and-white tassled scarf swathed about his shoulders--a *keffiyeh*, he'd called it once--entered the room, Mona craned her neck past the door frame and peered down the hallway. She then pulled her head back in and secured the door.

"Excuse my casualness," she said, glancing down at the shimmery rayon top and matching calf-length culottes

billowing about her full figure. She thought of it as her puttering-about outfit, a bit gaudy maybe, but comfortable, and yes, purple. Because she loved purple, in all of its splendid shades--lilac, mauve, violet, lavender, plum. Objects scattered about the apartment, from the grape-pattern potholders to the amethyst bookends, attested to her passion for purple. "I was just talking long-distance to my Gemma," she explained, "and haven't had a chance to change."

She escorted Jared to the white oval table, its four white chairs with lavender cushions, set between the kitchen and livingroom. "Good news, deary," she began. "I spoke to Carol Offstein down at Housing and Development and she agrees that if the elevators are out more than a day we're perfectly right to deduct from our rent--provided it's within reasonable limits, of course. I said to her, 'Carol, old people live here, sick people, people with walkers and wheelchairs who can't get out if the elevators don't work.'" She paused to catch her breath. "So, there you are. I'm raising the stakes, Jary. Ten dollars for every day the elevators are out--retroactive last month!"

Still standing, Jared watched her, then looked across the room, shaking his head. "Ten bucks a day?"

"Why not? I can't climb eight flights of stairs every time I need to cross the street to buy a quart of milk. I have my health--knock on wood--but I'm no Jackie Joyner Kersey."

The elevators were a flashpoint in her drive to

organize tenants and pressure the owner of the Cornelius Arms, Warren Cardason, into doing long-needed repairs to the old building and maybe even a few improvements. During her very first week as a tenant six years ago, she'd become trapped in the passenger elevator between the third and fourth floors. After the two building managers failed to get it to budge, technicians from Otis Elevators were called in. Shaken by the hour-long ordeal, she refused to use either elevator for three weeks. She would have moved to another building if she could have afforded it, but she couldn't--not then, not now. Then, just six months ago, it happened again. This time in the freight elevator, which made the experience doubly frightening. Two days later she decided to do something, and began compiling her "List of Disrepair," which she presented to Warren each month along with her rent check. When the list went ignored and things kept breaking down and taking forever to be fixed, she began deducting from her rent. She also began organizing the tenants--or at least trying to.

Jared pulled a seat out from under the table and sat down. When he withdrew a pack of cigarettes from his jacket, Mona retrieved an ashtray for him. A muffled *uh*-ing continued from her throat.

"I was down at the Fire Department this morning," Jared said. "I got the list of emergency calls made here in the past five years, with all the dates inspectors issued warnings or citations to Cardason, *and* all the times those



warnings and citations went unheeded. Yet, the funny thing is, only the most minimal fines were ever given. It's unbelievable."

"I believe it, I do," Mona sneered. "The things that awful man gets away with is criminal. It's sickening."

"So," Jared went on, "I'm going to write the Fire Chief, the Housing Inspector, and the Mayor's office and say, 'Look, this shit has got to stop already.' You know what it boils down to, don't you? Big money landlord in bed with city officials."

"Naturally," Mona said. "Of course it does, sweetie. You're not surprised, are you? Just you be sure to show me those letters before you send them." She reached across the table, the underside of her arm jiggling inside her sleeve, and retrieved a manila filefolder crammed with papers. Placing it before her, she raised her eyes and said, "Excuse me, Jary. I almost forgot to ask...Would you like some wine?"

"Thanks all the same, Mona," Jared said. "But I've given up the booze. And caffeine too. They're all part of the whole oppressive ideological apparatus, a humungous distraction from the world's real problems. Who do you think profits? Not the migrant worker picking the grapes." He loosened his *keffiyeh* and unzipped his jacket. Examining his cigarette, he said, "These are next," and added, "I'll take some water though."

"Certainly," Mona said, dismissing his little harangue-

-because, no matter what, she wasn't about to give up her wine. She pushed back from the table and stepped into the kitchen. Taped to the refrigerator was a small poster of Eleanor Roosevelt with a quote reading: *No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.* She retrieved a plastic water pitcher from the refrigerator and a purple-tinted glass from the cupboard. "Tap water's so delicious here," she said, handing Jared the glass and pouring it full.

"Thank you," he said, and turned to look out the large picture window at the view. "Pretty nice, Mona."

She returned the pitcher to the refrigerator. "Not if Cardason and his ilk have their way," she grumbled, then sat down and opened the filefolder. "I called Stewart yesterday, who was a manager here last year, you may remember. Curly red hair? He told me that before he quit Warren had him and another fellow scrapping away asbestos from the basement, removing it in plastic trash bags, and tossing them in the alley dumpsters."

Jared turned and stared Mona.

"Yes, darling. Yes," she said, shaking her head in disbelief at the same time that she forced back a big grin. While Warren's conduct never failed to infuriate her, any information incriminating him was an endless source of delight. "I'm calling the E.P.A. and the Hazardous Waste Commission first thing in the morning."

"Should we still leaflet?"

"Of course! Don't be absurd." She got up, poured

herself more wine, and sat back down. "If Warren had his lackeys stirring up asbestos in the basement it could have gotten into the laundry room, the washers and dryers, gone up the elevator shafts, the stairwells, the air vents--it probably contaminated the entire building. We're looking at a class action suit here."

Jared sipped his water. "I suppose," he said somewhat weakly. Over time Mona had observed that despite his radical posturings he always wavered when it came to making the hard decisions and taking action. "The asshole needs to pay for his crimes though," he said. "And that's that. Right?"

"Of course," Mona said. "And keep in mind the money we can deduct." She leaned back, letting her throat idle away, and then went on. "I wouldn't mind paying full rent if the building was maintained. And kept safe. And cleaned once in a while." Her face brightened suddenly and she raised her hand--a heavy silver ring with inlaid turquoise on her thumb--and brought it down with a thump on the table. "You have to see the pictures I took!" She found several Polaroid snapshots in the filefolder and pushed them across the table to Jared, then leaned forward to look at them too. They showed an elevator with a hand-scrawled *Out of Order* sign on it, a toilet bowl with a puddle of water around its basin, a window pane cracked in three places, a rusted radiator, a section of hallway ceiling that had caved in, the splintered frame of the building's front entrance from

the last time someone tried to kick the door in, and a large, bearded man in a filthy overcoat curled up on his side in the stairwell.

"Very pretty," Jared said.

Mona smirked and let out a small chortle. "A hundred and forty dollars--for everything."

"Jesus!"

"All perfectly legal. And believe me, sweetie, if every tenant deducted half that much for just one month, you'd see things fixed around here fast. Money talks, Jary, and Warren Cardason, bless his greedy little heart, listens. Oh, he listens very well." She took back the snapshots and handed him a sheaf of colored leaflets printed with the notice: *Cornelius Arms Tenants Meeting: For Safe, Sound Living Conditions. Wednesday, 8:00 PM. Apartment #814. All Tenants Welcome.*

"Warren won't crash this one, I hope," Jared said. At the meeting in the basement laundry room last month, Warren showed up uninvited, and when Mona politely asked him to leave, he refused, citing his right to know what kind of nonsense was being carried on in his building. She began to squabble with him, then shout, and pretty soon the meeting turned into a total fiasco, until finally Mona cussed him outright, called the meeting off, and told the handful of tenants who'd bothered to show up that she would reschedule for a later date.

"You never know," she said to Jared. "He'll send one

of his spies, just wait and see."

Mona took pride in being suspicious to the last. While she knew some people thought she was just being paranoid, she preferred to think of it this way: she never met a conspiracy theory she didn't like. When the CIA director William Casey died right before the Iran-Contra hearings, she knew his death was a cover-up. It had been obvious Kissinger was a Soviet agent. AIDS was a Republican plot backed by the religious right; the BCCI scandal a smoke screen for Chase Manhattan's dirty Third World dealings; and the Challenger disaster an act of sabotage against the first multi-ethnic crew. And don't even get her started on Kennedy, she warned whenever the subject was broached. Some people, her son-in-law for one, thought her bizarre, even a little touched. Yet she believed a robust suspicion was still the best defense against the inevitable, and pervasive, forces of corruption. "You just wait and see," she said again.

Jared flipped through the leaflets. "Which floors do you want? We can go together, if you like."

"Nonsense," she protested, and stood up, a little stiff from sitting. "I'll be fine."

"Okay, then," Jared said. "I'll take one through five, and you can have the top four."

"Deal," Mona said and walked past the two glass doors leading into the other room. She snatched her black wool cloak from off her antique sewing stand and swirled it over

her shoulders.

Jared unlocked the apartment door and stepped out into the hallway. When Mona joined him, she secured both the deadbolt and the doorknob lock. "Good luck," she said.

"You too," he replied, and headed down the hallway.

As soon as he disappeared around the bend, Mona checked the locks again, then made her way to the elevators.

The hallways were dim--they were always dim--even though it was only mid-afternoon. The walls were dull white, like heavy cream left out too long. The carpet's oversized flower pattern was worn to a mesh of fading red, green, and yellow threads. As on every floor, the apartments were spaced apart about every fifteen feet on either side of the two long hallways that met at a right angle. Each floor had 16 units. The apartment doors, shellacked with a shiny black-walnut stain, heightened for Mona the already menacing atmosphere of the hallway. Going door-to-door was unpleasant business, but, she knew, it had to be done. Starting here on the sixth floor, she would work her way up.

After knocking at the first two apartments and getting no response--a fifth of the units were probably vacant--she slipped a leaflet under each door. When she knocked at the next apartment, there was again no response, but this time she could tell someone was inside, standing on the other

side of the door less than a foot from where she stood, breathing asthmatically and eyeing her through the tack-sized peephole. She knew who it was too. He was a cranky old-timer who had lived in the building nearly as long as it had been standing, back in the days when it was still a hotel. Last week Jared told her how he'd walked by the same apartment the day before and found the door open. The way he told it, a stench of old-man urine, cigar smoke, and rotten food seeped into the hallway, and when he nudged the door open a sliver for a better view he saw trash everywhere: empty soup cans, crushed milk cartons, cereal boxes, crumpled wrappers, beer cans, tissues, newspapers, magazines, scattered across the floor. The vinyl blinds were drawn and the walls brownish from cigar smoke. Mona knew the old man wouldn't answer the door--a shame really, since the old-timers could bring a lot to bear against Warren--but rather than knock a second time she slipped a leaflet under the door, right at his feet.

At the next apartment there was again no answer, but at the apartment after that a large woman in a tattered pink bathrobe came to the door. Her florid face bulged from the neckline of her bathrobe, and her chafed ankles swelled from a pair of frayed, fuzzy slippers. She stood in the doorway and gazed vacantly at Mona, who suspected they were about the same age.

"Hello," Mona greeted the woman, and handed her a leaflet. "We're having another tenants meeting next week."

The woman looked down at the leaflet, then back up at Mona. "My radiator won't heat and it clanks all night so I can't sleep. Can you get one of them to fix it?"

Mona glanced down the hallway. She sympathized, she really did, but it exasperated her when tenants took her as their special liaison to the building's managers. Sometimes they even thought she was the manager. They couldn't grasp the simple fact that they, as tenants, had to pull together to see that things got done--because nothing got fixed on its own.

"You can call the manager," she explained. "And if he doesn't fix your radiator, then start taking ten dollars off your rent for every day it remains broken. After two weeks if it's still broken, you withhold your rent altogether. And if it stays broken after that, you sue."

The woman took a pack of cigarettes from the pocket of her bathrobe. "So you can't fix it?"

"That's what our meeting's about," Mona said.

The woman looked down at the leaflet. "Okay," she muttered, and withdrew back into her apartment.

"Next Wednesday," Mona reminded her as the door clicked shut.

At the next apartment, a tall man with receding reddish hair clipped close to the scalp opened the door. He wore a tight olive-green T-shirt and baggy fatigue pants. As Mona explained her purpose, he eyed the leaflet she'd given him.

"So what you're telling me," he interrupted her, "is



you're going to bring this creep down."

She paused. "I wouldn't put it that way. But, yes. We want Cardason to stop using the building as his tax write off and start treating it like a place where people live. It's our home, after all." She removed her black-rimmed glasses, placed one of the arms between her teeth, and studied the man standing before her. "We can use everyone's help."

The man looked annoyed. "I'm not into protesting, if that's what you mean. Force, swift and decisive, has always been my motto. But, hell, I might stop by, just to see what you folks are up to." Without another word, he closed the door on Mona.

Mona put her glasses back on and continued her rounds. She slid leaflets under the next two doors, though at one she could hear someone flipping channels on a TV. At the next apartment she heard a baby wailing inside as a woman yelled to it to hush, and the very instant she knocked on the door the woman stopped yelling and the baby's wails dropped to a low whimpering. When the door opened, a sour whiff of diapers and fried food reached Mona. A young woman hardly out of her teens grasped the doorknob. She wore a Waterwaves T-shirt and a pair of denim cut-offs. Couched in one arm over her hip sat a baby boy, maybe a year old, who seemed half as big as its mother. The child stared at Mona with wide, wet eyes. "What is it?" snapped the young mother.

"Sorry to bother you," Mona said, and gave a weak smile at the child. "I'm making the rounds to let people know about the next tenants meeting on Wednesday, up in 814. You can bring your baby if you like."

"Thanks," the woman said back. "I haven't got time." She snatched the leaflet from Mona's hand and slammed the door.

Mona stared at the door while inside the baby began to cry again. Babies having babies, she thought, and pushed on.

She knocked at every door, floors six through nine, with a response from about half. The canvassing went easiest on the ninth floor, where people tended to be long-term tenants holding on to some of the best views in the city. In all, while a few said they'd try to show up, most everyone brushed her off. When she finished her rounds, she went through the entire building taping leaflets to the walls next to the elevators and on the metal doors leading to the stairwells and fire escape. Though the managers would promptly tear them down, it pleased her to know she was keeping them on their toes.

The next morning, Mona set out for work dressed in a crimson and gray pants suit beneath her black cloak and on her head a wide-brimmed, black-felt hat. She also carried her brass-handled oak cane. For the past month she'd been

trying to help an auto mechanic put his chaotic account books in order, and the further she progressed with the task, the more daunting it became.

As she stepped off the elevator and crossed the lobby, she heard her name called out, turned, and saw Warren Cardason approaching, clutching one of the leaflets. He was expensively dressed, his double-breasted suit tailored especially, it seemed to Mona, to compensate for his slight build. Mona sensed his annoyance as he came toward her.

"I told you not to post these, Mona. Legally you're defiling my property, which is vandalism. The tape peels the paint off the walls." He waved the leaflet before her face.

"I'll use tacks next time. How would that be, Warren?" She found the use of first names between them amusing--familiar adversaries. She also loved seeing him so peeved. "Besides, Warren, most of the paint around here is peeling on its own, without any help from me."

He crumpled the leaflet. "Come off it, Mona, let's not play games. I'm running this building as well as any sane person can. These sort of tactics don't make my job any easier."

Mona gave a sarcastic sniff. "What *tactics*, Warren? Organizing? No one around here expects the Waldorf Astoria. Just that the elevators work and the hallways are safe and there's heat and plumbing on a fairly regular basis. That's all." While his peevishness amused her, she'd also grown

tired, long ago, of having to explain what should be painfully obvious. For God's sake, the man was an associate partner at a large law firm, he'd inherited a major piece of downtown real estate from his wealthy father, and now he was letting it slide into ruin--squeezing tenants penniless while he was at it. She found it difficult to sympathize with him. "Mrs. Kerny on the sixth floor is in a wheelchair, Warren. She can't leave her apartment when the elevators are down. If anything happened to her, you'd be responsible." The temptation to zing him with the asbestos information tugged at her, but she refrained, knowing it was best not to reveal her full hand.

Warren checked his watch. "I'd love to discuss this further, Mona, but--"

"I know, Warren," she cut him off. "Your briefs and litigations beckon you." She thumped her cane on the floor and brushed past him. You let his type set the agenda, she thought walking out the building and onto the sidewalk, and they walk all over you. If she could handle New York City Councilmen and the ruthless Manhattan Borough President assistants--as she did years back--she could handle Warren Cardason. Indeed, now that she recalled it, it had truly been one of her great civic triumphs, back in '71 when she convinced city planners to convert the old Tenth Street Church into a public library rather than replace it with a city jail. Only after forging a coalition of residents, business leaders, preservationists, academics, librarians,

and anyone else willing to back the project, and carting a van-load of petitions down to City Hall, did the politicians change their minds. Later, once the conversion of the big Georgian sandstone was completed, she was the one who planted the garden in the adjacent vacant lot. The project benefited the entire neighborhood, but even more, from that time on she had a nice library and pretty gardens to look out on from her apartment across the street.

A brackish breeze blew off the bay as she headed down Blanchard and turned the corner at Third Avenue. The air was smokey from the fireplaces and wood-burning stoves across Seattle. She checked the skies--clear and blue except for the smoke haze--and decided to hike the dozen blocks to the mechanic's shop on lower Queen Anne Hill.

Across the street from the Cornelius, in the small, treeless park at the corner, four homeless men huddled on the benches and grass, their bodies formless beneath piles of dirty blankets and sleeping bags. Last year, after much protest from both sides of the issue, the park was declared a *safe haven*. While this meant police no longer hustled people along who had no place else to go, it also meant that violence was now a routine occurrence in the park.

When a bearded man in a skull cap and dirty flack jacket thrust a grimy hand at her, Mona stepped aside and winced, then dug into her canvas satchel and gave the man several coins. She knew she gave out of apprehension as much as any sort of kindness. Not apprehension of the

panhandlers, but of her own potential homelessness, something which worried her almost daily--until handing out a few dimes and quarters, now and then, became her means of storing good karma against just such a fate. Of all the things to fear in this world--disease, decrepitude, senility, even dying--homelessness frightened her most. It could happen to anyone is what they said. And hadn't she read studies that showed old women became homeless three times more often than old men? What safeguards did she have? She barely scraped by as it was, and ever since Gemma married Rick, she didn't dare count on her daughter or son-in-law to take her in. Which was part and parcel why she fled New York for Seattle, which six years ago still took care of its homeless better than any city in the country.

Mona arrived at the mechanic's shop distracted as ever by her worries. When she tried entering by the side door, it was locked. Going around to the front entrance, she discovered the reason why--a notice, with lots of fine print, declaring that the premises, and all property therein, had been officially seized by the IRS.

A dozen people crowded into her apartment for the Wednesday night meeting. Jared was there, and so was the representative from the Fair Housing Association. The tenants who bothered showing up were a mix of Cornelius Arms residents: retirees, working folks, welfare people, some

old, some young. A few were recent tenants, and three or four were people who had lived there forever. They all seemed somewhat doubtful about what they'd gotten into.

Mona stepped to the center of the room. "I'm glad everyone could make it," she said. "The more people we have, the more we can pressure Cardason to finally get something done around here."

"We're not going to be evicted, are we?" a woman in her seventies asked.

"No, Doris. The Right to Assembly, remember? It's in the Constitution?" Mona knew Doris from riding the elevator with her, knew that she moved to the Cornelius three decades ago after her husband died and she was forced to sell their house in the Wallingford neighborhood.

"So what do we do?" asked a young black man who moved in six months ago, a college student. "I'm on the ninth floor and my ceiling's been leaking for weeks now. If I tell them to patch the roof, they never do it, and now the rug's all mildewed. I have to keep moving my desk so it won't get a big water stain."

As at the previous meeting, before Warren arrived, everyone reverted to simply airing their grievances. Mona looked to Jared standing in front of the picture window. "Jared, sweetie, give people a copy of the Warranty of Habitability and the other sheet." Jared wore a green and black baseball cap with an X printed across the dome. He stepped forward and did as Mona asked.

"This explains your rights," Mona went on. "If anything goes wrong to diminish the condition of the building or your apartment from the condition it was in when you first occupied it, then you deduct from your rent. Plain and simple. The only stipulation is you have to report the problem in writing and give a reasonable period of time for them to fix it. A leaky sink can wait a few days. But something like the elevators shouldn't go more than an afternoon. We're recommending \$10 off for every day an elevator is down."

"And all this is legal?" asked James, a tall, solidly built, middle-aged black man who worked on the UW grounds crew, and had moved into the building the same week as Mona six years ago. A few of the older Cornelius residents called him King James--because of, Mona always figured, his physical stature.

Mona tugged at her eyebrows. "Of course it's legal, James. I've saved hundreds in the past months and I'm not in jail. And when I take off for something, Warren fixes it the next day." She smiled around the room, deciding not to mention how Warren kept a running tab of her deductions and insisted each month that she pay the balance with penalties. Whenever he placed one of his so-called bills in her mailbox, she simply filed it, figuring he was too chicken to take her to court, and that if he tried... Well, a score of housing advocates and city bureaucrats had assured her that her actions were well within her legal bounds, so she took



comfort. "As long as Warren accepts your check, he's *de facto* accepted the deductions. That's how it works. Right, Melanie?"

The woman from the Fair Housing Association nodded. "Just keep your deductions reasonable," she said. "I've suggested to Mona that the group try to agree on amounts for every item that might lead to a deduction. This will keep the process consistent."

"Then we'll give a copy to Warren," Jared said, "and watch him sweat bullets."

People began listing their grievances again, this time tossing out amounts to be deducted for each, as Mona hurriedly jotted it all down. Enthusiasm seemed to rise as the list grew. Just the same, Mona knew that when it came to actually handing over the cash in the front office at the start of the month, with all the deductions taken, most everyone would balk.

"We've learned from Jared," she announced, moving the meeting along, "that the building has failed three fire code inspections--which, of course, warrants considerable deductions. In addition, Warren has avoided paying just about every fine for these violations. Therefore, we think it's a good idea to write the Fire Chief, Housing Authority, and Mayor's office, and insist that the fines be paid and the building be brought up to code immediately."

"I'll have a generic letter ready tomorrow which you can just sign and drop in the mail," Jared said, and drank

his water.

Prior to the meeting, Mona had consulted with Melanie and come to the decision to not bring up the asbestos issue. They would keep it quiet long enough for the E.P.A. to investigate. Then, as soon as a determination was made, they would find a lawyer and call a meeting to see who wanted to be named as a plaintiff in the class action suit. With something this big, it was agreed, you had to proceed with care.

Just as she was about to go into the kitchen to pour herself some wine, one of the new tenants spoke out, a chubby man in a brown tweed jacket. "Excuse me," he said. "Call me crazy, but all this seems a little extreme to me." He looked well groomed, in his late thirties. "Are you two people attorneys?" he said, looking to Mona and Jared. "Have you studied the laws governing tenant/landlord contracts? Because something tells me if we follow you like so many lemmings over the side of the cliff, we'll all end up on the street." The man leaned against the wall near the entryway leading to the door.

Like everyone else, Mona watched him as he spoke. Somewhat annoyed by his tone, she said, "Of course we're not lawyers. It's absurd and idiotic to think a person needs a law degree to exercise their rights."

"It's people like Cardason that are the problem," Jared said, backing her up.

"Well," the man went on, "this Warren fellow you keep

talking about--he's a lawyer, isn't he? And furthermore, I don't see all the problems that you do around here. I think the building's in pretty good shape, considering its age, and the way some people living here treat it. They've responded every time I've needed something fixed. And I've been told there are plans to install a new heating and hot water system."

Mona glared at the man. She'd heard about those plans too--in strict confidentiality from Ellen, the office secretary--plans to replace the radiators in all the apartments with electric baseboards and the old boiler in the basement with individual water heaters. What she wanted to know is how this sourpuss knew. When people were introducing themselves at the start of the meeting, he said he'd been a resident for only five weeks. In five short weeks, how could he know so much? Unless of course--and Mona knew it was not beyond Warren--he was a spy. A *provocateur*. One of Warren's pals, or someone he paid to eavesdrop on the meeting and report back. Crazy as it seemed, there it was.

"Just wait and see," she replied, pointing an index finger at him. "Each apartment will have its own meter and we'll all get stuck paying for heat and hot water. Who will benefit then? Believe me, Warren's doing no one any favors."

"So even when there are improvements, it's not enough for you. You find a new reason to gripe. I see how it is

with your kind. All piss and moan."

"No one's forcing anyone to do anything," Jared said, looking nervous.

"No?" said the man. "Then what do you call these letters? Just sign and drop it in the mail, he tells us."

That's it, Mona thought. "Look, mister, this is our home, where we live, by choice or necessity, and we care what happens around here--even if you don't. So if you don't like what we're doing, you can just slink back to Warren, give your report, and get your little pat on the head."

The man glowered at Mona from the shadows of the entryway. "Screw you, lady," he said. "I hope you're the first one evicted." He gave her the finger then and stormed out.

Mona went to the door and slammed it shut, and when she stepped back into the room, there was dead silence. For several moments no one moved, too scared or confused or embarrassed to know what to do next.

"Okay then." Mona took a deep breath and let it out. "The extent Warren won't go to to avoid fixing a sink."

A few people laughed at this and the tension seemed to slacken. Mona offered wine to everyone, and gradually the meeting got back on track, all agreeing that the man in the tweed jacket was a nutcase. When the suggestion was made to organize floor watches and demand that Cardason hire a private security guard to patrol the lobby and hallways at

night, everyone agreed, especially since two apartments had been broken into just last month.

The meeting went on like this for another half hour or so, a petition for the security guard was passed around, and after everyone had straggled back to their apartments, Mona thanked Jared for his help and saw him to the door. Then, finding herself alone, she began to fret. She could not get the rude little man out of her mind. And by the time she settled down enough to get herself to bed, it was nearly dawn.

## RISING MOON IN THE STAIRWELL

She sits on the top step of the sixth floor landing. The concrete floor, walls, bannister, washed in gray paint. A dull cold works through her body, aiming straight for bone. People say being fat keeps a person warm, she thinks. But they're wrong.

*The stairwell is safer than the lobby and not as cold as outside. Tomorrow I'll go to the Center. If they can give me a new name, they can give me money for rent. Old Crow man down there last month tells me he's a medicine man, can give me my Indian name, my spirit name, looks me up and down and says I'm low to the earth and full and soft red like the autumn moon rising. Later a few people there started calling me Rising Moon instead of Kathy anytime I come around--though I'm not sure I liked it, heritage or no. And I do have heritage, half-blooded from my mother's side, the Iroquois Confederacy, though which tribe I never could find out. Mohawk or Onondaga, it doesn't really matter to me, though people always say, "What tribe you from, girl?" One thing I know for certain--I'd rather be around my own people. Indian people. Which is why Silar and I came to Seattle. The Indians here come from all over, not just*

*Puyallup and Yakima and those tribes. They come here like us to be with other Indians, and have a place like the Native Peoples Center to go to, so they can get help if they need it--like I do.*

She leans her head against the hard, rough wall. The hallway light shines through the wire-reinforced glass of the door and spreads a diamond-pattern shadow across the concrete. A sour whiff of vomit and stale urine creeps up from the landing below where a wino passed out two nights ago. Heaving herself up, she moves to the hinged window and props it open with a dried paint stirrer left on the ledge. A mist comes in on the cold air, and she sits down again with her back pressed to the wall.

*Probably cold in Laramie right now too. Wild and weird Wyoming, Si used to say when we lived there. Before Silar, I stayed with a girlfriend I had there. She played drums in a different tavern around town every night of the week. Magen wailed on those drums. That flat red hair, arm muscles like hemp lines, red plaid shirt rolled up at the sleeves, and baggy dungarees--she was a sight. After a while she wanted me to sleep with her, but I had to explain I wasn't like that. We stayed friends though. Then one night I went to hear her band play and afterwards went back to the house, and around 3:30 the phone rang and it's Magen saying she's at the police station picked up for soliciting-*

*-which is a crock. Fucking cops, I cuss over the phone, because I know she'd say it if she wasn't in the middle of a police station. She tells me her truck broke down a few blocks from the bar and by the time she went back for a ride everyone was gone. So she starts hitching down one of those dusty strips that run through Laramie, just steps out on the side of the road and sticks her thumb out. And even though she's carrying a drum case--since it won't fit in the cab of her truck with the rest of the set--a cop hauls her in like a regular whore. They explain how it's not safe for a young lady to be hitchhiking at three in the morning. She tells me how they won't let her go till she gets a ride. So I say I'll be right down, but when I get dressed and go out to my car--naturally!--it's got a flat. I cuss up and down a while and then see next door the light's still on. So I hop over, bang on the door, and ask the guy inside if he can drive me down to the police station to pick up my girlfriend. He says sure, pulls on his western boots, grabs his keys, and we drive downtown in his big ugly green Bonneville--worst Indian car I ever seen. About two weeks later, I take my stuff out of Magen's and move in next door with Silar.*

She hears a whiskey howl from the park across the street, the little square of grass and cement at the corner where drunks sit on benches and drink all night. Someone bangs the bottom of a trash can. If she bothered to look



out the window she knows what she'd see. Some Indian stomping, stumbling through a dance, a couple people chanting, hooting, cackling from the benches, a bottle of T-Bird being passed around, or dropped and shattering, then the clerk from the convenience store telling them to shut up, as someone watches from a balcony of the high-rise condo nearby. Eventually a patrol car pulls up at the curb, a cop gets out and strolls up to the drunks, hushes them, pours out their wine, checks I.D.s of those who have any, and maybe writes a citation or two. It happens every night. And from her apartment--if she wasn't locked out--she might watch the whole sad performance.

*Me and Silar talked of moving to Vashon Island, getting out of the city, getting a big enough place so I could make my masks again. I've made them ever since my college days in New Jersey. Ever since the night I had my dream that showed me how to make my first mask--features, materials, every detail I needed. Only later did I learn it was a spirit in my dream. In the days at Ramapo I worked on masks in the campus sculpture shed by the duck pond. A bunch of us had a teepee in the woods behind the campus where at night we read poems, chanted, puked up peyote, played with the litter of kittens that seemed to come every couple weeks. That's when being Indian started meaning something to me. But like everyone else claiming Indian ancestry back then, I put on a lot of airs at first, wore buckskin and*

*moccasins and put feathers in my hair, wanting to make a statement.*

She smiles remembering. Then a door slams closed several flights down the stairwell and there's shouting in Spanish between a woman and man. Their voices ricochet up the concrete stairwell. "*Conyo, mujer,*" the man shouts. "*Hijo de puta,*" the woman screeches back. Then the door slams closed again and the shouting becomes muffled. After several moments, it ceases all together, and a hollow quiet returns to the stairwell.

*Gayle and Jack, the white people who adopted me, they were the ones told me at fourteen my mother was full-blooded. I knew they wouldn't make something like that up, even though they couldn't say which tribe. They were good people, all considered. They knew that secrets poison people. They knew if they told me, I might find strength in my heritage, but if I learned the truth on my own, I could resent them for a long time. Which I don't, even though being raised white means I've had to become Indian through my own will, my own imagination. Still, when Gayle and Jack told me, it made sense. Though my face isn't as wide and flat as Indian women I'd seen in pictures--those ones long ago by Edward Curtis or Fred Walcott where everyone's posing--my skin has that deep shade of dried oak leaves and my hair's almost as jet black. I've been told besides, by*

*an Algonquin elder one summer, that being Indian is three things--cultural, spiritual, ancestral. So I made up my mind to be Indian. At Ramapo College I wrote a paper for English class on Indian ceremonies and Transcendentalism. I read all I could about my people. And I kept making masks.*

The drizzle outside turns to downpour. The damp stairwell grows colder, and dimmer. Cars swish up and down Third Avenue. By craning her neck and leaning her head back, she can make out the slant of the rain in the spreading glow of the streetlamps. Past the streetlamps and beyond the tar-black rooftops that lead down to the waterfront, she sees the Sound, a dark expanse stretching toward the distant black shoreline.

*Silar always thought my masks were wonderful. He got me the show at the gallery near the Market. It was run by two white women and they let me have a back corner for six weeks, though I was nervous about showing my masks in public. And I refused to show all the Iroquois False Faces, which need to be bundled and fed and shown great respect. But I showed the others. The P.I. gave my masks a four paragraph write-up, called them pan-Indian. I had one False Face, some Inuit spirit masks, Losh, Sculpin, Seal, a few Kachina masks, and a couple Kwakuitl ones. I had others too. Ones I dreamed up, with Indian, African, Carnival, and Halloween parts all mixed in. Like the plastic Casper the*

*Ghost with feathers and corn husks and gaudy barrettes stuck to it. Or the wool ski mask with shredded newspaper, cowhide, and bones. I sold all but three of twelve masks. Which took getting used to, not having them around the apartment anymore--though the money we took in was fine. Even after a commission for the two lady owners, it was still as much as Si's paycheck from the Harbor Island Tap and Die where he worked. So we started talking of finding a place where I could make masks full time. And not long after the gallery show, Si found this old abandoned resort on the southwest side of Vashon, across the narrows from Kitsap Peninsula. It had cabins, a huge old hall, and a big main house. The guy living there said the place used to be hopping during Prohibition and on through World War II, people coming in on the old Mosquito steamboats for big parties with bands playing, people jitterbugging, crap tables, and booze galore. There was even a general store and post office for the staff. But now it was all run down. The caretaker said the owner was crazy, wouldn't rent, wouldn't sell, didn't even like people snooping around, and he only stayed on because he lived with the old coot's daughter. So that place fell through, and then after a few more trips around the Sound looking at others, nothing panned out and Si and I decided to stick it out in the city. I set up a work-table in the one-room apartment, did a few masks in gauze-mache and junk I picked up in the alleys, but the apartment was too small, shit got everywhere, I became*

*frustrated, and put most of it away--though Si said I shouldn't.*

Someone comes up the stairs. She wraps her arms around her knees and puts her head down so she doesn't have to look up when he steps around her. She can tell he's looking at her as he passes. He seems to pause before opening the door and walking down the hallway.

*Tom I think his name is. Lives down the hall. Silar said he had a beer with him once down at the Liberty Tavern. He doesn't know Silar's dead. Probably just thinks he ran off and left me. But Si wouldn't do that. It took those bastards out by Pasco to take him from me. And I know it was because he was Indian--Cherokee from eastern Oklahoma, one of the five civilized tribes. I don't know what happened but what the police told me. There was a fight outside the bar Si was in, and he got the worst of it. But I know Si didn't get in fights. He'd walk away, even drunk, he'd just leave. I'd seen him do it. That's how I know they jumped him, ganged up on him. Broke his ribs, punctured a lung, and cracked his skull. The state troopers said locals were "involved," that's how they put it. But they never arrested anyone, said there were no witnesses, no positive I.D.s.*

"Fuckers," she shouts with all her might down the

stairs and pounds her hand on the concrete floor before taking a deep breath and trying to calm herself. "I'm Indian too," she whispers. "You can't kill me."

*Si's spirit is still with me. The first mask I made all year was his death mask. When they killed him, I swore myself to him again, like after we first met. I started eating, to rid myself of the emptiness at first, but then just to get big, too big to ignore or kill. Yet so fat another man wouldn't look at me or want me. Because I'm Silar's. I ate up the insurance money from the Tap and Die plant, I ate up our savings, I ate up the money I got from selling the Bonneville. And four months ago I stopped paying rent so I could eat more. I put on about a hundred pounds in a year and didn't leave a cent for rent, heat, power, phone--nothing.*

The door opens and she looks up.

"You okay?" Tom holds the door with one hand, a can of beer with the other.

"I'm okay." She looks away.

"You locked out or something?"

"Something like that," she says. "They changed the lock." She pauses. "I'm behind on rent."

"You still live with...what's his name?...Simon?"

"Silar."

"Yeah, Silar."

"He's dead."

Tom fidgets and looks away. "Sorry."

She watches him a moment, then clasps her hands under her knees.

"You got a place to stay tonight? I mean, I ain't coming on or anything, but if you want, I got a couch you can crash on."

She looks up.

"It's cold out here," he says with a shiver.

"You don't mind?"

"It's just a couch."

She studies him a moment, and says, "I'd appreciate it," and pulls herself up from the step where she's been sitting since early evening. Her muscles are sore. "I think I can get some rent money in the morning."

Tom holds open the door. "You should just move," he tells her. "This place is a dump."

She stands straight and steps into the hallway. As she passes her apartment door with the eviction notice on it, she thinks of Albuquerque, Minneapolis, South Dakota--places Si wanted to move to, places she knows her own people can be found, and decides that if she can find the money, she'll leave tomorrow.

## MAGNUS OPUS

He pulled the covers off and edged his sagging body out of bed. Bunching up the blanket and bed sheet, he heaved them into the corner of the closet, lifted the metal-framed Murphy bed with a groan, and shut the closet door. Most days the bed stayed down.

In his boxer shorts he shuffled into the narrow kitchen--a rectangle of scratched cabinets halved by counter space and a sink--took a dented saucepan off the stove and began making coffee. After a while he lumbered into the bathroom, and when he returned poured some of the fresh coffee into his mug. Too agitated to eat, he retreated to the large, sunken armchair that faced the side-by-side windows facing north. A cool breeze from the open windows mingled with the aroma of coffee and his own stale body odor. Slowly he began to recite the names of the peaks across the bay--Olympus, Kramer, Pillet, Crag, Saliqua--until a firetruck roared by below, sirens wailing like air raid warnings. As he drained his mug, coffee grounds washed over his tongue and their bitterness made him wince.

Most mornings he drank an entire pot just sitting in his chair looking out the window, while afternoons he might stroll down to the public library and read the week-old



newspaper from Norway or sit in the lobby of the apartment building and watch tenants come and go. Life hadn't always been so dull, though he wished to keep it that way. Decades ago in Oslo, a young artist, he'd lived wildly, day to day, in a whirl of painting and carousing about town. At night he produced three, sometimes four canvases before dawn, then during the day knocked around cafes and restaurants with friends and other artists. Urgency overcame him in everything, especially painting.

He shook his head and regarded the cigar stub in the ashtray beside his chair. Only in old age had he learned to keep still, to content himself with the simple things, such as his view of the mountains and the sea, which so closely resembled the serene *Romsdolsfjord* of his homeland.

Yet today, even his view seemed diminished.

Yesterday when the art professor phoned to request an interview, Magnus acted dumb. "Who are you? Paintings?"

"Renewed interest in your work demands it," Professor Kelso, from the University of Washington, explained. "I wish to arrange a retrospective."

"That's long ago," Magnus returned, "I've done nothing in these years," pronouncing each word with the care of someone still learning the language. "I would be no help."

The professor offered to pay him a fee, a considerable one.

Magnus remained uninterested. His modest pension and regular government checks, he knew, allowed him to live

adequately. He didn't need some stranger's bribes.

But Kelso persisted. "One hour, Mr. Olafson, that's all. It would help immeasurably those of us interested in your work."

Trash, Magnus wanted to say, all of it--but didn't.

"Please, Mr. Olafson, it's taken me this long to find you."

The professor's pleading wore Magnus down, and warily, reluctantly, he gave in. He said the professor could come by the next day at noon. "I only have a few minutes," he warned, before hanging up, as doubts already crept over him.

He set his mug on the floor and heaved his heavy body from the armchair. If he was going to go through with it, he told himself, he had better get dressed, and after foraging through the closet he pulled on a wrinkled pair of khakis and a long-sleeved, musty smelling shirt. He added a pair of canvas shoes and a brown cardigan and combed his fingers through his thin white hair.

Just as he was considering whether to make another pot of coffee, a knock came at the door and his stomach gave a sharp twist. He kept very still, holding his breath, and only when the knock came again did he move to answer it.

He opened the door and before him stood a plain-looking man, in his mid-thirties, wearing an orange shell jacket and tan corduroy pants and holding a canvas briefcase in front of him. The man nodded and gave a nervous, friendly smile.

"Mr. Olafson? I'm Professor Lewis Kelso. From the

University. We spoke yesterday?"

Magnus was surprised by how short the man was. "Yes, Yes," he said and ushered him into the apartment. He lead him to the armchair and retrieved a kitchen chair for himself. He sat down but quickly got up again and drew the curtains closed over the picture window which faced a condominium across the street.

"The people there," he pointed, giving an uneasy laugh, "we watch each other's television." He signaled out the north-side windows. "There, there is the real view."

The professor leaned forward and looked out the windows. "Yes, it's lovely."

"Yes," Magnus said, "I think so," and somewhat alarmed, he thought he heard the sibilance and clipped vowels of his accent, an accent too often mistaken for something other than Norwegian.

"It's good to meet you finally, Mr. Olafson. How long have you lived here, in this building?"

Magnus sat down. Beneath his big body the kitchen chair was very uncomfortable. "I can hardly remember," he thought back. "Twenty years? Maybe. Maybe more."

Professor Kelso nodded politely, and then opening his brief case withdrew a small, pocket-sized cassette player. Magnus fidgeted some as he watched him set the device on the arm of the chair.

"I do not think I can help you," he sputtered out. "I have not painted in fifty years. All the paintings now,

they're gone. I live alone--an old man."

Professor Kelso looked up. "Collectors are buying your paintings again," he said directly. "A few have found their way into museums--in Oslo, and New York." The professor watched Magnus closely. "Mr. Olafson, I only want to tape our talk so I don't have to take so many notes. It's nothing."

Magnus stared at the device as if it were a mean, little animal, and finally, rubbing his brow, he signaled the professor to go ahead. When Kelso thanked him, Magnus looked up. "You like coffee, eh?"

Kelso smiled and said, "Certainly, I'd love a cup."

Magnus got up, returned to the kitchen, and pattered away the next twenty minutes making another pot of coffee. When he finally came back, balancing a full mug in each hand, he announced, "I'm a good Norwegian. We like our coffee strong." He handed Kelso one of the mugs and sat down. "*Helse*."

"*Helse*," Kelso replied, and after a single sip set his mug down and pressed a button on the cassette player.

Magnus held his mug to his lips and eyed the professor over its brim. For the next hour, he answered questions about his early years in Norway, his short career as a painter, and life in Oslo before the war. He kept his answers short, pronouncing his words as carefully as possible, and every few minutes scanned the professor's face. He explained how he did almost all his paintings

before the war, a few canvases during the Occupation, and nothing afterwards. Asked about his influences, he shrugged. "Whatever was popular," he said, and went on to tell how after two years at the Art College in Bergen, he got lucky, had three shows in Oslo, and sold several dozen paintings. With the money, he said, he came to America on a fishing boat with fourteen Estonians, worked as a farm hand on Whidbey Island for two years, then moved to Seattle, rented a house near the Ballard locks, and became a janitor at the Boeing plant.

Kelso jotted down notes on a legal pad once in a while but mostly kept his eyes trained on Magnus, who didn't like being watched, who felt he was being studied like an animal specimen by the professor, even judged. After speaking for over an hour, Magnus thought the interview was over, yet the professor, sitting forward, said he needed to know one thing more. Kelso cleared his throat. "Before you left Norway," he said, "I understand you were working on several paintings based on a tone poem by Ricard Strauss. Do you remember these?"

Magnus shifted his weight in the small chair and pressed his mug against his lips. He took two swallows and wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. "They were nothing" he mumbled and glanced away. "I never finished them."

"You remember them, though?"

Magnus grunted, and felt the dull ache in his stomach

again. He looked out the two windows and didn't speak.

"It was the hero series, no?" the professor pressed him.

"Yes," Magnus answered, feeling his perspiration trickle down his side.

"Why Strauss?"

Magnus crossed his right ankle over his knee. "When I was a young man, I was introduced in Switzerland. I heard Ein Heldenleben there. It was very beautiful music. You know it?"

The professor nodded.

"Yes, then. Wagner too. I enjoyed both their music. But no longer." He uncrossed his legs and put both feet flat on the floor. He let his body slump forward, his shoulders slouch. "I think that's all I can tell you," he murmured and stood up.

"Excuse me, Mr. Olafson...", said Kelso, laying down his note pad. "I need to ask this." He leaned forward still further. "Did you know that Vidkum Quisling, when he visited Berlin, presented one of your paintings to Adolph Hitler? Were you aware of this?"

Magnus was motionless, his large face drained and sallow, his arms at his sides. He looked the professor in the eyes and then looked away. When he turned to peer out the window, his view was gone, as if someone had laid a thick, gray gauze over the glass. Sorrow spread through his chest, and the air became nearly too heavy to breath. Mute

and helpless, standing before the professor, he felt like a child summoned before a stern authority for an offense he did not commit.

"Yes, yes, I know," he spoke, finding his voice, and dropped back into the kitchen chair. He tried to take a deep breath, found he could, and closed his eyes in relief. "For some reason, Quisling, he liked my work. He bought three, four canvases, more than anyone else."

When the professor had telephoned him yesterday, he instantly remembered everything, not the specific events, but the bitterness that had overcome him when his brief, coveted acclaim overnight turned into broad, public disgrace. The whole affair seemed to him like a painting that's been primed over, the canvas reused, so that the original work is discovered only years later when the new oils begin to crack. He never intended the association with Norway's notorious collaborator, whose name was now synonymous with "traitor." So why a half century later, half a world away, should he be made to account for it? He'd done nothing wrong, killed no one, betrayed no one.

"I was a pacifist," he began to explain, his voice weak but clear. "I supported Nygaardsvold, who funded the arts before the war so well. Even so, my paintings did not sell well. Then it all..." He let the words trail off. The professor would only believe--as his friends in Bergen had, as the Jewish gallery owners in Oslo had--that he, too, was a traitor.

Kelso sat up in the armchair. "Did you belong to the *Nasjonal Samling*?"

Magnus glared at him. His back went straight and his face hardened, and then, just as quickly, his anger subsided and he slumped back into his former posture. "No," he answered, and as he made the denial it occurred to him that he had wanted this all along. He wanted the professor to ask these questions, the same old questions, because he wanted to answer them--finally, one last time.

"They began to like my work, I couldn't help it." He watched the floor between their feet. "I was new in Oslo. Soon I was having a following. And the *NS* people, they thought they could buy my work, that it would make them legitimate with the intellectuals. But I was never one of them, those Nazis. Never. Then Quisling came to one of my shows."

"When?" Kelso asked. "Was it before the Germans moved in?"

"After." Magnus studied his hands where liver spots had replaced the dribbled paint stains of his youth.

As Kelso scribbled down some notes, the small apartment grew quiet and Magnus glanced out the window again. His view had returned. The teal-green waters speckled with white-caps, the jagged mountains, the roil of clouds, it all provided a strange sort of solace to him. Strains from Ein Heldenleben, loud and eager, then soft and remote, played through his head. He remembered the large canvases he'd



painted to accompany the dramatic tone poem--seven feet long, five feet high, of earthy colors, browns, yellows, greens, and grays, in strokes bold and distinct here, blurred and merging there. First came the hero's stubbornness and defiance, then his adversaries, then the love of his companion, and then his battles--painted when the Nazis closed the university. He meant the hero to represent the artist, yet the *NS* people saw the figure as a soldier, a nationalist, and when the idea caught on his works were labeled propaganda.

"They paid the highest price for them," he admitted. "But when they took over in February, I stopped. 'No more paintings,' I said."

"What year was that?"

Magnus closed his eyes, trying to recollect. "Nineteen hundred and forty-two," he said after a long pause. "I had no more friends, my paintings were no longer mine, my life stolen. I no longer wished to paint."

Something, perhaps skepticism, crossed the professor's face. Magnus paid it no mind. He had never wanted sympathy or even understanding. He had refused to paint the fifth canvas in the series--the hero's self-doubt and final peace with his adversaries--for good reason. There had been no final peace for him. And only doubt.

"Did you have to sell your paintings to them?" Kelso asked.

Magnus continued looking out the window. The sixth and

final movement of Ein Heldenleben, of course, recorded the hero's retreat from the world.

"Have you ever considered painting again?" Kelso asked, his tone more conciliatory.

"No," Magnus replied, as resolutely, he thought, as King Haakon in refusing to abdicate to the Germans. The King had also been an old man in exile.

"One of your paintings sold for \$11,000 last year," Kelso informed him. "An art critic recently called you a 'modern Munch.' How's that make you feel?"

What did it matter? Magnus thought. Could this young professor understand anything? Could he understand his loathing for the Nazis? Everything else--the collectors and curators, the historians and critics--meant nothing. He watched out the window without flinching, no longer acknowledging the professor's presence.

When finally he turned from the windows and rose from his chair, he moved straight toward the door. Kelso quickly clicked off his cassette player, slipped the note pad into his briefcase, and followed.

"I appreciate your cooperation, Mr. Olafson," he said and handed Magnus a business card at the door. "Here's my phone number. If you wish to tell me anything further, please call. I'd like to meet with you in a few days, if that's all right."

Magnus opened the door and stood to the side for the

professor to pass. "No," he said and handed back the business card. "We've said enough. Goodbye, Mr. Kelso."

The professor looked puzzled, even somewhat alarmed, as he stepped into the hallway. Magnus extended his hand and Kelso shook it.

"Goodbye," Magnus said, and closed the door.

For several moments he held the glass doorknob in his hand, then let it go, returned to his armchair, and sat down. He again looked out the windows. Puget Sound stretched west to the rocky curve of Alki Point and north to the shores of Bainbridge Island. Beyond the wide expanse of water--more placid now since the wind had died down and the skies cleared--the Olympic Mountains. Earlier when the day had been overcast and the sunlight muted, the blue peaks, their summits covered in year-round snow, seemed to emerge from the morning fog like a column of soldiers. But now, since the skies had brightened, the mountains appeared more vivid, so distinct in fact it seemed he could trace winding footpaths along their slopes.

As evening came on, Magnus continued to watch out the windows. First the late-afternoon light cast a warm shimmer over the Sound, then the waters turned from yellow to indigo, the sinking sun spread a wide swath of orange across the water's surface, and the mountains faded into the purple evening sky. Only after night came on and his view became completely obscured did Magnus rise from his chair to pull the bed back down.

## SMITTY AND DOLORES

Smitty did not want to move, Dolores was less sure. They had lived in the Cornelius Arms for nearly three decades, longer than all but a handful of the building's residents, most of whom were nice people, though some were not--a few being just plain nasty, the type one circled the block or waited for the next elevator to avoid.

"We've lived here too long to move," Smitty grumbled, seated on the faded red tweed couch, its cushions crushed flat from years of pressure. He crossed his legs and smoothed the wrinkles in his gray slacks. He wore a tan sweater vest and a starched shirt which was yellowed around the collar and cuffs.

Dolores, his wife of fifty-nine years, sat sideways on the straight-back chair that matched the writing desk against the wall. Both pieces of furniture, coated in a creamy white enamel, were considerably chipped. Her beige sweater with crocheted buttons hung loosely over her frail shoulders. Her back was curved, and she rested her forearms across her knees as she considered her husband's words.

"It's supposed to be very safe," she said. "There's a security guard. Eleanor has lived there two years and she's very happy."

"Who would move us?" Smitty asked, as if only this prevented them from relocating. "I don't know." He wasted no time in answering himself. He was doubtful about the prospects of moving into the city housing for seniors and losing his independence. "Have you seen those buildings? They're penitentiaries. Cinderblock walls."

Dolores rolled her eyes. "Our walls are concrete too, Mr. Smith--you know that. Which is why we haven't burned to death--with this lunatic arsonist running around."

In the past month someone had been setting fires in the garbage chute and stairwells, keeping residents on a steady alert, although some had resigned themselves to the situation and barely poked their heads out their doors now when an alarm sounded. But not Smitty and Dolores. Only last month in the middle of the night, when a small fire was set on their floor, grayish smoke filled the hallways, and they had to grope down the dark stairwell in their bathrobes and slippers and wait outside for half an hour until the fire department declared the building safe. Ever since, Dolores had been talking about moving.

"I don't know," Smitty repeated, crossing his arms and turning his head away from his wife. "I'm ninety-two years old. That's too old to move."

Dolores rose slowly to her feet using the back of the chair to steady herself. From under the sleeve of her sweater she pulled a tissue and rubbed a smudge off the thick plate glass that protected the top of the writing

table. "Look at these scratches," she said. She knew that when her husband did not reply he was only sulking, and that his sulking wouldn't last long. They weren't like those elderly couples who never spoke to one another and hobbled about their homes in bitter silence. Maybe it was because of all the years she had been a waitress and Smitty a barber--they both had the gift of gab. "You're a stubborn old man," she said and shuffled past the couch into the kitchen. "I'm going to make coffee. Do you want some?"

"I might walk down to the Market," he replied, watching her place the large kettle on the small electric range. "How will I go to the Market if we live on Beacon Hill? I'll have to take the bus."

"There's a Safeway around the corner. Eleanor says they have a very good fish counter." Dolores scooped instant coffee into two imitation-Wedgewood cups and placed each on a matching saucer.

Smitty doubted that any supermarket fish counter could be as good as the Pike Place Market. Once a week he walked the eight blocks from the Cornelius Arms down to the Market. Until her hip began giving her trouble, Dolores used to accompany him, but now he went alone. Around nine o'clock on the morning of his weekly trek, he polished his brogans, pulled on his light tan raincoat, donned his brown corduroy cap, took up his mahogany cane, and headed out the door and down the darkened hallway to the elevators. From the lobby, he stepped out onto the sidewalk, inspected the sky once,

and set off. Half an hour later, upon crossing the busy corner at Pike and First, he passed beneath the big green "Meet The Producer" sign and entered the Market. He followed the same routine every time. First he stopped at the Athenium for coffee and a heated bear claw; then from one of the vegetable stands he bought a bunch of asparagus and several new red potatoes; next he walked past the tables where the artists and craftspeople sold their goods: paintings, photographs, wood carvings, jewelry, ceramics, homemade jams, honey, and cider; then a quick stop at one of the fish stalls to pick out two filets of snapper (or cod, depending on the season); and finally, via Market Park, where the political candidates gave speeches and the drunks drank their wine, he hiked up the graded sidewalk of Lenora Street and headed home. By early afternoon he was back at the Cornelius handing Dolores the fish and vegetables and--again if the season was right--a bundle of sweetpeas or daffodils purchased from a Loatian woman at one of the flower stalls.

"They have nurses," Dolores said as she carried in the cup and saucer and set them on a small sidetable beside the couch.

Smitty looked up. "We have the Fire Department around the corner. Sirens every half hour. When your hip gave out, they were here in an instant." He snapped his fingers. Then reaching over, he tipped the steaming brown liquid from his cup onto the saucer, placed the cup on a copy of Time,

and sipped his coffee from the saucer.

"Don't slurp," Dolores reprimanded.

For the next half hour they sat without a word between them---traffic noise, slamming doors, an argument in the hallway, the grind and clunk of the elevators the only disruptions to their quiet. Smitty considered the two framed photographs on the wall, one of Dolores in a white wedding veil, the other of himself posing in a white tunic beside his barber's chair.

When a knock came at the door, neither seemed to hear it. When it came again, Smitty looked up, then began to push himself off the couch. "That'll be Taylor," Dolores said as Smitty shambled to the door, peered through the spy hole, and removed the latch chain from its catch.

"Hello, Mr. Evans," he called out upon opening the door. "Hello there. Come in." Smitty stepped to one side and allowed Taylor, a man in his seventies, tall and somewhat stooped, to enter the apartment.

"Good morning," Taylor said, greeting Dolores, who had risen to her feet and with one hand was leaning against the desk. Taylor turned to Smitty. "The arthritis is bad today, Smit. I'm afraid I'd cut my own throat if I tried shaving myself." He raised a hand of gnarled, boney fingers for Smitty's inspection. Until last year Taylor had owned and operated a cab, one of the first black men in Seattle to drive his own cab, but after a series of minor accidents, "fender benders" he called them, his insurance was revoked



and he had to sell the cab and retire.

"You need a shave indeed, Mr. Evans," Smitty said. For the past several months, he'd been shaving Taylor about once a week in the apartment, as a courtesy. "Take a seat," he said and pointed to a big, vinyl-covered recliner in the corner.

Smitty liked to keep his barbering skills honed. Even after he sold his shop on Union Street to Dang Ngyium, the Vietnamese man who had been his apprentice for four years, he liked to go down to the shop just to help out. Yet when most of downtown was blocked off and dug up for the Metro tunnel, Dang had to move the shop to Rainier Valley or else face going out of business, which left Smitty no one to barber.

"I'll see if I can find my razor."

"I appreciate it, Smitty, I really do," said Taylor, as Smitty disappeared into the bathroom near the front door.

When he reappeared, he was carrying a water basin and in it a straight-edged razor, soap mug, foaming brush, two folded white towels, and a long strop.

"I may be ninety-two, but I can still hold a razor steady," he declared, and placing the basin on the sidetable removed his tonsorial instruments. "It's just that no one gives shaves like the old days any longer." Turning to Dolores, he motioned her to pour hot water into the basin and soak one of the towels.

"People in too much a hurry," Taylor remarked,

reclining as far back as the chair would go. "Don't know what they're missing."

From the kitchen Dolores brought in the tea kettle and poured hot water into the basin. Smitty then picked up the steaming wet towel by its corners, squeezed it out carefully, and dangled it over Taylor's face. As he wrapped it around Taylor's cheeks and forehead until only his nose poked through, Taylor groaned contentedly. When Smitty removed the towel after sharpening the razor on the strop, Taylor raised his head off the back of the chair and said, "Heard you two might be moving out."

Dolores, seated back in the chair at the writing desk, answered, "We're weighing our options," paused a moment, then added, "I'm afraid to step out the door anymore, Taylor, or let Smitty take his walks." She gazed steadily out the window, the light catching the purple tint of her chalky white hair left from last month's coloring job. Her mouth was delicately lined, her forehead and cheeks scored with wrinkles. Her hazel eyes, the ones Smitty had fallen in love with, were wide and unblinking.

Smitty glanced at her, bothered by the way she stared out the window. He spoke up then. "Used to be mostly retired people lived here. Folks like us."

Taylor lowered his head. "That was years ago, my friend. The people they let in these days...most of them don't stay longer than a year. Why, they'll let any garbage."

"That's right," Dolores murmured and looked at Taylor.

"Like this Mona woman says, who's trying to organize the tenants," Taylor went on, "if they scare us old timers out, they can tear the place down and put up a new Marriott or Hyatt."

After laying a dry towel across Taylor's chest and tucking it into his shirt collar, Smitty slapped a brush, heavy with foam, across his stubbled face.

"This whole neighborhood's going to pot," Taylor added through the lather.

Smitty passed the brush across his mouth. "This is how I started back seventy years ago," he declared. "Helping out those who couldn't help themselves." He put the brush down and picked up the razor, a four-inch, single-edged blade with a wooden handle--and proceeded to clear a smooth trail through the foam on Taylor's right cheek.

"I was a young man then, no more than seventeen. We were on the front in France, near Reims." He paused and tapped Taylor's shoulder to make sure he had his full attention. "This is World War One, mind."

"That's some history you have there, Smitty," Taylor said.

"I was in the infirmary with a leg blown up good in the trenches a few days before. Laying there in my own blood, I figured I had two choices: I could stay in the trench and let my leg kill me with gangrene or I could crawl off the front line and chance having my head shot off. Since that

leg was all swollen and full of puss, I started crawling, and eventually a couple of fellas found me and dragged me off to where it was safe."

Smitty lifted the razor and paused to see how Taylor was receiving this tale. Eyes closed, Taylor nodded absently, and Smitty resumed shaving him. Dolores, meanwhile, had begun rummaging through the drawers of the writing desk.

"Anyway," Smitty went on, "it was hot and dry in there in France, let me tell you. Like desert that summer. And that infirmary...we sweat night and day just lying on our cots, as still as corpses." He tilted Taylor's chin up and scraped the stubble off his neck.

"There was this fella next to me with crushed legs and a couple of broken ribs, could barely move, couldn't get up to wash or shave and no one around to do it for him. They didn't have pretty Red Cross nurses like you read about. So this fella's whiskers kept getting longer and longer, and eventually he had a beard as thick and tough as a grizzly's hindend and in that heat it was itching him something fierce. I'd hear him whimpering and moaning all night in the cot next to mine. That beard was making him loopy."

Smitty pushed Taylor's nose to one side and then to the other and shaved away the faint moustache he'd grown. Instead of shaving the few remaining rough spots on Taylor's face, Smitty paused again to sharpen the razor.

"I saw this fella was suffering, so I hobbled out of my

cot on my crutches and went over to give him a shave, just like I'm giving you right now. And then he asks me if I'll cut his hair too. Let me tell you, that was one grateful doughboy. Anyway, while I'm shaving him, a major comes in behind me, yet I don't know this and go right on shaving this fella. And when he salutes, I think he's saluting me. Doesn't say a major's looking over my shoulder because he knows I'll stop shaving him. So when I finally turn around and there's the major looking mean and sweaty in his starched uniform like he'll court-martial me right there, all he says is, 'Private, in my quarters,' and marches off. I didn't know what to think."

Smitty shaved Taylor's sideburns and put the razor down. He wiped up the remaining specks of foam with a dry towel and whipped it over his shoulder. Before Taylor could lift himself from the chair, Smitty placed his hand on his shoulder.

"I go to the major's quarters and soon as I step in the door he tosses me a leather case, and when I look in it there's a couple straight razors, a brush, a mug of shaving cream, new pair of scissors, and a few other things, and he just says to me, 'I need a shave and haircut.' Now a private doesn't argue with a major, so I give him one, and it's pretty choppy and he looks like hell, but when I'm done he says he's making me the official barber around there from now on. He kept me in that infirmary right up to when we pulled out, well after my leg had done healing." Smitty

lifted his hand from Taylor's shoulder. "I took that leather case home with me after the Armistice."

"I remember those old razors in that glass case in the old shop."

"I let Dang have them," Smitty said. "Just seemed they belonged with the shop."

Taylor climbed out of the chair and reached for his wallet, yet Smitty pressed his hand on his forearm and stopped him just as he did every week.

Dolores found at last what she'd been hunting for in the desk drawers and in her thin fingers held up a glossy postcard: the top half picturing the Cornelius Arms against a deep azure sky, two '57 Chevys, one white, one red, parked out front at the curb. The lower half pictured a clean, modestly furnished room with walls painted a delicate baby-blue. Dolores flipped the card over, held it at arm's length, and read the back caption. "The Cornelius Hotel. Three blocks to city business center. Everything convenient. Two elevators. No bellboys. Wonderful beds. Modern large clean rooms. Many television sets. Away from noise. Lots of adjacent parking. Fireproof. Complete kitchen available." She stopped and looked up. "How's that for luxury?"

"Let's see that," Taylor said, and Dolores handed him the postcard. He examined it a moment, then asked, "Who was it sung that song about the bluest skies in Seattle. I always forget, but I know it was either that Perry Como or

Andy Williams."

"That picture's from the old hotel days when the old man still owned the place," Smitty told him. "Remember him? Old Cardason. Bishop in the Mormon church. Not a bad fella actually. He'd say good morning at least and fix something if it needed fixing."

"I never liked him," Dolores snipped, taking the postcard from Taylor and returning it to the desk drawer. "He seemed cold to me."

"Now the son, he's the one I never liked none," Taylor said. "I've seen him round here no more than once or twice in the five years he's had run of the place since his daddy died. And it's gone straight downhill ever since then too."

"He's a fancy-pants lawyer downtown," Dolores said. "What's he care?"

"I heard he's been storing food for Armageddon, like Mormons supposed to, in one of those storage rooms in the basement."

Smitty waved this notion off and gathered up his shaving implements.

"Maybe I'll pick up a can of peas next time I'm down doing laundry," Taylor said and laughed, ambling his way toward the door. Smitty followed him, while Dolores stayed seated.

"Thank you folks again," Taylor said, fitting his knotted fingers around the glass door knob and turning it with difficulty. "I do appreciate it."

"My pleasure, sir," Smitty replied. When he smiled, the folds of his face deepened about his mouth and his moist, red-rimmed eyes. "It's good to see a clean shaven man going about his day."

"Well, it's good to know there're still a few of us old-timers around this place, let me tell you." Taylor stepped into the hallway. "You let me know if there's anything I can do for you two?"

"Thank you, Taylor," Dolores called to him.

Smitty shook Taylor's hand, watched him walk down the hallway, and then closed the door. When he returned to the couch, he moved slowly and seemed tired. "Taylor's alright," he said.

"He's got the arthritis bad, poor man," Dolores said.

"We've been lucky," Smitty replied, and slumped down on the couch and closed his eyes.

Dolores rose to her feet, took up her cup and saucer along with Smitty's, and shuffled back to the kitchen with them.

Smitty passed most of the afternoon sitting in the paneled lobby of the Cornelius Arms watching the various comings and goings. Around three o'clock, Magnus Olafson, a burly Norwegian in his eighties, joined him and together they sat quietly, only occasionally remarking on a new face passing through the lobby or a piece of news from the



morning Post-Intelligencier.

When a young, scruffy-looking man charged into the front foyer and found both front doors locked, he began rapping hard on the plexiglass, signaling Smitty and Magnus to let him in. At first they ignored him, yet as the man persisted, Smitty cleared his throat and called out that they couldn't let anyone in who didn't have a key.

"If I had a key, gramps, I'd let myself in," the man yelled back and banged the plexiglass some more.

Smitty did not budge. Cornelius Arms policy prohibited tenants from admitting strangers into the building. "You can ring the manager," he advised the man without looking up. "He's the only one can let you in."

When the stranger, cussing them both, finally gave up and stormed out of the foyer, Magnus said, "All kinds try to get in. They get in and break in your apartment or mug you on the stairs. I tell you, Smitty, I don't know how come half the people here has keys. There was a young man on my floor I see peeing in the hallway just last week. I tell the manager, but he's done nothing. Still I see the man. They don't kick him out just because he pees on their carpets. He's got to kill someone." Magnus shook his head and stared out the door.

Smitty stroked his chin, then pushed his hat back and rubbed his brow. "It's not like it was, Mr. Olafson. People don't take care of what they have. Dolores and I, we've always rented. All the same, I believe that where you

live is like our own. I respect it, take care of it. But today...this terrible homelessness and then the drugs. Used to be you knew who you rented from. Getting your toilet fixed didn't mean your rent would go up. So I don't know, Mr. Olafson, I honestly don't know." Smitty crossed his legs and folded his arms, and he and Magnus Olafson drifted back into their watchful silence.

As the afternoon wore on, Magnus left and Smitty dozed off in his chair. Around five-thirty, after snoring away an hour or more, he came to, looked about, and tried frantically to figure out where he was. Where were the mirrors, the chairs, the waiting customers? Then, recognizing the paneling and threadbare carpet, he realized he was still in the Cornelius Arms lobby.

Just as he began to stir--to return upstairs to see how Dolores was coming along--the passenger elevator opened and she appeared wearing her black orthopedic shoes, her gray wool skirt, and her crimson overcoat. The paisley kerchief on her head was snugly tied beneath her chin. As she stepped gingerly forward, a middle-aged man also riding down kept the elevator door from closing on her.

Smitty approached, thanked the man, and took his wife's elbow, having forgotten that they'd made plans to eat out. With arms linked, they made their way out the front doors, carefully crossed Blanchard Street, and strolled down the sidewalk several yards until they reached the Unique Cafe.

Smitty held the door open and followed Dolores into the

fluorescent-lit restaurant. The white-washed walls were bare except for a pink, spindly-legged Alaskan crab on a backdrop of crumpled fish net, a Chinese calendar picturing a tall pagoda amidst blossoming cherry trees, and a wood-framed clock shaped like a ship's barometer. There were three tables with chairs near the large front window, three booths against the right wall, and toward the back a waist-high counter with several stools bolted to the linoleum floor. Near the entrance, loud chatter and laughter trickled from a passageway that led into the bar lounge. Behind the counter, through a large rectangular cut in the wall, the owner, Mr. Wo, slapped food onto a hot grill, dished it onto sturdy white plates, and dinging the small bell on the window ledge hollered, "Oda up."

Smitty helped Dolores off with her overcoat and hung it with his cap on the coatrack. As soon as they had settled themselves into one of the booths, Beryl, the veteran waitress at the Unique, came over and handed them each a laminated menu with Today's Specials scrawled on index cards and paper-clipped to the top.

"How are my two favorite senior citizens," she asked, her hands flapping about her head and upper body due to her advanced Parkinson's Disease. "Are you as old as Bob Hope, Smitty? I heard on the news today he's going to be 97?"

"Smitty is only 93" Dolores told her. Having waitressed for thirty years at Ivar's Seafood House on the waterfront, a far classier restaurant in her estimation than

the Unique, Dolores frowned on Beryl's overly casual manner with her customers.

"Well, anyway," Beryl said. "What can I get you?"

Smitty examined the menu. One side listed Chinese dishes, the other side American. "I think...let me see here...I'll have pork fried rice, and maybe...how about a cup of won ton soup?"

Dolores closed her menu and handed it to Beryl. "A grilled cheese sandwich for me, Beryl, and coffee, please."

"I think I'll have iced tea," Smitty added.

Beryl steadied her hands long enough to jot down their orders and then returned behind the counter to give the order slip to Mr. Wo. Meanwhile Smitty and Dolores sat quietly watching the other customers come and go--older people, workers, a homeless man mumbling to himself--most of them familiar faces from around the Denny Regrade. Along with the Frontier Room and the Dog House, the Unique was one of the few places left in the neighborhood where a person could still get a meal for under five dollars.

When Beryl set their food before them, they each shook out their paper napkin, picked up knife and fork, and began to eat. Smitty slurped his soup and then shovelled up half the fried rice heaped in a mound on his plate, while Dolores carefully cut her sandwich into bite-size sections and chewed each bite carefully.

When Beryl returned to refill their water glasses, she set the pitcher of ice water on the table and slid into the

booth next to Smitty. "So how you two making out?" she asked loudly.

"The government sends our checks," Smitty answered and took a drink of iced tea. "Though you never can tell what'll happen with this Bush fella." In his day, Smitty had fancied himself somewhat of a radical. During Seattle's labor revolts in the twenties, he cut hair for free in the union halls, and years later in his own shop he taped political cartoons and editorials to the mirrors and argued politics with his customers as he shaved them.

"He don't have to worry about doctor's bills," he said, content now simply to scold any and all politicians.

Changing the subject, Beryl asked, "How much longer you two going to stay in that building across the way?"

Smitty looked at Dolores, who returned his look. Who would have thought it would come to this, she seemed to ask him. Thirty years ago they were happy living in the small house they rented on the western slope of Capital Hill. Then the freeway gouged its way through and they had to relocate. Now it was crime and high rents forcing them out. Maybe, Smitty sometimes thought, they wouldn't have had all this grief if they hadn't lived so long.

"A young man was in for breakfast yesterday," Beryl proclaimed, "works for a group that helps people keep their homes. He told me the owners over there are going to evict everyone and turn the place into condos like they did the Carlin. Said it would cost fifty thousand dollars just to

buy back your apartment. Can you imagine?" She whistled through her teeth and shifted the salt and pepper shakers and ketchup bottle around the table, her way of making use of her nervous disorder.

"I don't even have fifty dollars," Smitty grinned.

"But maybe the bank'll give me a long-term loan."

"You lived there, Beryl," asked Dolores. "Why'd you move?" Beryl had been in the apartment below theirs, the one the rock band now occupied.

"I moved in with my son," Beryl explained. "You remember. I introduced you. Oh, I was sorry to lose my view. I loved to sit and watch the sunset behind the mountains." She wagged her head and shifted Smitty's water glass. "I miss the place sometimes," she said and pushed herself up from the booth. "I do. But I'm not sorry I left it. Dessert?"

Dolores and Smitty both waved off the suggestion.

Beryl continued her rounds, leaving them to themselves. As Smitty swallowed a pill for his blood pressure, Dolores sipped her coffee and looked out the front window. The dim blue evening light washed over the street. When they decided to leave, Smitty laid a dollar bill on the table, helped Dolores on with her overcoat, and walked up to the cash register. Dolores signaled him to pay for the two Peppermint Patties she helped herself to from the bowl next to the register.

As they waited for Beryl to find their ticket and ring

it up, sirens could be heard wailing in the distance---high-pitched screeching and deep horn blasts. The noise quickly became louder and more deafening.

"They do make a racket," Beryl shouted.

"Payday at the firehouse," Smitty said, just as loud, and held out his palm for the change Beryl counted out.

"You take care of yourselves," she said.

Dolores waved, covered her ears with both hands, and moved toward the glass door, where peering out she waited for the sirens to subside before stepping out onto the sidewalk.

Instead of fading off, though, they reached their most ear-piercing pitch and then stopped. A reddish light strobed across the face of the two-story brick building across the street. Smitty pushed the door open and escorted Dolores outside. Neither spoke. They walked down the sidewalk at their normal pace, but as they reached the corner, they stopped. Across the street, a hulking fire engine and an EMS van were pulled up to the curb in front of the Cornelius Arms. Fire fighters in phalanged hats and rubberized coats scrambled into the building, a thick firehose trailing them. Two paramedics in dark blue shirts, one carrying a medical bag, the other a collapsible stretcher, followed.

Smitty and Dolores hurried across the street. When they reached the entrance, a firefighter blocked their way.

"We've had a fire on the fifth floor, folks.

Everything has to be checked out before anyone goes back in."

Smitty and Dolores glanced at one another, their alarm subsiding as they realized the fire wasn't on their floor and their belongings were probably safe. Dolores laid her hands flat on her chest in relief.

"Is it that arsonist fella?" Smitty asked the firefighter.

"Could be," he answered.

People were gathering near the front entrance. One of the firefighters came out and reported that a chair cushion had been set smoldering in the hallway and the medics were bringing down an old guy who'd inhaled too much smoke.

"Should be okay," Smitty heard the firefighter explain to his colleague. "Couldn't get his door open, probably panicked, and his asthma kicked in. Nice old guy, too."

The next instant the two paramedics wheeled a stretcher out the front entrance and onto the sidewalk. Smitty immediately recognized Taylor laid out on the stretcher, a clear plastic mask strapped over his mouth and nose, his hands laying curled on top his stomach, his eyes closed.

Dolores gripped Smitty's arm as they stepped forward and looked down at their friend. "We know this man," she said.

"Excuse us, ma'am," the paramedic warned and pushed the stretcher toward the curb.

"Where are you taking him," Smitty asked, following the



paramedics to the rear of the ambulance. "This man's our friend."

"He'll be admitted to Harborview, sir. He suffered a fair amount smoke inhalation." One of the paramedics hopped onto the back of the ambulance.

As the stretcher was lifted up, Taylor opened his eyes and looked at Smitty. He raised his right hand as if to wave but then slid the back of his fingers down his right jaw and over his clean-shaven chin. He grinned weakly beneath the oxygen mask. The paramedics heaved the stretcher into the back of the ambulance and closed the door.

"Okay, folks," the firefighter called to people loitering about. "You can go back in now."

Smitty stepped back onto the sidewalk where Dolores stood. They watched the ambulance bleep its lights twice and head off for the hospital.

"They're taking him to Harborview," he repeated to her.

Dolores did not respond. As she stared down the street, Smitty watched her with concern. She was right, he thought. They couldn't live in such a place any longer.

As tenants filtered back into the building, the firefighters rewound their hose, climbed onto their truck, and drove off.

"I'll call Senior Services in the morning," Smitty said. "Maybe they can help us move."

At the sound of her husband's voice, Dolores looked him

in the face. She watched him a moment, the worry in his eyes, the sincerity. The thought that they might have been burned out of their home terrified her. She thought of their life in the Cornelius Arms, simple as it was, the two of them perched on the seventh floor like two nesting geese, their splendid view of the mountains and Sound, the memories and habits they'd established in their small, corner apartment over the years. Would those habits relocate? Would they serve them as well elsewhere? She stepped close to Smitty, touched his forearm, and nudged him toward the entrance.

## LEATHERS

In high-peaked hat, black leather jacket, and skimpy white briefs, Michael waltzed about the apartment, bare legs and pale feet flashing in the body-length mirror on the closet door, until swinging it open and entering the narrow closet, he stopped. Closing his eyes, he pictured Paul, tall and naked, standing behind him, wrapping his arms around his chest, licking his shoulder, his erection pressed against the back of his exposed thighs.

He opened his eyes, released a big sigh, and snatched up off the floor his favorite old blue jeans--the ones nearly too tight for him, though he hadn't put on an ounce in ten years--and after squirming into them strapped on his black leather chaps. He then pulled on a pair of motorcycle boots, tucked in his white tank-top, zipped the jacket half way up, and stepped back from the mirror to size himself up.

"A man after my own heart," he crooned, adjusting his hat.

He'd been invited by word of mouth to a party at Tugs where a friend of Paul's--someone named Nathan he couldn't remember Paul ever mentioning--was having a birthday party. He suspected a youngish crowd, which worried him some. Slim and boyish as his figure still was--more from chainsmoking

than diet or exercise or anything else--he could not deny his age. It showed in every crease and crevice in his face, and in the ever-graying hair on his head.

He leaned toward the mirror and with the flats of his hands stretched back the loose flesh around his cheeks and forehead. Even then, the dark bags beneath his eyes drooped like olive oil sacs. He might apply mascara--it was Tugs after all--but then none of the young Turks these days went in for that kind of showy stuff. All so health-conscious, he thought, so damn body beautiful.

He zipped up his jacket the rest of the way, plucked up his keys from the kitchen counter, and headed out. In the lobby of the Cornelius, where he'd lived now eight years, he ignored the stares of the three old men sitting in the lobby. Yet once out on the sidewalk, walking alone as he was, he felt uneasy, nervous, as if he were being watched. Who knew when a gang of skinheads would spring from the alley and like they did that poor Rodriguez man in New York, hit him on the head with a hammer, stab him with a kitchen knife, and leave him to die? Whenever Paul, tall, dark, unshaven, had accompanied him, people would stare--they always stare--but they never gawked, never snickered. But alone, by himself, short, slight, not half as rugged-looking as Paul, he felt more vulnerable, more defenseless, even against that insistent gawking. Keeping his eyes straight ahead, he locked his sights on that invisible point on the horizon, past the heads of everyone who passed. All the

same he continued to feel their stares coating him like some sticky, corrosive film.

He reached for his wrist. Like having a loved one's photo or a lucky amulet, rubbing the leather wristband Paul had given him--four inches of black leather buffed to a high-gloss finish with two rows of gleaming studs--boosted his courage. He wore it everywhere, cherishing it as a token of the strength he'd always found in Paul, who had occasionally worn a matching wristband which Michael liked to call its "mate."

Lately, though, when he rubbed the soft leather band, he also remembered the day Paul had given it to him. Joking around he accused Paul of adoring anything studded. "Me included," he said, and instantly, upon hearing this, Paul huffed and puffed and turned very remote, resenting as he did any suggestion that their existed a powerful mutual affection between them, that they were in love. He lectured Michael on how he wouldn't tolerate his emotionalism.

Two blocks from Tugs, Michael no longer felt so up for a party. Admittedly, he wasn't the social butterfly he'd once been. After decades of parties, more than he cared to count, he was losing his touch. He no longer received the invitations he used to--so many people simply weren't here anymore--and besides, what parties there were seemed to pale next to the wild affairs he could remember if he only wanted to. Debauchery wasn't what it used to be, parties were so much more tame and inhibited these days--restraint

everywhere like a bad smell.

He turned the corner on Second Avenue and headed in the direction of his shop half way down the street. It was only two blocks from Tugs, Seattle's most notorious gay bar, which some people might think bad for business. But what did they know? And what did he care? He maintained a small clientele and enough street trade to pay the rent and bills, while insurance paid for his medicine. So what more did he need?

From the outside, in the late evening light, the custom framing shop didn't look like much. The windowbox was crowded with framed black-and-white hunk posters, assorted frame samples, a two-year old SALE sign, and his beloved calico cat asleep on a wedge of matting. The cluttered look, which he knew was really only neglect, lent the window a certain charm. He simply didn't have the energy to dress a big window anymore. Not like the old days when he spent two straight summers studying window design at New York's Fashion Institute. Now he couldn't even keep the cat out of the window.

As he took out his keys and began to open the door, he peered down toward the Korean brothers' small grocery. Two winos were haggling on the sidewalk, counting their money and panhandling anyone who walked by. Last year Michael had urged the city with petitions and letter writings to ban fortified wine in the Denny Regrade. In response, officials claimed the winos would only go elsewhere. So he tried

asking the Koreans to stop selling the MD 20/20 and Thunderbird, arguing it only caused them trouble--what with drunks passing out on the sidewalk, peeing in doorways, breaking bottles, harassing customers--yet the brothers said the wine was their biggest seller and they couldn't drop it.

A big swollen-faced man with cuts on his hands, his dirt-encrusted pants falling down, sauntered up the sidewalk from the grocery store. Standing down wind, Michael caught a whiff of his stench. The man stopped in front of the shop, eyed Michael up and down, and slurred, "Those fancy duds, pardner. Where can I get some like 'em?"

Michael slipped into the shop and after locking the door kept a close eye on the man to make sure he didn't make any trouble. He'd already replaced the front window twice in three years after it had been shattered, and he was fed up. As the man staggered on, Michael pulled the shade down on the glass door and stepped over to the windowbox.

"Gertie, Gertie, Gertie."

The orange and tan feline arched her back, leapt off the foot-high windowbox, and made a quick pass around his ankles before prancing toward the back where her food dish was. Michael scanned the front room--"the gallery," he liked to call it--to see that everything was in order: the large poster bins, the display works on the walls, the framing samples on the pegboard, the wire rack of artsy postcards, the magazine table with high-gloss copies of Architecture Digest and Framing scattered across it, the two director's

chairs, and the matting and wood scraps strewn on the floor. He looked at his most recently completed project, the Doisneau kiss poster--*Le Baiser de L'Hotel de Ville*--suspended in a shiny bluish-grey frame. In recent years, since his diagnosis, he'd been specializing in prints and photos of people kissing and now had an entire rack of such works. He'd collected dozens of portraits of kissers--young and old, straight and gay, black and white--and even thought once of mounting an exhibition. Nonetheless, he lacked the one photo he most desired--one of him and Paul. Paul would not allow him to take it. And too bad, too. Their height difference would have made a splendid composition. They could have both worn their leathers. He would have enlarged the photo and specially framed it. It would have been the next Eisenstaedt.

"I do fine work," he said to himself and leaned the Doisneau poster back against the wall. The cat meowed at the doorway leading to the back. "Gertie, ol' gal. *Ma petite chatte* wants a little appetizer before *le* big party?"

He followed the cat into the back. After taking a can of cat food from a shelf and fetching the opener from the sink in the bathroom, he twisted open the can and scraped the contents into an aluminum dish. The cat sprang onto the large worktable in the middle of the room and chomped at its food. Michael sat on a tall wooden stool watching. He couldn't understand why Paul was never fond of Gertie. If she happened to jump onto his lap, he picked her up and



tossed her half way across the room, and if she purred at his ankles he shooed her away with his boot. Sadly, he seemed to fear even the smallest creature's affections. A condition which only seemed to grow worse. At times, he could even become quite cold and distant, spurning anyone who dared love him, regarding such a person as a fool.

Michael reached out and stroked Gertie, her soft back arching. He went to the large filing cabinet against the wall and pulled open a middle drawer, knowing right where to look for the only photo of Paul he did have--a Polaroid snapshot from the day they drove in Paul's battered, baby-blue Rambler to Poulsbo out on the Kitsap Peninsula.

He returned to the worktable with the photo. In it, Paul stands on one of the Poulsbo docks, fishing vessels moored on both sides with nets and rigging strewn over their decks, a mid-morning mist lingering over the small, tucked-away bay. In his frayed denim jacket and black jeans, faded where his goods bulged, he could have been any horny, unshaven fisherman back from a lonesome sea voyage. Michael remembered how, after taking the photo, they sat on a bench not far from the docks and he placed his hand on Paul's crotch and like Gertie's back it rose toward his warm palm. He also remembered, later on, hugging Paul on a Poulsbo sidewalk in front of an imitation-Alpine storefront with a Norwegian flag draped in the front window. As they lingered in the embrace, retired couples from a tour bus trundled past them into a nearby bakery that sent out the warm

fragrance of funnel cakes and coffee. It was one of those special moments, the most memorable Sunday of his life, and the only time he and Paul had ever ventured out of the city together. And although he had always wanted more such excursions, Paul, for whatever reasons, had always said no.

One day, early in their short-spanned time together, even before the wristband incident, Paul came right out and said, "We can't love one another." For Michael, the words rang as terrible and piercing now as they did then. "One of us will get sick," he went on, "and I won't stand another loss, I'm sorry. There's been too much already." He was so decisive, so adamant, how could anyone argue with him? Michael finally relented, accepting Paul's terms, but skeptical, even scornful of them to the end. He thought Paul was acting atrociously, like a selfish little boy. To think they could carry on a relationship like theirs, so passionate, and yet keep their emotions in check. The notion was absurd, blatantly absurd. But then, Michael supposed, that's how it was when facing mortality. We *become* absurd, he thought--all sense falls away.

Michael knew he wasn't totally blameless. He knew part of the thrill of being with Paul was the doomed, abandoned quality of their sex together, the freedom to throw caution to the wind since caution had already failed them both. Sex, for however much time remained, could be as wild and unrestrained as in the old bathhouse days. Back then love never figured in much either. It was all physical, let's

get physical. Which was part of the thrill--though later part of the panic too. With Paul, each orgasm became, as some people thought of heartbeats, a winding down, a subtraction from your allotted amount, leading to your eventual demise. It became essential to strive for the most ecstatic orgasm each and every time, the one that would seal the moment forever. Though it never did, and afterwards only seemed to hurry the end. So while sex with Paul at times was like plunging into a vast restorative lake which protected one from the world's rampant disease and bigotry, at other times it was like playing on an abacus, one by one the beads pushed to the opposing side.

Michael held the photo in front of him. "So what," he said and placed it to his lips. Laying the photo down and picking up his cigarettes, he lit one and filled his lungs with the warm, soothing smoke before exhaling it across the room. He took several more languid pulls and recalled how Paul never approved of his smoking, had himself quit shortly after they met, being one of those who went in for holistic cures. Macrobiotics, vitamins, exercise, wellness imaging. Michael, on the other hand--unlike so many people who discover themselves toting around a fatal disease--was never convinced drastic lifestyle changes would do much good, especially after the fact. You were who you were, and except for the inconvenience of strapping on a condom or rubber glove, he wasn't going to abandon the petty vices he cherished so dearly. For what? If his vices didn't

exacerbate his condition, the stress of quitting them would. Hadn't testing positive caused enough stress already?

He smoked his cigarette down and lit another off it. Getting up, he tacked the photo of Paul to the cork board behind him and crossed the workroom to retrieve the bottle of Courvoisier from the cabinet where he kept his tools. He took out two snifter glasses, inspected them, and returned the dirtier of the two to the cabinet. He then poured himself three fingers of the amber liquor. Even Paul, health conscious as he was, he recalled, liked a taste of brandy now and then.

"To tutus," he toasted, and sipping the brandy swished it between his cheeks before swallowing. "Remember the tutu, Gertie? Those long, slender legs of Paulie's that would put Baryshnikov to shame?"

He took another sip as the scene came back to him like the racy outtake from a favorite movie--how last Halloween they went to a costume party at Tugs, Paul as a ballerina, and Michael, because he was so short, as Marlon Brando in the Wild Ones. While he wore his every day leathers, *sans* chaps, and stuck several wads of cotton under his lower lip, Paul went all out, donning tights, slippers, stretch top, silk gloves, and a frilly pink tutu. On his head he wore a cheap plastic tiara. Around 4:00 A.M., when the party was over and they were both silly drunk, they tottered back to the shop for some brandy. As soon as they got inside, Paul, in a moment of drunken exuberance, dashed off his tights,

jumped onto the big square worktable, and began pirouetting about in nothing but his tutu. Startled at first, but too drunk to care, Michael applauded and shouted, "Brava! Brava!"

He emptied the snifter glass. "And you said you weren't in love...", he said, remembering how they made love that same morning on the worktable.

He looked at his watch. Nearly midnight. Anyone who was going to the party at Tugs was probably there by now-- ordering drinks, getting kissy-kissy, all that. He wondered again who this Nathan was. Maybe Paul had mentioned the name once or twice, he couldn't really be sure. A passing acquaintance, that sort of thing. Certainly if there had been more to it than that, he would have known. As it was, all he did know was what Alex, the friend who'd invited him, had reported that Nathan came all the way from merry England, was extremely cute, and was eager to meet Michael.

Michael took off his storm trooper's hat and ran his hand through his thinning hair and down the back of his neck. In six months, or a year, or more if he were lucky-- whenever the AZT stopped working and the pneumonia or sarcoma or whatever set in--at that point thinning hair and a scruffy neck would matter precious little, he thought, sighing, and put his hat back on. He wondered if anyone from the support group where he met Paul might show up. Would they ask why he hadn't come around lately, why he showed up only once after Paul had left and never again

since word of his death reached Seattle? Could he, would he, explain to them that when he heard that Paul had died he simply wanted to stop thinking about diseases, just void his mind, and give it all a rest? Not exactly pretend they didn't exist--because he'd done his dance with denial and knew it only lead to greater grief--but just give it a rest. He hated the fretting he was so prone to. He'd had enough. And it seemed the support group--though fabulous early on--only made a worrisome situation worse.

Weeks ago he decided that when his time came he wouldn't disappear as Paul had, escaping to a distant city, holing up in a strange hospital, and dying like a wounded animal that retreats to the woods. That's what people wanted. When Paul's symptoms first appeared--the fatigue, the diarrhea, the weight loss, the nagging sniffles--he ignored them, hid them from Michael, though Michael suspected all along. And then one day he just disappeared, puff, into thin air. Michael called and called and at last went to Paul's apartment and talked the landlord into letting him in. Everything was gone. The antiques, the books, the framed artwork, kitchen wares, wardrobe, everything. Later he found out most of it had been donated to Good Will. In less than two days, Paul had pulled up stakes and left. What was there to do? He always expected to be with Paul to the end. But clearly Paul had other ideas, and went off to die by himself, convinced, more than likely, that the past seven months between them had been

merely physical, meant nothing.

Michael squinted back his tears. It was a full five months since Paul left and one month since word filtered up from a Phoenix hospital that he died "of complications"--a phrase Michael never could come to terms with, preferring to believe dying was a simple affair, it happened or it didn't. He lit another cigarette and tried to compose himself. Before long, another two months, and more time would have passed than the entire time they were together.

After a while he got up, filled Gertie's water bowl, checked to be sure the windows were locked, turned the lights off in back, and stepped into the front gallery. He scratched Gertie behind the ears and left the shop, thinking it would be best if he went back to the Cornelius and went to bed. As he locked the door from the sidewalk, he could hear music reverberating down the street from Tugs. Bursts of laughter and shouting escaped the bar as the front door opened and closed. It sounded like a party all right, lots of people, noise, drinking.

"Oh heck," he said, and rather than crossing the street to go back to the Cornelius, he cocked his hat forward and strode down the sidewalk to Tugs. As he neared, several pairs of men walked in, some in leathers, some older, some preppy types too. A mixed crowd in all. When he reached the heavy flat-black door and pushed it open, he felt the

noise from inside crash over him like a wave, strong and frothy, and pull him in with its undertow. A man perched on a stool just inside the doorway solicited donations for the local chapter of Act Up, and Paul tossed a ten dollar bill into his red beach pail.

"Love your chaps," the man said.

"Thank you," Michael said. "They're even better without jeans."

"I'm sure," the man smiled.

Michael squeezed his way through the tightly packed crowd to the bar, where he ordered a vodka collins. The bartender reached over and gave him a peck on the cheek.

"I want you to frame something for me, Michael. A wonderful big Elvira poster I found at the flea market last weekend."

"Of course, Billy. Bring it in and we'll pick out something special. Something Elvira-ish." Michael had to shout over the noise in the room. Billy reached below the bar for a bottle and began mixing the drink. When he slid it across the bar, Michael leaned toward him and asked, "Where's the birthday boy?"

"He's in the back. The tall one with curly hair. Cute accent, too."

"Thanks, Billy."

Billy nodded. "I'll bring the poster in next week."

Michael raised his glass to him and put a five dollar bill on the bar. He pushed his way through the crowd again,



trying for a closer look at Nathan. Edging toward the jukebox, he rested his drink on top of the machine, dropped several quarters in the slot, and pushed some buttons. A Prince song spilled out from the ceiling speakers. When he turned around, he spotted the birthday boy swaying to the rhythm across the room. He was lean, almost as lean as Paul, but not as tall. He was younger too, yet not by much. A half dozen gold earrings looped through his right earlobe and a small silver crucifix dangled from the left. He wore a billowy white shirt, the kind Ryan O'Neil wore in Barry Lyndon, blue jeans, and scruffy black shoes with pointed toes. Michael could understand why anyone, including Paul, would be interested. People on both sides put their arms around him and kissed him on the lips or cheek, wishing him a happy birthday. All the while he continued to sway and occasionally tilt back a pint of beer.

After leaning against the juke box and sipping his vodka collins through two more songs, Michael spotted Alex across the room and waved to him. Alex sidled his way nearer while balancing a champagne glass in the air above his head.

"Michael," he cried out, "You came!"

"You're looking perky," Michael said and reached one arm around Alex's shoulder and gave him a half-hug.

"I want to introduce you to `Oliver'. That's what we call him since his visa expired last month. He's on the lam now. His real name's Nathan. But you know that. Well, at

any rate, he's just a poor little waif now."

"He doesn't look so forlorn," Michael said.

"Oh he is, he is. You'll like him." Alex took Michael's hand. "Come along. I'll lead the way."

They squeezed their way through the crowd, and when they reached Nathan, Alex walked straight up to him, kissed him on the cheek, and spun around to pull Michael closer.

"Michael, this is Oliver. Oliver, this is my good friend Michael, whom I think you already know something about."

Before Michael could sort out this introduction, Nathan extended his hand to him. "Delighted," he said with lilt of his British accent.

"The pleasure's mine," Michael replied, feeling somewhat unreceptive toward this upstart illegal alien.

"And, oh yes, Happy birthday."

"Thank you. That's sweet. Thirty-six, you know, solidly middle-aged. But then what's one more year, right?"

"Wait till you're pushing fifty," Michael said.

Nathan reached past Michael's shoulder and took a pint of beer which someone held out to him. Michael thought him rather crude.

"You know, mate," Nathan went on after taking a gulp of beer, "we have a friend in common."

"Do we?"

"Yes, indeed. Or rather, *did*, I should say. I was with him in Phoenix several months ago. I used to live there,

you know."

Michael understood then. He saw it all in an instant-- as if he'd known all along and been unable to admit it-- exactly how things had been with Paul. He hadn't simply fled into the woods to die as he'd imagined. He hadn't been alone. And yet, what of it? So what if, instead, he ran off to a younger lover with a foreign accent? Wasn't that how it always was in the movies? It was his life after all, his dying, and he could damn well play it out as he pleased. Anyway, they weren't in love.

Michael looked at Nathan and asked, "Were you with him?"

Nathan nodded. "When I mentioned I was coming to Seattle, he told me about you, said I should look you up. He wanted me to give you something." Nathan put his beer glass on a table. Then, reaching out, he placed his hands behind Michael's head, drew him close, and planted a solid kiss on his lips. "That was the first."

Michael leaned back, a bit stunned, as Nathan began unbuttoning his shirt cuff and folded up the sleeve.

"This was the other," he said, and revealed on his arm a black leather wristband with two rows of studs, identical to the one Michael already wore, the one Paul had given him--its "mate". Michael watched as Nathan pulled at the leather laces and unfastened the band. When Nathan finally got it off and held it out to him, Michael stood back, unsure whether to accept it or not.

"He told me you were fond of studs."

Michael looked up and stared. "You lived together in Phoenix?"

"Until three weeks before--"

Neither said anything more. Nathan drained his glass, and Michael continued to watch him. Didn't he have a right to the wristband? Why should he let this Nathan keep it? He had said Paul wanted him to have it. Wouldn't two keep Paul's memory alive better than one?

"Thank you," he whispered, and took the wristband. Nathan leaned forward and pressed Michael's head on his shoulder. Michael didn't resist, but after a moment he stepped back, pulled up the sleeve of his leather jacket, and turned to Alex. "Would you, Alex?"

Alex, who stood quietly by the whole while, took the wristband and carefully tied it around Michael's wrist. Then Michael extended both wrists out before him and showed off the matching pair.

"They're gorgeous," Nathan proclaimed.

"Absolutely," Alex said.

Michael rubbed one wristband, then the other. They felt good, secure, balanced. But they had a heaviness too that he had never felt in just the one.

"What say the three of us go motoring next week," Nathan proposed.

Michael looked at him, then at Alex. "I suppose," he said, and they all three agreed to make an entire day of it.

Michael thought maybe they could go to Poulsbo, but then dropped the idea when Alex suggested driving to LaConner for lunch at a small restaurant he knew there.

As Alex and Nathan continued to make plans for the excursion, Michael gradually edged away and drifted back to the bar where he ordered another vodka collins and talked to Billy some more. The party was a good one, but his heart wasn't in it. He still felt off-kilter from Nathan's little revelation and the scene they'd played out just moments ago. What was he to do with all that? Finishing his drink and pushing away from the bar, he angled himself toward the front entrance.

"Going so soon?" the man collecting donations asked.

Michael looked at him and then around the bar at the crowd. "Afraid so," he said.

"Well, before you part, I must tell you you have the best leathers I've seen all night. If a prize was given out, you'd win hands down."

With a smile at this compliment, Michael admired the man's good looks. Without thinking, he pulled back the sleeves of his jacket, unknotted the leather laces of the wristbands, and when he got both wristbands off, dropped them in the beach pail.

The man looked surprised, but pleased. "Are you sure?"

"Of course," Michael answered, and patted the man on the thigh as he walked out.

## THE PEARL OF PUGET SOUND

Ellen watched as people walked past on the sidewalk beneath the movie marquee lights. She stood before the *Now Showing* poster, a blurred naked couple embracing with the movie title, *L'Amour Oblique*, scrawled below. When it became obvious Bruce wasn't going to show, she wondered why she even bothered, why she let this kind of thing happen to her--*low self-esteem?*--and returned to the bus stop.

There, a young guy in round glasses, wearing a blue shell jacket and a knapsack over his shoulder, shuffled up to her. After pacing past her, his awkwardness painfully obvious, he asked, "You live downtown?" Ellen groaned something under her breath and continued to stare up the block, watching for the 74 bus through the heavy traffic along University Avenue. "I live here in the U-District," he went on. Ellen raised her hand to her mouth and coughed, then stepped off the curb into the road for a better view. The student--that's what she guessed he was--came closer. "I'm visiting a friend downtown."

"That's good," she said. After the night she was having, she had little patience for some college boy's puppy advances. She retreated to the bus stop shelter and crossed her arms. The 71 or 72 would do fine, she thought, as long

as a bus--any bus--came along so she didn't have to wait. When one at last did arrive, huge tires screeching against the curb, she moved aside and let the student board first. Then she stepped up, flashed her transfer slip at the driver, and took a seat toward the rear. Several seats in front of her, the student rummaged through his knapsack, opened a book, and began to read.

Ellen watched the back of his head a moment, then rested the side of her forehead against the scratched plexiglass window and gazed out. The bus rattled over the iron grating of the University Bridge and made its way down Eastlake Boulevard, stopping every few blocks to let a passenger on or off. Watching, brooding, chin wedged in her palm, she could feel all the old, all-too-familiar impulses. She knew just what she wanted--go to some happening club, find a guy with money to burn, score some blow, stay out all night, get good and wasted, do the nasty, stumble home by noon. She was after all--as she knew very well--a creature of habit.

She rubbed her eyes with the heel of her palm and silently began to recite the Serenity Prayer, "God, grant me the serenity--," then stopped short. "Fuck 'em," she muttered, falling back on the abbreviated version that a 300-pound biker at the Fremont group had taught her. She said it again--"Fuck 'em"--and this time the student in the blue shell jacket twisted around and gave her a troubled look before returning to his book.

The next morning at quarter to nine she stepped off the passenger elevator into the lobby, passed the wall of small mailboxes with their tarnished brass doors, and entered the dusty office of the Cornelius Arms. As the apartment building's office secretary, she'd been instructed by Warren--her brother, employer, and landlord--to "be on time each morning and dress professionally." She preferred, though, to dress comfortably--pink button-down shirt found at St. Vincent DePaul for \$2 and her favorite pair of black Levi's tucked into the snakeskin boots a long-gone boyfriend bought her in Nevada.

After pulling up the front window blinds to let the morning light into the paneled office, she pressed the red button on the answering machine and leaned her shoulder against the wall. The first message was someone asking about apartment rates, and the second was Warren, his voice like a school principal's, instructing her to make out a debit sheet on every tenant who had been a week or more late on rent within the past three years. What it mattered to him, she couldn't figure, although it most likely concerned the recent disputes he'd been having with several tenants. No one knew better than she how he neglected the building, raking in thousands each month on rents and putting almost nothing back into maintenance, to say nothing of improvements.



She opened the center drawer of the desk in the middle of the room and pulled out a brown, hard-bound ledger. Since Warren was too cheap to invest in a computer for the office, the ledger contained nearly all the building's accounts. She dropped it onto the desk and went into the back, separated from the front by two plywood and frosted-glass partitions, where her brother, and their father before him, kept an office more or less for show--since she was the one who actually ran the building. On the back wall hung two mass-produced prints of fishing vessels in rough, dark seas. In the center of the room stood an oak desk as big as a double bed, while in one corner there was a metal file cabinet and in the opposite corner a small refrigerator. Ellen removed a plastic water jug and a cellophane packet of coffee from the refrigerator and returned up front to the coffeemaker on the side credenza. Inspecting the brown-stained carafe, she considered a moment before concluding it still wasn't grungy enough to rinse--especially since she hadn't had her morning dose of caffeine yet. Chemical dependents, she thought as she poured water into the machine, were geniuses at making allowances for such things as cleanliness.

For the past week the coffeemaker had been a sharp point of contention between her and Warren. Devoutly Mormon, as her whole family was, Warren forbid her at first from drinking coffee in the office. "The smell turns my stomach," he told her, though he spent less than an hour

there on any given day. The prohibition was his means of making her abstain. *Hot drinks are not for the body or belly*, The Doctrine and Covenants reveals. So to have her coffee, she would close the office and walk down the block to the Unique Cafe, and later if Warren asked where she was, she lied and told him she was showing apartments. Then last week a tenant bolted on two-months' overdue rent and left behind, among other junk, a nearly brand new Mr. Coffee. Ellen snatched it and the next morning she and Warren were wrangling over whether it would remain in the office. They argued all morning until finally, acting put out, Warren said she could keep the coffeemaker provided she kept it spotless and, moreover, odorless.

A saint, she thought, and poured her first cup of the day--the first of eight or so she drank every day. She knew she drank way too much coffee, though she also knew it was better than in the past, drinking herself into "hospital hangovers"--her ex's term for the two times she went to the Emergency Room after all-night parties, or jammed cocaine up her rear because her nose bled too much.

She moved her lips over the hot rim of her cup and sat down at the desk. She was about to open the ledger and get to work when one of the building's managers, the latest in a long series of turnovers, entered the office after tapping on the open door. A pair of gold-rimmed sunglasses were pushed up over his forehead and a leather tool belt sagged about his narrow waist. Humming aloud, he nodded to Ellen

and strolled straight past her to the coffeemaker.

"Good morning," he said finally as he filled his plastic Circle K mug.

"Hey."

Since he'd tipped her off about the Mr. Coffee in the first place, she didn't mind him helping himself. From what she could tell in the six weeks he'd worked at the Cornelius, he pretty much kept to himself, the quiet type, though a sneer was always playing about his mouth and his grey-green eyes seemed constantly on the look-out. And while he sloughed off plenty, he usually got his work done. "I'll be in 518 fixing that sink most of the morning," he told her and sucked at the small hole in the lid of his mug. "Joe should be around if you need anything." He stepped in front of the desk and fiddled with the pens and pencils in their holder.

"If he's not drunk," Ellen said. Last week she went by Joe's first floor apartment and saw his door open. Poking her head in, she found the 50-year-old co-manager passed out on the floor, his pants unbuttoned and shirt thrown open with his flabby gut hanging out. She helped him off the floor and onto the couch, wondering if some people ever hit bottom.

"What can I say?" Curtis said.

"When do you think you'll be done?" She knew if he said noon, it would probably be three or four.

Curtis examined his watchless wrist. "Hard to say," he

said. Let's just keep it at this afternoon." He looked at her across the desk, raised his mug, and left.

When Bruce called a little after eleven he said he was at work at the bank and couldn't talk long. Ellen heard out his excuses and apologies and hung up on him. When he called back ten seconds later, she called him an ass and asked if he stood up all his dates. But after he continued to reason with her, explaining what had happened--something about a family emergency, though everything was okay now--she agreed to meet him for dinner that evening in Pioneer Square.

At noon, after showing two apartments, she poured herself a third cup of coffee and began leafing through a Cosmopolitan article on why women can make commitments and men can't. Then Warren strode into the office and said, "Is this what you do all day?" and set his briefcase on the floor.

She slid the magazine under the ledger. "If I told you differently, would it do any good?"

It was like talking to her father. Since the great patriarch died five years ago, Warren routinely assumed the parental role with her, and yet while she resented the hell out of him for it, she knew she often played her part all too well--at least until she had sobered up. Since then

Warren's attitude was just plain irritating.

"I don't know, Ellen, I really don't." He went into the back office and continued to talk to her from there. "I suppose it would help if I saw you do something once in a while. Have you compiled that list?"

"I was getting to it."

"Have you shown any apartments?"

"Two." She sat rigidly at the desk, her long hands folded in front of her, as Warren planted himself in the doorway between the two partitions.

"Well?" he began.

"Well what?"

"Are they rented? Did you put anyone on a lease?"

She pushed her chair away from the desk, stepped past him to reach the credenza, and poured herself more coffee. "No," she whined, sounding to herself like a peevish thirteen-year-old. "I didn't. One guy said he'd call back tomorrow." She faced off with her brother. "In case you haven't noticed, Warren, there's a glut of apartments. *For Rent* signs everywhere."

"Maybe so, little sister, but it's still your job to lease *these* apartments. If anyone walks in, just to look, they should walk out with their name on a lease. It's called doing business. We rent the apartments we have or else we get out of the business. Father could have told you that."

Ellen took a good look at her brother, his grey pin-

striped suit, wispy haircut, recessed chin, small pointy nose. He was far more the slum-lord than their father ever was, she wanted to tell him.

"I gave you this job, Ellen, because I thought you could handle it."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," she answered, fed up with his daily suggestion that *he*, the selfless brother, was making every sacrifice so she, the family black sheep, could have another chance. The truth was that he only cared about making a buck and guarding the sacred family name from any smear she might impart to it--such as the time, just seventeen, she came home with a red and black nautilus shell tattooed on her back right shoulder, or a year later when she stole her father's Buick for a run across the mountains to Ellensburg--to see a town with her name--and swerved it into a ditch on her way back. Her father yelled at her for the incident and even suggested she go to school in Idaho to get her life together. Yet Warren, just back from his mission in Switzerland, recently advanced from the Aaronic to Melchizedek priesthood, and about to start Brigham Young University in the fall, blamed her for every sin under heaven, called her a slut, and advised the family to disown her.

"I don't want to argue," Warren said and retreated into the office and closed the door. Through the frosted glass, Ellen could see his silhouette before the file cabinet. She sat down and opened the rent ledger. It wasn't even noon,

yet she wanted a drink bad--two or three even, shots of Cuervo with beer chasers. She could close the office as soon as Warren left and drop by the Frontier Room, a familiar old haunt where the drinks were cheap and the bartender took care of you. Or, she thought, she could find a meeting.

She reached for her purse beneath the desk and took out the pocket-sized AA schedule with the encircled triangle on the front cover--the same emblem as on the six-month coin presented her several weeks ago. Flipping through the schedule, she found an open meeting at the Tropicana Inn at four-thirty. When Warren stepped up front, she was startled. "What's that?" he asked, as she slipped the booklet back into her purse.

She dropped her purse to the floor and looked up, then said, "An AA schedule."

Warren lifted his overcoat off the coatrack in the corner and sighed. "If you came to Church once in a while, you might not need to hang out with those old boozers."

She pushed the ledger away from her. "I guess I like being around my own kind."

Her brother's scorn for the program despite the Church's prohibition on drinking was nothing new to her. Her father had been a bishop with the Latter Day Saints and Warren was next in line. Church elders wanted him to bring her back into the fold, and as a favor to him the Council agreed to postpone excommunicating her, and hence casting

her into eternal outer darkness, until he could give it his best effort--which accounted for his badgering her to go to Church so much. Yet as they both knew, church business would eventually move forward and regardless of what happened with her, Warren would be ordained. And of course the sooner he became bishop, the sooner he could advance to High Councilor, then Stake President, followed by Area President, and the capper, General Authority.

"It's absurd going to these meetings," he said, "and so soon after leaving the hospital. How long has it been? Five months?"

"Eight," she corrected him. "And it was a recovery center, not a hospital." She told herself to just let it go, *let it go*. "They told us to go to meetings," she went on. "It's the whole point." In fact, fresh from the center, she followed through with the recommended 90 meetings in 90 days, the only way she was able to survive those first excruciating months of blessed sobriety.

"I want the eviction notices posted this afternoon," he ordered, changing the subject as if she hadn't said a word. He pointed to the brown ledger on the desk. "I also want you to start keeping a duplicate. I don't like there being just the one."

Exasperated, Ellen shook her head and tucked a stray hair behind her ear. Warren picked up his briefcase and left the office without another word. Through the front window, she watched as he double-bleeped the alarm system on



his silver Saab parked at the curb, tossed his briefcase onto the passenger seat while climbing behind the wheel, revved the engine twice, and raced off. She kept staring out the window until she realized it was time for lunch and locking up the office headed down the block to the Unique.

Later in the afternoon Curtis leaned in the doorway and announced, "I have to run out to Pay n' Pak for a loop joint. That sink's giving me trouble." Ellen glanced at the wall clock--2:50. "I'm going to need some cash too."

"Can't you charge it across the street?" she asked since the Cornelius Arms had an account at the small hardware store on the other side of Third Avenue.

"I checked. They don't have the right piece."

Ellen thought a moment and watched Curtis run his hand through his dusty hair. "Okay," she said and reached into the bottom drawer for the metal cash box. Using a tiny key from her keychain (*Turn it over*--the phrase, so familiar lately, ran through her head) she opened the box and handed Curtis a twenty.

He stuffed the bill in his pants' pocket, winked, and was gone. Ellen then set about compiling the list Warren wanted, but after the fifth name, since nearly every tenant paid rent late at some point or another, she gave up. Warren wouldn't return to the Cornelius once he left his law office downtown anyway. He would head straight back to his

fancy lake-front home in Bellevue. So the list could wait. She could finish it in the morning and post the notices then too. The way she figured it, a day of grace never hurt any one.

After reading a couple more articles from Cosmopolitan and rearranging the contents of the desk, she put the ledger away, drew the blinds closed, and flicked off the coffee maker and overhead florescent lights. Just as she was securing the office door, she spotted Curtis breezing through the lobby, carrying a paper bag in each hand. The smaller bag was probably the loop joint, but the large, squarish bag--no one had to tell her--was a 12-pack of beer.

Ellen arrived at Trattoria Pugali wearing a snug black skirt and a sleeveless silk blouse which floated, she thought, nicely about her breasts. Since she feared the blouse exposed her bony shoulder blades too much, she also wore a waist jacket. Taking a table by the front window, she ordered a Coke from the tall waiter, and when he returned with it a few minutes later he also set a basket of warm bread sticks before her. "Can I bring you anything else?" he asked with a certain smugness and smiled down at her. Before she could answer, he handed her a menu and leaned forward to point to selected items. "The tortellini alfredo is very good, as is the pesto."

Ellen laid the menu down on the white tablecloth. "I'm

waiting for someone actually."

"Ah," the waiter uttered and stepped back from her table. "I'll return then when your company arrives." He gave her a faint smile and moved to another table where he began chatting up a well-dressed man and woman.

Ellen sipped her Coke. As she turned away to look out the window, she saw a raggedly clad man with clumps of yellow matted hair and a dirty duffel bag yelling at a woman who tagged along behind him. Her face was pock-marked and swollen and she had a mid-bulge as if she were pregnant or suffering from kidney stones. She wore faded bellbottoms and a tattered windbreaker and was barefoot. At the end of a long, frayed rope she held a mangy, brown dog. The man, unshaven and frantic-eyed, raised an open hand at the woman and both she and the dog flinched. Then the three of them continued on their way, past the Good Faith Shelter, toward the Alaskan Way viaduct.

"There but for the grace of God--" Ellen began, then hesitated. After a long, hard childhood of seminary each weekday morning at dawn, sacrament meetings, Relief Society, Sunday School each and every weekend, and monthly Testimony meetings, she was averse to most professions of faith, including those in AA. She'd tried using the catch-all "Higher Power," as others at meetings did, but it sounded idiotic to her. All the same, since she started the slogan, she finished it, "--go I," and glanced about the restaurant to see if anyone had overheard.

She drained her glass down to the crushed ice and began nibbling on a breadstick. Why a bank manager in the first place? she wondered, and checked her watch. Last week it had almost begun to seem they might have something good going, but when she opened up to him (about her six-month marriage, the quick divorce, the abortion soon after, the drugs and drinking, the treatment center) he turned skittish--which was okay, everyone had the right to back out--but nothing excused him from standing her up. Twice now.

She waited fifteen minutes more, picked up her purse, left two dollars under her glass, and walked out of the restaurant. She glanced up the block to see if he might be coming, then headed down the sidewalk toward the harbor. Passing beneath the viaduct, she spotted the man and woman with their dog huddled in a doorway, a green bottle with its cap off resting between them. The sight made her glad she'd gotten herself to the meeting at the Tropicana. She even read the 12-Steps aloud after the opening preamble, though she avoided sharing for the rest of the meeting.

Leaving the wino couple behind, she counted the electric beer signs in the windows of the corner convenience store. Farther up, she spotted a knot of men loitering along the harbor walk railing, passing around a bottle. Here she was, in the heart of the original Skid Row, where soused loggers a century ago stumbled into Yesler's log chute and slid down the hill into the mudflats of Elliott

Bay. It was one of the city's most celebrated historical sites, making getting drunk almost a point of civic pride. And she was supposed to resist?

She stood ready to skip over the railroad tracks, dodge traffic along Alaskan Way, and join the drinkers on the harbor walk for a few swigs when one of them bellowed out, "Hey, honey, over here!" She stared hard at him, bundled in his hooded parka despite the clear, warm evening, and instead of crossing she hurried up to the nearby concrete ramp where the old-fashioned trolley, its bells jangling loudly, was about to make its last run along the waterfront. She scurried up the ramp, stepped aboard the trolley, and after handing the conductor a dollar took the first seat directly behind him--all the while silently repeating to herself: *A minute at a time, minute at a time...*

She arrived back at the Cornelius Arms around eleven after stopping at Ralph's all-night deli for a double mocha cappuccino, extra foam, extra syrup. From the lobby, the apartment building seemed far too big and lonely. Everything was worn and faded and tainted with the nose-curling odor of age and transience and disrepair. She wasn't ready to patter back up to her third floor apartment. There was nothing there for her. Letting herself into the office, she unlocked the large metal lockbox on the back wall and located the building's master key. She relocked

the office and took the freight elevator to the fifth floor where, yanking the iron gate open and halting the elevator, she stepped out.

In the dimly lit hallway, she felt almost drunk. She walked past several apartment doors and when she reached #518 inserted the key. Seek, she thought, and ye shall find. She wanted to look to see what else besides the coffeemaker had been left behind. To get in, she had to tug at the deadbolt and push hard against the door before it gave. The inside foyer was as dark as an alley, but as she stepped all the way into the vacated apartment, filled with a bluish light from the streetlamps below, she saw more clearly.

Near the two side-by-side windows a vague figure stretched out in a chair. Ellen went rigid and for an instant imagined she'd come upon the body of the former tenant who--word had it--had dealt methamphetamine and bathroom lab valium. When she took a frightened half-step forward, the figure leaned back on the hindlegs of the chair and arched his body around. "Hey."

"Curtis?"

Ellen edged into the room while Curtis turned back around, propped his feet on the window sill, and reached a hand down to pick up a can of beer from the floor.

"Didn't you hear me come in?"

"I figured it was you."

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lights lit up a mass of low-hanging clouds moving in off the Sound. Out on the water a tugboat blew a solitary fog horn blast, while a ferry, a different one, appeared in the distance. "I haven't ridden a ferry in ages," Ellen remarked, watching the ferry inch toward the Seattle terminal. "How about you?"

He looked at her skeptically, hesitated, and answered, "I've never been on one, period. Can you believe it? Living here in Seattle, ferries everywhere, and I've never been on one."

"Where are you from?" She'd grown up in the suburbs on the other side of Lake Washington, though it was a fact most people in the area these days came from somewhere else-- California, the Midwest, the East Coast.

"West Seattle," he said. "But my family didn't take ferry rides. We didn't do much of anything for that matter. I've been on boats a couple times, just never one of these ferries they've got."

"Your family's screwed up too then?" she said. He smirked at this and took a long pull off his beer. Ellen leaned forward and confided, "I go to AA as much for my family as for my drinkin' and druggin'."

"I hear that," Curtis returned. "I drink as much because of my family as...well, because I like to drink." He grinned a wide, close-mouthed grin at her.

She went on. "My family expected me to be a good little Mormon girl and find some rich guy to marry and take

care of so he'd pick me again as his wife in the afterlife when he came into his heavenly kingdom. It was always like that. It stinks if you're a girl. Warren goes on a mission and goes to college. Warren inherits everything when the old man dies, including this damn building, and all because he's the son and I'm the daughter. I tried being good, I wanted to be, but it never worked. Sometimes I don't know which life would've been worse. That one or this. I mean..." She startled herself with this flurry of words. Even in the back rooms and church basements of AA meetings, wired on coffee, no pressure from anyone, she rarely said a word. If called upon, she made a few remarks about her gratitude for the program and how glad she was to be sober, then passed. Meanwhile other people gave ten-minute versions of their entire lives from day one. She knew she should be working the program better--she didn't read the Big Book or work the Steps or even have a sponsor--yet she *did* go to meetings, four or five a week, and she *did* listen.

As Curtis watched her, she began to think he might make a move toward her, reach over and lay his hand on her arm or knee, maybe try to kiss her. And if he did? She wouldn't shy away. She would make love to him if it came to that. Why not? What other consolation was there for being "clean and sober" these past months? Didn't everyone deserve a little impulsiveness now and then? So what if AAers advised against starting relationships the first year of sobriety? She didn't want a relationship.

She returned his look, but he made no move, and she began wondering if she'd made a total fool of herself. "You know," she said finally to break the silence, "I should take you up on that beer."

He turned to her. "Hey, Ellen, if you--"

"But I won't," she finished, and went back to looking out the window.

## THE CYST

No one likes a middle-aged guy living off by himself. That's my sense of it. They think he's a pervert, luster after little children, pathetic loner, loser, hopelessly stuck in mid-life crisis, beyond the love of a good woman or even therapy. Why else does he live in that old apartment building downtown? Is he queer? He's got a Ph.D. for godsake, from a big-time university back East. He could teach. Write books. Herr Doktor.

I'm not a cynical guy. This is the life I have, which I've settled into, and I get a bit defensive now and then. Who doesn't, regardless of circumstances, get defensive on occasion? Who isn't struck by how life should hold more of this or less of that? Better jobs, better bodies, better sex. Education makes no difference--usually. For instance, how many people have heard of John Cowper Powys? I wrote a 369-page dissertation on his works, primarily the Autobiography, while at Syracuse nearly a quarter of a century ago. A religion professor there, having heard I was writing on Powys and believing I must share the author's brand of sensuous mysticism, confided to me he regularly had visions of St. Augustine atop the MONY Tower in downtown Syracuse. In fact he was once transported back to the Baths

of Sozius to witness Augustine vanquishing the Manichean heretics in debate.

My problem may be that I'm not more mystical. I don't even have a good fetish. Unless, of course, the dove I keep counts. Which I doubt. I do lust, it's true, which may diminish mystical capacities, or augment them, I don't know. I lust in my heart, as the 39th President confessed, and in my hand (called *self-pleasuring* these days), although not inordinately, or so I trust, and certainly less frequently since detecting several varicose veins, eye-liner thin but feeding the main line, which the urologist told me were nothing, just aging. For a time Powys was into pornography, though renouncing it later in life, and I've taken Japanese clients into the Fantasy Arcade down on First Avenue, but really it's not my style. Now and then I meet a woman and we go for a drink. We laugh, we talk, we discretely explore each other's past and present, have dinner (some place modest), and I invite her to my room. Occasionally she accepts. Sometimes we check into the Waterfront Inn.

Djuna, who gave me the dove six months ago, said the Chinese believe a bird in the home brings good luck. Certainly doves boast a famed history of loyalty and companionship, though they're not song birds and plumage-wise pale next to parrots or cockatoos. Djuna was the most recent woman in my life, as the saying goes. She's African-American. We met in a basement cafe in Pioneer Square. She was reading a novel by a Native American writer and I was

passing the hours in my lonely-guy, middle-aged way. When she looked up I asked how her book was.

"It's good," she said as flatly as one of those taped messages over the telephone, turning the page and stirring her cappuccino with a spoon.

"Would you recommend it to a stranger?" I followed up and leaned toward her table to fake eyeing the jacket cover.

She looked at me, big brown eyes wide with caffeine, her lean face as dark and shiny as glazed Mexican tile, and set her book down, very deliberately, on the table. She looked me over with the most queenly look I've ever been subjected to. "When I'm done with it I'll let you know," she told me and picked up her book again.

I pulled back even more discretely than I'd leaned forward. "Excuse me," I said to her down-turned head, "Please," and signaled her to resume her reading, which she already had. I reached for one of the cloth-bound books, all forgotten titles, that line the basement cafe's turn-of-the-century brick walls, and after a quick inspection of the frontispiece put the book back and carried my cup to the front counter for a refill. When I returned, Djuna was tying the strap about her burgundy raincoat. I smiled when she glanced my way, then she left.

Not an auspicious beginning. But we continued to run into each other at the same cafe. She eventually finished her novel, we talked it over (in younger days, in true Edwardian fashion, I fancied myself the "bookish bachelor,"

though lately, I hope, I'm less pretentious), and afterwards we went for a late dinner at a trattoria around the corner. A few nights after that we went to the Waterfront Inn. We opened the curtains and undressed one another in front of the window overlooking the bay. The hotel's lights reflected off the water and rippled on the ceiling of our room. For over an hour we did little more than embrace and pet--I in my briefs, she in her foundationals--and kiss wildly. Then she unsnapped her bra, we tugged each other's underwear off, I kicked the bedspread to the floor, and together we ceremoniously removed the condom from its aluminum sheath.

All night, Djuna soothed and stirred me. Her skin was undulantly shaded like a woodland pond, her body supple yet edged. Around three a.m, we tossed some clothes on and took a stroll outside. In the next couple weeks we returned twice to the Waterfront, then went several times to my apartment, and for a brief period spent our nights at her small bungalow house on Capitol Hill, her queen-sized futon far more comfortable than my rusted, creaky Murphy bed. But our interest had already begun to peter out.

Then one night we saw some foreign film at the Egyptian Theater, and a few days later, mutually and acrimony-free, we decided to stop sleeping together. Neither of us wanted anything long term, since she had her career and I had. . . I can only guess. We agreed race had nothing to do with it, though for my part it's hard to tell in such matters. I'm



sure my testicular condition contributed nothing to our split up. I doubt she ever knew.

As tokens of respect, we exchanged gifts the next time we met a week later at the cafe. I gave her the latest behemoth novel by Kathy Womack, the Native American writer she liked so much, and she gave me a dove in a teakwood cage. Our conversation was awkward. Djuna was still an insurance adjustor then. She recounted claimants' stories to me. For instance, the young man who got drunk after being released from the hospital for a motorcycle accident, then fell off a cliff, broke his skull, and died. His parents wanted to collect \$80,000 life insurance, but Djuna had to tell them their son's reckless behavior entitled them to only twenty grand. In all, she said, she wanted a different job.

Seven weeks after I brought the dove home, it laid an egg. The shell was light tan, like suede leather, with a dark speckling on it.

The day before, the Japanese Cultural Council called me with a job for the next afternoon. I hire out to Japanese businessmen and students for English instruction. I help them with pronunciation and idioms, and now and then writing projects--proposals, reports, term papers, that kind of thing. I charge students \$30 an hour and the businessmen \$60. It's not the same as being a tenure-track professor at

some place like Southeastern Georgia State in Statesboro, GA, where I held my last professorship before resigning six years ago out of sheer academic ennui/exhaustion/exasperation, pick one. Still, the tutoring pays the rent.

This time, because Yushi Hakasawa did not play golf, I took him to the zoo. I'm a popular tutor because rather than sitting face to face in a room thinking up small talk, I give my clients a cultural context for language acquisition. Which is to say, we go on field trips. With the businessmen, I head out to Jefferson Park and play eighteen holes, zipping about in the golf cart reviewing golf terms in English--bogey, divot, bunker, slice, Hogan, etc.--my greens fees and club rentals paid for on top of my hourly rates. The students I take to the mall or maybe to a hockey game since I'm a big fan of the Thunderbirds, our minor league team, and the kids like the rowdy crowds.

But Yushi was his own man. We met at the posh Madison Hotel downtown and ate sushi at the bar on the 19th floor overlooking the city and harbor. Yet over our raw tuna and \$36-per-pound abalone, Yushi explained that he would rather eat in "American style restaurant" from now on. He didn't like sushi, and as it turned out, when I proposed stopping at Dick's Burgers on our way to the links, he didn't like playing golf either. So I lifted the last sliver of pink, snappy ginger into my mouth with the plastic chop sticks and suggested the zoo. It took a few minutes to make myself

understood--I had to do my elephant imitation with entwined arms swinging in front on my face--but eventually Yushi got the picture. He signed the bill the waiter set before him and we drove his Avis car to the Woodland Park Zoo.

At the entrance, I sang several lyrics from the Simon and Garfunkle zoo song while Yushi paid for our admission. "It's all happening at the zoo, dee dee dee." Yushi was amused.

We pushed through the turnstile and just inside the gate stopped at the espresso cart for a double cappuccino. Caffeine's a sure bet to get client and consultant--which is how I like to refer to the relationship--jabbering up a storm. First we stopped to look at the ibex, the Pyrenean variety, my favorite. According to the plaque, which I read aloud despite Yushi's limited comprehension, the ibex is a surefooted, sturdy wild goat which lives in herds, except for the old males, which are usually solitary. The ibex is also greatly reduced in numbers.

Just then a whining five-year-old tugged its mother past where we stood, fatigue and despair wrought across the mother's face, and I explained to Yushi the expression, "Spoiled brat." He laughed, but then turned back to the ibex in its pen and pointed to the muddy, surefooted hooves of the old goat standing on a rock ledge. "What kind hands it has?" he asked.

It took me a moment to understand him, then I said, "Hooves."

His face widened. "Ahhhh, whouss."

"Vvva," I urged. "Hoova."

"Houvvvfa."

"Very good," I said, and we moved on to the tapirs, another ungulate mammal, and then to the ostriches in their large holding area. At the bald eagle cage, I explained the bird's symbolic importance and how they were on the Endangered Species List, and what that was, and yet how they were coming back and could even be seen around Seattle occasionally. Then we entered the glass-enclosed aviary. Under the canopy of tall deciduous trees and various palms, looking up toward the chatter of exotic cagelings among the foliage, there, of all people, was Djuna. A British writer who lives in Seattle wrote that the city, with its population of 800,000 or so, is nearly the same size as Dickens' London, where one could become lost among the masses as well as happen regularly upon acquaintances--the perfect novelistic city. And so here was Djuna at the zoo.

Putting my hand on Yushi's forearm and gesturing him to stay where he was, I sidled over to her and whispered, "What? No doves?"

Not the least startled, she looked away from the big-beaked bird she'd been watching and considered me at her side. "It's called a Laughing Bird," she said. And as if on cue the creature in the upper branches of the magnolia tree gave up a loud, sustained cackle. Djuna gave a nod toward Yushi. "Friend?"

"Client," I said. "Imports-exports."

She looked at me, her manner impervious but for the shimmer of something in her eye. "Aren't you going to introduce me?"

When I did, Djuna and Yushi politely shook hands and then, to my surprise, in accordance with Japanese customs, bowed to one another and exchanged business cards. Djuna-- as she later explained that evening over the phone--had just the week before accepted a job on the mayor's Commission on Pacific Rim Trade.

In the Autobiography, Crazy Jack says, "Just as I saved myself from my worse sufferings at Sherborne by pretending to be mad, it is possible to save yourself, *the other way around*, by pretending to be sane." I pretend a lot these days. Some days one way, some days the other. I'm not always sure which direction I'm going, though, which makes me think Powys was generally right about American men: We're tragic without knowing we're tragic. Nonetheless, I can say, like the great forgotten literary mystic fetishist himself, I'm happy. I've been told, besides, a time or two, that I look like Powys, unruly silver curls, sledgehammer nose, and small primary eyes of pale blue.

When I returned to my efficiency that evening--after

happening upon Djuna at the zoo, after Yushi paid me \$150 for our 2 1/2-hour session, and after I stopped at the Virginia Inn for a couple of pints of expensive micro-brewery ale--I found that the dove had laid its egg. I opened the cage, as I do every other day to let the bird fly about the small room, but it wouldn't leave its newly laid egg, which was about the size of a large marble. The mother dove (which to this day remains unnamed) watched its egg with one eye of its delicate, angled head. Then it fluttered down from its perch to the cage floor and strutted about its egg flicking up paper shreadings, sunflower seeds, and its own crusty droppings. I wanted to touch the egg, weigh it in my hand, and stroke its shell, but I'd been told as a child that birds reject an egg that's been handled by human hands. Just the same, I knew I couldn't leave an infertile egg at the bottom of the cage to rot. It occurred to me then that I might lacquer it. I could buy a jar of clear nail polish, give the shell several coatings, and return the egg to its loving mother. With this project in mind, I reached in through the narrow cage door. The mother-dove obligingly stepped aside as with index finger and thumb I carefully lifted the egg from its make-shift nest. Then, to my horror, as I withdrew the fragile ovum, I tapped it against the side of the cage and cracked the shell.

The gentle, grey-brown mother-dove seemed to watch me with great confusion, angling its head from side to side. I

felt horrible. I rushed the fractured, slightly seeping egg to the kitchen counter and thoroughly rinsed my hands in the sink. I felt a pain rising in my chest, so hurried into the bathroom, opened the medicine cabinet and shook out an aspirin first, then a 500 IU vitamin E capsule. I take one of each every day because my father, a depressed businessman and widower, cigar smoker and gin drinker, died from heart disease at 50. So now at 50 myself, I'm with Shakespeare's Edgar--ripeness is all.

When I came back to the kitchen, I put the small, fractured egg into the white plastic grocery bag I use for trash and carried it down to the dumpster in the alley. I headed straight over to Ralph's Deli two blocks away where I bought a handful of those little, brown aluminum-wrapped chocolate footballs--fairly close to the size and shape of the dove's egg. I brought them back and placed one in the bottom of the cage and waited. The dove seemed uninterested. It cocked its head and eyed the chocolate football but seemed unwilling to interact with it. I thought of calling Djuna for advice, since she'd given me the bird, but instead fell asleep on the couch with a bad headache and a half-hearted erection.

About once a month I wish I were more mystical, more of the religious/artistic aesthete type, Sidhartha *cum* Thomas Merton. But what nonsense. Such thinking is the residue of

writing a too-long dissertation on one of the most affected minds of the century. And being old enough to join AARP.

About one month after the sad episode with the dove's egg, a urologist at Virginia Mason Hospital told me the lump I discovered many weeks earlier on my left testicle was merely a cyst. It's nothing, he assured me again, removing the white polyurethane gloves he'd donned for the examination. It's the size of a pea, he went on, though to me it felt more like a bowling ball. I asked him if it could be removed, surgically, and he said certainly, if I wished to lose the entire testicle, and repeated, it's nothing, forget it. Didn't he want to do more tests, I inquired, wondering to myself why this trained urologist wasn't being more sensitive toward my fragile male psyche. Didn't he know his brusque diagnosis could potentially wound my whole sense of self-worth? No, he said, more tests weren't necessary, and tossed the gloves into the waste basket beside the chrome examination table. He'd clearly grown impatient with my persistent apprehension. Okay, I thought, acquiescing to his diagnosis, so I don't have cancer. Still, major life changes seemed in order.

From the hospital I took the bus back downtown, walked over to the Virginia Inn, and downed four pints--two ale, one lager, one stout--which cost me ten bucks. Homer, the bespeckled bartender, put a fifth pint before me and rapped



his knuckles on the bar. "On the house," he said and walked away.

When I finished it and strolled out onto the sidewalk, evening was setting in. I stood on the corner wondering where to go and what to do next when I felt a hand on my elbow. It was Djuna again, this time hurrying to get to a Trade Fair going on at the Trade Center on Western Avenue. She told me she and Yushi were in contract negotiations between his Tokyo-based conglomerate and a small Seattle-based software firm. She was quite excited about the deal's prospects.

"Congrats," I said, and asked, "How's his English coming along?"

"We understand one another," she answered, rather too suggestively I thought. "I'm also picking up some Japanese." Then, quite abruptly, she said, "It's good to see you again. Let's have coffee sometime." And off she dashed, probably guessing how drunk I was, or so I suspected.

I tottered down the steep hill from First Avenue to the grass and concrete park beside Pike Place Market, where I sat on a bench watching traffic speed along the upper tier of the Alaskan Way Viaduct. The sky was getting that steely blue cast to it that tells us we're in for several weeks of drizzle. Across the placid waters of the Sound, the Olympics were disappearing from view as the light faded. I had to pee but didn't want to drag myself back up the hill

to the tavern. I worried about my dove, poor thing, and digging my hand into my jacket pocket found the last of the chocolate footballs and ate it.

That was all several months ago. Since then I've been considering relocation, maybe exploring Kyoto or Seoul or some such place where English instructors are in demand. Where philosophers and poets are national heroes. Where middle-age is distinguished, and old-age honored. Where, who knows, a cute little *geisha* might await me. There's just no telling.

## PARTNERS

Tom pushed open the door, which stuck ever since someone tried breaking in, and entered the dark efficiency apartment. Light from a streetlamp filtered through the thin curtains over the picture window. With his big body, Tom wedged the door closed and walked toward the kitchen.

"Hey, Tommy," a voice called from the shadows along the wall.

Weasel sat nearly horizontal on the dirty green couch. "Don't you work tonight?" Tom asked. From the first day Weasel started hanging out at the apartment after hooking up with Rick at the methadone clinic, Tom knew he was a first-class suck-up, the kind of guy that turned vulture the second he didn't get his fix. Occasionally he would cop for Rick, but more often than not he hovered around until Rick offered to do him up.

"I ain't got to be there till one. But nice try, Tom." Last month Tom found out how a bartender down in Pioneer Square got tired of Weasel hanging around grubbing beers, so stuck a broom in his hand and told him to get to work or get out. Now Weasel made \$20 a week for sweeping up every night after closing. "Where you been, Tommy?"

"I'll be fucked if I have to tell you," Tom snapped

back, carrying the 12-pack of beer cradled under his arm into the kitchen.

"How about a beer, Tommy?"

Tom tore at the cardboard case, yanked out a beer, and popping it open took a long swig. "Buy your own," he said as he set the rest in the refrigerator. When he looked up and saw Weasel watching him like some mongrel, he cursed under his breath and lobbed a can of beer across the room, where it bounced a couple times on the couch before Weasel grabbed it.

"You're all right," Weasel schmoozed, and opening the beer slurped the foam off the top.

"Last time, dick-head. You can buy your own from now on." Tom closed the refrigerator and stepped back toward the couch. "Where's Rick?"

"In the tub. He said that lice shit was driving him nuts. I don't know, man, maybe you guys should fumigate in here."

Tom chugged down the rest of his beer and went back to the refrigerator for another.

"Yo, Tomas," Weasel called out, raising his beer can above his head and shaking it to show it was just about empty. "I'll pay you back, man. I swear."

Tom scowled back toward the couch. Weasel, slumped low on the cushions, was so thin and scrawny-looking he could have been a cardboard cut-out of himself, his grungy jeans and wrinkled Hawaiian shirt hiding any form his body might

have. Tom looked away, took another beer from the refrigerator, and walked past Weasel to the bathroom. He listened for a moment at the door, then knocked. "Hey, Rick? You in there?"

There was the sound of water slushing around the tub and then splashing to the floor, followed by wet feet slapping across the tile. The bathroom door opened a crack and Rick poked his head out.

"You look like fucking John the Baptist," Tom said to him.

Rick looked down at the floor and pushed back his black, shoulder-length hair as water trickled down his sunken cheeks into his long, straggly beard. The glare from the lightbulb behind his head gave him an aura that made the shadows around his eyes darker than usual. Acne sores and lice bites spotted his nose, neck, and bare shoulders.

"What's up," he said.

"Try this. I got it at the drugstore. You have to rub it in till it starts burning. That's what the guy said." Tom handed Rick a small tube that looked like toothpaste. Earlier, Rick gave him five dollars to find something to treat his lice. Then around 5:30 in the afternoon, after Tom finished his rounds to the welfare office, the Post Office food stamp line, the Lutheran food bank, and half the taverns between Denny Regrade and the International District, he stopped in at the Pay 'n' Save Drugs where the pharmacist told him what to use and pointed him down aisle

four. Tom found the brand, looked it over, and after a quick glance over each shoulder, slipped the tube down the front of his pants and walked out of the store. After stopping in at a couple more taverns, he used Rick's five dollars to buy the 12-pack.

"You want a beer, Rick? Or something to eat?"

"No thanks, Tom. Not now," Rick murmured and eased the bathroom door closed again.

Tom heard him slip back into the tub and returned to the kitchen. "Maybe he should cut that damn beard off," he said aloud to himself.

"Never," Weasel said. "He'd never do it. He's had that friggin' rat's nest on his face since he left the army, he told me." He sucked on his empty beer can and tossed it down on the scuffed-up coffee table in front of the couch. "Maybe we should get him a flea collar. What d'ya think, Tom?"

Tom walked to the window, pushed the curtains aside, and looked down. Five men clustered against the wall of the high-rise condo across the street while a touter at each corner scouted the block. A neatly dressed couple was strolling up the sidewalk with a small white dog on a leash. Tom pulled his dirty t-shirt from his pants, scratched the two-day-old stubble on his chin, and waited to see what would happen. When nothing did, when the couple walked past the dealers and entered the condo lobby, he moved away from the window and returned to the kitchen.

"I got a deer on mine, Tom," Weasel announced, picking up his empty beer can and looking it over. "What d'you got?"

Tom glanced at the beer can in his hand. "A fish," he said. The kind with an animal scene on each can was the cheapest the Korean family sold at the little corner grocery. "Looks like a pike." From the pocket of his jacket, which he'd thrown over the back of a kitchen chair, he pulled out a brand new pack of cigarettes. He slapped the pack into his palm several times, unwrapped it, shook out a cigarette, and lit up. When he looked up, Weasel was flipping through a stack of fashion magazines he'd picked up off the floor and scattered on the coffee table. "Where'd they come from?" he asked Weasel.

"The laundry room," Weasel said. "They were just lying around, so I took them. Check this out." Weasel cut out the figure of a model in a bathing suit with the miniature scissors from his Swiss Army knife and held it up for Tom's inspection. "Super-model Rachael Hunter," he said and laid it down next to two other cut-out figures, making a miniature fashion show run-way out of the coffee table. "You have any tape, man?"

"That's fucking sick. Forget it, Weasel. Take your paper dolls and jerk off someplace else, for christsake."

"Jesus, Tom. People pay twenty bucks for posters of these freaks." He held up a cut-out figure in each hand, rubbed them against one another, and made moaning and

sucking noises. "Maybe I can glue them to popsicle sticks and put on a show." He fell back in a fit of shrill laughter, picked up the scissors, and started snipping off the limbs of the figures.

Tom rushed over to the table, swept up the magazines and clippings, and carrying it all into the kitchen dumped the arm-load into the trash. "No thanks," he said, coming back and standing over Weasel. He took a last, hard drag on his cigarette and dropped it into the empty beer can on the coffee table where it sizzled out.

The bathroom door opened and in a cloud of steam Rick stepped out wrapped in a blue bathrobe frayed about the cuffs and bottom trim. He crossed in front of Tom, sat down next to Weasel, and leaned forward to reach beneath the couch. After groping around for a few seconds, he pulled out a large zip-lock bag and dumped its contents on the coffee table. Tom retreated to the kitchen area and sat down at the table next to the refrigerator.

"The King," Weasel crooned, edging closer to Rick. "The tragic magic."

Tom lit another cigarette and looked at his roommate. "You done a lot of that shit today, Rick?"

Without looking up, Rick answered, "Not really."

"That's the attitude, Ricky." Weasel sprang to his feet and went to the kitchen sink for a cup of water. "This shit's a lot better than the crank we had last week," he said, returning.



"Is this the vcr money?" Tom asked.

Rick nodded. Then he sprinkled a few drops of water into a charred bottle top, dropped a small cap of heroin into it, and held it over the disposable lighter Weasel held out. When the mixture started to bubble, he strapped a rubber hose above his elbow and began slapping the underside of his forearm. As he waited for a vein to rise, Rick took up his hypodermic and drew the mixture into it, tapping the tube lightly. He checked his forearm again and aiming the needle upward slid its tip beneath the flesh and into a faint purplish vein, all the while easing the squeezer-ball back so blood seeped up into the tube. Reversing the pull, he injected the blood and heroin--"gravy" Weasel called it--back into his vein, withdrawing the needle when the tube was empty. Where a speck of blood beaded up on his forearm, he pressed a piece of toilet paper.

"You got that chlorine shit?" Tom asked.

Rick handed a brand new needle to Weasel. "Don't need it," he said and helped Weasel shoot up. When finished, they each slumped down at opposite ends of the couch.

"Those the needles I got you, Rick?"

Rick closed his eyes and nodded. Last week, wandering around Pioneer Square, Tom picked up a dozen free needles from an AIDS group handing them out from the back of a mini-van along with free condoms.

"You sure you don't want to fire up?" Weasel piped up.

Tom shook his head and got another beer from the

refrigerator. "That needle shit makes me too queasy." He popped open the beer and took a long pull from it. "You going to go back to the Bon tomorrow, Rick? Get something else?"

"Yeah, Tom. Tomorrow," Rick droned and wagged his head back and forth. A year ago his parents, who lived in Bellevue, gave him a credit card to The Bon department store, and every month they paid off the \$500 limit he ran up on it. He never spoke to his parents, but they had this arrangement, as if straight cash advances would be wrong, sent the wrong message. Tom said it was his parents' way of making him work for a living. So each month, the two of them went down to The Bon, charged a TV or vcr or some expensive sweaters, and a week later returned the goods for cash, hocked them at a pawn shop, or sold them on the street. Half the money went for rent and groceries, the other half to smack.

Tom sat back down at the table. Rick's skin-and-bones body seemed to ooze off the couch. His mouth gaped open and his face turned as pasty as papier mache.

"Rick, hey, you okay, man?" Tom called to him. "You're looking kind of sick, man. You alright?" Tom knew you didn't start mothering someone every time they got high. He didn't want to be pestered on a binge, and he knew Rick didn't either. But if they were partners, as they always said, what was he supposed to do? Didn't partners look out for one another?

Rick's eyes drew open, and raising his hand he waved Tom off.

"You look worse than the time we hitched up from Salt Lake. Remember that, Rick? The bitch in the trailer, man, the one we took turns poking? You got sick bad.

Rick shrugged and seemed to nod off. Tom looked at Weasel, who was grinning at him. He flipped him the finger, and Weasel closed his eyes still grinning. It seemed to Tom that with Weasel around, Rick shot up twice as much. He looked Rick over again. "Remember that dump you lived in, Rick? The Olympic? No doors. The can down the hall. Those dirty sheets in the window. Fucking place smelled worse than this, and twice as many roaches." Tom recalled how last year he let Rick move into his apartment in the Cornelius when the city condemned the Olympic and made everyone get out. "This is a goddamn palace after that," he said and waited for Rick's response. But when there was none, he got up and opened the refrigerator. "Want one, Weasel?"

"Yeah, Tom, gimme a beer."

"How about you, Rick?"

Again no answer.

Tom brought two beers out and set one on the coffee table. He leaned over Rick to see if he was breathing.

"I got to split," Weasel announced, easing himself off the couch, picking the beer up from the coffee table when he got to his feet. "You should stock up on some pop, Tom.

You know, a couple six-packs of Coke Classic maybe."

"You think Rick's okay?"

"Shit yeah, he's dancin' in the stars s'all. That's some wicked shit he got hold of."

With Weasel off the couch, Rick slid his legs up and stretched out. He blinked a couple times and nestled his head into the cushions. Occasionally his eyelids fluttered or a leg twitched.

"See you later, Tommy," Weasel called back from the door. "Hey, Rick, I owe you one." Rick mumbled into the cushions and rolled over.

When Weasel left, Tom sat back down at the kitchen table, drank another beer, smoked another cigarette, and watched Rick some more. Partners, he thought.

After an hour or so, when it seemed Rick was zoned out or sound asleep, either one, Tom went up to the coffee table, found the small aluminum foil packet with Rick's dope in it, and stuffed it in his pants pocket. He stepped back to the kitchen table, put his jacket on, and quietly headed out.

The Liberty Tavern was crowded with the usual loud drunks and quiet drunks. The stench of stale beer, cigarette smoke, dirty dishwater, urinals, vomit, and sweaty bodies hit Tom as he entered. He liked the White Pine Tavern better, but the beer was cheaper at the Liberty. He

had several chips left over from yesterday when he stopped in for the morning special--three plastic coin-sized chips, each one good for a schooner of beer, for one buck. He bought the daily limit, five dollars' worth, and so still had a few left.

He made his way through the bright, smokey tavern to the last vinyl-covered stool not taken along the horse-shoe bar. Hunkering over the padded railing, he slapped a beer chip down, and Joan, a burly woman with reddish hair, placed a schooner glass of yellowish beer in front of him and took up his chip. He drank the beer half way down and after chomping several handfuls of stale peanuts from the bowl on the bar, drank down the rest. Looking around, he saw Chester, a logger who'd been in the state treatment center at Cedar Hills with him last year. Chester came around the bar, wedged himself in next to Tom, and signaled Joan for a beer. "How about a quick game, Tom, help you work off that beer gut? Loser buys."

"Why not?" Tom said back, giving up his stool and heading to the rack of cue sticks on the wall.

"Where's Rick," asked Chester, plugging the pooltable with a quarter and racking the balls as soon as they clattered down the chute.

"Back at the apartment. Where else?" Tom chalked the blue felt tip of his cue stick. "The bastard's been strung out all week."

"That Mexican black tar shit's going round. That's

probably what he's shooting up. Wicked fuckin' shit, from what I hear."

"The fucker's got lice too. And then he don't eat." Tom took quick aim and speared the cue ball so hard it ricocheted off the others, jumped the table, and skid across the sawdust on the floor.

After that he played lousy and lost the first game. He challenged Chester to another, double-or-nothing, and lost that one too. "That's it for me," he said, and handing Chester two beer chips he laid his cue stick on the table and returned to the bar.

"Why don't you kick the deadbeat out?" Chester asked, following him to the bar. "I'll move in and give you ten bucks more what he pays. They're your digs, man. You can do what you want."

"Lay off, Chet. It's my problem, alright? I'll deal with it. He ain't so bad."

"He'll cash out on you some day, man, I'm telling you."

"Fuck off, Chet. I'll deal with it. At least he don't do that hairspray shit. He ain't no Clairol hound."

"Fuck you, asshole," Chester snapped back, stepping back from the bar as if to square off. "Have it your way. Baby your little dope fiend." Chester picked up the glass of beer Joan put down for him. "I wonder about you two sometimes. Awful cute if you ask me," he said and walked around to the other side of the bar.

Tom waved his empty beer glass at Joan. He had to

admit, he wasn't sure what to do sometimes. Rick's dope was in his pocket. Should he give it back? Flush it? Sell it? He and Rick had been bumming together a long time, six or seven years, through car wrecks, evictions, jail, treatment centers, whores, fights, all kinds of hell, from Denver to Seattle and a slew of places in between. Maybe he was getting too old. Thirty-nine wasn't young, that's for sure. Not for someone on a drunk since he was fifteen, through four treatment centers, and on Antabuse more times than he could count. Rick was different, though, never into the bottle much. He'd always preferred weed, and then one day--like the old saying about harder stuff--he started up on smack. And since then the unspoken rules of being partners--like you didn't mess with someone's dope--started to blur. Because when Rick got that glazed-over look in his eyes, forget it, you couldn't make any sense with him.

Tom looked around the tavern. Chester was talking to Corine, with her chopped bleached hair, ranting about some guy who'd ripped her off. She had an arm hooked around Chester and hung onto him like he was a big stuffed animal she'd won at the County Fair. Farther down the bar, near the door, sat Carl, from the newsstand, nursing a beer and minding his own business. Next to him, in his red Budweiser windbreaker and red Budweiser cap, stood Larry, who used to work for Anhieser-Busch until he got canned for being drunk on the job. Next to Fat Charlie, who never raised a peep, Sally sat hunched over the same stool she sat on every

night, scribbling away in a small notepad and drinking white wine shooters. A few others Tom didn't know the names of, although he recognized almost everyone.

Straight across the horseshoe from him was the only guy he didn't recognize, an old geezer with grey stubble and a black cowboy hat who slumped over the bar cussing into his beer. When he glanced up and saw Tom looking at him, he shook his fist and barked out that a man didn't need no noisibuddies watching over him when he was trying to get good'n'drunk. He gulped down the rest of his beer, peeled a crisp ten dollar bill from a wad of bills he pulled from his jacket pocket, and ordered another pitcher. "Go find a job why don't'cha," he shouted across the bar to Tom. "This goddamn hole-in-the-wall's for old farts like me."

Tom flipped him the finger. And then Joan, not wanting any trouble, told them both to shut up or get out. But the old geezer cussed her, and she had to come around the bar, jerk him off his stool, and escort him out the door. Once on the sidewalk, and after Joan was back behind the bar, he pulled his pants down and peed on the front glass. Joan then grabbed a piece of pipe from underneath the wash sink and chased him down the street.

When she returned, Tom congratulated her for a job well done. He then polished off his beer, got up, and left. Spotting the old fart stumbling up the sidewalk, he followed him for a few blocks, gradually catching up. When he was right behind him, he wasted no time. He roughly shuffled



the smaller, drunker man into the alley, knocked him down against a green metal dumpster, lifted the wad of bills from his jacket, slapped his hat off, and strode away. When the old guy started cussing, Tom glanced back and saw him crawling along the pavement trying to get to his feet. After falling on his rear a couple times, he gave up and apparently passed out. Tom stuffed the money in his shirt pocket without counting it and continued on his way. Half way back to the apartment, he took Rick's dope from his pocket and dropped it through the grates of a sewage drain.

Rick was still on the couch when Tom got back to the apartment. Instead of lying stretched out, he was on his side curled up with his arms wrapped about his gut. He winced and moaned when Tom flicked on the overhead light, which illuminated the stained curtains, faded green carpet dotted with burn marks, torn couch cushions, battered coffee table, yellowed walls and ceiling, overflowing ashtrays, and empty beer cans strewn everywhere. After taking a beer from the refrigerator, Tom stepped up to the couch and looked down at Rick. "What's the matter, partner? Bad clams?"

"Sick, man, fuckin real sick." Rick's voice sounded strained, though muffled by the cushion he rammed his face into.

"You going to heave?"

Rick groaned, his body rocking back and forth, and

gripped his stomach even tighter.

"You should eat something, Rick. Got to eat, man. It's a goddamn fact of life. Specially if you shoot up all fucking day."

"No," Rick got out. "Can't eat. Cramps."

Tom thought he should eat anyways, but didn't say anything. When he went on a bender he always made sure he got down something. Some mornings, while he drank instant coffee, or more likely his first beer of the day, he cooked up a big plate of hamburgers--five or six at a time--and put them in the refrigerator so later when he got hungry he could slap one between a couple slices of bread, slop some ketchup on, some salt and pepper, and eat. But Rick, he ate a few potato chips, maybe drank a couple cans of pop, and then mainlined for dessert. A couple months ago when Rick really started losing weight fast, Tom went into a health food store and lifted a two-pound canister of protein powder--but Rick wouldn't touch the stuff so Tom ended up drinking protein drinks for six weeks and putting on eight pounds.

"You want me to make you anything, some eggs, or get you a beer or something?"

Rick shook his head and rolled over so he was no longer facing the back of the couch. Tom sat on the windowsill, lit a cigarette, and watched him. After a while he asked, "You mind if I turn the radio on?"

Instead of answering, Rick dragged his feet to the

floor, got up, and slouched into the bathroom. The next instant he could be heard gagging, his dry heaves echoing off the bathroom tile, followed by desperate gaspings for breath. Tom got off the windowsill and walked to the bathroom.

"You okay, man? You want to go to the emergency room?" Tom remembered that the last time Rick went on the methadone program was right after he brought him to the Harborview emergency room after an episode like this--about six months ago.

"That's okay, Tom. Thanks anyway," Rick said, struggling to sound calm though his voice quivered with each word.

Tom decided to let him alone and went back to the kitchen for a beer. As he opened the refrigerator and counted what was left of the 12-pack, a knock came at the door and someone entered the apartment.

"Why's it so damn bright in here?" It was Weasel. "Hey, Tommy, you want me to turn this light off?"

"Leave it, Weasel. Just leave the fucking light. And next time don't come barging in like you live here. Cause you don't."

"Right, Thomas, gotcha." Weasel looked around the room. "Where's Ricardo?"

"Puking his guts out. So why don't you come back later?"

"He's sick, huh? That sucks." Weasel reached for the

pack of cigarettes on the kitchen table. "I ran out. Mind if I mooch?"

"Get your own."

"They don't pay me till Saturday, man. I'm broke. One lousy cig, man. You know I'm good for it. I'll give you a whole pack on Saturday, Tom. Promise." He raised his right hand, three fingers straight up, as if taking the scout's pledge of honor.

"Asshole," Tom muttered and slid the pack across the table. Weasel picked it up, shook out three cigarettes, and put one in his mouth and the others in his shirt pocket. Then he flopped down on the couch. Rick returned from the bathroom and dropped down next to him.

"The man," Weasel said. "Sorry about you bein' sick, dude."

Without saying a word, Rick straightened up, leaned forward, and looked through the clutter on the coffee table. Tom saw him and pretended not to notice. But when Rick finally looked up, his cheeks pale, lips white, a scared look in the contracted pupils of his eyes, he looked towards Tom.

"Where'd it go? It was here, just a few hours ago." He looked to Weasel and back to Tom, and pleaded, "Where's my dope, Tom? I can't find my dope." He checked the ziplock bag again and then got on his knees on the floor and searched beneath the couch.

"You can't find it?" Weasel asked, watching Rick's

frantic movements, beginning to look worried himself. "Come on, man, it's gotta be here. Where could it have gone?"

"I can't find it, man. My dope, I can't find it."

Rick crawled back onto the couch.

"Try under the cushions," Tom suggested and went to the refrigerator for another beer. "Maybe it fell behind."

Rick flipped the cushions off the couch and onto the floor. Weasel helped him dig around the seams, pulling up all kinds of dust and paper scraps and a few crusty coins.

"Jesus!" Rick said. "That's it, the last of it. No mas." His face twitched, and he shivered as if an icy chill blew through the room. He bit his lower lip and pulled and twisted at his beard. Tom could see what was coming, could make out the symptoms, and felt bad for him. He'd been through the d.t.'s a couple times, real bad, but he knew it was nothing to what was coming around the mountain for Rick.

"Maybe someone took it," Tom hinted and popped open his beer.

"Yeah, like who?" Weasel asked and lit one of the cigarettes he'd grubbed.

"All I know," said Tom, "is we were the only ones here, and I don't do that shit like you guys." He glared at Weasel.

"Fuck you," Weasel spat back at him, flicking a bit of tobacco off his tongue with his forefinger.

"Fuck yourself, dickhead. You're a fucking vulture and everyone knows it." Tom saw an opening and went for it.

"Who goes around here leeching off everyone all the time? You'd steal anything you could get your grubby paws on, Weasel. Look at him, Rick, prancing in here while you're puking your guts up. Why ain't he sick?"

Rick sat on the couch with his head in his hands, every now and then nervously glancing up. Marching past Tom into the kitchen, Weasel yanked the refrigerator door open and helped himself to a can of beer.

"That's my fucking beer," Tom reminded him. "Look at this asshole helping himself to my goddamn beer." He looked at Rick and raised both arms in the air. "Jesus, Weasel, you don't go drinking people's beer and you don't go snatching their dope either. You just don't." He looked hard at Weasel. "Look, man, give the dope back now or let Rick have some money so he can cop some more."

Weasel stepped up to Tom, popped open the can of beer in his face, and said, "I didn't lift his stash, shithead. He's my friend. Maybe you took it, did you ever think of that?" He turned to Rick. "You know me, man. I didn't take your stash. It's probably lying around here and we just can't find it."

Rick stared up at Weasel and then looked at Tom. He then laid his head in his hands again as if he was going to cry. "Just give it back," he said mournfully. "We'll do up right now and forget about it. But just give it back, Weasel. I'm hurting bad."

"Come on, man," Weasel pleaded. "I didn't take it."

Why don't you ask your buddy here? He probably sold it to buy more beer. He's the goddamn lush."

Rick didn't bother to look up this time.

"I'll check his pockets?" Tom said, moving up close to Weasel.

"Right, Tom. I'm going to let a faggot like you pat me down. Do your homo number on someone else," Weasel said and backed away.

Tom moved in even closer. "Look at him, Rick. Scared shitless."

"Right," Weasel scoffed and took another step back. "I'm scared of your big, ugly face."

"You already shot up Rick's dope, didn't you?" Tom gave him a light shove on the shoulder, and when Weasel tried to slap his hand away, Tom swung his arm around the front of his neck and got him into a headlock. Weasel began squirming and kicking and flailing his arms about until he slipped free of the hold.

"I don't have it, jerk-off," he shouted. "So back off." When Tom approached again, Weasel hurled the can of beer he held at Tom's head.

Tom ducked--"That's it, motherfucker"--and stepping into the kitchen, reached behind the refrigerator and pulled out a black baseball bat which he lifted above his shoulder ready to swing. "Better get your skinny ass the hell out of here, Weasel. Fast."

"You're goddamn crazy," Weasel said, backing toward the

door. "A fucking loon, man. You should be locked up. How do you live with this ape, Rick? You two suck each other off? Is that the deal?"

Tom pulled back the bat and swung it inches from Weasel's head, deliberately missing. Weasel scrambled to the door and throwing it open staggered into the hall. "I'm coming back, man. You wait. And when you're not looking..." Weasel clasped his hands together and held them out at arms' length as if taking aim with a handgun. "Boom! Your brains all over these fucking walls."

Tom followed him into the hallway and swung the bat again, this time grazing his shoulder. Once Weasel recovered his balance he scurried toward the stairwell. He stopped there and started kicking the stairwell door. "I'm coming back, Tom, I'm coming back and..."

Tom rushed him, and Weasel darted into the stairwell and down the stairs.

"Show your junky-ass face around here again and we'll see who gets killed," Tom shouted down the stairwell after him. He heard the basement door bang closed.

Marching back down the hallway, he returned to the apartment and slammed the broken door closed behind him. Rick was crouched in the corner of the couch, his legs tucked up under him, his head cradled in his arms. The cushions were still strewn about on the floor. Tom walked right past him into the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator and reached for a beer. Then he turned and looked back at



the pathetic figure huddled on the couch.

"Hey, Rick?"

Rick clapped his hands over his ears and let out a loud, steady, moaning hum.

"Look, man," Tom said and came closer, kicking one of the cushions out of his way. He looked down at Rick, who began rocking back and forth. "I got this cash I took off this old fart." He took the wad of bills from his pocket. "Why don't you take it and get a fix, something to take the edge off. You know, tide you over?"

The rocking grew steadier, faster, more rhythmic, while the humming rose in pitch.

"Come on, man. You gotta do something." Tom held out the money. Yet when Rick still did not respond, he stuffed the bills back into his pocket and stepped over to the window. He stood several minutes with his back to the couch, waiting for Rick to say something. He lit a cigarette and watched the traffic down in the street.

"Okay," he blurted out and turned around. "I'll go, man. I'll cop for you. But this is it. The last time, Rick. Hear? The last fucking time."

Flicking his cigarette into the kitchen sink and grabbing his jacket off the chair, he headed out. If he couldn't fish the dope from the gutter or find someone dealing on the street or in the bars, he knew he'd have to track down Weasel to help him score. Anything, though, even that, was better than watching his partner get so damn sick.

## CARL

He snapped the plastic seal off the Newsweeks and began stacking the magazines on the front rack. A man in a suit hurried in, tossed a quarter and dime in the change tray, snatched up a paper, and hurried out. Carl thanked him and continued stacking.

When done, he stepped behind the counter, perched himself on a stool, and spread out the morning sports page. On the street a truck roared by rattling the plate glass front, and Carl took his reading glasses off to consider the rush hour scramble outside--buses backed up at the street light, messengers weaving through traffic, construction workers walking to the site of a new highrise, a man with his head wrapped in rags pushing a shopping cart, and men and women in suits and fancy sneakers scurrying to their offices.

No commuting for me, thank you very much, he thought. He lived and worked in downtown Seattle, and had for the past 23 years. It was an eight minute walk from his apartment door, down the elevator, out the Cornelius Arms lobby, and down Third Avenue to Queen City News and Magazines--though the store was no longer called that, not since six months ago when Benny took it over from Walt, his

old boss and friend, and told Carl the name didn't have the right flair, then changed it to Emerald City Kiosk.

A woman rushed in and bought the new Cosmopolitan. Other people came in for the morning Post-Intelligencier, cigarettes, gum, or to browse the racks. After giving a man back his change, Carl looked out the window and spotted Benny standing on the opposite corner waiting to cross. He quickly folded up the sports page and stashed it beneath the counter.

A few moments later Benny pushed his way through the two front doors. "Hey, Carl," he said, "everything okay so far?"

"So far," Carl assured him, feeling the platform behind the counter sag as Benny stepped up. Carl figured the man weighed 300 pounds at least. And he was tall, too--at least six feet--which made Carl, at only five and a half, a hundred and thirty pounds, feel dwarfed. Benny's bald head, and a chin that spread down into his shirt, only made him seem bigger, a mountain, though not the least majestic. His pants drooped, his shirttails hung out, and his front was always stained. He was about fifteen years younger, Carl also figured, than his own 61 years.

Carl squeezed to one side as Benny stepped past him to get to the drawer where he locked away the lottery tickets. An old man wearing a light blue golf jacket came in, circled the magazine and paperback racks, then crossed in front of the counter and ducked into the left section of the store.

Benny referred to this as the Adult Literature section. Right after buying out old Walt--who never sold so much as a Playboy--Benny partitioned off the left third of the store and began stocking porn--men with women, men with men, women with women, in threes, fours, fives, even more, doing all kinds of things in bedrooms, barns, vans, sometimes with ropes, leather straps, chains, and worse. Benny also owned a store on First Avenue with a backroom full of curtained booths where guys came in to watch ten-minute loops for fifty cents. Benny knew his trade, Carl gave him that. But as for himself, he never imagined he'd be peddling such smut.

Benny bent down and flicked on the black-and-white TV monitor beneath the counter. A camera bolted to the back ceiling picked up the entire left section of the store: magazines, videos, and sex-aid devices locked in a clear plastic case.

"Keep an eye on him," Benny said. "He's probably okay, but I don't like when there's only one back there."

Glancing down at the monitor, Carl watched the man flip through a magazine, pick up another, and flip through it just as fast. *Jostling their jollies*, Carl once heard Benny say about the customers who came in just to leaf through the magazines.

He looked up from the monitor and saw the large, brown U.P.S. truck pull up to the curb. A blonde-haired woman in brown shirt and pants hopped out, dropped a handcart off the

back, loaded it with boxes, and wheeled it into the store.

"Nicky," Carl greeted her, taking the delivery sheet from off the top box.

"How goes, Carl?" she said, ignoring Benny, who didn't even look up from his newspaper.

Carl watched as she swung the handcart to the left side of the counter and set the boxes next to a rack of Playboy, Penthouse, and Hustler--the standards. She ignored the racy covers and returned to the counter. Embarrassed, Carl handed back the delivery sheet. "Busy today, Nicky?"

"The usual," she said and took the clipboard from him. "You have a good one," she called out and spun the handcart back out to the sidewalk.

Benny looked up when the truck was gone. "Carl, haul that new stock to the back and start getting it on the shelf--that center rack that's bare back there."

Carl rolled up the sleeves of his yellow plaid shirt, lifted a box, and carried it back through the adult section. "Watch your back," he warned the man in the golf jacket. After getting the remainder of the boxes to the back, he took out his box-knife and began slicing open the tops. He pulled out a handful of magazines and scanned the titles--Mountain Mamma, Cocks and Cooze, Swingin' Sweeties, Butt Delight--and wondered why they always came in assortments like that, before dropping them back in the box.

Benny had advised him early on to think of it as just *merchandise*, like anything else they sold. But it wasn't so

easy. Carl remembered last month when he snuck a magazine home, how once he got it in his apartment it sat there in his small canvas bag like a trapped rodent, gnawing at his concentration as he tried to read the new Sports Illustrated. When he couldn't take it anymore, he put the SI down, drew the curtains closed across the large picture window, and pulled the magazine from his bag. He sat in his lounge-chair turning pages, quickly at first, then slowing down, focusing on each picture, holding the magazine closer to peer at the exposed flesh, the tangle of limbs and genitals. When he came to a face that seemed so much younger than the others, he stopped, caught by the blank expression that seemed frozen into the soft complexion, and looking closer, could sense the dull, desperate sadness behind the girl's eyes. He broke his gaze and dropped the magazine to the floor. When he picked it up again, he felt a little nauseated, but excited. Near midnight, he put the magazine in a paper sack, carried it to the end of the hall, and dropped it down the garbage chute.

After setting the magazines from the first box on the center rack as Benny told him to, he put his box-knife down and returned up front. "I'm not feeling well, Benny. Probably something I ate. I'll just straighten the racks over here for now," he said, and started toward the other side of the store without waiting for Benny to reply.

"Sure, Carl," Benny said. "Just get that new stock out before tonight." He returned to his copy of Car and Driver,

but a moment later looked up again. "Hey, Carl. I got a better idea," he called out, "How about getting us some coffee," and ringing open the cash register, he pulled out a five and slapped it down on the counter. "Get me a double cappuccino and bring back enough sugars this time. You get whatever you want."

Carl returned to the counter. "Double cap, extra sugars," he repeated and snatched up the five. He left the store, turned the corner, and headed up the block, glad for the break. On the street, despite all the diesel fumes from the trucks and buses, a sharp, cool breeze was blowing, and he could smell the pungent, briny scent coming in off the harbour. The sky out over the water was cloudless.

The next block over, around the corner of Second Avenue, he came to the Downtown Cafe. People were lined up in the narrow aisle between the shelves of expensive coffee makers and the row of coffee bins. Carl squeezed in through the door. Inside it was warm. Rich coffee odors hung in the air, and a long red and chrome espresso machine hissed steam. Carl got in line, and thought, So what if a 61-year-old man fetches coffee?

"Carlo!" the man at the espresso machine shouted.

"What news this morning?"

"`Sonics Scorch Suns,'" Carl barked back. "How you doing today, Tony?"

"Busy as ever. But that's good, right?" Tony was young, short, dark haired, with muscles stretching his

short-sleeved polo shirt.

"You're a success," Carl told him. "Don't complain."

Tony smiled and waved him off, then pulled the handle down on the espresso machine so that black ooze dribbled from dual spigots into two paper cups. Carl looked at the menu board, coffee names scrawled in orange chalk--Sumatran, Kenyan, Costa Rican, French, and a dozen more, along with numerous espresso drinks.

"Hey Tony," he said. "What's this cafe mocha stuff?"

Patricia, Tony's partner, answered from near the cash register. "Cappuccino with chocolate syrup, Carl. Good stuff."

He looked toward the cash register. "Hey ya, Patricia," he said. "Is it good?"

"The best," she said, passing two foam-topped cups from Tony to a man and woman wearing identical beige overcoats.

"Give me a cafe mocha then. And a double cap for Benny."

Tony went to work as Carl moved up and stood across the counter from Patricia.

"How's life at Emerald City?" she asked, making change from the five he handed her.

Carl shrugged.

When she asked how he liked his new boss, he gave her a puzzled look and said, "Benny?" and added the next instant, "He's okay, I guess." Then he leaned over the espresso candy and Biscotti and whispered, "To tell you the truth,



Patty, I don't much like what he's got us selling these days. Walt didn't go in for that. Makes me feel"--he blushed--"not right, I guess."

"First Amendment," Patricia said. "It seems women pay the highest price for free speech."

"Yeah," Carl replied, not really following her.

"That's progress I suppose."

Tony carried two cups of coffee toward them.

"You're a good man, Carl," Patricia said.

Tony handed him the coffee.

Carl thank them both. "I'll see you folks later," he said, and stuffing several packets of sugar in his pocket, worked his way back out the door.

When he got back to Emerald City Kiosk and placed the cappuccino and sugar packets on the counter, Benny stopped stamping lottery tickets long enough to pour all six sugars into his coffee. Carl glanced down at the monitor and saw two men in the back. After several minutes, one of them, a young man in a dark double-breasted suit, came up to the counter and asked, "Do you carry Rascals?" Carl looked to Benny, who raised his eyes, studied the man a moment, and answered, "No. We don't carry that. Never heard of it."

"Thanks anyway," the man said and walked back to the adult section. Carl watched him on the monitor as he continued to search through the magazines on nearly every rack.

Benny put away the lottery tickets, looked at Carl

sipping his coffee, and asked, "Is that the best thing for an upset stomach?"

"It's hot chocolate," Carl lied and moved the cup from Benny's view. "Here's the change."

When he finished his cafe mocha, he got up, walked over to the right section of the store, and beginning at the first rack started straightening the stock. He started at news and commentary, made his way through regional and local, then business and industry, on through women's fashion, arts and hobbies, travel and outdoors, autos, planes, and boats, boxing, wrestling, and body building, fishing and hunting, up and down three full aisles, ending at foreign language journals. Then he checked the paperbacks--bestsellers, self-help, romance, horror, science fiction, and westerns. At the end of the rack, he picked up a Louis L'Amour book that had just come in and started reading the back cover, when Benny bellowed to him to come up front again. He slipped the book in his back pants pocket and made his way to the counter.

"I'm taking off here in a few minutes, Carl," Benny told him. "I have to train a new guy at the other store." Benny opened the cash register and took out most of the money from the morning's receipts. "You mind working late?"

"That's fine, Benny," Carl sighed. He'd planned on hiking down to the public pier to do some fishing--bring a couple sandwiches, some coffee, maybe the Louis L'Amour book, and make an evening of it--but all that could wait, he

supposed. He didn't like turning down overtime. And not because of the money either. After eleven years of working at the same store, he felt he owed it something, there was a committment. And besides, he still liked the work--though lately Benny was making him put in twelve-, even fourteen-hour days a little more often than he would like.

"I'll be back around six," Benny announced and twisted a rubber band around the bills. He slid his weight off the stool and walked to the backroom where he put the money, as he did everyday, in the fireproof safe. When he came back, he pulled his jacket on and left without so much as saying "So long." Carl was glad he was gone.

Around three-thirty, the blue Seattle Times van pulled up front and a kid jumped out the back swinging two bundles of afternoon papers.

"My man Carl," he yelled. "A hundred in." The kid counted yesterday's remaining papers on the small rack by the door and replaced them with new ones. "And six out. See ya tomorrow, guy."

"Okay, Nat," Carl hollered back. He marked the numbers on a ledger sheet and watched the van race down to the newspaper dispenser at the bus stop at the end of the block.

Things picked up during rush hour and stayed brisk most of the evening. Around seven, Carl began wondering where Benny was and thought of calling the First Avenue store, but decided not to. He wanted nothing to do with that store. Two months ago he agreed to work the counter there one

Saturday night while Benny was out of town--and he had regretted it ever since. The customers at the First Avenue store slinked in and out without saying anything to him. Red-painted ply-wood and chicken wire covered the front window, the ceiling was low and stained yellow, the air was dank and smoky, and what's more, he didn't trust the guys in the back booths. Later that same week he told Benny he would rather not work First Avenue again.

If Benny's not coming back, Carl decided as he rang up a TV Guide for a white-haired lady, that new stock back there can wait.

A guy who was a weekly regular hurried in just then and went straight to the adult section. As Carl watched him on the monitor thumb frantically through several magazines, someone else walked in and asked for a pack of Newports. Carl rang up the cigarettes, and then from the corner of his eye saw the regular approach with five or six magazines in his arms. When his turn at the register came, he placed the magazines on the counter. By the guy's looks, Carl guessed he was a boozier--his hands trembling, his face and fingers blotched red, the skin around his eyes blanched white, and the sparse hair on his head slicked back.

Carl quickly rang up the magazines. "Thirty-eight, fifty-three," he said, amazed as always by how much the skin mags cost, and slipped them into a paper bag.

The man handed him a fifty. Usually when handing back change, Carl liked to say something--"thank you," "have a

nice evening," "come back"--but when someone bought a skin mag he slid the change across the counter and looked away, embarrassed for himself and the customer alike. He once told a man buying a copy of Hustler, "Have a nice night," and then realized it could be taken wrong. Tonight, though, since this guy was a regular, he handed him back his change and said, "See ya later, pal."

The man glanced up, anxious-looking, but avoided eye contact. "Right," he murmured and slouched toward the door clutching his magazines in their brown bag.

Carl looked at the small digital clock stuck to the side of the cash register. It was eight-thirty, half an hour till closing. He figured out his OT pay for that week and thought about stopping by the Dog House Diner and maybe splurging on the dinner special, whatever it happened to be. Maybe Lois, who'd been acting kind of sweet on him lately, would be waitressing. He looked at the clock again and then, for the first time since morning, stepped back into the adult section. "Closing time," he announced to the half dozen men standing in front of the racks. "Five more minutes. That's it."

Next morning, at seven sharp, he opened the front doors and lugged in the two bundles of morning papers waiting on the sidewalk. After stacking the papers and going to the toilet, he climbed a stool behind the front counter and

flapped open the P.I. Usually he glanced over each section front and back, eyeballing a few headlines, and then turned straight to the box scores on the Sports page. But this morning, something caught his attention. There, on the front page of Section B in the "City Notes" column, a small headline stood out--*Man Arrested on Child Porn Charges*. He hunched over the paper and read the short article:

*Seattle--Last night, at approximately 8:30, Benjamin Kovacic, of Ballard, was arrested on charges of possession and dissemination of child pornography. Acting on an anonymous tip, police obtained a warrant to search Kovacic's home, after which they confiscated a series of photos depicting adults allegedly engaged in sexual activity with minors.*

*According to Officer Dalkey, several boxes of evidence were removed from Kovacic's basement. It has yet to be determined whether Kovacic took the photos or was simply acting as their distributor.*

*Kovacic owns two stores in downtown Seattle which sell adult literature and videos. His arraignment is expected this afternoon.*

Carl folded the paper and dropped it beneath the

counter. A woman came in and bought a newspaper and Time magazine. When she left, he hurried around the counter, locked both front doors, and flipped the Open/Closed sign around.

Walt would love this, he thought, and sitting back on the stool looked out at the first commuters arriving downtown. What if the police came and searched the place? What if they arrested him? He thought of Lois down at the Dog House, how last night she sat and talked with him during her break, how she even offered him a piece of pie on the house. Just as he was thinking about making a quick search of the store and then turning over to the police anything he found, the phone rang, nearly startling him off his seat. As he reached across the counter and fumbled the receiver to his ear, he noticed a man peering through the front window. He quickly turned his back and faced the wall behind the counter.

"Hello?" He didn't give his usual *Good morning, Emerald City Kiosk, How may I help you* greeting. "That you, Benny?" He listened a moment. "Yeah, I heard. It was in the P.I. Sure the store's fine. No trouble. But hey, are the police going to shut us down? What?" He listened again. Benny wanted him to take the money from the safe in back--Carl jotted down the combination--then he wanted him to lock up the store and bring the money down to his lawyer's office next to the courthouse so he could make bail. Carl listened carefully, without saying a word. When

Benny stopped giving him instructions, his tone changed and he asked Carl if he would do this favor for him, as a friend.

"Sure Benny," Carl said, "I'll do it. I just wish..." He fidgeted, put the phone to his other ear. "I don't know, Benny. Never mind. I'll bring the money." He heard Benny say thanks just before he hung up.

He turned back around and stared out the window for a long time, hardly noticing when someone on the sidewalk tried the doors, knocked on the glass, looked in at him, and then walked away. Eventually he picked up the phone again, dialed Fleetfoot messengers, and told them to send someone around.

He walked to the back, opened the safe, removed the money, which was already in a manila envelope, and carried it up front. When the messenger arrived, in yellow vest and helmet, walkie-talkie strapped to his hip, and tapped at the front door, Carl let him in.

"Be with you in a second," he said and stepped back behind the counter. He found a spiral notebook in a drawer, tore a piece of paper from it, and in small, neat letters, printed two words--"I quit"--and signed his name--"Carl." He slid the paper into the envelope with the money, sealed it, handed it to the messenger, told him where to take it, and gave him a twenty dollar bill from the cash register. When the messenger began to give him change, Carl waved it off.



"Thanks!" the messenger said. "You have a great day."

"You too," Carl replied, and after emptying the cash register, followed the messenger outside. He locked both doors from the sidewalk and walked up to the curb. "Take these keys down there too, okay?"

"You got it," the messenger said and kickstarted his moped.

Carl watched him closely. "Is this a good job?" he asked over the whir of the small motor.

"Except when the weather's bad," the messenger answered and lifted the moped off its kickstand. He nodded to Carl and sped off down Third Avenue.

Carl watched him a moment, turned, and started walking. When he reached the corner, he dropped a quarter and dime into the slot of the newspaper dispenser, pulled out a copy of the morning PI, and with it tucked under his arm crossed the street.

## A SOLACE OF RIPE PLUMS

Scott pulled his uniform on in the back warehouse. He tightened his belt, smoothed his shirt where his name was neatly stitched across the pocket, and disappeared between the metal supply shelves.

"How many you have?" asked Richy, the other driver, from across the aisle.

"Nine," Scott hollered back. "One's in Enumclaw and one's way the hell to Tacoma."

He complained plenty since being hired as equipment handler/driver for the Visiting Nurses of Greater Seattle, though he knew the job was the best luck he'd had since leaving Oklahoma. For the past year and a half he'd had to string together temp jobs--stuffing envelopes, stocking inventory, hauling bricks--and owed two months' back rent. When he called his parents in Enid, they told him he could either come home and enroll in college or fend for himself. He decided to stay in Seattle.

"As long as someone don't croak on me," he groaned, and screwed the legs onto a bathseat. "Once was enough."

"Part ov dee job, mahn," Richy said, but then more seriously, "It gets me too sometimes."

"That old guy last week...? No way was I ready for

that." Scott placed the screwdriver on the workbench as details from the visit flashed before him--the white hair, the withered face, the transparent hands grasping the armrests as he slid a gel-cushion under the old man's butt and onto the seat of his wheelchair. Then the frail limbs trembling, the eyes straining wide, the mouth sucking air, and the wasted body slumping back into the wheelchair.

"Like the nurse told you," Richy said, "he was overdue."

"He could have waited till I left," Scott said and carried the bathseat to the back door. He yanked the knotted rope off the floor and sent the wide aluminum door flying toward the ceiling. A powder blue step-van with white cross decals on the sides and back was parked inches from the loading dock. He began piling the day's deliveries into the van--two electric hospital beds and two plastic-covered mattresses, a wheelchair, quadcane, bedside commode, three bathseats, and one pulmo aide. He also loaded several boxes of supplies: incontinent pads, syringes, catheters, saline solution, gauze, and rubber gloves--and then closed the garage door.

From the far end of the warehouse, Karen, the office secretary, appeared and yelled out to Scott that he was wanted up front on the phone.

"Who is it?" he yelled back. If it was Ellen, he didn't want to take it.

"Your sweety, Georgette. She won't talk to anyone but

her `Scotty.' Says it's urgent."

"Tell her `Scotty's' left already."

"Sorry," Karen replied. "I told her you were here. She's waiting."

Scott, shaking his head, plodded up front to where Karen stood near the coffeemaker. "You're going to make me late again," he told her.

"I thought you already had a girlfriend?"

"Funny," he said and followed her into the front office.

He took the receiver off Karen's desk, said hello, and began fidgeting with his keys as Georgette went into her spiel.

"Hold on a second, Georgette," he got in finally and cupped his hand over the receiver. "She wants a liftchair, a brown one," he whispered across the office to Karen.

In the past two months, he'd delivered to Georgette's home nearly every piece of equipment they carried. The old woman was ill and disabled, granted, but sometimes Scott wondered if she and her homecare nurse weren't scamming the insurance companies somehow.

"Tell her she needs to have her doctor sign for it," Karen said, "and then Medicaid has to give authorization."

"Georgette," he said, removing his hand from the receiver, and then for the next five minutes tried to explain the procedure to her. "That's right. Have a Medicaid coupon ready. Okay. That's fine. I'll be there

around noon or so, Georgette. Right. Goodbye."

He handed the phone back to Karen. "She wants me to pick her up the new People Magazine on my way down."

Barrelling south on I-5 in the van, the radio cranked, the windows down, the wind whipping through the cab, Scott realized he'd have to face Ellen.

He liked her a lot and all that--those first few weeks had been really something--but things were going too fast lately. She was twenty-nine, almost thirty, while he was only twenty-one. She was the first woman he'd slept with in Seattle, and only the third ever. Yet she'd already been married and divorced. Lately she'd been hinting that they should move in together, share an apartment on Queen Anne Hill or someplace like that. But what would that be like? What would his parents think? It was all a little too much to think about, so he kept his distance. And yet, he really did like her.

He got off I-5 at the Sea-Tac exit and made his way to his first delivery, a box of incontinent pads for Mr. Churney, a grizzled old Russian immigrant. After that he dropped off a quadcane for the great grandmother of a large Loatian family in Tukwila, and after that he set up a bed and trapeze unit at the home of a woman returning that afternoon from Harborview Hospital. It was 11:30 by the time he checked his route schedule and decided he should get

Georgette out of the way before stopping for lunch.

Her house was out along one of the many two-lane blacktop roads that skirt the Cascade foothills east of Seattle. After driving for half an hour, and stopping once to check his map, he spotted the name RICKERS painted white on the red barn-shaped mailbox, steered the van into the dirt drive, drove past the dense bank of rhododendrons, and looped in front of the small, weather-greyled house.

Stepping out of the van, he peered up at the Douglas firs that towered behind the sloped, cedar-shake roof. In the middle of the driveway loop and to the right of the front porch, clusters of irises reared through a tangle of weeds and blackberry tendrils. On the other side of the house, several gnarled fruit trees--some still in brilliant pink and white blossom--formed a small orchard.

He jumped up the sagging wooden stoop, opened the battered screen door, and stepped onto the porch. Strewn across the porch floor were a card table, wicker rocker, tangled garden hose, pruning shears, loppers, rake, spade, some firewood, and several rain-beaten boxes. He stepped over the clutter and gave several firm knocks to the front door.

After a lapse of several moments, a faint, raspy voice called out from within. "Is that you, Scotty?"

"It's me, Georgette," he hollered back through the door.

"It's okay then. I'm decent."

He lifted the door slightly, pushed it open, and stepped inside the dark interior, pausing momentarily to let his eyes adjust. Furniture appeared slowly from the shadows--in the far corner a bed draped with a faded quilt, next to it a cardtable crowded with medicine containers, glass tumblers, and crumpled tissues, and on the other side of the room, a small kitchen with propane stove and aluminum sink, while in the center of the floor, a large, oval rag rug. Toward the rear of the room, silhouetted against the faint, dusty light from the back hallway, Georgette appeared in her wheelchair, wearing her bulky wool sweater and resembling a piece of overstuffed furniture.

"I was making potty," she declared, pushing back wisps of coral white hair from her large, fleshy face. "Come in, Scotty, come in. Would you like a doughnut? There're some on the counter there." She wheeled herself into the room.

"No thank you, Georgette."

"Then how about some orange juice?"

He declined this as well. As a personal, on-the-job policy, he never accepted food from patients and never used their toilets.

Georgette pushed herself closer. "Bring me that do-whacky from over there, Scotty," she said, wheezing and raising her hand in the direction of the bed.

Scott retrieved an inhalator from the table, and Georgette took it from him and inhaled the swirling vapors that seeped into the plastic mouthpiece from a tube

connected to a small pump on the floor. Then she handed it back.

"Did you bring my magazine, Scotty?"

"I forgot, Georgette, sorry. I brought the swatches, though, and I need to take your height again." He looked about the room. "Where's your walker?"

"Over there," she said and gestured toward the hallway.

Scott retrieved the aluminum walker and placed it in front of her. "Okay then, can you stand up straight and tall now?"

She reached out, grasped the walker, and eased herself up from her wheelchair. As soon as she was standing, Scott stretched a measuring tape along her frail length.

"The girls must really go for you," she cooed, sitting back down. "Such a young, husky fella as yourself."

"Here are the swatches, Georgette."

"I told you already, Scotty. I want a brown chair. Plain ol' brown."

"You have to point to the fabric so I order the right one. We don't want to make any mistakes."

Georgette yanked the pad of upholstery swatches from him and flipped through it. "There," she declared and pointed to a brown tweed.

"Thank you," he said and took the swatches back.

"Now tell me about your girlfriend," she ordered, out of the blue, looking straight up at him.

"What girlfriend?" he said. "Who would go out with



me?"

"Who wouldn't? Don't tell me the girls aren't beside themselves over those curly locks of yours and those big brown eyes. Put sixty years back between me and my grave and I'd be head-over-heels in love with you. So who is she?"

"No one."

"Such a pity."

There was a lull between them. Neither spoke or looked at the other. Scott jotted the fabric number down on a piece of paper as Georgette tapped her fingertips on the plastic armrest of her wheelchair.

"Okay," Scott finally relented. Georgette stopped her tapping. "There is someone. But she's older." His admission surprised him, and he was annoyed at himself for so easily giving into her chatter.

"Really now..." Georgette crooned and tilted back her head. "How much older did you say?"

"I didn't say," he answered and stood waiting for her next query. But when she remained quiet and only kept gawking at him, he voluntarily confessed, "Seven, maybe seven and half. Something like that."

She pushed her wheelchair back several feet from where he stood and gazed incredulously at him. "Seven, did you say? Seven years, Scotty? That's small change. My Herman was sixty-eight when we took our vows. I was forty-six. Now that's a difference in years. My Herman used to say an

old man in love was like a flower in winter. And he was right. He had three wives before me and out-lived every one, until I finally had to bury him some years back. He was 99 years old." She took hold of Scott's wrist and shook it. "But seven years, Scotty, that's nothing. What's this lucky girl's name?"

"I'll need that Medicaid coupon now, Georgette."

"Her name, Scotty."

"Ellen," he said, and added, "I haven't known her very long. A couple months at most."

"Such a nice name. You tell her I said so. Are you going to move in together?"

"I'd love to talk, Georgette, but I got someone waiting for a commode."

Georgette then spun herself around toward the bedside table and after rummaging about picked something out from the mess. "Here's your silly coupon. And here's the doctor's note." She held out two slips of paper.

"No liftchair without these," Scott said and took the slips of paper from her thick, mottled fingers.

Georgette wheeled herself closer and lowered her voice. "Please, dear, do me a favor. Take some irises for Ellen. I can't cut them all, and they'll go to waste otherwise. Take as many as you like. Please, as a favor. Bring Ellen some flowers."

"I don't know, Georgette," he protested, sidling toward the door.

"Oh, I used to grow bushels of bearded irises when I lived outside Ephrata across the mountains. I shipped them to all the florists in Seattle and Portland and Spokane. The weather this side, though...it's harder growing flowers here."

"Georgette..." He opened the door.

"That's okay, sweets. I'll let you go. You have to do your work. And all the other old ladies you visit deserve a chance at you too."

"Thanks, Georgette." He stepped out onto the porch. "I'll call as soon as the chair comes in. It shouldn't be more than a couple weeks."

"Remember the irises," she called after him. "And leave the door open, Scotty. I enjoy the spring breeze."

Out on the drive, Scott looked over the ruffled petals curling back from the cocoon-shaped buds of the irises that arched toward the bright sunlight. He looked back and saw Georgette through the dirty porch screen.

"Go ahead. Take all you want. They're for Ellen."

He stepped into the thick growth and snapped off several flowers at the stem--violet, maroon, soft yellow blossoms--and held them up for her to see.

"Thanks, Georgette," he hollered toward the porch and climbed into the cab of the van. "She'll love 'em."

That evening he let himself in the front entrance of

the Cornelius Arms hoping to slip quietly up the stairwell to his apartment. Yet just as he was checking his mail at the wall of small mailboxes, one of the elevators opened and Ellen stepped out.

"Scott," she called to him and approached.

He could see the outline of her bra beneath the loose beige blouse she wore. Her tight brown corduroy pants made her appear taller and thinner than she already was. She looked tired.

"Hey," he said. "New tenants?"

"I've got to put them on a lease."

A young, brown-skinned couple--Filipinos, Scott guessed--quietly followed her. She pointed them toward the office across the lobby and told them she'd be right there. Aside from living in a sixth floor apartment, she worked as the Cornelius Arms secretary, leasing apartments and collecting rent--though Scott sometimes suspected she only had the job because her brother owned the place.

"I was going to close up after that," she informed him and ran her hand under her shoulder-length hair and rubbed the back of her neck. "It's been one screwed-up day."

"You look tired."

"This building's a mess. We need National Guard in here, not some puny secretary like me. I haven't eaten since morning, it's been so busy."

Before he knew what he was doing, before he could stop himself, Scott was asking her if she would like to get some

dinner with him--regretting it as he did so. "Why don't you come up when you're done," he said. "We'll go out for Mexican. To Mama's."

Ellen laid her hand on his denim jacket. The gesture reminded him how nice she could be to him, and he felt crummy for his recent behavior. "Mamma's sounds great," she said and patted his chest. "Give me half an hour."

"Half an hour," he confirmed and watched her walk across the lobby to the office, her pants snug to her rear-end. He boarded the elevator that she'd come down on, held his finger on the ninth floor button, and steadied himself as the elevator lurched up. As soon as he got inside his apartment, he tossed his dirty clothes into a cardboard box in the closet and wiped off the kitchen counter. Then he changed his shirt. In front of the large picture window he paused to watch a floatplane speed across Lake Union, lift into the air, and bank toward a mass of dark blue clouds gathering over the mountains. He was following the plane into the distance when a knock came at the door and he lost sight of it. He left the window and reluctantly went to the door.

Ellen stood in the badly lit hallway. Her hair was pinned up, and she'd put on a pair of dangling silver earrings. "Can I come in?" she asked.

Scott bowed with a flourish, waved her into the apartment, and closed the door. Might as well make the most of it, he thought to himself and followed her to the window,

where he maneuvered behind her, wrapped one arm around her waist, the other across her breasts, and kissed the back of her neck. She turned in his arms and returned his kiss. "Nice," he said and tried to kiss her again, but released her as she tried to wiggle free. "So," he let out, "You ready?"

Ellen dropped onto the couch. "I guess," she said. "Do you mind if I rest just a minute? I'm really beat."

Scott got the sense something was bothering her and wasn't sure what to say. He didn't want to come off as pushy, so he sat down beside her to wait. He tried to fold his arms around her shoulders, but she leaned away.

"What a madhouse! The cops were here twice. Some jerk and his girlfriend mixing it up." She let her head fall back and closed her eyes with a sigh. "I'm sorry, Scott, I had no idea I was so exhausted."

He rose from the couch and looked down at her. "Mama's will perk you up. Some nachos, an enchilada or two, and then maybe--"

"Actually, Scott,..." She lifted her head, opened her eyes and looked up at him. "...before we go. I don't mean to put you on the spot, but--"

"But what?" He suddenly felt bad, anticipating what might be coming.

She sat up and laid her hands flat on the cushions. "I'd like to know--just straight out, okay?--if maybe you're avoiding me. You don't call or come by, and so I start

wondering if those first few weeks counted for anything or were just a fling. It would help me a lot to know."

Scott froze, then began to turn away.

"Scott."

He stopped and made himself face her. "I wasn't avoiding you. I work too, is all. I was on call all last week."

"Don't get defensive. I thought you might have gotten spooked?"

"What's that mean?" He really wasn't sure, he told himself, though he had an idea and was even a bit ashamed by how easily she figured him out. With one word.

"Spooked. About us. And getting serious."

"Come on, Ellen." He turned away again. "I asked you out to dinner, not to come up and give me the third degree. Let's get something to eat. You said yourself you're beat."

"I'm exhausted." She spoke calmly, even though he half-expected her to yell at him. "Scott, I'm sorry. It's just my ex was great at jerking me around, and I don't need anymore."

"I'm sorry too," he muttered and walked past the couch to the window. "This whole thing was maybe a bad idea."

"What was? Us?"

"Maybe I should have waited for you in the lobby."

"I don't know, Scott." She dropped her forehead into her fingers. "You're right, maybe we should forget Mama's." She got off the couch.

"Damn, Ellen," he blurted, backing away and flapping his arms in the air. He wasn't sure what was happening here, much less why. He couldn't say if he wanted her to stay, go, or what.

She brushed past him on her way to the door, stopped, and turned around. "What is it with you? All I wanted was a simple straight answer. I wasn't going to bite your head off, or kill myself, or anything like that. I like you, Scott. I like you a lot. Maybe it was too fast, I don't know."

"That's not it," he urged, then doubted the denial the instant he spoke it. "I know what you're saying. I do, in a way."

"In a way, Scott?" She came up to him looking angry, but then seemed to relent. "I'm sorry we had to argue." She touched his arm. He looked at her and put his hands on her hips.

"Me too," he said. When he kissed her, she returned the kiss, though not as warmly as he would have liked. "We could stay here," he suggested, and smiled, shyly.

"I don't know, Scott. We have a lot to think about first, it seems." She backed away from him. "I'm going to go home and sleep." She kissed him again and left.

Scott watched her, more confused than ever. Was that it, he wondered. Were they through? She didn't even slam the door. He stood in the middle of the room for a moment. Then he went to the door, opened it, peered down the empty



hallway, and slammed the door closed--which only made him feel ridiculous. When he returned to the couch and flopped down there, Ellen's scent, the honeysuckle lotion she used, still lingered over the cushions, reminding him of the irises he'd left lying on the workbench down at the warehouse.

When the liftchair arrived from the manufacturers two weeks later, he and Richy tested it and then heaved it into the back of the van.

The early morning drizzle had turned to downpour, and by the time Scott hit the road he had to lean over the steering wheel and squint past the windshield wipers to keep sight of the white dividing line on the highway. Despite this concentration, he couldn't keep his mind off of Ellen. In the past two weeks he'd seen her only once, briefly in the lobby, and felt terrible how things had fallen off so abruptly--with no real reason he could see. When he called her a few nights back, they exchanged courtesies, then she told him he had to decide if he wanted a relationship or not, said good night and hung up.

He was wondering whether he should try to call again later or try to forget the whole thing, when his beeper went off and he pulled into a gas station to use the pay phone. When he reached Karen at the office, she told him to return straight to the warehouse, Georgette's nurse had ordered a

hospital bed and she wanted it delivered today.

He hopped in the van and sped back to the warehouse, and when he arrived he hurried up front.

"What happened? Did she fall or something?"

Before Karen could answer him, the phone rang and she picked it up. With her free hand, she pointed to the computer on her desk. Scott bent over the screen and read Georgette's name, address, height, weight, and age. And then down a long single column he traced a series of diagnostic codes--208, 1103, 312, 836, 224, 237, 1200--which told him nothing unless he was willing to look up each number in the code directory.

"Will she still need the liftchair?"

Karen put the phone to her shoulder. "You'll have to check with her nurse, Scott. I'm really not sure. But bring it just in case."

He returned to the back warehouse and quickly loaded a hospital bed into the van. He closed the back door, got in the cab, and again took off. Half an hour later, heading south toward Enumclaw on Route 169, he pulled into a Quick-Stop in Black Diamond and bought a People Magazine.

It was nearly two o'clock by the time he drove past the barn-shaped mailbox and into Georgette's muddy drive. Water spewed from the corner gutters of the house, the irises sagged, and the last of the orchard blossoms lay in pond-sized puddles. Scott raced around to the back of the van, pulled out the front section of the bed, and hauled it onto

the porch. After wiping the rain from his brow, he knocked several times on the door. Yet there was no answer. When he knocked again, and again heard no response, he opened the door gingerly and stepped inside. The interior was dank and smelled moldy.

"Georgette?" he called out, hoping the worst had not happened, that she was still alive and he wouldn't need to apply emergency care he knew nothing about. "Are you home?"

From the back of the house--"It's okay, sweetie. I'm here. I was looking through Hermy's old letters." Georgette crept forward in her wheelchair from the back hallway. She seemed smaller, more shrunken, and her uncombed hair had turned a slight yellowish. Instead of her big wool sweater, she wore a tattered blue bathrobe.

"Do you think it will rain, Scotty?" she asked, pushing past him.

"It might," he answered, wondering if this question was Alzheimer's or just a poor sense of humor. "You been taking care, Georgette?"

"Best I can," she answered. "The nurse says my cancer is spreading. But like that Red Skelton on TV says, I get up every morning that I don't see candles and flowers surrounding the bed. That nurse wants to put me in one of those homes, but I told her what she could do with such talk."

"I'll have to move your old bed, Georgette. There's not enough room." He then remembered the magazine he'd

picked up and reached into his back pocket. "Here you go, Mrs. Rickers. Happy reading."

"Oh my, thank you, darling. That's sweet. You do whatever you have to now, and I'll just read up on all the movie stars and royalty. That nurse--you know the one, the skinny bag of bones--said I needed that hospital bed for the circulation in my legs." Georgette leaned forward and rubbed her right calf as if mere mention of the affliction caused it to act up. "Did you bring my chair too, Scotty?"

"Of course," he assured her.

There were times--times like this--when despite the common wisdom of the job, he couldn't help but feel sorry for the people on his daily routes. The bedridden, the incontinent, the crippled, the senseless, the smelly, the destitute, the very young, the very old, the diseased with AIDS or cancer or some bizarre ailment he'd never heard of. Once or twice, he'd nearly lost it, had very nearly broken down weeping like a baby--though in the end he'd always managed to get a grip and check his tears.

"How's Ellen?" Georgette asked, hacking into the sleeve of her bathrobe.

"She's fine," he said.

"Are you going to marry her?"

Scott glanced at Georgette and raised his hand to interrupt her. "I'll be right back," he said and headed out to the van.

"Bring my chair too," she reminded him.

After dragging the rear section of the bed into the house and setting it up fairly quickly, he leaned over Georgette's wheelchair and began demonstrating the controls. Her attention seemed to stray, though, and finally, raising her face to his, she asked in a calm, level voice, "What is it you do, Scotty? Tell me. What do you do?"

"Like I said, Georgette, the top button moves the top part, same way the arrow points, and the bottom button--"

"Not the bed, Scott. You. What do you do? I mean, with your life."

Her directness caught him off guard. What was she asking? Did she want him to tell how he'd escaped the flat dullness of Oklahoma, his church-going parents, his strip-cruising high school buddies, his nowhere life, to find something more uncommon by which to orientate himself? Or did she want him to admit how really, most days of the week, he didn't know what he was doing with his life?

"I deliver medical equipment," he answered finally. "I drive around and I deliver medical equipment to people like you," he added and straightened up.

"But what makes you happy, Scotty? That's what I'm asking."

He stared into her pale, filmy eyes for several moments and said, "I guess I don't know, Georgette. I get by, you know. I hang out, like everyone else, and I try to be happy any way I can. That's about it."

"You and Ellen broke up, didn't you?"

"Kind of," he admitted. "But it's no big deal." He then told himself to stop the chitchat. It had already gone too far. Get the chair into the house and get out.

"You had a fight. Did you bring her the flowers?"

"No, I forgot."

"Good flowers, too. So what are you afraid of? Afraid of falling in love?"

"I better get the chair now."

"What's a few years?"

"It's not the age." He handed her the controls--"I'll be back in a minute"--and went out to the van.

After lugging the liftchair back inside, he threw the plastic covering to the floor and plugged the cord into the wall.

Georgette wheeled her chair behind him as if circling a stray sheep into the fold. "You're a prude, Scotty, plain and simple. I wish my Herman were here. He'd tell you."

Scott looked up. Screw Herman, he thought and moved the chair around some more.

"He wasn't like you. He didn't let little details stand in his way."

"Now, now, Georgette." He decided to ignore her tirade. "Is this where you want the chair?"

"Is she ugly?"

"No, Georgette."

"Then she's pretty?"

"She's okay."

"You need a beauty queen, right? A young beau like you."

"Forget it, Georgette." She was starting to unnerve him. "Is this where you want the chair? I have three other stops to make this afternoon."

"Who's keeping you?" She wheeled herself into the kitchen and after looking about slid a brown paper bag off the end of the counter into her lap. She propelled herself back by scuttling her feet along the floor. "Take these," she ordered. "I saved them off the ground yesterday. Elsewise they would've rotted. They're actually sweeter from off the ground if you get them in time. Go ahead, take them."

Despite his no-food policy, Scott took the bag. He unfolded it enough to peek inside and then crumpled it back up. "Thanks, Georgette. They look good."

"Herman and I used to take plums to the movies. They were his favorite. He couldn't stand the sight of prunes, but he loved plums. The trees out there were his doing, and every year we now have more than we know what to do with." She fell silent, and when it seemed she would stay that way Scott got worried and asked if she were all right. Her hands fluttered up about her face as if swatting away flies.

"Georgette?"

"Oh, yes. Fine, thank you," she at last answered.

"Too many memories I suppose. Though I don't imagine you can grow old without them. Or would want to."

Scott watched her. She seemed to diminish before his eyes, to fold into herself and fade--yet without the sense that life had been robbed or squandered or misplaced which other patients sometimes left him with.

"Now how does my new chair work?" she demanded.

He demonstrated the controls to the liftchair, and together they watched it lift into a near-vertical position and ease back down again.

"Looks like fun," she said.

"You want to try it?"

"Another time, Scotty. When I'm more in the mood."

He laid the controls on the seat of the liftchair, gathered the plastic covering off the floor, and headed toward the door.

"Don't forget your plums," she reminded him. "And bring Ellen with you next time."

Scott scooped the brown paper bag off the floor where he'd placed it, intending to leave it there. As he straightened up, he saw Georgette rubbing her calf again.

"Let me pay you for the magazine, Scotty," she said and started to wheel herself toward the card table.

"Don't bother, Georgette. I owe you from last time." He opened the door and inspected the grey skies. "This ain't Oklahoma weather," he drawled, extending his hand out under the rain.

"Seattle mist," Georgette quipped.

"Call if you need anything," he said



"I will," she answered and followed him to the door.

"I always do."

Scott scurried off the porch and bolted to the van. He pushed the plastic into the back and dropped the bag of plums onto the passenger seat. Looking back, he saw that Georgette had wheeled herself onto the porch and was holding the screen door open with one hand while waving to him with the other. He started the engine and rolled down his window. "Don't get wet," he called out to her, and as he steered the van down the flooded drive watched in the rearview mirror to make sure she got back inside.

Several miles down the road, driving between a stand of cedars and a large pasture, he reached over, grabbed a plum from the brown paper bag, and without thinking bit into it. It was a large, ripe plum, dark purple and delicious, and in three slurping bites it was gone. He spit out the pit and waited a moment. Then, with the juice still wet on his chin and his fingers all sticky, he reached into the bag for another.

## THE PRESIDENT WALKS HOME

The President of the Planet ordered a hot butterscotch sundae and a cup of coffee, and smiled. The young girl in the orange-and-brown uniform behind the counter fetched the order, placed it on a plastic tray, and pushed it across the counter toward him.

"Thank you, precious."

"You're welcome," she said, so low he could barely hear, and looked straight past him to the next customer in line.

He took the tray and, slightly offended, thought, Impudence, plain and simple, for his esteemed office and for his age. He was half a century older than the child if a day. In fact, as he liked to remind himself, he would be a septuagenarian in a matter of months.

Where's the time go, he thought, carrying his tray to the front and sliding into a booth beside the floor-to-ceiling window. He remembered perfectly how just seven years ago, on the fourth floor of Harborview Hospital in the Psychiatric Center, he went public--full disclosure--explaining everything to the two doctors who stood beside his bed in their white coats. It was simple, he told them. God had stepped down, the democracy movement had finally

caught up, a new universal order was dawning, strong new leadership was called for. The time had come to heed the call to duty and serve his beloved planet at this crucial juncture, its moment of greatest need.

The doctors asked why *he* had been appointed.

"Not appointed," he corrected, trying to be patient by shrugging off their ignorance. "Elected. A plebiscite."

"By whom?" The question was loaded with skepticism.

He looked at them, frustrated. "Default, of course."

"Ah," they said, and then questioned him about the toxicity of the products he handled, if his family had any history of mental illness, if he'd experienced any recent traumas--until it became plain to him that neither of them got it. So he did as so many great leaders faced with insurrection do: he took the Presidency into exile, and kept mum until the doctors released him.

He took a quick sip of coffee and watched several people across the street buy tickets to the movie theater and then enter. Up the block a few doors a bluish yellow glow from the frozen yogurt store lit up the sidewalk, while back on this side of the street a clerk in a green apron lugged a white bucket of gladiola out of Harold's Market and placed it beneath the awning next to the other cut flowers.

Of all his global administrative purview, as he liked to think of it, he most adored lower Queen Anne Hill. It was his Hyannis Port, his Kennebunkport. Here he could escape, however briefly, the stress and strain of his

position, the responsibilities it saddled him with. Every night for the past six years, in even the worst weather, he walked from his Cornelius Arms apartment, up Fourth Avenue, past Five Corners and the life-size statue of Chief Sealth with extended arm, through Seattle Center's tall iron gates, beneath the Space Needle, past the Center House, the sunken fountain, the green-and-white Bagley Wright Theater like a Chinese puzzle, out the northwest gates, and two blocks west to Dick's Hamburger Drive-In--which wasn't really a drive-in at all.

He ate his sundae slowly, savoring it. The heavy butterscotch goo caught at the back of his throat and he took several sips of the hot black coffee to loosen it. He glanced out the window at the fading light. Another half hour and it would be dark.

He considered his own faint reflection in the window and had to admit it, he looked somewhat rumped sitting slumped in the red-Naugahyde booth. He needed a shave, and his old tweed jacket hung on his shoulders like a pup tent slung over two stick poles, the kind they had in the service. The bright menu board behind the front counter made shadows under his brow, which reminded him of his little neice, so many years ago, trying to fit two big muffins into the recessed part of his face where his eyes were. Nonetheless, in all, he thought, he looked okay, all right for a man his age. No doubt his somber appearance was well suited to his eminent position in the world, a position

which could age a person fast--though he'd been persevering at it, knock on wood, for nearly a decade now. Indeed, with the possible exception of the Canadian Prime Minister with his square chin and thick hair, he looked as good as any one of the G-7 leaders.

He scraped up the last of the vanilla ice cream and butterscotch and licked his spoon clean. What still got his goat most when he looked back on those days was Mr. Karl, Director of Human Resources down at the Post-Intelligencier, calling him into his office and offering him early retirement one week after his release from the hospital. Him! Who'd been as hard a worker as the paper ever had. Who'd been around longer even than Mr. Climenhaga, the gray-haired Editor-in-Chief. Yet what could he do? It was more an ultimatum than an offer which Karl made him. So three days later, reluctantly, with great regret, he took his retirement and walked away. And since then, almost eight years now, he'd been receiving his modest union pension and monthly SSI checks, and all the while, quietly and incognito, fulfilling his duties as President of the Planet.

Pushing out from the booth, he carried the clear plastic bowl to the trash receptacle near the door, retrieved his cup, and returned up front for a free refill--just one of many favors conferred on him by management, like the free napkins, as many as he wanted, or the sugar packets and tiny creamers, or the plastic spoon he put in his pocket and took home each night.

Once back in his booth, he blew the steam off the top of the cup. As he sipped his coffee, he followed a scrawny youth in a Dick's uniform swabbing the floor around the tables and booths with a string mop. The young man wore one of those ponytails kids found so popular these days, and had rather Sad Sack features. He swung the mop around, then stopped and leaned against the wooden handle.

"Mr. President, sir. How goes?"

Upstanding youth, he thought. The only Dick's employee to faithfully address him by the title of his office. The young man understood respect. He had promise. "Fine, fine," Lester said and looked the young man up and down, admiring the cut of his uniform, recalling his own days as a robust young soldier at the end of the Second World War. "How would you like an appointment in my Cabinet? Secretary of the Defense, let's say? Or the Interior?"

The young man looked up and grinned. "I don't know, Mr. President, that's a big responsibility." He lifted the mop, plunged it into the bucket of murky water, squeezed it out, and slapped it back onto the floor. "Does it pay more than four and a quarter?"

"We can work out the details. You think about it, no hurry, and let me know."

The Dick's employee shook his head, still grinning. "Okay Mr. President, I'll do that." He dropped the mop back into the bucket, pushed it down past the next booth, and then returned up front and disappeared into the back.

Lester drank his coffee again, holding the cup snug in both hands. He studied his hands, mottled with ink stains, like tattoos, from forty-plus years as pressman for the P.I. Today the inks they used on the big presses weren't so indelible; a man could wash the stains off with soap and water at the end of the day. But no matter. His hands made him proud, proud of his rise from a hard-working blue-collar career. He'd been one of the few pressmen around who saw the presses go from "hot" to "cold," from molten lead to aluminum. No one ever ran a flat-bed as smoothly and efficiently as he did. No one. There was a smashed blanket in a rare moon, sure, or a folder jam-up (which at 50,000 copies an hour could bury a man alive in headlines), but he always righted it and kept the presses rolling. He knew he'd been good, regardless of what a few sour-grapes said behind his back toward the end. What should he care what they said anyhow? The whole world might regard him as plain old Lester Boren, retiree, man on a fixed income, with weak eyes and trouble urinating, who lived alone in an apartment so crammed with old newspapers he had to make a path last week from the doorway to the kitchen. What did he care?

Time was, years ago, when the guys down at the shop called him "Let's-Go-Bowling-Lester" on account of his love for the ten-pins. He alone, among all the pressmen, was able to organize a team and lead it to two straight league championships--using the same leadership skills, he liked to note, that served him so well in his present capacity. Some

day they would see. And if not...just as well. Ego and petulance and getting all choked up every time you opened your mouth might be virtues at the national level, but he occupied the highest post in the world, by God, where humility--genuine humility and not this phoney-baloney, I'm-your-servant crap--still counted for something.

He looked out the window at the last light in the western sky beyond the movie marquee. Elsewhere the sky had deepened into a dark indigo--a 180 Wash, the color of hair in the Sunday funnies. He turned about and surveyed the restaurant: the orange-plastic tables, white-plastic swivel chairs, padded booths, and busy front counter. People came in, got in line, ordered hamburgers, fries, shakes, sundaes, sat down, ate their food, and left. Constituents.

By the time he finished his second refill, he was nearly ready to stroll back to the Cornelius. He withdrew a sheet of blank newsprint from the pocket of his jacket and with the stub of a light blue pencil jotted down several notes for the upcoming State of the World Address.

*You got your doctors and your Serbs, your Khomer Rouge, your ozone and your radon. A malaise threatens our great world. Values. Terrorists. Populations. Corporations. Look at the environment, global policy. I'm tired of the media's pessimism. We have our continents, our oceans, our deserts, we must protect. Developing*



*nations a priority. Pull together. Schools.  
More butterscotch. Better coffee. French fries  
with the potato skins...*

He closed his eyes, and then, opening them a moment later, refolded the newsprint and returned it to his jacket pocket.

"Excuse me," said the Dick's night manager standing at the end of the booth. He had a moustache and wore a yellow shirt, brown tie, and brown twill slacks. "You're mumbling to yourself again. So if you're done with your coffee, I think it's time to call it a night."

He considered the man. Such rudeness again. A general loss of respect. "I was just leaving," he said, displeasure in his voice. A warning.

"You can come back tomorrow. But I want you to be quiet from now on."

Lester nodded, the way he'd learned to nod to the doctors, and the manager returned up front. Then, leaning toward the window, he pressed his cheek to the glass, cupped his hands over his eyes, and peered out at the street. A Metro bus rumbled past, vibrating the glass. He watched it pull to a stop one block down, disperse a passenger, and pull away again. Backing away from the window, he looked up toward the Dick's workers taking and filling orders, and the word *canard* came to mind.

He slid out from the booth, and as the rear of his pants peeled from the sticky Naugahyde, the uniqueness of

his position presented itself to him. No President's men, no Secret Service, no limos, no motorcades, and no police escorts. No press corp, protestors, or admiring public. None of it. The President of the Planet was his own man, he thought, depositing his papercup in the trash near the door. The President always walks home.

## THE CORNELIUS ARMS

### *Worries*

"I'll be okay, sweetie, don't you worry." Seven months had passed since Mona last spoke on the phone with Gemma, who'd just returned to New York after touring Europe in a punked-up revival of Oklahoma!

"First," she explained, "the Hazardous Waste Commission found Warren negligent in the removal of amphibole asbestos, the worst kind, and levied record fines against him. They sent in a Hazardous Materials Response Team to decontaminate the building." She paused to take a gulp of wine. "And then, darling, and then, we tried to get the Guardian Angels to patrol the building when the new owners wouldn't hire a guard. But that fell through. Oh, baby girl, it's been a circus."

Mona listened then, fidgeting, as her daughter voiced her astonishment at her mother's hectic life, and concern that she might be getting herself into trouble. What if all this protesting doesn't work out? What then, Gemma wanted to know. Mona thought how she'd often asked herself the same thing. But rather than burden Gemma with doubts, she reassured her everything would be all right. "You're such a darling to worry," she cooed.

In her account to Gemma of all the goings-on, Mona tried to gloss over the seriousness of the situation--how to cover the settlement costs of the asbestos case, Warren Cardason had sold the Cornelius Arms to a foreign investment firm which, in turn, placed a local developer in charge of gutting and remodeling the building top to bottom. Within weeks of the sale, tenants were being issued a \$1,000 relocation fee and told to vacate their apartments. While many tenants had snatched up the money, a few still held out.

Thinking of the long-distance charges, Mona tried to wrap up. "While half promising everyone their same apartment back when the renovations are done, they won't tell us what the rent will be. And it's not automatic we'll all get our apartments back. We have to file a lease application like everyone else."

Gemma tried to convince her mother to accept the \$1,000 and find a new apartment. How safe could it be to be living in a half-abandoned building downtown? she asked. Just last week Gemma explained, she heard a report on CNN about the gangs from L.A. moving up to Seattle. Maybe a different building, in another neighborhood, would be safer, she said. Or maybe her mother could find a roommate.

Mona pooh-poohed this last idea. "Nonsense," she said, looking about at the familiar objects in the room: the framed photos of her daughter from her high school graduation, her wedding, and a production of Brigadoon; the

spider plants Jared had given her when he'd pocketed the \$1000 and moved into a house with his anarchist friends; the two silk pillows with pink and aquamarine tassels, souvenirs from Las Vegas and Miami, on the couch; the bookcase cluttered with song and picture books of famous operas and all the filefolders she maintained; the antique sewing stand in the next room with the pea-green Swinger on it; the bamboo and rice-paper shades from Pier I over the windows. "I've checked these new places out," she said. "They're all so overpriced."

She couldn't bring herself to tell her daughter that workers were already gutting the building, creating total havoc. While only a month ago the Fair Housing Association had presented her with a Certificate of Recognition for her work in preserving low-income housing in the downtown, her morale lately had suffered badly. The Cornelius was sold, tenants were fleeing, and conditions were worse than ever. What had her efforts amounted to? The futility of the struggle seemed unbearable at times, and by all appearances the battle was lost. How much longer could she pretend to Gemma, or to anyone else, that things were okay? The strain of it all, even speaking about it over the phone, made her nearly want to cry--even though she'd never been one of the weepy sort. Just as she felt herself tearing up, she wondered if this was how nervous breakdowns began, then laughed out loud. "They'll have to drag me out, Gemmy," she said, "Kicking and screaming." She felt her defiance

scratching back suddenly. "This is where I live, and this is where I'll stay."

When had she ever caved in to the powers that be? Never, she told herself, getting worked up now. Damn the work crews, damn the developers. And especially damn the faceless investment firm that thought they could drive people from their homes. In her fresh resolve she barely hear Gemma expressing her alarm from the other end. When she finally acknowledged her daughter's concern, she reassured her again that everything would be alright, just fine. "You know me, baby girl--always exaggerating."

They talked for another ten minutes, until Mona agreed to let Gemma pay for her airfare back to New York in the fall for a visit, though Mona knew Rick would oppose the idea. Then as discreetly as possible, she told Gemma good-bye and hung up. Within moments, she had retrieved the phonebook and was dialing again--first the local newspapers, then the television stations.

It was another ten days before The Seattle Times sent a reporter and photographer out to the Cornelius Arms to check on Mona's story. When they entered the apartment, she was exuberant and couldn't resist going into elaborate detail concerning the horrors of life in the building and the enormous grief the owners, old and new, were putting tenants through. When the reporter mentioned he would be talking to

Munsen and Company, the developers, later in the week, Mona told him he was wasting his time. "Lies," she said.

"That's all you're going get from them. Sugar-coated lies about how humanitarian they are."

Two days later the newspaper ran a photo of her in her apartment standing before the window while, catty-corner, in another section of the building, workers cleared rubble from an apartment, a disposal chute dropping from its window to the alley below. The caption read: *Mona Jabaly defies construction workers as renovations to downtown apartment building proceed.* A six-inch article gave her account along with Munsen and Company's in almost equal proportions.

"It's dog doodoo--if you'll excuse my saying so." She spoke to five other tenant hold-outs meeting in her apartment the evening of The Seattle Times story. "The way those Munsen people tell it you'd think they were Mitch Schnieder himself come to rescue us from sleeping over steam vents." She took a quick sip of wine and smacked her lips. "Still, all said and done, we should've called the press in long ago."

"Dirt and dust's everywhere," complained Josephine, a pretty twenty-five-year-old with straight yellow hair to her shoulders and skinny, tanned limbs. She bussed drinks down at the Rainier Executive Club.

Mona took Josephine's glass from her and refilled it from a gallon box of red wine on top of the refrigerator. She could tell Josephine was close to tears. Enduring the

upheaval and uncertainty in the building would wear down the most stalwart individual--which Josephine was not, Mona knew. Most likely Robert, Josephine's common-law husband, a poet and part-time carpenter with wavy reddish locks and warm brown eyes, made her stick it out.

When Mona returned from the kitchen she noticed Budi, a young man who did freelance graphics, sitting quietly to the side. For the most part he had taken over at the point where Jared had bugged out. Mona was grateful to him for that. He demonstrated far better follow-through than Jared--perhaps, Mona thought, a benefit of the work ethic of his Japanese-American heritage. He helped make picket signs for their demonstration in front of the Munsen headquarters, solicited city officials, went door to door with petitions, and in general held tough. Mona was convinced that aside from herself, Budi would be the last to give in. So when, in sympathy with Josephine, he said, "It's getting ugly all right," Mona was concerned.

She let the remark drop, handed Josephine her wine, and went back into the kitchen to get more water for Gregor, the old curmudgeon whose apartment on the sixth floor had stunk with garbage until she contacted DHS and they began sending a helper once a week to look after him. While he didn't always have it on the ball, Gregor was as defiant as they came. He rarely spoke since his throat was shot from a lifetime of cigar smoking, yet when he did speak it was a hoarse grumble of expletives against Warren and, as he put



it, "the sons-of-bitches who'll throw decent bastards in the gutter." He'd been living in the building since 1958, he'd told Mona one day.

The other member of the group was James, who still came to the meetings but said his job as a grounds keeper at the university left him little time to get too involved. A handful of other hold-outs, most of them not there that night, stayed on as much from necessity as principle and kept back from the front lines, which Mona resented at times.

"So--" she said at last, handing Gregor his water and sitting down on a kitchen chair. "What now?"

"They're clearing out 512 two doors down from me," Budi informed the group. "They start at 8:00 and don't quit until late afternoon. Which means I don't work all day."

Budi's griping, the snively tone unheard from him until now, continued to bother Mona. She tried to deflect it by citing her own grievances. "Have you noticed the workmen now use *both* elevators? One for their equipment and the other to haul rubble to the basement?" Because of recent pain in her legs, climbing stairs had become nearly impossible for her. Rather than dwell on the negative, though, she changed the subject. "I've opened an escrow account at the bank under the Cornelius Arms Tenants Committee. The Fair Housing people say we should pay all our rent, every cent, into it until these renovation are done--right down to the last nail." She looked around for

people's response. "Should we have a motion on it?"

"Seconded," Budi said, with little enthusiasm.

"Fine by me," Robert agreed. "I could use the cash."

"Sweetie," Mona was quick to clarify, "we don't keep the money. We deposit it in escrow so everything stays legit." She turned to Gregor, who stared at the floor. "Gregor, what do you think?"

"Eh?" He looked up abruptly. "Don't give the bastard a dime. Damn right."

"Thank you, Gregor," Mona said. "And James?"

James scratched his stubbled chin. His hands were thick and cracked from his work outdoors. "It couldn't make the situation any worse, I suppose. They've tried kicking us out half a dozen times already. What's one more?"

"The building's hardly even livable this way," Josephine got in. "Like last week when our water was turned off for two days. I don't see why we should pay them anything? I really don't."

Mona nodded, the back of her throat fluttering with her delight at the unanimous response. "You're right, Josie. We'll continue taking our deductions and put whatever's left over into the escrow account."

"What about the lawyer?" Robert asked, picking at his thumbnail. "Aren't we going to sue?" Just last week he admitted trying to get on one of the work crews doing the renovations. The foremen, though, apparently told him forget it, which Robert took as an insult, so that now, to

get back, he was planning to filch their tools the first chance he got. When he told everyone this plan, no one in the group of hold-outs condemned it or endorsed it. All just kept quiet on the idea.

Mona went to the bookcase and took down a filefolder. "I've found an attorney who'll represent us *pro bono*. He usually does work for homeless organizations."

"That's not us yet," Budi said. "At least I hope it's not."

"No, Budi, I hope not too," Mona replied. "He thinks we might be able to file suit on grounds of physical endangerment *and* emotional distress. I showed him around to all our favorite worksite hazards, and he was genuinely frightened."

"Sue the bunch of them," Gregor grumbled.

Budi slapped the old grouch on the shoulder. "Thank you, Gregor."

"Do you think we could win, I mean, from what this lawyer says?" Josephine rubbed her left wrist.

"He'll try to negotiate something first," Mona explained. "And get them to give some guarantees, like allowing everyone with a lease already to move back with no more than a 5% rent increase, and doubling the relocation fee. City ordinances mandates a minimum of low-income units in the Denny Regrade, so we'll argue for a cap on Cornelius rents. And with Gregor here"--Mona patted the old man's knee--"we can prove a vested interest, legacy, regardless of

who owns the property." Sometimes Mona surprised even herself with the legalese she'd picked up in the last year.

"Possession is nine tenths of the law," Budi affirmed.

"Depends on who's doing the possessing," James added.

Mona raised her wine glass to bring the meeting to a close. "A toast," she called.

Robert jumped to his feet. "To the Anti-Gentrification Coalition of Concerned Cornelius Citizens--fighting for justice and the American way."

Everyone clinked glasses.

"Hear, hear," Gregor said.

One week later, after three drawn-out meetings with the lawyer, Mona began feeling too old to be fighting such battles. Instead of tangling with high-powered developers, she should be enjoying the retired life, she thought, in some place like Sun City in Arizona or Palm Springs, California, one of those fancy retirement communities. Only, she had to remind herself, who could afford to retire?

Sitting on the couch, she opened the package of orthopedic stockings the doctor had prescribed. Her lower back ached so badly that when she bent forward, pressing against her own abdomen, she let out a groan before pulling the elastic stockings up over her calves. They felt good, supportive, once they were on. But getting them on wore her

out.

She looked about the small apartment and tried to catch her breath. A glass of wine would be nice, she thought, and some French bread dipped in olive oil and balsamic vinegar--good wine from that Woodenville winery and a fresh baguette from the French bakery in the Market. There was also the pastry she'd bought herself for dessert, despite her Group Health physician advising her last month to go on a diet. He told her losing 20 pounds would make the running around she did that much easier on her feet and calves, to say nothing of her heart. Yet, while Mona appreciated the advice, she knew she wouldn't follow it. Her mother had lived to 89, her father to 83, so by her best estimations she had at least two good decades left in her. Of course her mother had lived her whole life in a sleepy Delaware town. Whereas Mona, after leaving home at 16 with her first husband, had lived in one big city after another--Miami, Baltimore, New York, Seattle--and city life simply wore a person down. She'd had a significant illness in every city she'd lived in. Gall stones in Miami, a lung infection in Baltimore, a hysterectomy in New York. Only Seattle had spared her so far. That's if you didn't count the risks one ran from just living in the Cornelius Arms, where if the asbestos dust, lead paint flecks, pesticides, and other contaminants didn't get you, the murderers would. There had already been two murders since she'd moved in--a drug deal shooting and a hallway stabbing--and those were just the two

she knew of.

She sighed and hefted herself off the couch. There's work to be done, nonetheless, she told herself. Money was tight since the mechanic was busted--no fault of hers, she knew, what with the shape his books were in when she got there. Gemma helped out by wiring \$100 into her account each month. But mostly she scrimped by, cutting coupons, picking up the odd bookkeeping job, and still collecting the pittance from her dear second husband's pension, which had been coming in now for 26 years. She first learned bookkeeping at Rupert's lamp shade factory in Miami way back when. After he died, she sold the business and moved to Baltimore to live with her sister, then two years later went to New York with Gemma, a toddler at the time, enrolled in City College, and earned her accounting certificate.

She sat at the kitchen table with receipts, ledgers, tax forms, calculator, and pencils spread out before her. A clog maker with a small store in Pioneer Square and no money sense whatsoever had asked her to do his taxes. Mona picked up a pencil, but then put it back down. Looking out the window, she took in the view. In the northeast a patch of dark blue evening sky with a single star in it opened over the Cascades, while from the west stratus clouds moved in over the city, seeming to subdue the Friday evening rush. This was often the saddest time of the day, Mona thought, and even of the year, what with darkness in the Northwest falling so much earlier and lasting so much longer than

anywhere else in the country, except Alaska of course, once fall and winter arrived. She was certain there would be a drizzle soon. She could feel it. She'd grown used to how weather worked in this mixed-up region--tropical, alpine, and coastal all at once. The rain got to her sometimes, like it did everyone. The gray skies in winter never let up. Nonetheless, she'd acclimatized, as she told Gemma not long ago. In fact, two summers ago when there were three weeks straight of warmth and sunshine, she grew uneasy and started yearning for rain: the comfort of a prolonged drizzle, the luxuriousness of wet streets, the quiet of dull grey skies, the general introspection of inclement weather. Gemma told her she was talking crazy.

The weather, though, probably explained why Seattle had one of the highest suicide rates in the country. As for herself, Mona thought, she would rather watch opera than swallow Drano. Alongside purple, opera had recently become one of her prevailing passions. In fact, PBS was broadcasting Bizet's Carmen live from the Met that very evening. She would save her bread and wine till then, she thought, and maybe eat the pastry now--or vice versa. Maybe, she thought, she should call Gemma and tell her to watch. Her beautiful, most dearly beloved Gemma. As she got up for a glass of wine, Mona hoped her daughter would never have to face the trials and tribulations she herself had had to.

Old radiators and twisted pipes lined the hallway from her apartment to the elevators. Doors had been removed from their hinges and propped against the hallway wall. Mona peeked into several open apartments where carpets had been torn up to reveal grimy wood floors with warped boards. Walls had been knocked through into adjacent apartments, and exposed plumbing was everywhere.

The workers must be taking a coffee break, Mona thought, because an elevator was free. Its floor was covered with white plaster dust and its side panels scratched and gouged. After riding down, she stepped into the lobby and brushed off her purple overcoat. Without so much as an "Excuse me," two workers pushed past her, forcing her back against the mailboxes. Mona scowled at them and made her way to the front office.

"Anyone home?" she called into the empty office.

"Be right there," came a man's voice from the back.

Mona peeked about the room. A layout of the fifth floor was spread across the front desk. It showed the reconfiguring of the units that was underway--identical, in all likelihood, for every floor. The apartments were being subdivided, just as she'd suspected would be done, so all the rich, new tenants could be squeezed in like dogs in pet shop cages.

A man walked forward from the back room.

"I want to lodge a complaint," Mona stated. "About the



elevators--again!"

"Ms. Jabaly--" the man said. With this young exec, Mona knew, there was to be no familiarity, none of the grudging tolerance that had existed between herself and Warren. "The work crews have been instructed to use the elevators strictly as necessary. If the situation has inconvenienced you, I'm sorry. But you must remember that this is a construction site now."

The snit, Mona thought, inspecting his slicked-back hair and manicured fingernails. He was so much more worse than Warren, certainly more devious, serving some behind-the-scenes master rather than his own greedy self-interest, as Warren could be trusted to do.

"Ms. Jabaly, I'm afraid this protest of yours cannot continue indefinitely. We're going to have to vacate all the units by the end of next month."

A loud thump came from the lobby and several workers cursed.

"A judge will have to decide that, Mr.---" She had already forgotten his name. Instead she said, "What I don't understand is the pleasure you take in throwing people out of their homes."

A derisive look spread across his face. "Only when they're uncooperative," he said.

Mona glared at him. She really did hate him. She could taste her own bitterness in her throat. "You're really quite an evil man, aren't you?" she said, then turned

her back on him and stomped out of the office, whacking her cane against the door as she went.

When Mona returned from the clog maker's, there was a message on her answering machine. In a distraught voice, Josephine explained how Robert had to be taken to the hospital after fighting with two of the workmen on their floor. Before even taking off her coat, Mona sat down and returned the call.

"He has to have stitches," Josephine said, and wept into the phone. "The medics were here and everything. They took him to Harborview."

"Did he steal their tools," Mona asked, trying to sound calm, for Josephine's sake as well as her own.

"No!" Josephine practically screamed, "He didn't do anything," and began sniffing.

"What happened then?"

"Well..." she started, composing herself slowly, "those guys on our floor were saying things to me when I walked down the hall, asking me out on dates and...you know, stuff like that. But disgusting. So Robert went down to talk to them and next thing I know there's yelling going on and when I looked to see what was happening, they were fighting. One of them hit Robert on the head with a pipe."

"Did you call the police?" Mona felt a little ashamed that her excitement about this incident almost equalled her

alarm.

"No. The medics said he'd be okay, and then Robert told me to stay home and he'd take a taxi back after they put the stitches in."

This was too much, Mona thought. "Call the police," she told Josephine. "Maybe they can arrest the two men who did it." She thought a moment and added, "You need to file a complaint. That's the only way." She remembered back in New York, Bruce Bailey, chair of the Columbia Tenants Union there. Murdered--decapitated with a chainsaw--for his efforts on behalf of tenants rights.

Her voice still shaky, Josephine agreed to call the police, and Mona in turn said she would come right down to make her a cup of tea. It was plain as day to her that the workers had been given their orders, likely from the little Goebbels in the front office, and were now out to intimidate the remaining tenants until they ran everyone from the building after making them scared for their lives. She locked her door and took the stairs down to Josephine and Robert's apartment.

An hour later, all the police could tell them after speaking to both Josephine and the building management was that filing charges seemed pointless since both parties seemed equally to blame. When Mona complained, the two officers said they had warned the workmen to stop harassing the lady and that they would file a report at the station in case anything else like this happened again. Otherwise, it

was their opinion, it would be best if the whole incident was just dropped and everyone involved stayed clear of one another from now on.

"So someone has to be killed first," Mona said, wanting to give the cops grief for being so casual about the situation. But when she saw the on-going commotion only upset Josephine further, she allowed them to leave. Twenty minutes later, Robert returned from the hospital, a large white bandage over the right side of his temple covering the 14 stitches he'd received.

"It looks worse than it is," he said, and put his arm about Josephine to comfort her. "If those assholes give you any more trouble, next time I won't discuss it with them empty-handed." Josephine smiled weakly at his gallantry and hugged his waist.

Taking this as her cue, Mona told them she'd check back on them tomorrow, said good night, and left. She walked slowly down the hallway and, while waiting for an elevator, realized how badly she was shaking.

As soon as she was back in her apartment, she slumped onto the couch and very slowly let herself cry. She cried for a good half an hour over the anguish and grief that had accumulated in her over the entire past year--which it seemed to her now she was always too busy or too angry to recognize.

Eventually she dried her cheeks and dabbed at her eyes with a lavender handkerchief. She took several breaths and,

even in the dark, felt mild embarrassment for herself. Then she grinned, and looking out the window at the sparkling city lights she recalled a peculiar dream she'd had several weeks back. In it she entered a 1950s film set in Seattle, although one she had never seen or even known about. She could return to present-day Seattle whenever she wished, yet if a jump-cut in the film occurred she would be caught in a cinematic time-warp forever. Nonetheless, her nostalgia for a long-gone Seattle overrode her apprehensions. She wanted to enjoy this pre-technicolor world with its simple shades of gray. The ugly highrises from the 70s and 80s and 90s were gone. On the sidewalk men still wore hats and women calf-length skirts and high heels. A provincialism pervaded the streets. The city was yet undiscovered, still ignored by the rest of the country as a northwoods burg of mud streets and clap-board storefronts. And that was its charm. It still resembled Victor Steinbrueck's drawings, the ones in the architect's Cityscape books on her shelf. The dream was so odd, stayed with her so long, because she'd never been one to pine for bygone eras.

She got up, her joints stiff, and entered the kitchen. On the calender on the side of the refrigerator she marked the date, two weeks from Thursday, on which had been scheduled the court hearing on the Tenants Committee's demands. For better or worse, she felt certain, something would come of it. The impasse would be broken.

With the exception of Budi shouting at several workers who began hammering away at 7:00 a.m. one morning, the next two weeks passed without incident. There were the same old inconveniences: the water and electricity turned off, the elevators shut down, dust and debris everywhere. But the direct violence against the tenants stopped--for which Mona was glad, although she knew such occurrences boosted their case.

The hearing was held on the last Thursday in October in the King County Courthouse. Testimony lasted all morning and well into the afternoon. All the Cornelius hold-outs, except for Gregor, took their turn on the stand: Budi, James, Josephine, Robert, even Rex, a middle-aged recluse on the third floor, and Lewis, a semi-retired merchant marine on the fourth. Melanie Kaulity from the Fair Housing Association also testified. But it was Mona, dressed in her best gray wool suit, her hair pulled back tight, who gave the most energetic testimony.

At around three o'clock, after witnesses from both sides had had their say and the two attorneys made their arguments, everyone waited in the marble-lined hallway outside the courtroom while the judge reviewed the testimony in his chambers. Forty minutes passed before the judge reconvened the court. From the bench, looking somber and hunching forward, the youthful judge, addressing both the plaintiffs and defendants, then handed down his decision.

It was as follows, he declared: The terms of relocation would stand for all former tenants who had accepted them, yet all remaining tenants would be awarded a \$2,000 relocation fee and be guaranteed that their rent would not be increased more than 5% upon their return to the building once the renovations were completed. In addition, Munsen and Company would pay the full court costs, and if a single further incident of tenant harassment occurred--the judge eyed the young exec who had taken Ellen's place in the Cornelius Arms front office--he would see fit to reassess, in his words, his generous settlement to Munsen and Company. Attorneys from both sides then assured the judge that his decision was understood and would be abided by. Then in swift fashion, the case was declared closed, the gavel came down, and everyone was cleared out of the courtroom.

Later that night Mona held a final get-together in her apartment for what she called the tried-and-true Cornelius Arms hold-outs. "It was horrendous," she complained, a wine glass in one hand, a Ritz cracker in the other. "The whole process was rigged. Home cooking through and through. And that little slap to the wrist of Munsen Junior at the end, or whoever he was...My God! How ridiculous."

"It could have been worse," Budi said. "It wasn't the best decision and it wasn't the worst."

Mona ate the cracker and sipped her wine. "It was horrendous," she said. "Why do you think they accepted it so readily, no statement of intent to appeal? Even odds say

they paid off the judge. Think how much they save by writing checks to a handful of us rather than all tenants past and present who deserve it."

"Now, now, Mona," their *pro bono* lawyer, still in his three-piece suit, chided her. "We did our best and came out all right. People rarely receive the full award that's asked for."

Even Robert, who usually backed Mona, shook his head. "When d'ya s'pose we'll get our money?" He waved a beer bottle about, celebrating his \$2000 windfall.

"Tomorrow, chances are," Budi said. "Because the faster they get us out, the faster they can finish renovating, jack up the rents, and start leasing again."

"Remember too," Mona reminded them, "you'll be paying 5% more when you return, and for a smaller apartment. And who knows what other costs they'll tag on."

When no one responded, she understood loud and clear what the message was--that she was the only one who planned to return. The others would take the money and run. Which was entirely understandable, though it distressed her to think their fight to save the Cornelius had come down to an extra \$1,000.

Just then a loud crash came from the floor above and spackling from the ceiling fell onto their heads. Everyone looked at one another somewhat bewildered, and then there was another heavy thud and a power drill began whirring. Mona went to the door and peered down the hallway, which had



become nearly impassable with debris piled along the walls, wood chips and sawdust strewn the length of the hallway carpet, and plaster dust coating everything. "I don't believe it," she said as the racket persisted. "I'm going up there."

Accompanied by Budi and James, who had to run out of the apartment to catch up to her, Mona climbed the stairs to the ninth floor. Half way down the hallway, two workers were unloading sheetrock from a dolly and leaning it recklessly against a wall. A third worker drilled holes through new aluminum wall studs.

"Excuse us," Mona shouted to them. "Excuse us!"

The three men stopped their work and turned around. The one with the drill removed his hardhat and wiped his forearm across his brow. The other two slouched against the sheetrock on the dolly.

"I believe you're supposed to stop working at 5:30," Mona said to them. "And it's now 7:30."

The man with the hardhat stepped forward. "That was yesterday," he said. "Starting today we're working two shifts, seven to three, three to ten. They want this job done last week, if you get my drift."

Mona glared at the man, and Budi said, "People still live here."

"Hey," the hardhat returned, "they told us you were leaving. That's it. So we're just doing our job."

"You bastards," Mona screamed at them. "All you,

bastards." She picked up a 2x4 scrap from the floor and hurled it down the hallway. Then she spat at them. "You loathsome, hateful men. You're evil, pure evil. You bastards." Still cursing them, she stepped toward the three men, but James quickly reached out and held her back.

"Look," James said, addressing the workers and handing Mona over to Budi. "The judge tells us we have ten days to vacate the premises. Now if you've got a problem with that, we can go ahead and call a policeman and settle this thing right now. Elsewise I recommend you three gentlemen call it a night, go get yourselves a beer, and tomorrow you can return to your jobs.

The man with the hardhat, the foreman apparently, put down his drill. "Fine by me, pal," he said, "Let the man in the office straighten this out in the morning," and signaled the other two men to leave off where they were.

"That's right," said James.

"Bastards," Mona cursed once more, under her breath, as James and Budi lead her back downstairs to her apartment.

In all her purple glory, Mona flew direct to Newark International where she was greeted by Gemma and her son-in-law Rick, and then driven through Lincoln Tunnel into throbbing mid-town Manhattan.

Before leaving Seattle, she'd stored her belongings, with the exception of a single suitcase of clothes, in a

facility out on Aurora Avenue. Rather than find a temporary apartment in Seattle, she accepted Gemma's invitation to stay with her and Rick in New York until the renovations to the Cornelius Arms were to be done some time after the New Year.

As they drove down Sixth Avenue--the Avenue of the Americas--Mona spotted her old apartment building and from the back seat of the car leaned forward for a better view. "Handsome as ever," she said to Gemma, while Rick drove on, silent, having hardly said a word since their initial greeting in the airport. The brick building stood on the corner, cast iron fire-escapes scaling its four stories on either side of the center bay windows. On the top floor, a large, spire-topped cupola extended above the roof. This was part of the livingroom of what was formerly her--and now Gemma and Rick's--apartment.

"I don't know where I'm going to park," Rick said. He had borrowed the car that morning from a friend in Brooklyn. "Maybe I'll just drop you two off and just bring it back to Shelby."

"All the way to Brooklyn?" Gemma asked him, as Mona ignored them, rested her right cheek in her hand, and stared through the windshield. On the opposite side of the busy avenue, people entered the library and strolled through the gardens. "There's Bellotini's," she said and pointed down the street to a large Italian deli. "No delis like that in Seattle. Not even in the Market." She knew she knew it

would be easy to get carried away with the excitement of returning to New York after six long years, yet, also knowing that Rick was being especially cranky on her behalf, she tried to restrain herself. She didn't want him to think she might wish to return for good. Which of course she didn't, and never would, New York being a great place to visit and all that, but. . . As she and Gemma climbed out of the car at the curb in front of her old apartment building, she already missed Seattle.

Not long after the holidays, which proved quite dull, what with Rick rarely even around the apartment to squabble with, Mona called Continental Air to arrange her return flight back to the Northwest. A week later, she took the bus back to the Newark International, boarded a plane, and six hours later landed at Sea-Tac, from where she took the shuttle to Westlake Plaza and then walked the remaining five blocks to the Cornelius Arms.

From the front, the building was nearly unrecognizable. A maroon canopy with *The Cornelius Suites* scrolled in white across its canvas hung over the front entrance in place of the old marquee. A strip of bright green astro-turf stretched across the sidewalk from the door to the curb. The wooden window frames had been retro-fitted with black aluminum casements, and the thick, warped glass replaced with tinted windows. All nine-stories had been sandblasted,

the former sooty patina washed away. A sign in the front window read: *Deluxe Apartments. Currently Leasing. For Appointment, Call 460-POSH.*

Mona stood on the opposite sidewalk taking it all in. She hardly dared to cross the street. Yet finally, mustering up her courage, she took a deep breath and went straight ahead. When her old key would not fit the lock on the new oak and bevelled-glass door, she rang the manager's office on the intercom system and instantly a young man in light gray livery breezed through the lobby and opened the door for her.

"Good evening, ma'am," he greeted her as she entered.

"You actually *work* here?" she said, looking him over.

"Yes, ma'am," he laughed. "May I help you."

"I live here," she said and turned to inspect the refurbished lobby--burgundy carpeting, walls painted a light fuchsia, a blown-glass vase on a marble table, and a discreet crystal chandelier. Even the elevator doors, once so scratched and dented, now had tinted mirrors with brass trim. In all, and despite the appealing colore scheme, she found it all too precious. She walked past the doorman and entered the front office, where a woman in her thirties wearing a blue skirt and jacket quickly stood up from her desk to welcome her. A large computer was on the side credenza. Mona, in her baggy pantsuit and black cape, her purple silk scarf wrapped about her hat and chin, felt uncomfortable for the first time in the room where she had

so often confronted former management.

"May I help you?" the woman inquired, so snap-to and business-like Mona was taken aback somewhat.

"I believe you may," Mona answered. "I'm Mona Jabaly. Apartment 814."

The young woman angled herself over the computer keyboard and typed something in. "Here it is," she said and looked up. "You're one of our former tenants, is that correct, Mona?"

Mona lifted her chin a notch. "That's correct."

"The apartment number has changed to 824."

Mona thought a moment, doing the math. "That means you've added eight more units on that one floor alone." The woman did not respond. "I take it you received my check?" Mona then said.

"Yes, we did," the woman answered, and added, "You can sign the lease forms while I get you your new key." She opened a desk drawer and flipped through several hanging filefolders. "If you move your furniture in between eight and five, I can have one of our managers assist you."

Mona looked at the woman and unwrapped her scarf.

By month's end, after she had gotten moved in, she found out that The Cornelius Suites was still only one quarter full, even though the new management advertised steadily in the papers, there apparently being a glut of

high-rent housing downtown in just the past year.

"Who can afford these rents," she said one evening over the phone to Budi, who had found a basement apartment on Capitol Hill. "\$510 for a studio, \$620 for one bedroom. It's outrageous, Budi, downright criminal." Mona looked about and thought her furniture, crammed into the up-scaled, miniaturized apartment, looked old and dingy. None of it matched the pastel-blue walls or light gray carpeting. "I haven't met any of my neighbors, yet, no," she went on. "I might bite someone's head off. They all seem such yuppy types. Those daring young urban pioneers with their trust funds and bottled water." She placed her slippers on the couch and pulled her bathrobe over her sore calves. Budi expressed his sympathy. "I don't like it here," she confessed at last. "Even with all the guarantees, I still pay an arm and a leg. On top of heat and electric and hot water, there's a security fee each month, and get this, Budi, a maintenance fee--to keep the chandeliers dusted." She switched the phone to her other ear and lowered her voice. "I don't think frankly I can afford it."

Budi told her how difficult it had been for him to find a new place, how it took all of November and December. Most places were either dumps, he said, worse than the old Cornelius, or half-a-million dollar condos. As much as he hated to, he was thinking of leaving, trying another part of the country, Atlanta maybe.

The idea of Budi's leaving saddened Mona. "Oh, dear,

dear, Budi," she said, "are you sure you would be happy anywhere else?" The question, it seemed to her as soon as she asked it, was directed more at herself than him. To change subjects, she asked Budi if he'd been lately to see Gregor.

At first there was no reply from Budi, then he told Mona that he was sorry, he should have contacted her sooner. There was silence for a moment, and then he told her that Gregor had passed away. He explained how two weeks after DHS moved him into the nursing home in December he stopped eating, and three weeks after that he died.

The next day Mona began hunting for an apartment. And over the next several weeks she rode the bus to different neighborhoods, studied the newspaper listings, and even talked to two realtors, both of whom she found unwilling to work with her within her price range. She soon discovered that Budi was absolutely right--pickings were slim. Meanwhile expenses at the Cornelius Suites kept eating away at her already tight budget. It had become so that being a CPA wasn't enough anymore, people wanted fresh, young MBAs. She grew more worried, tried to teach herself to use spreadsheets on the old computer Gemma sent her, gave out more change than usual to panhandlers, and slept badly. When it reached the point at which she felt she had to do something or else, she signed a lease, reluctantly, on a small second-floor apartment in a run-down building around the corner from the Cornelius--the Castlegate Apartments.



The following week Budi and James helped her move and, though she never really thought the day would come, it was goodbye to the Cornelius Arms.

"It's homey," James remarked, and set the sewing stand down in a corner of her new apartment. Mona knew he and Budi were only trying to be polite when, lugging in her furniture and boxes, they kept saying such nice things about the place. James, she was glad to hear, had gotten a mortgage on a small house in Rainier Valley since moving out of the Cornelius.

"You're too, too generous," Mona told him. "You're only saying that because you know as well as I do no place could be more dumpier than the Cornelius. Although I may have found it."

"Really," Budi said, "It's not so bad," and carried a box of dishes into the narrow kitchen.

"You too, Budi. You're too sweet." She followed him into the kitchen, pointing to the cabinets coated in a thick, yellow latex. "I'm going to have to paint those," she said, but knew she probably wouldn't get to it for some time. Then, backing out of the kitchen, she almost tripped over the boxes stacked in the middle of the floor. She sat down on the couch and surveyed the room. The green carpet throughout was worn and spotted. The only window looked across an alley to a parking garage, and beneath the window a radiator with peeling silver paint knocked and hissed.

"That's everything," Budi said, and took a beer from

the sixpack Mona had bought them.

She looked at James and Budi. "I wish I could pay you two something for your trouble," she said, and added, "How about I take you both to the new Thai restaurant on the first of the month?"

"No, Mona," James said, "There's really no need. We're just glad things worked out for you."

"You can call a tenants' meeting tomorrow," Budi said. "Start getting them organized."

Mona did not respond. She knew they were trying to be nice. She looked out the window a long time and wondered, if she did call a meeting, if anyone would bother to come.

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