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EXILE: A Collection of
Short Stories

by

Gregory A. Quinn

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
English

Department of English
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
December 1996
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University of Nevada, Las Vegas
December 1996
ABSTRACT

These stories follow the lives of people, many of whom are expatriates, living in Spain and the United States. The stories take place in no specific period, no determinable place. Except for Humera and Pozuelo, two adjacent towns outside Madrid, the locales are completely fictional.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Although these stories were written in the final year of my graduate studies, the momentum needed to reach a writer's fever pitch began years earlier. Much gratitude is due to my friend/advisor/confidant, Douglas Unger, who taught me to bring a hard-hat and lunch pail attitude to the computer and work on my writing until I drop. I thank Richard Wiley, Tom Clark, and Julie Jensen for their insightful comments and involvement in my committee. I thank all my relatives on three continents who have inspired many of the characters in these stories, and especially aunt Winifred for encouraging me to dream. Finally, I thank my mother for everything.
THE COOK, THE WRITER, AND HIS CATS

It was late. There hadn’t been a patron for hours except the American travel writer who sat outside the restaurant feeding the cats. The cats, about ten of them, were very thin and feral, and it made the American feel good to feed them since he wasn’t very hungry and the food was cheap and poorly made. The cats were patient and didn’t jump on the table, and at this hour, sitting alone, that mattered to him a lot.

Inside the restaurant, the cook and a young bartender who doubled as a waiter were about to close for the night. The bartender looked at the American through a window. “Last week he threw his dog over the balcony.”

The cook, a fat, middle-aged Andaluz with a peasant face, was sitting at the bar having his vino and watching TV with dull interest. “Why did he do that?”

“The dog belonged to his wife.”

“So he hates his wife.”

“Yes,” the bartender said. “He should have thrown her over the rail.”

Distracted from his movie, the cook glanced at his friend. “Do you hate her, too?”

“She needs to wake up. I don’t know what she sees in him, the miserable wretch. He’s not even that handsome. I’m better looking than him.”

“You like the wife then?”

“She’s not bad.”
“Maybe he has a future. He’s young enough. That’s something.”

The bartender began wiping tables with a wet cloth. “Six nights in a row now. Pretty soon the cats will come every night, whether he’s here or not.”

The bartender went out to the terraza to bring the dinner special sign back in. It was a heavy wooden sign, but he liked to carry it in one arm, because it made the muscles taunt. He often admired his reflection in the window with his sleeves rolled up, especially the right profile, his best.

When he saw just a little bit of food left on the plates and the American sitting back smoking a cigarette, the bartender went up to him. The cats scattered into a bush.

“Finished?”

“No. For the cats.”

“Hombre! You’re wasting food.”

The American gave the bartender an irritated look. “I’m paying for it,” he said.

“You bring the cats here and they don’t go away,” the bartender said. “They bother other people.”

The American casually regarded the empty tables, blew a cloud of smoke and laughed. “There are no other people here because the food is bad.”

“Oh?”

“The mariscos are tough and overcooked and the omelette is runny because it’s undercooked.”

“So you come here anyway. To insult the food and attract cats.” The bartender and American kept their eyes locked on each other and did not blink. “If the food was good, I wouldn’t share it. I’d eat it.”

The bartender gave him the hardest look he had. “May you eat shit the
rest of your miserable life. Go to hell. Or better, go back to America. I don’t want to see you here again.” He walked away and didn’t come out for a long time.

“It’s bad for business,” he said to the cook. “When the tourists come next month, I don’t want him around. Let him feed the cats at his place. And he should mend things with his wife.”

Later, the bartender brought the American his check on a small saucer plate and slid it on his table. “Mend things with your wife,” he said. “Then you can stay home.”

He waited for a response, but the American only picked up the check and began adding. The bartender looked at him and then at the cats, who were crouched in the bushes, watching the scene. He went back inside and sat at the bar with the cook, who had his eyes fixed on his TV movie.

“He insulted you,” the bartender said. “He thinks your food is bad.”

The cook poured another wine. “He can go anywhere he wants,” the cook said.

“He knows I won’t serve him if he comes back.”

“What’s the problem with his wife?”

“Who knows? The whole community hates him.”

“Serves her right for marrying an American.”

“She’s also American.”

“Well, then they’re made for each other.”

“She has money, too.” The bartender poured a glass of wine as a toast to himself for having stood up to the tyranny of foreigners.

“Viva España!” he said, and the bartender and cook clicked their glasses.

“What kind of dog was it?” the cook asked.
“A dachshund. It barked a lot.”

“She can buy another one.”

“She has two more: a Doberman pincer and an English bulldog.”

“I’d like to see him try to throw the Doberman over.”

The bartender looked out the window. “He should be locked up,” he said. “How can you throw a little dog from a balcony? I like dogs. I’d throw one of those damn cats, though.”

“How high does he live?”

“I don’t know. But a neighbor said the dog’s body popped like a balloon.”

“What a shame.”

“There’s a place in hell waiting for this man.”

“He’s trying to make up for it. Feeding the cats because he killed the dog.”

“Hombre, there’s still poison in him.” The bartender washed out his glass behind the bar and stored it on the shelf. “His wife should leave him as soon as she can.”

The cook rubbed his bald head and thought for a moment. “I don’t try to understand people anymore. Nothing they do makes sense.”

“What’s to understand? A man kills your dog, he’s sick in the head, and you leave, no?”

“You don’t know what it’s like to be alone, because you’re young.”

“But she wouldn’t be alone. She has money. She doesn’t need him.”

“Maybe she likes to torture him. Maybe that’s his penance.”

“And what do you know about torture, viejo?”

“When I look at my mother, I’m reminded every day of what I don’t have. She still wants me to get married. She’s still waiting for grandchildren. I was
"That's different," the bartender said. "You live with an old woman, but the American girl lives with a poisonous man."

"In this case, there's no difference," the cook said. He did not wish to insult his mother. He only wanted to face the truth. He dropped his head into his chest and looked at his glass. "We go along as much by hating as by loving," he said.

"Hey, you only have one mother. But a husband or a wife you can always replace, if they're defective."

"You talk like someone who has lots of choices."

"I do have choices. I am not lonely."

"You are very lucky," the cook said.

The American travel writer laid a thousand peseta bill with a few coins on the table for the exact amount, picked up the plate of omelette, held it in view so the men inside would see, and then tossed the last slice on the floor. The strays were out of the bushes again, and ran back to his table so they could nose the offering. The writer studied their eyes, and he concluded that even though the cats were beggars, they were subtle and discrete, and they always kept their poise.

The writer did not drink and his head was always clear. He pictured the cats as part of the scenery of a coastal town that was now in repose. Waiting, almost frozen with anticipation for summer to begin. While the town held its breath, the cats took over the streets. From this image, there came to the writer an idea for a story. The writer imagined the strays as a warning sign for hungry tourists who were looking for a place to eat. Where the food was bad, the cats...
would go, to eat what people didn’t want. The more cats there were, the worse the restaurant. Yes, the article could be a restaurant guide, or maybe a simple cautionary sidecar in the margin of a glossy page of a leading magazine. It would sell. Stay away from the places that were swarming with cats. A clever anecdote, not enough to base a whole article, but it was a start. The idea churned in his head, and the writer’s face went vague and dreamy in a sudden swell of inspiration that usually sent him to his room, and away from his wife, for days.

The writer stood up and left. The road was dark but at least he knew his way home. He tried not to think too much of home because it left him cold. He preferred instead to warm himself on the fever of his idea. He would use a rating system for bad restaurants—five cat-heads would be a slop shop, an invitation to dysentery. He would take the name of this restaurant with the sneering waiter and include it on his hit list of places that obliged you to share food with the cats. Yes, why didn’t he write that? Why didn’t he write the truth? There were so many things in this country to write about. He hadn’t written anything in a long time. He walked slowly and deliberately up the road as if trying to feel the ground beneath his feet with every step. He became suddenly depressed. He had been to the best schools in the States. If needed, he could think clearly and rationally every minute of every day. What was the problem? He was not a drunk. He had no excuses for the way things had turned. The walk to his building took only a few minutes. The dog falling from the balcony took one second. Somehow, he thought there was less pain in falling to the ground than walking up the hill. At all cost, he avoided looking at the spot where the dog had dropped.

The light of his apartment was visible in the distance, and on the balcony,
leaning on the rail, very still, he saw the silhouetted figure of his wife.

The bartender watched the American go up the road, his head down, a young but obnoxious foreigner who said whatever was on his mind. When the foreigner disappeared in the dark, the bartender rushed to the table and chased away the cats.

"Why did you do that?" said the cook, who was busy bringing the outdoor tables into the restaurant before they closed. "Let them eat it, so I don't have to clean."

The bartender studied the remains of the omelette splattered on the floor. "You have to cook the eggs longer." He pointed at the watery mess. "The asshole was right. The omelette is underdone."

"So now you take his side. Suddenly you're a critic."

"No. I'm no cook and I don't like to cook, but I wouldn't eat a soggy tortilla."

"I won't clean that mess. Let the cats eat it."

"To hell with the cats." The bartender tried not to think of the cats as he cleared the plates and carried in the American's table and chairs. The other nearby restaurants, the Chinese and the Pizza Hut, had closed early, leaving the terrazas very deserted.

"Why don't you cook the cats?" the bartender said as a joke.

"Look, when the crowd gets here, things will pick up."

"God willing. And then you'll start cooking the food?"

"Ho, macho! The tortilla was fine. He's just a cat lover who'll feed them gourmet cuisine."

"That's not the point. The cats are bad for business. They're a nuisance."
“Right now, it doesn’t matter. Do you see any customers?” The cook waved an arm to the empty street.

“No,” said the bartender. “But there will be very soon, and my father can’t afford to lose money because some people get bothered by cats.” The bartender glared at the cook, his friend for many years, but one who had to be reminded of his place every now and then.

The cook, who rarely argued because he got nervous and queasy in his stomach, said nothing. He went on with his business, emptying ashtrays, switching off the lights and TV, and turning the “Open” sign to “Closed.” When he was done, he walked out. “You’ll lock the door?”

“Claro,” said the bartender. “See you tomorrow.”

The cook was about to go, then stayed to make a point. “Tell your father if he wants to make more money, he should put a German section on the menu.”

“No. We’ll just raise the prices next month.”

“But if they can’t read the menu, what’s the point.”

“We have English,” the bartender snapped. He wanted to go home. “The Germans who can afford to travel all speak English.”

“I’m the kind who likes to include everyone,” the cook said. “No one should feel left out when it comes to food.”

“Including cats.”

“The door to kindness should be left open just a little,” the cook said. Out of habit, he checked his pockets for his house keys to make sure he had them before he left. “There are many lonely people in this neighborhood. If the cats are around, someone might take one home.”

“Hombre, there are pet shops with better cats.”

The cook did not want to argue, but there were things on his mind that
had to come out, so he kept talking as he looked at his feet. “A pet shop cat is not better when he ends up on the street. I always feed them because even when there's not enough money, there's always a little food.”

The bartender, who had stopped listening, locked the front door of the restaurant and started for his car. “See you tomorrow, jefe.”

“You're lucky to have so many options,” the cook said. “What I'm saying is you should give people a choice, too. Choosing kindness is never bad.”

“But they have a choice,” the bartender said. “They can go somewhere else.”

“Goodbye,” the cook said.

Walking up the road, the cook continued the line of thought to himself. You could be kind, you could be cruel, or you could close your eyes and forget. It came down to choice. There was so much food thrown away every night that you had to close your eyes. Try to forget. Forget all your garbage. Forget your suffering. Just throw it out and wait. And whatever you did, it always came back. Like the cats. They came back and they sat at your feet and looked you in the eye. And you chose either to feed them or not feed them and if you didn't feed them, they moved on. People were no different—they moved on and forgot. The cats moved on to garbage and so did people. To suffer and wallow in their own garbage. Gorged on garbage until they were sick.

The cook was not nervous anymore, and as he walked to the Plaza Comercial, he felt the argument, in a subtle way, had been won.

He lived in a small flat above a souvenir shop that had been closed for the last week. He hated emptiness. It had to be the economy that was getting everyone down. They said next month the tourists would come for sure. All you could do was wait. He tried to open the door quietly without waking his mother,
who was probably asleep on the couch. The TV would be on, and when he opened the door, she would wake up. She'd wait until the blood ran back into her arms, then march into the kitchen to cook him dinner. He never liked her to do this. But tonight might be different. He was a cook, but he never could eat his own cooking. And sometimes, he liked to be fed.
In my family, secrets never last very long. If my cousin Dale had what some of our relatives politely called “a lifestyle problem” that he was hiding from us, it would be simply a matter of time until we found out. Carla, my sister, was most curious.

“He’s getting old,” Carla said. “An old bachelor. Do you want to make a bet?” My sister was a thin, edgy woman who rarely looked you in the eye, although in a room full of people she seemed to hear and see everything. She was busy at a table with a calculator summing up her receipts. Her fingers moved with a steady rhythm on the machine like they were playing a musical tune.

“I wouldn’t bet against him,” I said. “Dale’s pretty normal. He just doesn’t have much luck with women.”

“He could have lots of luck with Miguel.” Her smile broadened into a wicked curve as her fingers tapped on the Casio.

“Miguel has enough lovers,” I spat back. Carla loved to think up lurid scenarios, and sometimes she arranged them in her house. Once at dinner, she connived a seating plan, whereby one of her handsome business associates sat between his wife and a known nymphomaniac. Carla kept refilling the nympho’s wine and eagerly watched. By the time they got to the Chorizo Bilbao, the nympho had her hand in the young man’s pocket and the
wife was storming out the door. I wondered who she would get for Dale.

"Miguel's in love with Dale," she said. "I don't blame him. I had a crush on Dale when I was young. My own cousin. Thank God I have some morals."

"Dale does not like Miguel."

"It's not Miguel I have in mind," she said.

Who?"

"I won't tell you. When is Dale coming back?"

"Next week."

When Dale came back to Madrid for another aimless trip, my sister set him up with a date. I remember that night well. He didn't have a car so he had taken the bus to Carla's house for dinner. Normally I drove him around, but there was no reason to expect him to go home until later that night.

At about nine o'clock my cell phone rang. It was Dale. He demanded that I come pick him up, no questions, just get in the car and come now. So I did. My wife asked where I was going and I said, to avoid any questions, Dale was very sick. She understood.

While driving to my sister's house, the phone rang again. "What's taking you so long?" he said.

By the fourth ring, I turned off the phone.

He was sitting on the steps of my sister's house in a black Armani suit, the creases in his pants razor sharp, the jacket hooked on his thumb and draped over his shoulder because of the heat. When he saw me pull in the driveway, he jumped up as if he thought I might pass him by, as if I were the only taxi cab in the darkest, meanest city in the world. I kept the engine running. He looked very strung out, his face drained of color, eyes shaky.
“What's up, Dale?”

“Just drive around. I've got to get away from here.”

I drove slowly down the road, unsure where I was headed. Something was wrong with the street lights, an electrical malfunction of some sort. The long row of houses down Diamante was dark and eerie, and the steepled tops of the buildings set against the heavy darkness of the sky made the landscape look like a jagged, lunar terrain, unfamiliar and foreboding.

“Your sister is a bitch,” Dale said.

“I know. What did she do now?”

“Why do people try to fix my life? Single life isn’t so bad. It hasn’t killed me.”

“No it hasn’t,” I said. “You're doing just fine.”

I made a right at the next street, which had to be La Colina, but in this darkness I wasn’t sure. I figured I'd head to Pozuelo’s main drag and go around in circles for a while. Dale took one of my Fortunas and lit up. The car's interior filled with smoke. “Look, you might not believe this,” he said, “but in all the years I've spent on assignment in Spain, I've never gotten laid.”

This did not surprise me. I took a second to think, then I said, “It's no crime, Dale. Just that people wonder about a single guy your age. It raises obvious questions.”

There was a long pause. We both knew what the obvious questions were. To be honest, I knew he wasn’t gay because we had dated around somewhat when we were younger. But, the fact is, lately his life had been void of women, and this had made a few people in our family suspicious. I said, “Let me tell you Dale—cousin to cousin. I hear talk. Believe me, there's no doubt in my mind that you're okay. But Carla...she wants proof. She’s never seen you
with a woman."

“Well, she brought one home.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“Nothing to say. Carla told me to look good because I had a hot liga.
‘You won’t be disappointed,’ she said. So, I thought I’d morph into Dale Armani,
slick back the hair, and give it a shot.”

I rolled my eyes to heaven. “You could squeeze through a door crack
with that grease,” I said.

Dale fixed his eyes reproachfully on my face. “My hair is hard to handle,”
he said. “A little dab will not do.”

“You look fine,” I lied. He looked squishy. The ooze saturating his hair
flattened it over his scull like a swim cap. There emanated a swarthiness about
him but it seemed overly forced. I decided he looked less handsome than slimy
and wicked. Most things that gave him confidence were contrived and made
me wince.

“So,” he said. “I’m in the living room talking to Carla’s other guests for
what seems to be an eternity. Miguel was there, swilling down his champagne
and talking up a storm, as usual. I hate how he just glues himself to me and
rattles on about futbol, as if he knows anything about it. Finally, the bell rang. I
opened the door and there’s my date. Not bad. Tall, skinny, blonde, a little
worn around the edges but sexy.”

“Is she still there?”

“No. She left an hour ago. But get this: she didn’t even say hello. She
said, ‘Where’s the dog?’ ‘The dog? He’s in the kitchen,’ I said. She walked
right by me into the living room, said hello to everyone else, and sat down.
Carla walked over and whispered to me in English, ‘That’s Marinel. I brought
her for you. Go on.' She gave me a nudge with her shoulder in Marinel's direction, like I was some nervous actor late for his cue. Well, you can imagine..."

"That's a lot of pressure," I said.

"Lots of pressure," Dale agreed. "And you can bet Marinel picked up on Carla's tone, even though she doesn't speak English. I was nervous. I bet it showed, too. So I made us some drinks and sat with Marinel and went along in Spanish as best I could. Now, she definitely likes futbol. And she can talk about it, too. She said, 'I like your best American player, Alexi Lalas.' I said, 'He's not our best American player and furthermore, he's a clown.' 'He's a very good player,' she said, 'and I like his beard.' 'Men with beards are ugly,' I said. 'Why do you think they wear beards?'"

Dale just sat there, pondering the question of beards, perhaps. He had never considered growing a beard; in fact his face had remained as innocent and childlike as it had been when we were kids. Only a stripe of grey hair arching over his temple gave any hint of his age. Other than that, he might have been a pouty child I had to pick up after school.

We drove along Avenida Europa, Pozuelo’s main drag. Except for the pulsing lights of the discos and bars, the whole street was dark. But it was Saturday night and people were bent on having a good time. Over the last year the quiet community of Pozuelo had become a watering hole for the young and adventurous. They braved the shadowy roads in rowdy groups. Several men charged across the street, totally oblivious of the cars. The more leisurely couples took advantage of the powered-down darkness to kiss and fondle against a wall or by a tree. There were lots of cars parked on the curb and so the bars had to be full. Dale craned his neck at every sight, as if trying to record
all the sounds and sensations around him. I wanted to stop for a drink, except I was very curious about Marinel.

Was this the same Marinel from the riding club—the sassy, sexy, Marinel? I knew this girl from way back. Her father bred some of the toughest bulls in Spain. When Marinel was in her late teens, she used to jump barefoot into the corrals with her bullfighter cape and torear with the younger bulls. I managed to get friendly with her when she moved out on her own. But I wasn’t the only one. She had a lot of bullfighter boyfriends, many of whom trailed her back to her flat in Old Madrid. From the street, I would look up at her bedroom window and see if she had the room lighted with the sunset glow. It was a special effect, something she did with her bedroom light, as a signal to the guys on the street. If the red scarf was drapped over the lampshade and the glow in the room looked like red skies at night, it meant she was busy with another man.

A few years ago, we lost track of Marinel. There were rumors. Someone said she was pregnant and her parents had sent her out of the country. There were stories of drugs and waywardness. Who knew what was true?

Now this girl, this same Marinel, could really talk some trash. It was very easy for her to infect a closet-lech like Dale with a lot of hope. Dale was never too far from that red light district in his mind, and a girl like Marinel could glut him so bad he’d be sick for weeks. Marinel was like a buffet for the senses; she could feed a man full of ideas, make him think he’d finally found someone to flesh out that imaginary red light district into real shape and form. Like I said, Marinel knew how to talk dirty. Slumming with the second string bullfighters made it come naturally. For Dale, this was like the hearing of strong music and the drinking of hard booze. He could slush himself silly. But if there was no pay-off—if Marinel didn’t put out, if she simply played with him and kept her legs
crossed, he would be squashed. The infection would spread like an illness—a short, sweet night of drunkenness followed by a bruising hangover with no end in site.

"So what happened next?" I asked.

"Well," Dale said, "we talked and drank. Then someone accidentally let Igor out of the kitchen. He started barking and went for her. She said, 'Maldito pero,' and kicked him in the jaw. Igor whimpered back into the kitchen."

"She didn't have to do that," I said. "Igor's an old dog."

"That's what I said. I said, 'His bark is worse than his bite.' And she said, 'Oh yeah?' Then she pulled her sweat pants up to her knee and showed me a mark. 'He did that last week,' she said. And I was like, 'You have very nice legs, and I hate the fact that I'm overdressed.' She said, 'You look good in that suit.'"

"Wierd conversation."

"It was. I almost came in my pants when she showed me her leg. Christ, it was nice. Then I said, 'I bet that's not a dog bite. That's something you got from a lover. I bet Alexi Lalas gave you that bite.'"

"What did she say?"

"She said, 'Don't talk to me about sex bites. I know all about sex bites.'"

"So what did you talk about?"

"We talked about sex bites. She said, 'There was this one bull who used to bite the female after fucking. He'd be giving it to her from behind, you know, with those big bull testicles pounding against her backside and that huge, black chorizo thrusting into her cunt, and then he'd come with a big loud grunt. Just like some men. But the funny part is this: right before dismounting, he'd bite her on the back of the neck. I don't know why. Maybe he wanted to leave his mark.'"
"I didn’t quite know how to respond to this bit of information," Dale said. "My legs were shaking and I could feel my dick tenting up my pants. What could I do? I tossed back my drink, hoping I’d get slushed enough to think of something equally wicked to say. But how the hell do you deal with a woman who is fascinated with fucking bulls?"

I didn’t know what to say to him. We kept circling the neighborhood. If only there were some moonlight. Honestly, I couldn’t see a thing. Just a lot of shadowy shapes darting across the street. I thought I saw a pair of shapely legs dangling over a power generator.

"Listen," I said. "I’m getting dizzy from going around in circles. Let’s go for a drink."

"I hope there’s nobody there I know," he said. "Now is not the time to socialize with people."

We stopped at Draq for some rum and cokes. Negotiating the muddy terrain was no easy chore without any light. The dark, heavy dome of the sky seemed to press down, making us mince our steps along the shadowy curb. I scrapped my ankle in a ditch and ruined my sock. Someone had the brilliant idea of placing torches at the entrance of Draq, giving it the feel of a strange temple. But at least it lit up part of the street.

Inside, though, the scene was a mass of confusion. All we could see in the tacky strop light were bodies everywhere. They were young, sweaty bodies, huddled against the bar or bunched on the floor. Clouds of cigarette smoke hung in the air and made my eyes red. I was dying for something to drink. The excitement and energy of the place made me nervous. We pushed our way through the crush to find a place to sit in a lonely corner of the room. There was music, loud Euro trash, but no space to dance. Most of the kids stood around
and shouted at each other. We waited for a waitress. I could see Dale was very edgy. He reached into his jacket and searched all the pockets, like he was trying to keep his hands busy. Then he took another one of my *Fortunas* and lit up. Smoke covered his face.

"Did Marinel give examples of *her* sex bites?" I asked.

"Well, we had a lot to drink," he said. "We were getting along great. Carla seemed happy. At that point, I guess the talk was flowing right along and I was performing pretty well. The other guests moved to the porch and left us alone."

"It helps when you're alone," I said.

"Actually, I regret it. That's when she started in on her love life and intimidated me. It was worse then having her describe the mating bulls. She fell in love with a Portuguese rider when she was fifteen. She said, 'I was fifteen and he was 36, but he looked younger. He taught me how to ride. He trained horses for a living, but he was very cruel. If a horse didn't jump well, he forced it to climb a building wall. Sometimes he just whipped it across the ears.'"

"Why did that intimidate you?" I asked.

"Well, I'm thinking I have to compete with the Portuguese and Lalas and the biting bull and everyone else. The pressure got to me. All I could do was go to the kitchen and make more drinks and think of something to say. I came back with the drinks and figured I'd talk about myself, but she went on with the Portuguese. She said, 'He never showered or shaved and always smelled like shit.'"

"And there you were—in your best suit."

"I said, 'I write about *futbol* and I think Lalas is a goof.' She said, 'He made me come with his beard.' And I said, 'Who, Lalas?' And she said, 'No,
the Portuguese. He rubbed his beard on my cunt and made me come.’ I asked her, ‘Did he fuck you?’ And she said, ‘Yes, of course, but I preferred his beard.’

"Dale, should we get something to eat?"

He said, "How can I eat after all this?"

"My sister really knows how to pick ‘em," I said.

"It was torture," Dale said. "I'm not so young any more. I'm thirty-two. The older I get, the less I know. If I could just tell women how much I want them, how fascinated I am with them...."

He puffed on his cigarette as smoke billowed around his face, blurring the agony that showed all too plainly in his eyes. We heard an uproar as a beautiful young girl propped herself on top of the bar to gain a better vantage point from which to gaze down at her admiring flock. What the girl saw, huddled around her, were men, four of them, each of whom dangled a cocktail cherry in front of her face. What the men saw was a goddess who cast a spell over them—long legs crossed in a classic movie-siren pose, ample breasts thrust out, lips like shiny rose petals after a light rain. I looked at the girl and the men admiring her, and thought that’s as good as it gets. I looked at Dale, at the heaviness in his eyes, the hunch in his shoulders, and thought that compared to the bliss at the bar, Dale was at the bottom of the sea, the furthest from sexual gratification one can get.

The scene reminded me of a long-ago summer, when Dale had poured out a story of another girl, another blind date set up by my sister. This girl was the complete opposite of Marinel—severe, tight-lipped and squeamish around men. When she danced slowly, she kept an arm in front of her tiny breasts so they wouldn’t touch a guy’s chest. Dale took this girl to a juice bar in Vallecas. It was a popular place during the hot summer. They had these plastic blenders
behind the bar. You threw in the fruits and churned them into a slush, and in a few seconds, the juice would funnel into your glass to the sound of squirts and hisses.

Dale thought it would be a good place, harmless and non threatening, to take the little spinster. Except that once they covered the topics of weather and traffic in Madrid, their talk dried up. He tried to interest her in soccer, but she hated sports. Her hobby was doll-collecting. On that topic, Dale drew a blank. So they sat like a pair of strangers and watched the juice makers squeeze the fruits, grinding grapes and oranges and strawberries in the machine, and the gush of juice through the funnel.

Afterwards, Dale and I met at a bar and he told me about it. “Your sister set me up with a real winner,” he said. He had just dropped the spinster off, and he was still wearing his vinyl chinos and purple sleeveless shirt. At the time, his hair was permed and bandanaed like some music video king. Another of his fashion disaster days.

Now it struck me, as Dale sat here in Draq, telling me about Marinel, that all his problems had a common motif. It had something to do with that slick get-up. It just happened that in this dungeon called Draq, he was the only one who wore a suit. Everyone else had on jeans and t-shirts that looked like they were ripped to shreds. But Dale, he had a thing for suits. He had worn one when he dated that spinster. And it had a strange effect on him, especially around women. He became really boring. His whole being seemed tied and strapped into that suit to the point where it became like his personal straight jacket. It was odd, because while on the outside, he affected the power-suited professional, inside, he was pure leather and latex. I swear, with me, all he talked about was sex. Once, he asked me how big my dick was. He offered to pull his out so he
and I could compare. How do you deal with a guy like that?

"The more we drank, the worse it got," Dale said. He was on his third drink. "That story about the beard was worse than the bulls. What would she say next? I felt like an idiot just sitting there, so I told her about how I sold chocolates in college back in California. My fraternity set up a booth during Valentines and we sold chocolate penises and chocolate breasts. There was one sorority girl, a real bohemian—frizzy hair, earth sandals, lots of beads—who came by to help. She hated sports. If you wanted to get rid of her, you talked sports. She had this real pretty roommate from Wales, who I liked. The three of us sat around selling chocolates. I argued with the Welsh girl that American football was rougher than rugby. She said, 'Why do they wear all that padding when they're so fat to begin with?' And I said, 'Because they hit each other a lot harder than the puny rugby players do.' We went on like this for a while and finally the Bohemian girl stood up and said, 'I find this conversation very boring! Do you understand? I find you both very boring!' Then she grabbed a chocolate penis and left. I started dating the Welsh girl after that, but it never really worked out. I got too nervous when we were alone. The two of us never had much to say, anyway. It was more fun with the grouchy bohemian around, so we could piss her off."

"What's the point?" I asked.

"Just keeping Marinel entertained."

"What did she say?"

"She said, 'Dog's out of the kitchen again. Look out!' And I said to the dog, 'Igor, ven aqui,' very nicely because he was scared, and I picked up his tennis ball and showed it to him and his tail started to wag. I gave the ball to Marinel and told her to throw it to him. She did. He caught it in his mouth. I
said, 'All he wants you to do is play with him.' Then I gave her a big kiss and probed her with my tongue. Maybe it was the booze or the heat, but she was burning up. She left my lips charred. 'What are you doing?' she said. I said, 'That's for being a good sport.'"

"Was she surprised?"

"She told me the Portuguese guy made one of the horses so paranoid that when it saw a stray dog sniffing at its heels it came down with its front hoof and smashed the dog's head. 'So don't think I kicked Igor very hard,' she said."

"I don't think I like this girl."

"Well, you should have seen what happened," Dale said, "after we drank and argued about horses—when I said that horses were too big and unpredictable to have between your legs, and she said, 'I can make a horse do anything I want because he's a dumb animal.' I reminded her about the time Superman fell off a horse and got paralyzed. Not even Superman could survive a fall. And she said, 'I fall off horses all the time and never get hurt because I'm flexible.' I said, 'I want to eat your pussy.' And she said, 'You men are all alike. All you want to do is eat pussy.' 'Let me eat your pussy,' I said. 'I'll eat you better than the Portuguese.' She laughed and said, 'Blah, blah, blah.' And then dinner was served."

When he mentioned dinner, I became very hungry because I remembered my sister said she would keep my dinner for me. "What did you have for dinner?" I said.

"You know, I can't remember. I was pretty soused and all the guests were looking admiringly my way and I thought, 'The dry spell is over. I'm going to have sex!' And then, just when we started dinner, Marinel's lover showed up."
"The Portuguese?"

"A Spanish guy. Out of nowhere."

"Like an ambush..."

"Don't let me start," Dale said. "Turns out he's the tennis pro at the riding club. He looked more like a soldier than a tennis player. Big, burly. His name is Arturo."

"I know him," I said. "Arturo. The tennis pro. He has a beard."

"Shut up about the beard!"

"Okay, okay," I said. We sat there for a moment. Dale looked pretty flustered. When the silence got unbearable, I said, "So, Arturo is her lover."

"That's just my luck, isn't it?"

"And you knew he was her lover because...?"

"Well, first off, she got mad at him. Chewed him out in front of the guests. That's a sign right there, you know. She said, 'You're not my bodyguard. And who invited you?' And Carla said, 'It's okay, Marinel. No scenes, please.' Marinel sat there and made ugly faces at the guy, but he didn't say a word. They set a place for him at the table and he sat down to eat. When he did that, I knew I had struck out. I was sitting next to Marinel, but she never looked at me again. I looked totally whipped. No one wants to look at a loser. Not even Miguel wanted to talk to me. He started talking about tennis with Arturo. It was all downhill from there."

"What happened?"

"I don't want to talk about it," Dale said. "It's your sister's fault. She put too much pressure on me. What did she want me to do, save this woman from Arturo? She doesn't want to be saved. Marinel left with him. They drove off in his truck. Anyway, it's the same old story. I shot my wad off too quick. It's
finished. What about some food? You still want to eat?"

I told him no. The bar was too hot and even with the doors flung open the air was ripe. Dale must have been dripping with sweat in that suit. Maybe it all came down to dress code, a instinctive knowledge of when to dress down, and with it, loosen up, that Dale seemed ignorant of. Maybe he needed a woman to dress him right.

Draq was really throbbing. Against the bar, bodies seemed to undulate, as though they were being pressed against the wood in some sweaty orgy, both lurid and private. Dale and I looked like complete foreigners in this place. Dale more than me. He could sense it, too. The more available the beautiful young women looked in the pulsing lights, the more frightened he became. In this atmosphere, everything is possible, nothing is remembered. A shapely tush shaking to the music is greeted by hungry hands, a broad shoulder is always there for a dishelved, swooning head to fall on, eyes are always on alert—probing, investigating, scanning for the weakness that is out in the dark.

Dale ran his finger on a puddle of coke he had spilled on the table and sucked on it. He looked real low. "The losing streak goes on," he said.

"I think you gave up too soon."

He looked at the puddle. He said, "After dinner, Marinel and everyone had coffee. I went over to the couch and pretended to watch TV. Arturo looked at me, and I swear, he had a grin on his face. A victorious grin. Spaniards are so competitive."

"And possessive," I added.

"That's right. Later on, I was still on the couch, watching a rerun of Dallas, when Arturo and Marinel left together. And I thought she was mine."

"You can't analyze women like you analyze a soccer game," I said. "You
have to look for the invisible game. A game within the game."

"How do I find it?"

"There's no formula. It has to come to you. You need to watch the whole field closely. And eventually, the field will open up."

"Didn't she open up to me with all that talk about beards and stuff?"

"She was cruel. She saw you were desperate and played with you. She turned you into her toy."

"Maybe I'll grow a beard," said Dale sadly.

"A beard won't cover that look."

"What look?"

"That look of fear."

"It's true," he said. "When I'm around women, I have this tremendous fear."

"I think all men are afraid of women. They have too much power over us. Some of them don't know it, and the ones who do are the most dangerous. That's why I'm glad I'm married. I've been with Diyana so long that she doesn't scare me anymore. Before, it was different. When we started dating, I was terrified. I couldn't believe she looked so calm. I thought the pressure to perform would kill me. But not anymore. I think that's why I want to keep the marriage with what's-her-name going. A dull comfortable marriage is better than having no one at all. Single life can be empty and lonely. I don't want to feel that fear."

"I really let Carla down," he said. "This was my chance. Do you think I still have a chance with Marine? I mean, if I get her alone, it might be worth it. I bet she's wild."

"You're so desperate," I said. "Forget her. Write about soccer and maybe
you'll become famous."

Dale's car was laid up in the shop so I had to drive him back to Majadahonda. We talked about Real Madrid and their new foreign players. Talking about sports always cheered him up. I dropped Dale off at his place and drove back to Carla's. It was 2:15 A.M.

So, Marinel was back in circulation. Up to her old tricks. That was good news. I had a phone number for Marinel from way back. It wouldn't hurt to try. And I could always find out more from Arturo.

I had an idea. While I was on the road, I called up my sister from my cell phone and got Arturo's number.

"Why do you want his number?" she asked.

"Never mind. Thanks a lot. I'll see you for dinner in a little while."

I dialed the number. Arturo answered. He sounded really tired.

"It's Dale's cousin, Howard," I heard him say to Marinel.

"Hola!" she said. "Long time no see." I imagined them lying in bed after they had just had sex. Probably smoking. Maybe she was yelling at him again, like at the dinner party, maybe criticizing his performance. She sounded happy to hear from me.

"You're cousin Dale is funny," she said.

"Yes he is."

"So, what have you been doing with yourself these days?"

"Well," I said. "I've been growing a beard."

We agreed to have lunch next week. "A nice restaurant without a lot of people," Marinel said. "So your wife won't find out."

By now, I was really hungry, and I drove as fast as I could. Carla was a very good cook. I wondered what she had for dinner.
COUCH POTATO

My wife Brenda was an actress. She wanted a divorce because, she told me, I was a remorseless drunk intent on ruining myself. I came home one day and found a three-page letter, written in a scrawled hand-writing style that took me about an hour to read, taped to the fridge. Her specious reasons for leaving were outlined along with this, her final blow: “Don’t worry about court dates,” she wrote. “Neither of us can afford a lawyer. Besides, what do I have to gain? If you keep this up, which I’m sure you will, there won’t be much left to take.”

I should have counted my lucky stars.

The main reason she saw for leaving me was that my drinking was a sign that I wasn’t happy with our marriage. Her many friends sympathized with her. All of them gave me a wide berth after she left. Who could blame them? It had to be the stench. For weeks, I had let myself go to hell, didn’t bathe or brush my teeth, stayed in bed and picked up bed sores, and drank a lot. I had dandruff so irritated from constant scratching that when I picked at my scalp, the chunks I pulled out were red with blood. My breath stank. I had rashes on my crotch. I didn’t care. Brenda had left me, and my isolation worked out fine because I wanted nothing to do with anyone. They politely obliged. Even my commercial agent, Marty Blevin, kept me at arms length. When I arrived for our meeting, Marty told his secretary to hold all calls. He led me down a hall of glass cubicles where his sub-agents worked, all busy with phones stuck to their ears. I’m glad I never had to deal with Marty’s sub-agents, a hornets nest of high-
strung gossip mongers who never missed a thing, as though they had a special radar aimed at the halls for any drama about to unfold. They fed off actor gossip the way they munch on veggie pizza. They watched us until we went inside the back office. Then Marty shut the door.

"Brenda needs order," Marty said. "She can't hack a stressful marriage. I don't blame her. She's got enough to deal with in her job, with all the assholes, the rejection, the unemployment. Well, I'm sure you know all about that. She had no choice but to bail out on you. That's what I call cutting your losses."

"Are you trying to make me feel good, Marty."

"That's what I like about you, kid. Always a sense o' humor."

We were sitting in the conference room, a small, pastel-colored suite in the back of his office. An oak console against the wall by the door housed a TV and VCR. Late in the day, when the work died down, Marty always came back here because he liked to take off his shoes and put his pudgy feet on the conference table and act like the big boss that he was. He slumped his heavy body into the plush cushion of his swivel chair, slipped one of the dozens of demo tapes he received every day into the VCR, and decided which one of the struggling new actors on the tapes he wanted to sign.

"The thing is," I said, "my drinking is not a criticism of Brenda. I really love her. But sometimes, that's not enough."

"Take it from me, kid. Drinking'll bring you down. I know all about it."

He didn't know a thing about it. Marty was a big talker, but when it came to socially acceptable vices, he was as boring as a Christian saint. I never saw him drink or smoke or bad-mouth the government.

"Look," I said. "Brenda had a few every now and then, too. She drank sweet drinks, margaritas and things with umbrellas in them. Three years ago,
on our honeymoon in Ibiza, she got totally shit-faced. I had to fish her out of a fountain in a hotel lobby. We knew we couldn’t keep up that pace very long. I was the one who said, ‘Let’s limit the drinking to social occasions and night caps, when both of us are stressed out and need something to wind down.’ But then the jobs...well, you know how it is. Marty, am I ever going to get an audition again? This is bullshit. You remember how I was cleaning up last year, in February. Man, I didn’t have a chance to breathe I was so busy with work. I could have bought a house in Encino. You remember, don’t you?”

“Is that what it is?” Marty said. “You’re throwing everything away ‘cause you can’t get a reading?”

“I don’t know why I drink. Now that she’s gone, I spend a lot of time thinking about it. What I remember are the headaches. Waking up the next day with my head churning. Then I think about Brenda. About that night in Vegas, when we snuck out to the pool deck of the Hilton, overlooking that giant pot of gold. We did it on the railing of the balcony, and I swear there were people looking out their windows. I’m surprised no one called security. They must have enjoyed the show. Those are about the only memories I have. Just headaches and her. Nothing else is worth keeping.”

Marty wasn’t listening. He slid a tape into the VCR and in a few seconds, the face of a square-jawed hunk filled the screen. “This is General Hospital,” Marty said. “I’m thinking about signing this guy.”

The young man on TV stood at a podium with tears in his eyes as he spoke about overcoming drugs. He offered a laundry list of talk-show cliches for why he had spiraled out of control: peer-presure, low self-esteem, careless parents, and so on. It lasted about two minutes and ended with a burst of sunshine, a kind of positive rant, about how he had joined an outreach group to
help others like him, an experience that had given him new perspective and the realization that things can change. He warmed the hearts of his audience with a final proverb: "Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, and today is a gift, to be treasured, not squandered"...etc. It was the kind of life-affirming stuff that made me want to go out and kill someone.

"What do you think?" my agent said.

"He's a little too intense for commercial work, I'd say."

"But he's good, and he really delivered that speech well. The message came through to me, alright."

A frown crept over my face. "It's just a soap opera."

"Wrong! It's life. Life and art mirror each other. Don't forget that."

The walls of my agent's house were lined with expensive paintings, and this gave him the right to talk about art. He lived in the Colony in a beach house set on stilts, so at night, the waves crashed under the house.

"When's the last time you took a bath?" he said.

"They cut off my water. I'm afraid to check my bank account."

"This should help you a little." He pulled my check for residual payments out of his coat pocket and gave it to me. "Good news and bad news. First off, it's a good-sized check because a lot of markets picked up the spot. The bad news is, it's a seasonal thing. After Halloween, they'll yank it. So spend it wisely, okay?"

"Well," I said, "what's on the breakdowns?"

He went gloomy all of a sudden. "I can't send you out on auditions until you fix yourself." He tried to hold me with his gaze, but broke off when he saw my sarcastic smile. It seemed to throw him. As he spoke, his voice knotted up. He kept his eyes anchored to the floor.
"This is really hard for me, because, you know, you've been great over the years. Really first rate. You've made me lots of money and I really like you, kid. And then this illness."

He raised his eyes to me with a look of sudden anger fueled by self-importance. He suddenly shifted gears, charging into one of his belligerent pep talks. "Jesus Christ, Lee! What the fuck are you doing to yourself? I mean, shit, look at you. You're like one of those scumbags on Hollywood Boulevard. You can't work when you're ill. This is like a fever, you see. With a fever, you've got to stay home and rest."

He laid a fatherly hand on my shoulder and spoke like doting rabbi. "This is what you have to do, son. I'm going to give you a number to call." He took out a business card from the same pocket as the check. It said Border House. "This group helps a lot of actors get off the juice. Ask for Donald Harkes. A real Scotsman, brogue and everything. I know him. Used to run a theatre in the Valley until the drinking caught up with him. Now he's a model citizen. He'll clean you up."

I was rattled by the idea of not working, and the fact that my own agent was, in a sense, black-balling me. "Wait a minute," I said. "Who are you to pass judgment? I thought you were my agent. You're supposed to work for me."

He stuck his double chin in the air. "I got a reputation to keep. Un'erstand, Lee. You've been lucky so far. No complaints on any set you've been on. But no one's seen you since...since this thing with Brenda. They'd never hire you now. You look like hell, man. I can't risk my reputation."

I coughed and said, "Maybe I should find a new agent?" There was no conviction in my voice.

"Lee, they'd smell you a mile away. You wouldn't get past the door. The
way you are right now, nobody in this town'll touch you."

Now it was I who kept looking at the floor. My leg twitched by itself and I felt very detached from what he was saying. I always knew where I stood with Marty, and usually, I was at the top of the list. For some reason, it sounded like I was being fired. Not likely, since he was the agent and technically he worked for me—agents always work for the actor, my union tells me—but then again, things had changed. I was now known as a drunk.

When the meeting ended, I thought about testing his theory. I had plenty of credits, a good demo tape, recommendations on request from top industry people. There were lots of desperate agents in town hungry for commissions. I slipped the Border House card into my pocket just to put Marty at ease, even though he had pissed me off. As I was getting up, he grabbed my arm. "One more thing. I still get the odd residual payments for you, you know, from the old ads. They're still running in a few places. But look, from now on, I'll have to mail 'em to you. I don't want you coming in here anymore. Not until after you fix yourself up, Lee. You see...it...it bothers people in the office...you know, to see you like this."

The hand reached for my shoulder again and I had no energy to shrug it off. If I had the guts, I would have told him what to do with his office and the people who worked in it. Whenever someone surprised me with their impudence, whether it was a waitress or a mechanic or the veggie-headed sub-agent, I never unleashed the snappy comeback. The good insults were always clogged in my head, and I never thought about them until I got home. "Marty, what's that spot on your forehead? Hope it's not AIDS, Marty, you haven't been slumming in Boys Town, have you?"

But I wasn't thinking about insults in Marty's office. My mind was on the
bar down the street.

I walked out of the suite with as much dignity as I could dredge up. I felt the office radar catch me. At the water cooler, a file clerk named Jerry adjusted his thick glasses on his nose and gave me a sad look as I walked by. I smiled pleasantly. The glass hall hummed with the sound of phone-hugging agents dispatching the latest casting call to their actors. I could feel their x-ray vision boring holes into me. I thought, "Just keep your feet moving, left-right-left-right, and you'll be out of here."

To get to the exit, I had to pass through a small waiting room that had a coffee table with magazines on top and chairs around it. There was a handsome man sitting with a portfolio on his lap. I recognized him as the tearful actor Marty had shown me on General Hospital. Waiting to meet with Marty. By the outfit he wore—dark suit and tie, hair slicked back, lots of rings and gold around his neck—I guessed he was going for the mafia type. Maybe a Godfather Pizza commercial. When he saw my clothes and picked up my scent, he gave me a contemptuous look. I said, "What do you know about drug abuse?"

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me. Stick around a few years. Then we'll see."

I was not angry with him. He was just another pretty face. I left the office and never came back. My sarcastic smile had disappeared, as well as any trace of contempt. I was in no mood to argue, even though I could have pinned Marty's fat ass to the console. The comfortable coward's choice was to slide back into a state of glazed resignation, a look that I wore more often than a soiled pair of underwear.
The money from that fat residual check helped right away. I paid off some bills, got some cash from the bank, and made a trip to the liquor store.

A few days later, I woke up on the couch. The dirty glasses and empty bottles were strewn on the table, some collapsed on their sides, like so many dead comrades killed in the line of fire. I felt like a boxer who had just come to. The pounding blood was like a herd of bulls stampeding in my skull.

I stumbled to the kitchen for another drink so I could kill the pain in my head. There was no way I could hold my liquor, which was like an anesthetic. Two glasses of wine and I was soused. I thought about going up to Laurel Canyon and driving off a cliff. Then I thought of another, bolder idea, something that had crossed my mind a number of times. I thought about committing a serious crime, so they could lock me in a cell far away from all the booze. I made a target-list of who I could kill: a drug dealer, a corrupt politician, a terrorist, some impudent, ungrateful talent agent. Marty's name made it to the top of the list.

When I saw her letter, I thought of killing Brenda. Fortunately, she had disappeared and left me no address or phone number. I tried to toss her out of my mind the way I tossed out empty bottles of rum—without a second thought, just grab the bottle by the neck, drop it in the recycling bin, and let someone else deal with it.

I burned all her pictures. One by one, I ripped them out of the volumes of photo albums in my closet: the bright-eyed Disneyland pictures from the summer of '86, the color slides I snapped for her modeling demo (she never took a bad shot), all went up in smoke.

I left the head shot for last. It was an 8x10 glossy Brenda carried to auditions. She had her luxurious black hair teased so that it flared out to the
borders of the shot like a wild headdress. Her porcelain white face was like a diamond lying in the middle of her stack of black hair, and her kewpie-doll smile, childish and a little ditzy, was like an invitation to the boys to come out and play. Her eyes were a dark contrast to her playful nature. Arched by thin, sharp eyebrows, which made me think of gothic witches, her eyes had a streak of fierceness in them, very Mediterranean and vengeful. I remembered her vow in the letter to end the marriage peacefully, without bloodying each other with lawyers. But looking in her eyes made me feel uneasy.

I turned the stove flame to high and lit the top and bottom corners of her head shot. It burned quickly. Her dark, Italian eyes were the last to go.

Only later, in a drunken fit, did I start to cry, sitting on the floor, staring at the ashes in the kitchen. The bottle of gin didn't help dull the pain. Her face, or at least a physical reminder of it, was gone from my life. I realized one thing. There was something I felt for her that I had never felt for any other girl, so in the absence of any other feeling of equal intensity, I would say it had to be love. It was a physical, sweaty love, the kind of love that, when suddenly aborted, turns ugly and eats away at you like a cancer. I wanted another shot at Brenda. To prove I could change, I'd even give Marty's Border House a go.

I never saw her again. The events of that day, the day that I burned her head shot, were to catch me like a net and carry me forever far away from her. But even after all these years, I still think about her. I think about her eyes. The way they held me in her gaze, until the picture burned away. When I think of her eyes I get a cramp way down low, somewhere in my guts. And then I want to go to bed. That's where I do most of my thinking, in bed, alone in my cell.

What I have is an abundance of time. There's nothing to do in prison except think. And try to survive. I stay out of trouble, mind other people's turf.
and keep to myself, mostly. The rapes are another thing. That's a subject I
won't talk about. But don't worry, I won't burden you with a prison drama. All
the action in this story takes place outside the walls of my cell.

I composed myself and cleaned up Brenda's ashes. I thought of putting
them in an empty plastic film roll, sort of a miniature urn for her remains, a stupid
idea. So I tossed her in the trash. I needed some noise to break the silence in
the house that was depressing as a morgue. I turned on the TV and saw a
mound of giant bodies in helmets and pads tangled on a football field, and I
guessed it was the weekend. Either Saturday, for college, or Sunday, for the
pros. I had lost track of time.

The teams called a timeout, and the network went to a commercial break.
The first spot was a McDonald's ad. I recognized the copy immediately. It was
spoken by a clear-voiced actor, the kind they get to narrate computer shows at
conventions in Vegas. "Buy a children's Meal Deal and get a free Halloween
goblin. Collect the whole set. They're fun, they're cute, and they're scary."

I saw myself on the screen. There, with the fruit of my loins, a boy and
girl, the two cutest kids a casting agent could ever find, smiling at the camera,
with their goblins in their hands. And there I was, with my freshly-scrubbed,
three-something wife, the perfect suburban, sanitized couple decked out in the
finest apparel Wal-Mart had to offer.

I sat there on the couch, watching but at the same time totally detached
from the sounds and images that filled my room. My ears were playing tricks on
me. One ear seemed to close off, then open up again. Noise bounced back
and forth in my head, like someone was playing with the volume on my stereo
headphones.
After the commercial ended, I poured another Scotch and started making calculations—how much would that single airing in the LA market net me in residuals, how much of it could I budget for liquor, for the fucking mortgage, after Marty took his cut. I felt good again. Money offered hope. If I sold the house, the Mustang, I'd have enough to drink on for years. It gave me promise.

I heard noises outside. Spying through the drapes, I saw people across the street. They were having a moving sale. Normally, I could care less about these junkyard giveaways, where people unloaded the useless slag of their lives. But I saw the young daughter arranging some items on the lawn. I had watched her grow up (from a distance, of course) without ever having spoken to her. She liked to play with dogs and cats in the neighborhood. For some reason, I wanted to talk to her before her family moved away and was gone forever. Before I knew it, I'd never again see her playing with the neighborhood pets, rolling on the lawn in her cutoffs with the dogs licking her dirty feet. Over the years, I had learned her routine, sitting at home by my window. With her gone, I knew I'd have an empty spot between the hours of 4 and 5 p.m., the time when she got home after school, threw on her play clothes, and wandered the neighborhood before her mom called her to dinner. I had never said a word to her, nor she to me. Amazing, how people live in such close quarters and never speak to one another. What did I have to lose? She was just a girl. And the stampeding bulls in my head had stopped. That's what I loved about Scotch. It went to the source.

The water district people were nice enough to turn my water back on and so I took a bath. When I felt ready, I wandered across the street and looked at the shoppers, amazed by what they bought. A few hesitant bargain hunters pecked at the items splayed on the lawn. A man carted off a rocking horse with
no head. A young mother still in her bedroom slippers purchased a doll with burnt hair and gave it to her child, a shy little girl, who happily cradled the damaged doll in her tiny arms. They paid for this stuff with a few coins, dropped into the young daughter's glass honey jar. I shambled across the yard, trying not to keel over as I feigned interest in the worthless junk. The girl recognized me with a vague, icy glance and a crooked grin. "You're that guy across the street." She approached me and I got a closer look at her clothes: the cut-off jeans, her dirty hair and feet. The coin jar jingled in her hands. She had a black eye.

"Can I sit on that couch?" I said, pointing to an old, brown derelict sofa marooned on the driveway. "I've been drinking a lot." I plopped backwards onto the couch, trusting the rickety thing would catch me, the way a giant air mattress catches a man jumping out a burning building. The couch's worn, splotchy cushions sank like ruptured souffles under my weight.

"Wanna buy it?" she said. "I'll sell it to you for ten bucks."

Sprawled on the couch, I observed the girl through my sunglasses. She had freckles on her nose, and her teeth were straightened out after that two-year stint with braces. And that slanted grin gave her the appearance of a tacky salesgirl out for my money. Otherwise, she seemed like a typical teenager, stumbling through the gawkiness of adolescence, shaping and shifting into a young woman, with average, innocuous looks, marred only by that black eye.

"I don't know," I said. "This couch doesn't quite go with my Counter-Reformation Baroque decor."

"It's yours for seven-fifty," she said. I regarded the sorry state of the couch, a bulging monster fit for the incinerator. "I hate to hurt your feelings, but this thing's an eye sore."
“But you’re made for it,” she snapped back. “You grow right out of it. Like, what can I say. It’s you.”

“Why didn’t you say so. I’ll take it, for five bucks.”

“Sold!” A slanted grin cut across her face. She sat with me on the couch. “It’ll bring you luck,” she said. “Lots of people have had sex on this couch.”

She stretched her arms over her head and yawned. Her mouth opened wide to its maximum aperture. It was very wide for a young girl. She left it open for a torturous moment, inspiring in my mind the lurid visions of child pornography like I used to read in those kinky German magazines you can buy downtown. “How old are you?” I said.

“Almost fifteen.”

“So you’re fourteen?”

“Yup.”

“Talking about sex can get you in a lot of trouble. Didn’t your parents teach you that?”

“No.”

Apparently, they hadn’t taught her much of anything. She said her mother was at work, which left her to run the enterprising yard sale. And her step-dad, the second one in three years, she said, was in the house, fast asleep.

“He’s like you,” she said. “He likes to drink.”

“Who said I like to drink. I drink because I have to drink.”

“Why do you have to drink?” She tapped her dirty foot against my leg and teased me with her goofy grin.

I took a deep breath and listened to the dead drone of my voice: “I drink because I feel like I’m under siege, you know, like too many people are
watching me, judging me, like an actor on stage in front of a crowd of nasty critics."

The girl cocked her head sideways and gave me the curious look of a dopey dog. Then, after a pause, she said, "What do you do?"

"Oh, I do a number of things." My voice crawled back into my throat, as if the words were hiding. I hated talking about what I did, and that was lie on my couch all morning waiting for the lonely residual checks to come in, so I could go out and buy more booze.

"What things?"

"You know, this and that. Anything to get by." I cast my eyes downward, looking at a splotch on the girl's derelict couch. The weary cushions seemed to sink further down with every word I said.

"You're just like my step-dad," she said. Her eyes again went vague and icy, looking off into the darkening sky. The shoppers had long ago left the scene. People in the neighborhood were firing up their barbecues. I could smell ribs and burgers cooking.

The quiet between us was almost a challenge. What next? She looked down at the jar of coins in her hands and said, "Do you ever think about killing yourself?"

"Yeah, but I think about killing others, too."

"Who do you want to kill?"

"People I don't like. Dishonest people."

She became very interested, inching closer to me so her eyes could probe my face. "Would you really do it?" she said.

I put my arm around her shoulders and held her close. "Only if I got drunk."
"But you sober up sooner or later, right?"

"Not always."

She laughed. "Then I wanna get drunk, too! Go get me a drink."

I looked over my shoulder, at the house where her step-father slept. "I'm sure he would kill me if I got you drunk."

The girl looked me over and laughed (a cold, derisive laugh) at my sleight shoulders and bulging paunch. "Yup, he'd definitely beat you up. But don't worry," she said, warmly. "He won't kill you because he sleeps until late."

I wasn't shocked by her senseless attitude, an attitude fed on violence and neglect. Strangely, I felt warmed by her careless affection, which was all I really needed at the time. I had nowhere to go and nothing to do but just let things happen as they may.

She nuzzled her head on my chest and we sat there for a long time, waiting nervously for something to happen. Night closed on us like a shutter. I stroked her wavy, dirty hair and listened to the insects buzzing in the tress and then closed my eyes. I was about to fall asleep when she rubbed against me in just the right way (a signal), and then I knew it was time. Her body energized with every touch of my hand. I didn't dare take off her clothes. It was risky going. Whenever a car rolled by, we had to untangle before it caught us in its headlights. I felt again the juvenile guilt of old high school parking lots. But at my age, it seemed pathetic.

She refused to go to my house. So we swung the drag tailed couch around on the driveway to face the garage door, away from the street so no one would see us, and crawled onto the lumpy cushions. I flattened myself like a soldier in hiding and lifted her onto me. The sofa springs groaned. As soon as she mounted me, her voice throbbed out in a moan that would jerk and flutter.
Her breathing rattled in small frantic sighs. She was no heavier than a pillow. In a few minutes, she started going, “Umm Umm,” and I knew it would be over soon.

“I Ouch,” she said. “This thing’s jabbing me in the knee.”

I tried to ignore her and keep my concentration.

“Wait,” she said. “My knee’s hurting from this thing.”

“Damn,” I said. “What is it?” Maybe a busted spring was poking her knee, something in the bowels of the couch had risen up to stab her.

She fished between the cushions and pulled out a gun.

It was a revolver with a broken handle, fully loaded, buried in the fold of the couch. “What is a gun doing in your couch?”

“I’m alone in the house a lot,” the girl said. I looked at the gun, and then at the girl, trying to weigh the situation. I did not see the gun when I sat down because it was deep enough out of sight, but for someone who knew where it lay, it was reachable just in case.

“I don’t want a gun going off,” I said.

She took the revolver and calmly laid it on the ground by the couch. “Do you feel safer now?” she said. “Fucking out here on the couch, in front of the whole neighborhood?”

Irritated and impatient, she got off the couch and started gathering up the leftover items on the lawn. The junk from the garage sale had shifted around in the slight wind that had picked up, blowing over a few ragged dresses hanging from a tree, knocking over a table of old leather belts. I looked at the her as she worked, quickly grasping at clothing and things and bunching them into a ball with the urgency of a child about to run away from home. The eerie light of the moon drew shadows on her mysterious face.
The jolt of her harsh remark suddenly sobered me up. What had I gotten myself into? I realized that she could be a psycho. So could her step-dad. And to top it off, she was a minor. One word from her and I could be locked up.

“Look, you’re a very pretty girl,” I said. “I like you and all, but I’m not feeling good right now. My head hurts. What happened here tonight, it’s crazy. I don’t think anyone saw us, or the cops would be here by now. Don’t tell anyone. I really like you. You’re not moving yet, are you? Come to my house and we can do this again. But don’t tell anyone. I have to go now. Come over any time.”

She wasn’t listening. I rose on my shaky legs and ran as fast as I could across the street.

“What about your couch?” I heard her say.

“I’ll pick it up tomorrow,” I said, without looking back.

Inside my house, I turned on the light and saw the cluster of half-empty bottles strewn on the table. I remembered when I had friends, back in college, a party every night. Now, people have been replaced by bottles. In a way, I couldn’t complain. The bottles were warm and friendly, each night the sound of flowing liquor filling me with promise. I asked myself this question: have I always been a drunk? The kick about getting drunk was that if you didn’t like your personality, you could drink yourself silly until you became someone else, a happy, funny character that people (hopefully women) would like. I remembered the vague, blurry smiles people gave me when I got drunk back in college, looking at them through my drink-sodden eyes. I slurred a lot and people laughed. Eventually, the gibberish and slobbering became the point of getting drunk. It made people laugh and I felt a sense of accomplishment.

I sat on my rumpled couch and poured my second Scotch, watching the
light play reflections off the glass. Little jagged splitters like silver sickles, 
hooked and sharp, changing shape as I moved my glass, but always smiling at 
me. They reminded me of the girl next door and her screwy little laugh. 

I was tossing back my drink when I heard a knock at the door. I lurched 
down the hall. 

It was her again. She held the revolver. 

“I forgot to tell you,” she said, smiling, “the gun comes with the couch.” 

She handed it to me. “It’s a great deal,” she said. 

“Yes it is,” I agreed. It occurred to me that all I had to do was hand the 
gun back to her and be done with it. But that loopy smile of hers was playing 
tricks on my mind. I felt my hand tightening on the gun, the broken hilt digging 
into my palm. The girl didn’t move, just stood there smiling at me. It was smiles 
like this that made me feel like the life of the party back in college, and like then, 
I felt both happy from the friendship and sick from the booze. 

I was ready to puke. “Good night,” I said, and I closed the door. 

I wished to get her out of my sight, never to see her again. I changed my 
mind about her couch, too. The first chance I got, I would throw the gun away. It 
was probably stolen. Maybe they used it to hold up liquor stores. Only God 
knew. The gun was a .38 and it was heavy. Hell, I thought, it might have been 
used in a murder. Maybe I was being set up. Yes, the gun had to go. But not 
tonight. I was staying home. My nerves were toast. I settled back on my couch 
and got soused. Then fell asleep. 

Sometime in the night (or was it morning? I didn’t know), I heard a crash 
at the sliding glass door of my room. Somebody had broken into my house. I 
was still dragging myself out of the other world when I saw a huge man lurching 
like a bull in the hall. He was carrying something in both hands, something long
and big. I pushed myself upright on the couch to get a good look at him. My head swirled and my eyes strained to focus on the intruder, a monster of a man, not just for his size, but for the clumsy way in which he lunged through the hall, careening off the walls as if he were drunk. The man turned in the corridor and sighted me.

"You're going to die, asshole!"

I realized he had a baseball bat. I was a safe distance from him, at least ten yards, and yet I was close enough to notice certain traits of this man. He had huge hands, his knuckles turning white as they clenched on the bat. I could tell he was about to attack me and I had little time to think. My eyes were still crusted over as I rose out of the grogginess of sleep. It felt like a dream. Then I saw him swat the wall, the fat of the bat smashing the a/c thermostat into plastic shards. This was no dream. The sound was like an alarm, a jolt back into reality. All I could feel was the drowsiness in my head burning up in flames of panic and, indistinctly, the cartoon strangeness of that big bat as I imagined it heading toward my skull.

That was when everything began to reel. The fumes of last night's liquor seemed to ignite again in my throat. A volcanic wave of acid surged in my guts. I felt like I was drowning in something thick and black. To save myself, I reached for the gun. From a prone position on the couch and without aiming, I fired off several rounds in the general direction of the hall. I was in a movie once where I fired a gun from this same position, so it was easy. Except the broken gun handle was awkward to handle. The sharp metal of the busted end dug into my palm. With the blasts, sharp and deafening, came my awakening.

For months, years maybe, my house had been quiet as crypt, as heavy as a trunk at the bottom of the sea. The silence had drugged me into a kind of
permanent stupor for so long that any noise—anything so much as a ringing
doorbell—would set my nerves on end. It was a kind of harmony, mind-dulling
and monotonous. Dependable as the dawn of a new day.

The man fell dead.

It was like a nightmare. The empty bottle was on the coffee table, the gun
with the broken handle in my hand, the metal frame chewing into my palm. My
eyes were definitely open, I was awake, God help me, it was no dream. I saw
the man lying on the floor in my hall, a pool of blood streaming down his chest.
And as I staggered to my feet I heard a frantic knock at the door. I opened it. It
was the girl from across the street. Her face was battered. One eye swollen
shut, her cheek puffed out. Her lip was bloody. Somebody, probably her step-
father, had beaten her. And I knew why. She told him about what we did last
night.

I said to her, “Why did you do that? Why did you tell you’re step-dad?”
She walked into my house, into the hall where her step-dad lay dead. I joined
her, looking down at him, the smell of gin heavy on his sweaty clothes. I said to
the girl, “What the hell is your name?”

She kept looking at the dead man and said, vacantly, “Belle. My name’s
Belle.”

Her face was again a vague sheet of ice, watching the blood puddling in
my rug, detached and unaffected as if she were watching a gory horror movie.
“Belle,” I said. “You’ve done me in. I think you’ve done me in for good.”

She said nothing. She leaned against the wall and chewed her
fingernails. Her feet were still dirty, garden mud between her toes, and she
looked to me like some white-trash trailer girl who hung out at the 7-11. I didn’t
know what else to say, except, “That’s it, I really did it, I’m done,” as the police
sirens wailed in the distance.

I'm doing five years for second degree murder. The state prosecutor wanted murder in the first, on account that it might have been premeditated since the child's testimony seemed to implicate me as an accomplice. I should never have taken that gun when she handed it to me. I would have had no gun to defend myself, then her step-dad could have smashed my head with the bat and ended all this misery. Belle had reason to want him dead. Evidence during the trial revealed her step-dad had slapped her around a lot, and that morning before I killed him, he had punched her in the face. She didn't say why he punched her, just that he was prone to doing that kind of thing since he was a drunk. But I know why he hit her and came after me with a bat. Belle told him about our night on the couch. He was a jealous bastard and he was a drunk, a bad combination that you wish you would never have to deal with. She knew he would go nuts. Yes, she knew what she was doing.

Belle never once looked at me in court. She had the self-control and serenity of a monk. Someone had talked her into accusing me of child molesting, a charge that they later dropped, to my surprise. When I saw Belle sitting in the front row in what looked like a Catholic school girl uniform, a navy blue sweater and plaid skirt, her sunny blond hair curled and tied in little ringlets, like Shirley Temple, a complete opposite of the dirty-footed, trailer tramp that I knew, I thought I was going to jail for life. If only the jury had seen her on the front lawn, lying on her crumbling couch. Juries, I've come to believe, always give the child the benefit of a doubt. They see them as victims. Belle was no victim. Even in that court, I could tell. Something like ice was in her eyes—the eyes of a girl who could toy with a man. Calculating, patient,
fierce. I've learned to judge people by their eyes. Eyes tell everything. Here, in prison, they look for the weakness in your eyes. If you wear glasses they think you're scared. I look straight ahead, and keep a blank face, so they don't know what to think. I'll be ready when I get out of here. I can stare right through you, can see what's inside, like an x-ray. I know what to look out for. I'll be looking out for people like Brenda and Belle. And when I see those eyes, haunted, fierce, I'll run.
EXILE

Cherish has been hiding for months. Hiding from her maid, her neighbors, even her father's doctor. When her father, Mr. Imler, fell deeper into his coma, Cherish began to fade out of sight. Even at home, her presence is shadowy and dim. She sits in the corner of her room for hours on end, staring at the walls. That is all there is to do. She is here to watch and wait.

Five months ago, her father suffered a massive stroke, and now the Spanish doctors have given him no chance of recovery. Mr. Imler, or what is left of him, lies in bed, a dessicated husk. Mr. Imler is the second man Cherish has lost. She realizes death doesn't get any easier. Mournful condolences become trite. She feels heavy from so much sympathy. She's decided no one has to see her anymore. Really, they've made their point. All she wants to do is hide.

She's thought of moving to higher ground, further into the hills and away from the coven of gossipy Brits. Cherish and her father are the only Americans in this stately settlement of expatriates. In two years, no one has really accepted them. Now, Cherish is the talk of the town. People glance from the corner of their eyes to watch what she will do. Cherish has seen the threatening shadow of future uncertainty lurching toward her. She is thirty-six and a spinster and ready to retreat.

It happened at dinner, during one of their thousand silent meals together. Death catches you on your heels, in the shower, ironing a shirt, putting rinse agent in the dishwasher, and suddenly you're in the grave, or stashed away at

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the rest home riding the slow spiral to hell.

Everyone checks out like this, Cherish later thought.

He had grabbed his neck and then fell on his food, splashing stew over the place mats. Cherish remained calm, knowing the paramedics were slow and every minute wasted on hysterics would multiply their delay. She stayed calm for weeks, months—actually lost in a kind of fog, holding vigil by his hospital bed as he withered to nothing—until the doctors finally gave up and returned him home. Then she let loose. She hid in the bathroom from the nurse and the maid and cried on the floor.

Her father was a department chief at Bell Labs and she was a pampered child. His only child. She fussed over him, fixing his favorite drinks and reading the paper to him when his eyesight went bad. Her reward: Mr. Imler let his daughter share his cigarettes and pills. She had a habit of chasing Valium with sangria. It helped her hide. There were so many things back in America she wanted to forget. Her mother's death from a bad heart. Her husband's death from drugs. Drugs helped her forget. Drinking also helped. So did the ocean. Distance and refuge. Silence and solitude.

Mr. Imler had a good pension but his health plan worked only in the states. He knew this and didn't care. For him, Spain was a dream, a place where you could live with dignity and die with grace. He never talked much about death. When it happens, it happens, he always said. Who would have thought it would take this long to die? Cherish had no income, and now the bills were flooding in. She paid for the hospital with a credit card. She is dipping into what is left of her father's savings to pay for the nurse. The maid will have to go. Soon. Cherish is afraid to confront her. She fears looking into anyone's eyes.
Cherish has no children and she realizes that when her father dies, she will be completely alone. Maybe she will go mad with loneliness, trapped in a room, and nobody will know. Waiting is now a game. She focuses on her chores, helping with her father’s catheter and bed pan, changing the soiled sheets, cleaning the mucus running down his lips, under his pink upturned eyes and flaccid lids. His organs were slowly shutting down.

She talks to him while she rubs the muscles in his neck, dulled and atrophied under the sagging skin. As her hands slide over his face, she memorizes the obstinance of his jaw, the matinee-idol cleft on his chin, so that when he leaves, she will have something to keep. It may be all she’ll have. She doesn’t wash her hands. The scent of medicine and disinfectant on her hands does not bother her. She walks past the nurse and into her room.

There, she looks at her hands and touches them to her face. Sometimes, she sits and talks into her hands, recounting a life and times, visions and vistas. Once, she got into bed and masturbated with the nurse next door. She was barely aware of the nurse. She didn’t care if the nurse walked in and saw her moving under the sheets. Cherish never would have noticed her. Valium helps. It makes the fear melt into the bed sheets as she lies alone among the stoic walls.

The nurse’s face is a wall, heavy as a white plaster slab, hard and smooth and unfeeling. Cherish admires and craves that feeling of numbness. If she were numb, she could block out all the pain. She’d be like the wall. Lately, the walls have become a kind of clothing, like the wide-brimmed bonnet she wears to protect her pretty face from the sun. What she really needs is more Valium, and to wait for the walls to collapse.
She only watches the sea, the varied hues of blue and green and the rhythm of the waves. She observes her face, the immediate world around her, what her hands touch, how to glide through a room as though she were a ghost. Every day before sunrise, she gets into her white BMW and drives through Las Prisas, to the vast darkness that is the sea. Certain dawns, the ocean is timid, cringing; other times, reflective. The waves fill up what is left of her empty heart; they make her feel full.

The ocean reminds Cherish of her dead husband, the days they walked the shore at Zuma and professed their vows. His name was Sam, sun-bronzed and beautiful. Cherish still watches the changing tide for signs of him, hoping that he might rise from the depths of the sea like some mythic god. It wasn't easy finding a good man. Cherish once believed in God, but twelve years ago, God had taken her husband from her like a thief in the night. They both had dabbled in drugs, but Sam was weak and could not shake loose from the drug's ugly teeth. A tide of darkness closed in on him, until one evening, on the shore of Zuma, he took a loaded fix. From then on, every day for Cherish became a flight from death and from God. She gathered her things and traveled the earth, to Portugal, Monaco, never far from the sea's murky scent. Then, when her mother died, she went back home. Death was like a grim shepherd, gathering the stray ones back to what was left of the fold.

Today is her birthday, and this August dawn on the Costa del Sol is swirling with wind. The ocean, too, is alive, and last week, a tourist from Belgium who had paddled too far out had drowned. The Spanish coast has no lifeguard culture. Here, you take your chances when you swim. It is a hungry
sea, Cherish thinks, devious, predatory, and patient.

White caps are forming on the waves, spouting froth and foaming anger as they crash over the shore. The sound hits her like a warning, reminding her how weak and stupidly human she is. The road is empty and she drives slowly near the gravel edge. On her car radio, they say by noon the whipping gusts will gradually relax into another gloriously hot day; sand, surf and sun endlessly streaming over mindless oblivion.

She parks in a beach-front lot and reclines her seat. Her eyes are heavy and her shoulders are stiff. She will listen like a rapt audience to the pounding waves venting all their stress. This is her lesson. She will listen and learn.

The sea is a history of assault, slamming at the edge of civilization until sand and rock are ground down and swallowed whole. It's a vast, black army, boisterous and chaotic, led by a nasty dictator with a bottomless belly. Cherish imagines that if she were a virgin, then the sea would be a rapist. There is nowhere to hide.

She wakes up and finds a sea gull perched on her hood. It flies away when she uprights her seat. Her arm has fallen asleep and there are sweat beads on her face. According to her car clock, it is 8:20 a.m. She has slept over three hours and she is still tired. She wonders if, during her sleep, her father has died. If the bird were in fact her father's spirit taking flight. Probably the maid would run out in the streets of Las Prisas and cry out for help. Cherish wonders if her British neighbors are gazing at her father's corpse. There are worse things to stare at. They could be staring at a living corpse.

Cherish rubs her arm and decides to drive along the coast, now calm and dotted with a few joggers and their dogs. She'll watch the sleeping towns open
their eyes and come alive, full of sun-burnt tourists and happy merchants flooding the streets. It's a change from watching blank walls. She needs to see faces, smiles, sweet elderly couples holding hands.

She has driven for hours, aimlessly circling hotels and bars, down cobblestone streets and paseos de playas. She has stopped for no reason at a fishing cove, an abandoned house, yacht clubs and floating cafes. She dozed off at a horse stable only to be startled by a gypsy at her window palming for coins. Torremolinos, Fuenjirola, Mijas. So many towns that she's lost track of where she is. She parked for a long time in a colorful plaza, watching how the sea beautifully backgrounded the action on the street: stray dogs snuffling garbage, a cabin boy strapping a mattress to a lounge, ice cream vendors opening shop. She realized how little of Spain she's seen.

The forecasters were right—the day is blooming like a Spanish rose. People are in a trance, as though hypnotized by the ethereal sun. People are up early, ambling to the beach to lay towels over lounges, reserving their spots for when they come back with their broods in tow. Cherish looks at the towels. There's nothing distinctive about them, mostly white or fading pastels. Cherish is tired and stiff. She'd love to lie on one of those lounges for a few moments. Moving anywhere takes a mountain of effort, though. And risk. Making eye contact is a risk. Men move on women who walk alone on beaches. They rub up to them, pour words in their ears. Making contact takes risk. She wonders if there is space in her life for risk.

From where she is on the coastal highway, she can almost see Gibraltar.
She has driven most of the day, and by now, all the towns have that same sun-bleached, leathery look. Everything rashed out and chapped. Cresting a hill overlooking a rocky cliff, she finds a bullring with a lot of cars parked nearby. It's a small-time ring, seating for about 1000, for locals and a few bold tourists. The bulls are most likely third-rate, old and slow-eyed chaff for the young novilleros to cut down. Nevertheless, the taquillas are crowded with lines of people waiting for a taste of blood. Cherish thinks of coliseums in ancient Rome and action movies with mass body counts. The Greeks, someone once told her, spoke of theatre being cathartic, and that bullfighting was like a form of blood theatre, artistry and carnage blended together. She imagines unruly forces like the devil and God being purged from a crowd of spectators. She clearly sides with the matador/hero, Cherish thinks. A bull will gore out your heart. Why would anyone cheer for a bull?

She parks under a leaning tree and unbuttons the top of her blouse. Her feet feel swollen inside her high heels and her cramped body needs to be aired out. Insects have smashed into her windshield during her drive. Through the blotted smears on the glass, she watches the crowd filing into the ring.

The odor of sweat drenches the air, leadening the stifling heat. It is the heavy smell of the anxious beasts brooding in their cells. There are no children here, just silent, old peasants and budget travelers she reasons are as lost as she is—wandering the coast, hoping for a thrill, a jolt, anything that will carry them away. They've stopped trying to figure out what it all means, they just want to feel alive. Even the insane show up. An old man scrubs his cankerous scalp with a crust of bread under faucet while he babbles lunacies. Long-haired, dirty paletos stalking the crowd, spitting at anyone's feet. The beggars. The drug addicts. It is a tacky, run-down crowd, the kind never captured on postcards or
travel brochures.

There are women, too. By the railing, overlooking the cliff and the breaking waves. Packs of them. They stand in a cloud of cigarette smoke with one foot on the rail, cool and alert, their cheap summer dresses blowing in the wind.

Probably the groupies, Cherish thinks. I've seen them somewhere. Months ago, before her father...before it happened, at a bullfighter cafe she had drifted into, restless, aching for contact, she had seen them, dancing Sevillanas in high heels, along crowded aisle-ways and between tables lined up with rum and cokes. She couldn't stop looking at their lips. They were full in the way American girls' lips never were. Full of secrets. She hated them. She felt stupid among them. She hated all the dirty knowledge they owned, perversions, taboos, that were hidden like secret rooms behind bookshelves, forever a mystery to her.

Cherish wonders what bullfighter gossip they share with each other and what parts of the men they keep for themselves. Sometimes, alone in her room, Cherish dreams about toreros, godlike and terrible. In some of the scenes, she is cool and in command, leading her matador to the beach at night and making love under the moon. In others, she is a slut, quietly sneaking down to the garage of her father's house to ride her lover until she is spent.

It is a meat market. She wonders if bullfighters slay girls the way they kill bulls, stabbing hard and deep, cutting parts for souvenirs and prizes. Nothing is without pain. There are six bulls and lots of time to kill. Too much time.

This August is full of tail winds and sudden currents that drown. Cherish digs in her purse for Valium, cigarettes, money. Primping in the mirror. Her lips
could use some paint. It is her birthday and the girls out there are young. She swallows a pill and colors her lips, finds a sun bonnet to hide her hair, sun glasses to hide her eyes. When things go properly wavy, she gets out of her car.

She knows it is starting again: the flight, the panic in her guts. She is running from death. She will be forced to sell the house and the beautiful ocean view it has. She took photos of the shore at sunset, at dawn. She will keep those, and her father's poetry books, and his recipe book for drinks she committed to memory from cover to cover. She will take it all and keep it in her head. She'll leave nothing behind, no evidence she was ever here. Nothing. Only a trace of footprints, barely outlined on the sand, frightened and fleeing.

A low tree branch catches her hat and knocks it off. She bends down to get it, feels woozy, and tries to steady herself. The girls look at her and say nothing. She can only hear music from inside the bullring and the sound of waves crashing on the rocks below. Her red dress feels like it is stuck to her body. She wonders what crazy Andaluz could have built this ring on the edge of a cliff, a distraction, really, as if drawing blood on the sand were not dramatic enough.

Excess is not part of her nature, nor her father's, nor was it her husband's. Indeed, she is from boring stock. Very genteel blood, she thinks. At the taquilla, she gives the old woman a few thick coins and ignores the woman's disapproving glare. Cherish is used to being single. Now, she will get used to walking into rings full of sweaty men. She will get used to living cheaply from here on. She won't eat or drink, she will sleep longer hours.

Through shadowy tunnels, Cherish passes by walls on which were hung the frayed announcements of corridas long gone which make the place look...
more decrepit than ever. The smell of piss flirts with her nose. Her plan is to
head for the stands as far back as she can and still have a good look at the
spectacle. She is in luck because her section is only six rows deep, in fact the
whole ring, which seats about 1000, is only three quarters filled with paletos
and peasants sitting in twitchy little clumps, impatient for blood. No chance for
some borracho to hurl a cup-full of piss onto her head. They will do that, she
has heard. Instead of walking to the restroom, they will piss into their cups. She
sees a pocket of space at the back of her section, not far from the toril, a perfect
place to watch the entrance of the bull. She will memorize each bull and watch
it die. Then she will leave, get in her car, and drive the car until it dies. Then
she will lie down and sleep.

The matadors and their cuadrillas have made their entrance and a lazy
four-piece band is chopping through the last notes of the paso doble. It is like a
gaudy parade. It is the blood moment of 5:30, and the horrors of the week are
coming to term. People howl and whistle. The smoke of murder rises off their
pores. She feels invisible now. Absorbed and ingested and ready to float upon
the sullen fumes of the crowd.

The first matador, even to Cherish's amateur eye, is a hack. He has a
cartoon build—long stick legs, stooped shoulders, an ass that is too wide and
flat, and a pinched, whorey face with black hair sticking out of his nose. He
works the bull like a mechanic, like he should be digging ditches on the road,
and after the bull catches and tramples his muleta and the crowd rains down
with jeers, he quickly gives up and goes for the kill—a competent kill, the sword
going in halfway as the bull takes a few steps back and falls over.

Cherish watches the bull dragged out and feels something, a lightness of
some kind in her hands, her face. For the first time, she understands. Death for
the bull is just an incident, part of the ordered ritual. It had to happen at a
certain time, not sooner or later. Anything that takes too long is a bore. It had to
be clean. If not, there was disgrace for the killer in the gold suit. She can
understand this. Death as a ritual certainty. Measured and mandated.

It is at this moment when she sees a man staring at her. Standing on a
ledge overlooking the toril, a tunnel through which the next bull will come
charging out, he is ugly and damned like a creature from hell, and he smiles.
He doesn't have a shirt on and his shoulders are burnt, the skin cracked and
 parched from the breath of the Andalucian sun that melts the earth like a torch.
She wants to watch this man and knows she can. There are five more bulls and
plenty of time.

The crowd was noticeably irritated with the first faena and now lets the
matador hiding behind the barrera know. The girls, the ones from outside, now
prominently displayed up front by the barrera with their mantillas draped over
the wall, are the cruelest. The luckless matador cannot escape the wagging of
their knowledgeable tongues and the sound of their cruel laughter heaving like
dysentery through the ring.

Cherish sticks out like a target in her bright red dress and floppy hat, like
a lost celebrity who has landed in the slums. But this is what she wants—to
break down walls and slide into new worlds, secretly shedding her skin. She
adjusts her dark glasses so she can watch the man undetected.

The man staring at her is the most muscular man she has ever seen. Not
a bodybuilder, just huge and hard, with tattoos crawling up his scarred arms.
She discerns snakes wrapped around women, hooks and daggers dripping
blood down his shoulders. There is a boy nailed to a cross that spans the width
of his chest, which is broad as an ape's. Other scars, sewn up in the half-assed
patchwork of a village surgeon, line his ribs, as though he had been the target of a wicked razor. Cherish looks at her feet, then looks up again, and sees he is still watching her.

She sees his eyes, ebony black and feminine, oval shaped with thick lashes. The rest of his face is mangled from what could have been a bull’s horn. A greyish line like dried bubble gum curves from the edge of his mouth to the top of his ear, as though a horn had hooked into his mouth and ripped out his cheek. His nose is flat and flared, smashed up and broken, and his lips are bulbous, like a sausage that has been partially chewed. He is bald and pockmarked and his ears stand up like pointed spears. More tattoos sprawl on his head but it is difficult to know when the ink ends and the scars begin. His arms and hands are immense, muscular, and his back is crooked. He looks like an animal and he doesn’t make sense to her. Cherish is used to men who look like doctors, men who are civil, predictable, faceless.

He spits, stretches his arms above his head in a sudden reach for the sun and lets his muscles flex, then yawns, scratches his armpit, and grins at her. His two front teeth are chipped. One of his eyebrows is half-singed off. Then he looks down at his crotch and up at her, licking his lips. Cherish is not frightened. She is surprised. She watches him from the top of the sixth row and is entranced, thinking of the same fascination she experienced watching her first pornographic film, for those beginning minutes, until the repetition began to bore her. It’s those beginning minutes when everything is alive, Cherish thinks.

The second bull is in distress, huffing in circles as it chases the cape, wondering why it’s being tormented by a piece of cloth. The new matador is a pagan youth, beautiful and girlish. His clothes fit tightly and show off the classic lines of a beautiful form, ass high, waist tapered into a perfect V. The crowd
falls in love with him and suddenly, Cherish likes the way the boy moves, so
dangerously close to the bull, blood staining his clothes like a badge of honor.
Death should be bloody, Cherish thinks. Death by disease, the way most
people die, bloodless and withered, is nothing but a scam. All pain and
suffering without drama. In America, she only wanted to run. Death was
depressing and dull, but here, in the plaza de toros, death is sublime and
horrible. Cherish loves the extremes. From now on, she will crave only the
extreme.

The heat has made her thirsty, and she goes for a Coke. When she
reaches the bottom of the stairs, he is there. Smiling as though they are friends.
“Tienes pinta de actriz famosa. What, you are movie star, right? He visto
tu coche. You are British, no? You make movies, then you come to the playa
for escape. I see you hiding under that hat. Estas buscando algo, tia. Some
excitement, maybe. A little blood? I will help you find what you want.”

Cherish walks by him. This instinct to run is making her mad. Her feet
never stop. Always on the move. She walks through a dark tunnel that says
Salida but her legs go wobbly.
“¡Qué pasa? ¡Estas endrogada! You look like you’re high on those
movie star drugs. Let me have some. We’ll get high together.”

Cherish steadies herself by the wall. It is dark and her head is spinning
and she can’t breathe.

“Let’s go see the bulls before they die. They let me see them in the
chiqueros whenever I want. The bulls, they like me. I breathe fire into their
ears. I make the cowards brave as lions and the brave ones wild as cobras. I
am their only friend.”
His voice is lush and insistent. He casually drapes his arm around Cherish and supports her through the dark, almost lifting her off the ground. For some reason, she closes her eyes. Then she knows. It is to feel once again the arms of a man around her, to measure and memorize the sensation.

"I've been watching you since you came in. I love your red dress, and that funny hat. Estas sola. I am alone, too. I will stay by your side. You can take your drugs and die on my arm and I will carry you forever. Just close your eyes. Trust me."

His muscles are surprisingly soft, or it is soft skin wrapped around stone, she is not sure. He leads her down into the bowels of the plaza where the air is damp and the footing is difficult in her high heels. She sees a wooden door, which he opens to the sound of rusty hinges, and they walk through.

"You will like this. Girls always like this. I've brought others here. One was an Irish girl. She taught me English and she liked to fuck in front of the bulls. I fucked her in the pens until the bulls got horny. Pero tu eres diferente. You like to be touched, no? You like to feel things. You probably touch yourself when you're alone. I'll let you touch the bulls. They like to be touched by girls. So do I. I want you to touch me. Can you do that, jamona?"

The stench of the bulls has been constant throughout, but now, about to enter the chiqueros, it is something hellish and primal. One last short climb up a wooden stainway and they are on a catwalk. Below, ready for combat, are the last three bulls. They are in a chute, single file, in the order in which they are to die. With steel in their eyes, they gaze at Cherish and flare their nostrils, trying to catch her scent. They are unearthly and unbelievable, poised like chiseled monuments, serene and fearless.

Cherish is leaning on the rail of the catwalk and the man presses behind
her, rubbing is chest and crotch against her. He has an erection.

"I want you very much, te lo juro. You can feel my hard-on and you're still quiet. That's okay. Just let me touch you. Aqui, in front of the bulls."

He wraps his heavy arms around her waist. Cherish feels nothing except a pulsing in her head and a sense that she is falling deeper into a dark hole. She doesn't know why she lets this man touch her or if he plans to rape her or if her father is dead. She is not frightened. She is here to see the bulls.

"You want to go closer, jamona, so you can touch the horns? You want to know how it feels to be so close and still avoid death? Or do you want to stay up here, safe in my arms?"

His hands are huge. One yank and he could rip off her dress, and there's nothing she can do about it. He rises like a tower, his shoulders a foot higher than hers. She can't feel her legs—is she standing, or is he holding her up? She closes her eyes and listens as he whispers in a musical tone, "Feel the snake on my arm. Feel the softness, the tension. El serpiente es un amante. Ves a la cara de la chica. Her mouth is soft and her eyes are closed. She is not in pain. The snake is not crushing her. He is making love to her. She is enraptured."

He takes her hand and places it on his arm. She feels the roughness of tattooed flesh and the bulge of his heavy bicep. He takes his hand away from hers as a taunt. She quietly leaves her hand there.

"Lay back your head. Let it rest on my heart."

A roar from above, then much applause, warm and gracious, and another bull is dead. Cherish has melted into the man's arms. The heel of one shoe is stuck between the wooden planks and will not come out. He has a hand on her right breast and coaxes her nipple. She can feel his erection at the base of her
spine, extravagant and pulsing with the same life as his arm.

She does not know where he will take her, if he will be violent, if he is diseased, if he is a lunatic. She is shaking her brain, she is having a good time, she is feeling young.

"I can keep you here forever if you like. No one will find us. I can put you against the wall, jamona. Or I can take you to the cliffs and dangle you over the rocks. Me da igual."

It is 9:30 and the bulls are all gone. The bile and joy of a thousand peasants has drained into the memory of the plaza and now echoes like a dirty wind in Cherish's head. She has stood in the man's shadow and allowed him to have his way. He has floated obscenities in the air and strung them like pearls around her neck. He has held her like a pet, made her touch his genitals, and touched her vagina through her briefs, rubbing her pubic hair with his rough hands until it hurt. He's licked her brassiere through her red dress until there are wet spots on the front that reek of his breath. He has made her close her eyes most of the day.

They are lying on the rocks along the cliff, listening to the long careless rapture of the crashing waves. He is holding her in his arms. She does not remember climbing down here. She takes another Valium, thinking that soon, she could dive into oblivion. The man lights a cigarette and holds it to her lips. As she smokes through his hand, she smells semen and tobacco and a taste of forbidden fruit that can cure. He speaks to her, and in his voice, she hears chants and dances of ancient tribes, as if she were an offering. She is lucid and calm. She is listening.

"I am your poet for life, mi amor."
He's ugly as a pit bull who has fought one too many fights. She wonders if he is addicted to pain, if, when he's not assaulted by knives or horns or the tattoo needle of an artist, he lacerates himself.

"Mi amor, live with me and I will make a storm for you every night. Always of thunder will echo our names across the watery cavern, and the ocean will wash away your pain."

He brushes his lips across her cheek, then along her ear.

"Te conozco, jamona. Estas sola como una flor en el desierto. I know the source of your hurt. When you let me touch you, when you relaxed into my arms, I knew."

His breath smells of sangria and hashish. Cherish can feel it on the fine hair of her cheek. He touches his lips against hers and she tastes sugar cane, cigarette ash, flames. The wind has picked up, the sea is alive again, and dark night has made him more foreboding than a jagged cliff.

"Stay with me and I'll kill your pain. I'll fuck you so hard and so often the only feeling you'll have is me, the only smell you'll have is me, the only God you'll know is me. I'll keep you wet all day and crying for me all night. I'll be your fantasy drug, the tongue that licks you day and night and never quits. We'll go to crowded bars and you'll rub your pussy against my hand and laugh at the tourists as they watch."

The girls from the plaza are there with their men, dancing and singing on the rocks. Some have disappeared below, or have gone into caves along the face of the cliff. Cherish hears laughter, drunken moans mingled with the roar of the sea.

"I'll teach you how to suck my beautiful hard cock and lick my balls. I'll teach you again and again, hasta que aprendas. I'll save all my come for you,
jamona. I’ll fuck you so much you’ll go mad as a gypsy whore. I’ll stroke your head while you sleep and tease your titties while you dream of me, so you’re wet when you wake up.”

Cherish opens her eyes and looks at the sea. She must look at the sea. It will speak to her. It will explain to her why she is here, who she is, where she will go.

“I’ll fill you so full of fire you’ll be too brave to hide. I’ll make you so drunk on life you’ll take off your clothes and dance in the streets. I’ll display you for the Berbers, sell you as a slave, then steal you back in the night. I’ll carve ivory from bull horns and make you a necklace of ears. I’ll bring out the song inside your ache, show you the notes, until your voice cries out for joy.”

Cherish almost speaks. Then closes her eyes.

“We’ll swim to Morocco and sleep in the dome of a holy mosque. We’ll run with smugglers and drug dealers and hide in the rock of Gibraltar. At night we will lie in tents and travel the landscape of our bodies, lingering long and marveling at the sights. I’ll promise to love you.”

Cherish begins to roll away from him. He becomes rapid. His voice a growl. His chest becomes tight. He squeezes his cock through his pants.

“Look at it! It’s for you. I live in a rotten cavity in the side of a cliff. I steal food and carve poetry in the rocks. I have nothing to lose, no dignity, no pride, no self-esteem, no money, and I need you.”

Cherish watches this man, this warrior bull with a broken nose and girlish eyes, and she knows he is a drug, the spark before the flame, and she is burning. Burning all the noxious waste of her life, burning the memories and vistas of her past, burning on the hollow boat of exile.
"So what do you do, mi amor? You have the nice car and the nice clothes but you are no movie star. Don't worry. I'll make you burn so bright you will be the pin point of light in the sky. Stay here tonight and don't go back. I'm desperate and alone. I'm tired of being alone. A la mierda con la soledad. That's for maricas. I'm not queer. I'll fuck you like a stud."

She hears a cry from the rocks below, a voice suddenly unhinged, bodiless but real, floating through the air in search of someone to haunt.

"Que pasa? Are you mute? Or just insane, trapped in your squalid little cell?"

"My father is dying." Her voice is thin, scarcely a thread of sound, and still, it surprises her. Like a timid girl in the back of the class who has suddenly raised her hand. It's the sound of a spinster, a shrinking woman too long covered in veils from the eyes of men. What is the point of looking for men when so many died and left you alone? In pain. She straightens her dress and rises from the rocks. She drifts away from him, towards the edge of the cliff.

"Forget him. Father's are cruel, merciless tyrants. I bet he fucked you as a little girl because he couldn't get it from his wife. Maybe he's fucking you now. He's still fucking you in the head. I can see it. Look at you. He has a leash around your neck and he's pulling you back. Let me cut the leash. Let me kill him. I'll stab him in the neck. It will be quick. He won't feel a thing. And you'll be free."

Cherish listens to him, her face frozen. It all feels like a game. He is like a child playing in the street.

"I will kill any man who stands between us. A mi no importa. No tengo nada que perder. The only thing I want is you. I can jack off all day long, I can do it for hours. I've suffered enough in this life and I want to be loved. I need a
woman. I need you."

Cherish stands on the edge of the rocks and looks out into the dark. She looks down at the white foam bursting on the rocks. She moves a step further, until her toes dangle over the edge. A wind billows up her dress. It is like a gentle hand lifting her up. It is a friend showing her the way, leading her by the hand. She does not have to look. Enough has been seen. She closes her eyes.

The man bolts up and grabs her arm. She has fallen over the edge, her shins scrapping rock and dirt, but he has her firmly in his grasp. He yanks her up as if she were a rag doll.

"You are insane." She lies crumpled on the ground, rubbing her shoulder. It rings out from the way he pulled her arm. She cannot feel her shins, even though they are scratched and bleeding. He stands over her fallen body, fists clenched, and she wonders if he will hit her. The blurry moonlight silhouettes his huge frame, lumbering on the edge of the cliff like a monster from a folk tale. "You won't kill yourself. This is my cliff."

He sits down by her and doesn't talk for a long time. She looks at his face. It is thoughtful, reflective, staring out at the sea as if in deep conversation with something unseen. "Every year, people jump off this cliff. There's nothing I can do. They are like me. Alone. The loneliness has poisoned them so that they are already dead before they jump. I think about jumping, too. I almost did it after this." He points to the scar on his check. "Every scar makes me uglier. How can anyone live with such ugliness. Ugliness and loneliness. If no one will look inside me, past my face, what is left to do? The only thing that kept me from killing myself was a dream. That someone would see."

He does not look at her. His tone of voice has changed. It was no longer
a growl, infected with a plague of desperate anger, but filled with wise, tired resignation, like an old sage weighing the importance of every word. And yet the words flutter away like birds. She wonders what he could have been, an actor, a poet, with a bit of luck and love. And yet she prefers him as he is, a cartoon ogre more real to her than any man she has ever known.

She finds her car keys and dangles them in her hand: a silent signal. For him. Reluctantly, he leads her up the cliff, lit at intervals by a reclusive moon, clouded and dim. They cling to the remnants of an old scaffolding in order to scale the steepest slope. Cherish notes the crevices full of rats rooting in trash, of colored paint sprayed on the rocks, graffiti art of names and territories marked. The voices on the cliff have long been silenced, as if drowned by the sea.

At the rim of the rocks, he grabs her by the waist and clears her over the rail. She can see her car now, alone in the lot. The man is still following her. She had expected him to grab her by the hair and drag her into a cave. She would have sighed. But he didn’t. He just watched as she got into her BMW and slammed the door shut.

“I want a woman to love me.”
Cherish turns the ignition key.

“I will wait for you.”

Today is her birthday. She checks her lips in the rear view mirror and slowly pulls out of the lot. She will have to find out what town this is.

A week later, her father is dead. Two weeks after that, Cherish has bought two ferry tickets to Tangier. She has cashed in her savings, sold the BMW, put the chalet up for sale, and declared bankruptcy. There is no more
reason to hide. Neighbors still chat about her, and Cherish faces them all in stride. She has flung away her sun bonnet and glasses, and now a tinge of Andalucia's red soil has seeped into her cheeks.

She has bought the other ticket for the man at the ring. If she cannot find him, she will sell it at the docks. She has everything she owns in one bag and a supply of Valium that should last a month or more. It is early morning. She calls a cab and tells the driver to take her to the plaza de toros—the one on the edge of a cliff. He knows where it is.

She finds the old scaffolding and descends, tracing her way past the splattered graffiti and trash dumps, down to where they had lain. He is not there. He said he lived in a rotten cavity in the side of the cliff. She crawls over the rocks, sniffing for an animal scent that might be him. Then she sees it. A black hole at the bottom of the rocks, just above the shoreline. The waves are asleep, barely a ripple, and the sea has flattened into a sheet of glass. She has watched the ocean every day since her father's death and she has promised herself she will watch it in Morocco. It is now her heart's companion.

Cherish considers what will happen in Morocco. That she will wake up with this man, whose voice suckers you like a snake charmer's flute. That it will end. He will walk into the serengeti, wait for another woman, and hunt. She will start swimming in the Mediterranean and not stop. Or maybe not swim at all.

The cave is like he said: a dark cavity in the rocks, with a carpet of trash layering the entrance. She tramples over fish bones, cans of dog food, excrement. The morning sun lights the cavern just enough to see.

There is a blanket with a mass huddled under it at the back of the cave.
She walks over to it and looks down. She kicks it. She doesn’t care. As the bundle moves over, she sees his face covered with blood that has dried. He has been fighting.

They will sleep in Morocco, clean and oiled. She will rub his body in the sun, watch the snake curl around her thumb, the boy on the cross bleeding on her palm. She will absorb his desperation until they are without language and thought.

He opens his eyes and looks at her. He is naked under the blanket. He has lost his clothes. He smiles.
CHAIN LETTERS

Mike crawled out of bed and poured himself a drink. His head still whirled from whatever he had drunk the night before, and his face felt numb and disjointed, as if his features were not in place. His window was open and he could smell the stench from the Humera horse stables.

Man, he thought, after all these years, I still can't shake the smell of shit.

There were days, like today, when he thought that leaving America was a mistake. He should have stayed put and stuck it out. At least in America he could see movies done with the voices of the real actors. He'd gotten very homesick when he read in the local American weekly that disco was in. There was a picture of some kids in platforms and flight suits kicking out in some Vegas club. And why not, he thought? Disco was fun. Best of all, people in the 70's got laid. Good luck trying to bring that spirit back. In the nihilistic 90's, you had a better chance of getting shot.

Mike had his own room, and, best of all, a good imagination. He needed both to get by. Besides a room, he needed a private booth in his mind, the place where he could shut himself in when things got unbearable. Inside this private booth, Mike could peep out at the world. Who was happy these days? None of his friends were. It was definitely a bad time to be young. Well, in another fifty years, it would all be over.

The phone rang. It was his cousin. She sounded rushed and agitated.

"Listen, I'm changing my password and I'm not giving it to you. Do you
understand?"

"Okay."

When she got agitated, she always spoke in Spanish because it was easier to insult him. She said, "Every morning my computer is full of obscene email. It's disgusting! Nothing but cocks and cunts and cum. Who are these people?"

"They're writers. We're honing our craft."

"You are not a writer," she said. "You are a fucking pervert."

"But you sit there and read our stuff..."

"Fuck off! I'm warning you. Don't touch my computer. If you want to be kinky, get your own modem."

She hung up. Mike put the phone down and reached for his drink. Dora boycotting her computer was definitely a setback, so now he couldn't be a cyber-slut. But what did he expect? Dora was a prud. Her starchy corporate life smelled of disinfectant. No way was there room in her life for messy cyber-sex.

Mike walked to the window and looked out. The streets and terrazas were empty, and even the dogs and cats were ducking from the hot sun. Humera was a good place to hide. No one outside of his family and a few business partners had to know what he did. Faceless and invisible, Mike mailed out his chain letters, sat at the window, and prayed the money would come in. Nobody bothered him. Not even the smell of horseshit bothered him.

Mike basically ran a kind of pyramid scheme. They called it a "scam" back in the States, but in his mind, there really was nothing illegal about it. He mailed letters without a return address to one hundred anonymous people. Each letter contained a list of five people along with their addresses. Mike's
name was on the fifth spot. It was an alias—M. Gargallo, in case the authorities
got nosey. The person who received a letter was supposed to immediately
send a thousand peseta bill—a little more than seven dollars, to each one of the
five people on the list. This was payment for services rendered—supplying the
list, which made the system perfectly legal.

Next, the person had to remove the first name at the top of the list, and
move the other four names up one spot. Then he put his name in the fifth
position. One hundred copies of this letter with the person’s name in the fifth
spot were to be printed and mailed to another one hundred recipients. The
person could mail them to his friends, relatives, or he could buy a fresh and
active list from, Chuchi, Mike’s Mexican associate, who lived nearby. Mike
charged 2,000 pesetas for 100 names and 5,000 pesetas for 500 names, and
split the profits with Chuchi.

To get people really interested, Mike laid out his plan in a cover letter, but
lowered the response rate to show the lucrative potential of his scheme. He
projected that most of the people would get maybe 9% response to their
letters. This meant that when you sent out your 100 letters with your name in
the fifth spot, nine people sent you a thousand peseta bill, and in turn sent out
900 letters with you at the number four position. Well, 9% of 900 equaled 81.
Now, 81 people sent you 1000 pesetas, for a total of 81,000—around $630, and
in turn, they sent out 8,100 letters with you in the number three spot. And so on
and so forth. Nine percent of 8,100 equaled 729 people who sent you 1000
pesetas. And now, 72,900 letters went out with you in the number 2 slot. Then,
the big payoff—9% of 72,900 equaled 6,561, and from them, 656,100 letters
were mailed, with you at number 1. If 9% of those respond, you would get
59,049,000 pesetas, or $461,320, before your name was removed from the list.
The truth was that Mike's success rate ran so many peaks and valleys that he had no idea what kind of response he would have each time he did a mailing. He was currently in a slump. The economy in Spain really sucked, and people were unwilling to experiment with their dwindling cash. He hadn't sent out any letters for months, and mostly he made money off the few people who invested in one of his list. Mike had phone books from different cities in Spain that he and Chuchi had traveled to, from which he built his lists. They weren't as current as he had advertised, some, like the book from Burgos, acquired on a drunken all-night road trip, being as old as three years.

Mike poured another glass of Rioja and sat on his bed. He picked up the American weekly and turned the pages to a feature on a mad computer nerd named Kliff Klausen. Kliff lived in Moncloa with his computer. He had a theory that people were in transition.

"We are moving away from each other and into machines," he said. "So far, the machines haven't adapted to us very well, and that's frustrating. Maybe the fault is ours. Human limitations and a lack of megahertz memory space in the human brain means we are far inferior to the average PC. But things are improving. They've made 3-D sensors for body parts so we can meld mind and body with machine. As soon as we program the machines so they are 100% interactive and user-friendly, which, in effect, is like dumbing them down to our stupid limitations, then we can all take leave of each other and become machines."

A new dawn, certainly. And Kliff didn't have too far to go. Kliff had a shiny bald head and coke-bottle glasses. His eyes looked over-cooked. Kliff probably never left his room, where he was happy as a clam. Mike imagined him in a space capsule, plugged into the electronic universe of his computer,
TV, CD player, radio, fax, with all the wires connected to his big, floating head.

Mike fell back in bed and laid the weekly over his eyes. The glare from the sun could drive you mad. In August, half the battle was blocking out the sun. Well, at least he had a bed. When things got tough, you could always go to bed.

His mother walked in. “Who called?”

“Dora.”

“Dora? What? You’re having problems with Dora?” His mother wore a faded yellow blouse and a pair of Mike’s old running shorts. Her bare legs were thin and wrinkled. Her whole body was wrinkled, except for her face, which was smooth and taunt from all the face lifts she had. She looked okay from the front, but her profile, especially her lips and chin, showed signs of all the stretching and pulling of her skin. From the side, her face almost looked like a clay mask.

“No problem at all with Dora,” Mike said. His mother tossed some letters on the bed. The postman had come and gone. Man, he really had over-slept. He sorted through the letters and separated the ones with no return address. Those were the chain letters. There were three of them. He opened them immediately. Each one contained a thousand peseta bill, folded in a blank strip of paper (like an inner envelope), to hide it from the mailman. How much money Mike had lost to the postal workers in the last year he would never know. All he could do was keep his fingers crossed. At least today he had 3,000 pesetas, enough to treat his mother to a good steak.

His mother said, “Mike, what will you do when I die?”

“I’ll have one less mouth to feed.”

“Ridiculous!” she said. “I’m the one who feeds you.”

“And it’s good you’ve found your life’s work.”

“I have nothing to show for it,” she said. “I want grandchildren.”
Mike polished off the Rioja and went into the kitchen.

"Don't give me that blank look," his mother said. "This time I'm serious."

Mike said, "Want to go for steak tonight? My treat..."

"Look, you. Enough is enough! I want grandchildren. You have until the end of the year to get a wife."

Mike opened the cupboard and found what he was looking for. "How about we crack open this nice new bottle of Scotch I bought you?"

"You can't sway me with bribes," she said. "I want you to find a wife. If not, I'm throwing you out."

"What?"

"You heard. At this point I'll take anyone, even the ragged gypsy who sells chupetes on the street. There was a time when I thought you could hold out for someone good. But in your situation, you'll never get a beauty queen. And you're not getting any younger, either..."

"Are you drunk?" Mike asked. His mother tipped a few every day. After one or two drinks, she turned happy. But by the fourth, she got surly, and went on the attack. She aimed her attacks at her son for being childless and a bum.

"I'm not drunk," she said, steadying herself at the door. "It's time we had this talk. You need to shape up."

"And if I don't. If I ignore your desperate threats, like I always do?"

"I said I was serious. I've mentioned my plans to your Tita Nen. And Dora knows, too. All of us are going to put you straight, if it kills us. If you don't get a wife by the end of the year, I'm disowning you. I'm knocking you out of the will and I'm giving my money to Dora..."

"Dora! That's bullshit! You're not giving it to Dora. And you're not throwing me out, either, because you don't have the guts. I'll leave you..."
swear...I'll never see you again. What will you do—all alone?"

Her face began to twitch. She looked like she was going to cry. "I don't want to be alone. I don't want you to be alone, either. What will you do, Mike? I want us to be happy." She wobbled across the room. Her legs seemed to creak. It was all part of her schtick. When she wanted to put an end to an argument, she tried to look pained and wretched, to make him feel guilty. She headed for her recliner and flopped on it like a dolphin breaking water. Period. End of argument.

They went silent for a long time. Mike felt the wind knocked out of him. What kind of pathetic ultimatum was this? And how could she let his aunt Nen and cousin Dora in on it? He poured a double Scotch and stood there, staring at the glass. Meanwhile, his mother kept up the attack by lapsing into a reflective mood. "May is a nice time to set your engagement. Your father, God rest his soul, married me in May. That's what you should do. Get married in May. If she's a pauper, don't worry. I'll pay for the wedding. She'll feel that much more grateful to you. Of course, you'll both live here until we find a bigger place for when the babies come. I want to be near my grandchildren."

Mike leaned over the kitchen counter and peered deeply into his glass, speechless. He never washed his glass. At the bottom, he saw a dark, dirty ring.

"Now," his mother said, "make me a scotch and soda like a good boy."

Mike brought his drink back into the room and shut the door. The phone rang.

"Mike, is that you?"

"Yeah. Who is it?"
"This is Voler. You still live with your mom?"

Voler was one of his mother's old flames. They met in Miami over forty years ago. When she became a widow, Voler saw his chance. He showed up every few years with a bottle of wine and a dozen roses to pledge his undying love. His love never lasted very long, about as long as the roses in the vase. Voler was visiting an old Cuban friend about ten minutes away in Madrid.

Mike suggested that he try the casino in town.

"I don't do that anymore," Voler said. "That part of my life is finished."

Voler was pretty old—maybe late sixties, at best. But even an old guy could start a new life. Mike wanted to believe he had changed. Everyone could live and learn. Mike called his mom and she picked up on the other line. Mike eavesdropped on them, something he loved to do. Her voice went giddy, hitting all the high notes and squealing like a little girl. Mike listened to them talk about Voler's children, all grown, the pretty daughter married to a doctor.

"Can I see you?" he asked.

She gave him directions. "Yes, come over now, if you'd like." Voler said he'd be there in an hour, if that's okay.

When they said goodbye, Mike hung up. Mike remembered Voler's daughter. Really cute. Talked a lot about the Top 40 charts. That's what pretty daughters did—they listened to pop music and married doctors. The doorbell rang. Mike ran out of his room to get the door. His mother had fled into her room, probably to get dressed for old Voler.

"Just a second." Mike opened the door. It was Chuchi, the Mexican. Chuchi was a partner in the chain letter deal. He walked in.

"Chuchi, have you eaten?"

"I just got back from my mom's house in Salamanca." Chuchi was dark
and diminutive, with a handlebar mustache and thick, curly hair. If he wore a sombrero and chapas, he would look like one of those figurines they sold at the rastro.

Mike's mother came out. She wore a Hawaiian mu mu. Underneath, she still had on Mike's old running shorts. She had run to her room when the bell rang to make herself decent. When she saw it was only Chuchi, she began fussing around the place, putting things in order, clearing empty bottles and glasses and stray newspapers. "You boys go away now. I'm expecting a guest."

Mike and Chuchi went to the bar on the courtyard for some tapas, Mike's treat. "I'm not hungry," Chuchi said. "My mother yelled at me all morning. Then she fed me eggs and chorizo."

Mike had a Scotch with his sausage and omelette side dishes, and Chuchi drank a beer and watched him eat.

"Know where I can get a cheap computer with a modem?" Mike asked. "Dora's changing her password. Says I'm a pervert. She should know."

Mike stared at a waitress bending over to wipe a table. She had a tight ass, like a little filly. "I'm so dry from celibacy I could crack," Mike said. "We should pool our money and buy some whores."

"What money?" Chuchi said. "My mom takes a cut for letting me use her on the mailing list. I'm afraid she's skimming me. I have to drive two hours every day to get my mail from her. I'm sure she's holding out. Maybe I'll take her off the list so I don't have to go to Salamanca every day."

Mike drained his scotch. "You think you have problems with your mom. I have four months to find a wife or else I'll be selling boletos on the street."
A mozo from the stables walked in, smelling like he'd been shoveling manure from the stalls all day. He saw Mike and said, "Hey, Mr. Dumpster!"

Mike said, "Oh, shit!"

Mike had sold the stable boy a cover letter and a mailing list for 20,000 pesetas. One of the blurbs on the cover letter was about a woman who had so much money coming in the mail that she left a dumpster by her door so the mailman could dump out the mail. She had quit her job so she could sit by her window and watch the letters (and the money) dumped at her door. Of course, the woman didn't exist. Mike had made her up, the way he had made up all the blurbs. But the stable boy believed it. He expected a dumpster full of thousand peseta bills at his door every day.

"It's August," Mike said to the stable boy. "Madrid is empty—everyone has gone to the beach. They're not interested in business. That's why it's so slow. Be patient. This system is fool proof, but it takes a long time."

"Listen, Mr. Dumpster, I think you're full of shit," the mozo said, and he walked off to the bar.

"Ho, macho! Let's go," Chuchi said, "before he gets drunk and kills you."

They paid their bill and snuck out. Mike felt down, not because the money had failed to stream in for the mozo (it would, if the boy just waited), but because someone had doubted his scheme. He hated when people thought of him as a scam artist. It brought back memories of the States. The great thing about Spain is the people were innocent and enthusiastic. The chain letter had made him and everyone on his list a lot of quick cash. All you had to do was play the game. If everyone who received a chain letter did as Mike had instructed, then everyone would make money. It was a world away from the cynicism of America, where chain letters and quick money schemes met with..."
ridicule and stigma.

Mike and Chuchi stood in the shade of a tree on a sleepy street. It was siesta time. Everyone slept amidst the smell of horses. Two constants in Humera: the smell of the stables and the craving for cash.

On the street, Mike saw a red Renault parked in front of his building. It had an Avis rental patch on the bumper. Probably Voler's car. Mike looked up at the porch and listened for any noise.

Chuchi said, "Do you know that they give out awards for erotic stories? There's one called the Henry Miller Award."

"I've heard of it," Mike said, eyes fixed on the porch.

"I remember a scene in a story," Chuchi said, "about a guy's numpho girlfriend. Boyfriend follows her footprints along a beach. Then he sees another set of footprints merging with hers. He looks up and there they are, his girlfriend, naked and face down, getting fucked from behind. Her hands are gripping fistfuls of towel...I remember that phrase: fistfuls of towel. Boyfriend stood and watched."

The rent-a-car had a shiny paint job. Mike was looking through the car windows, looking for stray rose petals on the seat. "My mom has a thing for this guy. He makes her laugh. He took her once on a cruise, paid for it himself. I was surprised she ever came back."

Chuchi said, "Hey, do you think they're actually doing it?"

"Yup. He's giving it to her. The champagne's popping and foaming up."

"Man, you oughta write that down."

"She walks around in my old running shorts. We get drunk together, pass gas together, gripe about our hemorrhoids—we're like the perfect couple. My only point of contention is she gets laid more than me."
“Oh, macho, you got me going now. I mean, your mom’s what...67? Still,
if she likes to fuck, that’s pretty hot.”

“Everyone loves to fuck. Old and young. Except you and me, we don’t
get nothing. It’s like sex is a far-out idea.”

They leaned against the Renault and looked up at his mother’s porch.
The sun was blazing and his mother’s building provided no shade. It was
Wednesday, 3 p.m.

“You mom really puts out for this guy, huh?”

“I wish I had a video camera,” Mike said.

“You’re outta your head, dude. She’s your mom.”

“She’s blackmailing me. If I don’t get a wife, I’ll lose my inheritance.”

“Come on,” Chuchi said. “Let’s go see a movie. My treat.”

They took Chuchi’s Seat and drove to the Gran Via. But Mike couldn’t
concentrate on the movie. He kept seeing his mom on her back. What a sight
that must be for an old man. He’d have to rip off those old running shorts to get
to her. Do old people bump and grind really hard? Do old women scream
when they come? A video tape on the subject would probably cause a
sensation. In the history of pornography, had there ever been any scenes that
showed old people having sex? Usually it was pretty contrived: old man and
young woman, old woman and young man. That scene with Lawrence Olivier
at 70 fucking the French maid in The Betsy was a whooper. But you never saw
old men doing old women. Maybe Mike could carve out his own niche in the
pantheon of perversion.

Mike kept repeating in his mind: “I am a pervert. I need help. Dora was
right. I need a team of specialists to observe me around the clock.”

The movie he watched was a revival. It was Basic Instinct.
THERAPY

There’s a woman I’m seeing. I drop by her place after sundown, without bothering to call, because I know she never goes out at night. Her sheltered upbringing is the cause of this, and not a fear of the semi-dark roads I drive to meet her, or the transients by the front gate of the motel who pay no attention to me as I walk up to her room. I find her door and press my ear to it. The TV is on. She likes ice skating. I ring the bell and wait.

Prudy Guzman is a Filipina, a quiet little out-patient at the hospital, where we met in the hydro-massage pool. I kept moaning obscenely about how good the jets felt and she kept sinking under the water. Later, in the cafeteria, she told me she felt self-conscious of her body, and so she sank. I told her she had a nice body and she blushed, giggling uncontrollably. She told me in her crudely elemental English that she was here for six weeks. Because she can’t drive, she stays at a nearby motel so she can walk to therapy. Over the short time I’ve known her, I realize that she’s always cloistered in her room, glued to the TV, waiting for any distraction to take her mind off herself. She’s as predictable as a hostage with a gun to her head. Surprisingly, she never complains about it.

I know the routine: stand in front of door so she can see me through the peephole, and then the door flies wide open, a flourish of girlish giggles, touching all around, even a friendly hey-buddy slap on the back, with much
blushing joy on her face. She offers me a lazy lord’s choice of either bed or chair, comically announcing that “chair is good for back...but so is bed.” I would gladly flop on the floor, although it’s littered with shoes, boxes, and People Magazines. There are two beds—His and Hers. I sprawl on the firm, bouncy mattress. She takes a magazine and turns a page.

“Lea Salonga. She win Tony. But she too short. You no like?”

“Cute,” I say, “but no.”

“Nancy Kerrigan. She pretty. Big mouth.”


There’s an ease to our vulgar wits when together in this room. We are making up for lost time, letting crudeness rain on the parched land of our celibacy. I learned the hard way, as I’m sure Prudy has, that unrelenting solitude is not such a damned curse after all. Short of a dull imagination, no one is truly alone. The mind will always work, more than any muscle, stretching and pulling to make room for more imaginings, people, events, perversions. I for one never found erotic value in the pages of glamor magazines, but one invents infinite varieties in the game of foreplay.

“And your arm?” I say, touching the sling.

“Same.” She self-consciously pulls her arm out of the sling to look less like a cripple. To be as attractive as she can. To metamorphose into what she thinks I want.

I tell her to be careful with her arm, a sign of concern that exhilarates her. Inspired, she literally runs—bounding like a deer—to the table, and brings me her latest prescription: a long, orange vile full of pills as big as coat buttons.

“Take half,” she says. “For your back.”

I tell her, “You take half, I take half, and we’ll O.D. together!”

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"No," she objects.

"Yes. I order you!" I stamp my foot like a Third-World dictator. She laughs at me like a little girl and looks at my crotch. She is 46, childless, a semi-recluse, forever in the care of an older, Bible-reading sister. Therapy means six weeks away from sister's dour sermons and moral proclamations. She is happy here, the periodic stints in rehab act as sessions in commonality—sharing her life of pain with total strangers, and even occasional jokes at the expense of the cafeteria food.

"Lie down," she says. With her good arm, she slaps the mattress. "Hard bed good for back. Better than soft bed."

"Affirmative," I say, mechanically mouthing her words like a drugged-out drone. "Hard...is...good. Soft...is...bad."

"Yes," she says, matter-of-factly charging right by my mockery into her counseling ritual. "Also use heating pad. Heating pad relax your back. I get."

She gets. She used to be a nurse who offered care to the sick. Now, she's simply an offering. She gives her crippled body to me as a sacrifice. I allow myself the luxury of being her God. Her faith, like her patience, is undying.

She pulls off my shirt, lays the hot pad on my spine, and softly lowers my head into the pillow. She aims the remote at the TV.

"I look at tape of Olympic ice skating."

Tonya Harding flashes on, crying, her leg up on the judges' stand, pointing at her laces. Prudy makes an ugly face.

"UYYY! Boo hoo hoo!"

"What's wrong?" I say. "You don't like Tonya?"

"She cry baby. She shameless woman."
"What about me?" I say. "I'm shameless, too."

She looks at me, a bit shocked by my admission, and says, "No! You good boy."

"I don't work. Don't want to. Don't care."

"Good!" she says, her face again brightening. "Rich boy don't work. Stay home and be happy."

When she says this, I burn: the ropes in my back clinch, and I have a spiteful urge to leave, to punish her for being so simple, so safe and so nice.

"You're such a provinciana. And that's not a compliment."

She lowers her head and lapses into a ponderous silence, during which I watch her face cramp into knots, and I get a vision of what she might look like in her silver years, when there's no one left to nurse, when she's left with her sister and no relief in sight. But the silence in the room just as suddenly blows by her and she lights on the subject of food. She wants to feed me. Back into her service ritual, she "gets." We sit on the "His" bed—the sacred bed we use only for eating and fucking. The other night, she wanted me to take a nap. I wouldn't dare. She'll sedate me with drugs and when I wake up, she'll have me hooked to a machine, with plastic tubes in my arms and mouth. She'll be holding a scalpel and tweezers, opening my chest and studying my heart and every other pulsing organ. She could wrap my entrails around her little finger.

We're eating Snackwells and cream cheese. With a small knife, she spreads the cheese on the wafers with that provident delicacy of hers and floats it to my mouth. Her hands, so small and airy as pair of falling leaves, never stop. She will never be a nurse again because her shoulder is shot to hell. She can put two fingers into the socket. Her lifetime of caring has come to a halt in this room. I'm her only patient. All that's required is my lethargic presence
and she will quiver and quake.

She serves me a cracker. “Good?”

“I like cream cheese,” I say. “Creamy.”

“I know rich boys like cream cheese. Creamy white, like white-bread, ha!”

When she feeds me the next wafer, I playfully bite her hand. She jerks it back and yips like a puppy. I've stung her bad arm. She casts a whimpering glance at me, toying with my ready sympathies. I take the stricken finger and lay a sweet kiss on it. Sweat glitters on my forehead.

“Hot?”

“A little.”

“I turn on air condition.” She flies. “You want drink?”

“I want to drink you. Like mango cocktail.” It's a signal to her. She giggles and jumps back on the bed. I draw her close to meet my lips. Her eyes close. She sits waiting, praying to herself. Maybe she'll worship at the totem, kneel on the floor and stare at it with a mixture of fear and wonder. Or maybe she'll try to swallow the whole thing. On our first night, she gave me her diagnosis: “Cock too big.” She's too nice, stroking all my delusions. I can die here of encouragement.

Her body is so slight, she falls from her clothes. We roll onto the bed. She says, “Careful with my arm.” My hands explore her. Every lover has her own geography and contour. Prudy is no different. Her sights are minimal, sparse as the flat of a desert. A slow bake. A slow fuck.

“Tickle. I like.” My tongue rims her nipples. She moans, a warm wind on my face. I wiggle off her pants and splay her legs. My fingers mold her frizzy mound, sculpting it, forming the lips into sounds, vowels, consonants,
submissive whispers. She goes, "Uii Uii."

Desire feeds on its own frenzy. I could lose my tongue in her forest of hair. She begs me to water her bush with my spit—make it grow shaggier than it already is. A lone tuff of tumbleweed in the arid desert. I line up my cock with her mouth when she says, "Lately I read sex book. I get."

She gets the book and shows me this passion-killing commentary: "The fluids emitted in a penile ejaculation are in no way harmful to swallow."

"Now I eat." She fastens her thin lips onto the crown of my cock and tries to gorge. Nursing my cock. It's a valiant effort, but she has to break off for air. Her face is stuffed all red and raw. Instead, she teases my balls with her tongue and teeth, flinching me with playful sucker-bites.

She gives so much that I feel I'm cheating her. This is so easy to do, she is too easy to please. It's amazing how someone as kind as Prudy could be alone. She really deserves someone who could appreciate her love, who could give something back. There are things I would like to do for her which would only give her the wrong idea. Any sign of appreciation—a box of chocolates, some roses—would be like an offer of marriage. I will never marry her. I cannot tell her this. The sight of so much pain in her eyes would kill me. Worse than that, she will forget the pain, leap over it with a fit of tireless servitude, feeding me, massaging my back, as if trying to hang a guilt trip on me. She has only one strategy, to enslave me with her servitude. Prudy won't dazzle you with her beauty. But, if you let her, she will drug you with kindness. She's an opium pipe. Smoke her too much and you'll never worry about a thing. She'll cover your eyes and let you sink. She'll wear you down until you're gone, until your head lies forever on her lap.

I'm fading inside her. She won't let me go, scrawny legs anchored
around my waist, begging me to thrust. I feel something in my back, like a chord ripping.

"Hurt?"

"Don't know." She unplugs me and runs like an E.R. nurse to the fridge. She administers a cold pack to my muscle spasm. "Ice 48 hours after injury. Ten minutes on, ten minutes off."

I shake off the ice. I bring her down to her knees and inject my cock into her mouth. Explosion.

"Um," she says, smearing it down her neck. "I like. You take nap?"

My socks are still on. I grab my pants and check my watch, giving her the meaningful signals that she always ignores.

"Massage?" She rolls the rocks in my back as I comb my hair, trying to lure me back to bed, to lull me to sleep forever. Her hands feel good. I feel the love in her fingers, coaxing me to give in, to let go. I finally surrender.

"Medication?"

"Okay."

She pops a pain killer in my mouth, chases it back with juice. When I leave, she gives me literature on pain management, which I am to read before going to bed. She counsels me like a therapist. This is her out-patient service. She runs it smoothly and professionally. The rules are simple: I make regular visits, check in and check out. She gives, I get. It makes her happy. And I always come back. It's convenient. It's close. It's only a ten minute drive.

On the way home, I think about what she will do after her six weeks of therapy is done. I've given her my phone number. She wanted my address, so she can write. I'm debating whether to give it to her. I know she won't just write. She will track me down, show up on my door step with lumpia and chicken
adobo and all kinds of Filipino food—more of her slavish offerings. She'll start cleaning. She'll play house with me, call me "little brother," and we'll practice incest.

When I get home, my car finally breaks down. There is smoke coming out, and I have a major leak in the mainframe. There is an oil spill. I see a trail of black dots, big ugly gobs on the street, and I see where they lead. They lead from Prudy's motel all the way back to my house.