



Cruel
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Published: 1992

Categorie(s):

Tag(s): "young love" "Dangerous Liaisons" "New Jersey" torment

CRUEL

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The soft hum of the air conditioner proved that it really was working, though the atmosphere lay as wet and heavy as the t-shirt on Johnny's back, and both conspired to halt any thought or movement. Not half an hour before he had been asleep, oblivious to the suffocating heat. But now, as the droplets squirmed down his back, he cursed Billy for having roused him, and leaned sluggishly on the end of his cue.

"Wake up, beautiful dreamer," chuckled Billy from the far end of the table where he was feeding another set of quarters into the table. Johnny's eyes winked open, not with hesitation but caution, as if dangers lurked in every corner and might start at a sudden motion. Not much chance of that, not today.

This theory was immediately disproved as the alley screen door whispered open to admit Frenchie, who of course would be the exception to any rule he thought up. As he walked to the far end of the table to break, his mind could feel her unhurried progress across the room to the bar where Bruce stood sweatily eager, his bald head shining with affection for his favorite customer. Sherry and Candy had already been there long before Johnny's own arrival, their teased hair uncharacteristically limp and languid, and they shifted slightly to make room for their commandant, raising the stock objections to the weather.

Her eyes were upon him as Johnny leaned over to make the shot. He shook them off. The crackling snap as the balls split brought a satisfied smile to his lips but it failed to reach his eyes. He straightened up to wipe the sweat from his neck and saw her glance rake him once, twice

and turn back to her companions.

Would it never end? Worse, it seemed to have gone up another ten degrees. He suspected that it was due to Frenchie and drove his thoughts from her in irritation. He elbowed Billy, who was gazing thoughtfully at the three women, a little too sharply and his friend winced with a sharp intake of breath.

"Play," ordered Johnny. Billy grinned ruefully, rubbing his ribcage and sidling around the table, at last returning his attention to the matrix of balls on the green felt. While he watched his friend plan, execute and eventually miss his shot, Johnny gave up all resistance to thoughts of Frenchie and immediately felt her cool radiance wash over him, a temporary relief. But then the heat came again—and with it her smell, her voice, her touch, her power—and it could only be a matter of time before he would pay tribute to that shrine. His feet would drag his unwilling body surely in her direction, that of the irresistible force.

His eyes narrowed once more as he rested upon the stick, resisting the grin that arose as he watched Sherry vainly attempt to repair the heat-damage to her face. Each stroke of the pencil only served to make her look more disheveled. Candy's advice was either useless or malicious and she was dissolving into a cascade of mirth as Sherry's outlines persistently drooped. How could they wear that stuff on their skin in this weather? All to attract us, he thought. Why bother?

Frenchie's face, he knew, would be pure and flawless; but not everyone was blessed with such soft milky skin and big doe-eyes and china-doll lashes. Was it only his dreamy imagination that told him that she would not perspire—or was that "glow"? He remembered his mother's admonition to his much older sisters on cranky days like this: horses sweat, men perspire, but women glow. Yes, Frenchie glowed. He recalled it clearly—at least, as clearly as his suspect memory could dredge up—how she had glowed, how they had glowed together. In winter too.

Johnny felt the ache in his gut that always groped its way up whenever he thought about her for too long. As he leaned across the table to knock the 2 and 6 into the far corner pockets, the bonds of Frenchie's observation looped around him and swayed him toward her. Not yet, no; he would choose the time. She could reel him in, but he would resist as long as he needed to do so. He brushed against Billy on his way around the pool table and experienced the sensation of his strength doubling in the proximity of his friend's anchoring presence. No, it would not be too soon, not till he was ready.

Yet, he would have sworn, it was the very next moment that they were

face to face across one of the damp tables with only the wet air between them, while Billy and Sherry played eight-ball and Candy gravely discussed her rebuilt engine with Bruce, who vainly flapped his white apron in an attempt to send a cool breeze down his soggy collar. Roy Orbison serenaded from the jukebox, barely audible over the late afternoon hum of Highway Nine. Frenchie grinned at him and ran all her fingertips through her wavy hair.

"Hot enough for you, Johnny?"

"Too hot." Her voice washed over him, tinkling and cool as a suddenly revealed brook, out of place in the hot squalor of this city. He drank it in, refreshed. "Think it'll cool off tonight?"

"No. I heard this won't break for another week or so. Hard to take isn't it?" He nodded. Her smile deepened. "Miss me, Johnny?"

He shrugged. What could he say to that; what, that wouldn't make him look foolish. "We fit together real nice, Frenchie. Why'd you want to stir things up?"

She only laughed. "Why not?" It was her turn to shrug. "My mother always said that there was just a meanness in people that has to come out some way or other. Do you believe that?"

"No."

"Well, it was what she always said. I don't know." She looked at him more penetratingly. "Besides, why should you have it so easy? What's so special about you?"

"Nothing." He shifted a bit in his chair. Why did it always have to be like this? Why couldn't it ever be just simple, like the way he felt?

"In the olden days," she continued slyly, "men went on quests. They found holy grails or slayed dragons to win the damsels with the pointy hats." Her eyes gleamed. "Would you slay a dragon for me, Johnny?" she teased. He loved the way his name sounded on her lips, soft as her caress, promising if not inviting. He looked away. Billy was studying Sherry as she leaned to take her shot, punching the cue a little too abruptly and scattering the balls randomly across the felt. And over at the bar Bruce mopped away the perspiration that threatened to rush across his brow to the bridge of his nose while he filled another draft for Candy. "Would you, Johnny? That would probably really impress me, you know. I don't think anybody's ever went on a quest for me."

He rolled his gaze back to her face and savored again its perfection. There was something about a woman like Frenchie, something that lay beyond her beautiful features, lay beyond even her locomotion (he couldn't help it, he always saw her movement as locomotion—like that

old song—because there was that inimitable way she flowed forward, powerful and rolling, that just couldn't be described any other way), and it was this inexplicable quality that let her get away with murder. And here he was rolling over for it again, dog that he was. Still, he did want her back. He could play her game while it suited him. "A quest, huh?"

Was there more than a little triumph in that smile? He was intrigued and she knew it, but she played it deftly. This was no childish teasing but the expert angling of a seasoned pro. His mother had always said that Frenchie was descended straight from Nefertiti, and although he never really understood what she meant and knew that his mother resented her for some unspecified reason, somehow he knew it was just right. Not that she was calculated; unquestionably she was guided by an inner song, cocking her ear now and then to hear the tune clearly, responding intuitively to its counsel. "Maybe. I don't know. There aren't any dragons these days, though there are monsters enough." She glanced fleetingly toward the traffic's rumble, as if the exhaust fumes breathed a fire of their own. His gaze followed hers as it moved over the room, alighting momentarily on the figures of Sherry and Candy as they flipped for the break, Billy calling it in the air from his seat at the bar, cooling his brow with a sweaty beer. Bruce was engrossed now in the Weekly World News, which bore the headline "ELVIS ALIVE — AND MARRIED!" Frenchie smiled. It was a different kind of smile, but one he knew. Her tone became confidential.

"Did I ever tell you? My father told me once that Bruce had been a rival for my mother's affections? Hard to believe now, but I guess he was quite a Romeo in his time. Must have had hair then. Had a De Soto my mother couldn't quite resist. My father had to finally get the red T-Bird to win her, the one she's sitting in, in that picture in the front hall? He said it just broke Bruce's heart and that's why it always looks like '62 in here, and there'll always be old songs on the jukebox."

"And you'll always be his favorite customer."

"I suppose. My mother had red hair, can you believe it? I can hardly believe it myself. My dad says there's just something about a redheaded-woman, that a man just can't say no." She looked with curiosity at him. "You ever felt that?"

"Can't say that I have." He remembered the smooth caress of her blonde waves and could conjure up no passion for a carrot-top.

"You still feel that for me, Johnny?"

"You know it."

"What'll you do for me, Johnny?"

"Name it." Three beads of sweat cascaded down his back and he sat up to press the t-shirt to his skin and soak up the drops.

"I'm going to have to think about it." She looked serious. Against his will he detected stirrings of hope and tried to quash them. Frenchie stared absently at him, her mind turning over the possibilities, looking for just the right quest. "Let's dance."

"Aw, Frenchie..."

"I know you hate to dance. But I love it," and he followed her delicious laughter across to the jukebox, where he automatically punched all the slow songs. It was an old habit; when forced to dance, he tried to limit his participation to holding her as she swayed. That much he could do.

Between his half-closed eyes, he saw Bruce watch them, his look hungry and numb, and Johnny thought back to the story she had told him. He thought about the likelihood of seeing that look on his own face, while Frenchie crooned "Heartbreak Hotel" in his ear, and his arms curled more securely around her waist, though it was still too hot.

After a time she conceded to the heat, and they joined their three friends at the table. Bruce scooted another round across the table top. Frenchie downed half of hers in a quick swallow and sighed with pleasure. Billy held up a limp bill to their host.

Bruce pretended surprise. "What's the occasion?"

"I got a promotion."

"Really? Does that mean someone else has to bring coffee to the foreman?" He left without waiting for a reply, chortling at his own wit. Outside the sky took on its nighttime hues and the steady whine of traffic diminished. Other people were arriving. It was a nightly ritual; all at once their hang-out became a public place. Not that they were strangers—there wasn't one unfamiliar face in the crowd—but the cozy clubhouse privacy evaporated with the first greeting from the door. It was the peculiarity of the shift they worked that released them to freedom in the early afternoon. Other people go home to their families, thought Johnny, but this is where we go. A picture of the rooms he shared with Billy appeared in his mind, and he felt that spark of apprehension, so familiar now, that time was beginning to pick up speed.

Hours passed. Frenchie, Sherry and Candy all danced, occasionally with Billy. Johnny leaned back, dozing, and waited. But it was very late before he could resume the conversation with Frenchie; by then she was in no mood to humor him. "Tomorrow," was her only word. She smiled dreamily as the three of them walked out, as if she already knew his fate

and found much amusement in it. Many other eyes were upon her as she left and a brief, bright flash of ineffectual anger flared and died in his heart. Tomorrow, tomorrow; something less than a promise but enough. It would have to be, for now.

Billy quickly assessed his friend's mood as they shuffled home and tried unsuccessfully to brighten it. Johnny was uninterested in the latest gossip and unresponsive to the usual jokes. Billy was puzzled by Johnny's inner thought process, but that was nothing new. Since first grade he had marveled at the enigmatic mindfulness of this being, whose silence clothed a deeper understanding than his own. He was patient. It would come out. There was no forcing it. A temper, now dormant, lay just behind the quiet and he knew from experience that it was best not to rile it.

A new course struck him. "Want to head out to the shore?" No answer. "Might be cooler out there."

Johnny shook his head. "Too many bugs." Last thing he needed; he had enough to irritate him already. What was Frenchie up to, anyway? They reached their building and in a sudden burst of physical exertion, Johnny sprang for the fire escape above Madame Rosa's window and swung himself up over the edge. Laughing, Billy tried to follow and on the third leap, finally made it, grabbing Johnny's out-thrust hand to vault the final bit of distance. "Let's call it a night."

Billy agreed, "It's a night."

They were all laughing as Sherry tried to follow Billy's trick and balance a glass on her forehead and throw a peanut into it. So far she had broken one glass and sprinkled peanuts all over the floor while Bruce threatened to cut them all off, when at last Frenchie arrived. Johnny had had one eye on the door for the last half-hour in anticipation, wondering what could be keeping her, speculating what she did everyday after work when she didn't come here.

But here she was, looking slightly distracted, though lively enough, and all business.

"How's your father," asked Candy. Johnny heard the slight betrayal of worry in her voice and studied Frenchie even more closely, but she only responded, "Oh, same as ever," with a little snort of annoyance and turned her attention upon him.

"Come here."

He followed her to the window, senses acute, curiosity pricked. He had looked for her at lunch and at the gates at the shift's end, but had to keep his patience till now. The last of his patience evaporated and he could not wait another minute. Fortunately she was in no mood to torture him today. She was almost more eager than he.

"This is the bet," she said brightly, eyes gleaming. "You have to seduce the woman I pick out within a week and provide proof of it. That's it, that's the bet."

"I thought it was going to be a quest."

"It is. Sort of. Slaying a dragon kind of."

"Dragon! No thanks."

"Oh, not literally." She smiled mischievously. "Not up to it?"

"I don't know. Have you already picked someone out?"

"No," she said, hastily turning back to the window, "I'm going to pick out someone right now." Up and down the avenue, he would have sworn later, women swarmed. They were everywhere, walking, driving, shopping, laughing, talking; blondes, brunettes, even a redhead. Frenchie's eyes darted here and there, assessing in a flash the likelihood, the possibilities. He could feel his stomach begin to churn; was he really going to go through with this? And then he heard her—"Ha!"—and knew that she had found what she had been looking for, his dragon, his grail.

"There," she pointed. He followed her slender finger out the window, across the avenue, to the open door of HongChuk's Grocery. There she stood, with what just had to be her sisters, talking excitedly to Mama Hong and waving her arms, heedless of the groceries thrust in her elbows. Her long black curls defied the August sun and seemed to act as abundant shade, cooling what should have been hot. There was something in her movements that sang out exhilaration and embarrassed his moroseness as if it were shiftless melancholy.

"Well?" said Frenchie, an ugly grin on her beautiful lips.

The conversation concluded, the sisters had moved on, slowly south, stopping here to look at a window, there to bob their heads together over something forgotten or disputed. And each time his focus returned now to the black coils round the delicate face, now to the expressive hands. No dragon here—rather, a grail.

"Well?"

He turned back to Frenchie and met her defiant look, as she stood with one hand on her hip and a growing air of triumph. "Define 'seduce'—define 'definite proof'."

She gave a cry of joy. She could not exactly lose in this bet—she only made it more onerous for him to win. "You have to sleep with her."

He cast his eyes back for one last look. She was rounding the corner onto Tenth and the sinking sun grabbed a glint off her shining visage and shot forth a beam of pure light straight to the window where he stood. Or at least so he could have sworn. "I never had a virgin before."

"There's always a first time," giggled Frenchie, overcome with laughter. "Bet?"

"What about proof?"

"That's your department—but it has to be unmistakable." She smiled. "I'm sure you can come up with something....Bet?"

Johnny wondered why he still wanted Frenchie so much and whether it would be as easy as it usually was to get this woman. He looked suspiciously at Frenchie. "Do you know her?"

She shrugged. "I know she's the oldest Beauchamp girl. That's about it."

"Bennett Beauchamp's sister?" That was enough to give him a moment's hesitation. An ugly thought, indeed.

"I don't know, I guess so. Is it a bet or not?"

Still, what the hell? If this was her whim, and all it would take to bring back Frenchie into his life, to bring back the timeless mystery and safe haven of her caresses, then why not? So he said, "Yes." And as their hands met to shake, he glanced at her triumphant features and feared for a moment the uncertain future and could not decide whether he understood what was afoot. His eyes danced along Frenchie's soft curves as they went back to the table to toast the bet, and certainty returned as well. Even when his mind forgot, his skin remembered; he would do it. He would get Frenchie back and that dull ache in the pit of his stomach would fade to nothing, and he would cease to hear the ticking of every clock.

"Sounds like Frenchie's dad isn't hanging on for very long," said Billy later as they closed the bar. Johnny grunted and gestured ambiguously. His mind was on the plan of attack and he was not willing to be distracted. A casual word here and there tonight had revealed only that her name was Valotte, she had several sisters, and that she was her mother's right hand since the death of her father; oh, and the good news too, that Benny was away in the city, working as a carpenter.

Bruce set up a final round and joined the two young men. He was obviously quite pleased to see Johnny and Frenchie being so friendly again after so long, and it put him in an expansive mood. If Johnny had been in a more generous mood himself, he might have recognized the kindly empathy in the older man's face, who saw in him a reflection of his own younger, stronger self and envied—without malice—his prospects.

It was true, what Frenchie had said about Bruce's passion for her mother. But she had painted the picture all wrong. He did not suffer. He might live forever in his glory days, but did not resent the intrusion of the present, nor did he take exception to the constantly arriving future. In fact, he greeted it kindly, served it a drink, and listened to its stories. When the night was through, he swept the floor and washed the tables like a priest in his church on a Saturday night, and climbed the stairs to his home, fed the cat and turned in, to sleep in quiet innocence. No, he did not suffer. And Frenchie herself, who reminded him of the days of his youth was his own personal joy to behold, for the ghost within her face reminded him that he had loved well, if not wisely.

"So," began the old man, "You and Frenchie making up after all this time?"

Johnny shrugged. He was trying to decide how best to approach this woman, this girl. She was apt to be skittish; a good Catholic angel, so far as he could tell. "You know Frenchie, man. She's got her moods."

Bruce nodded sagely. "You have to be careful with a woman like that. She takes a dislike to something and you find yourself in the doghouse without a lawyer. Am I right?" He turned for affirmation to Billy, who obliged him.

"That's for sure. A woman out of my league," he joshed his buddy, elbowing him gently, suspicious of his deep study. Billy worried what Frenchie was up to, knowing Johnny's lost heart and her ruthless one—at least when it came to Johnny—and aware that some kind of challenge had passed between them tonight. When she took her leave tonight, alone (which was unusual in itself, but Sherry had said something then about Frenchie's father), her expression had a certain malicious glee in it, which Johnny met with a hardening smile and a look both defiant and hungrily eager. Together they undoubtedly meant trouble. But he would just have to wait, as usual, until his friend decided to spill his guts. It could be a long wait. "Now Sherry, she's more my speed, if you don't mind a little foolishness. I don't." Bruce laughed and eyed Johnny who did not respond. "Any day now, I think I might just ask Sherry to step out with me. Think she'll go for it?"

At last Johnny popped out of this own thoughts and grinned at Billy. "You've been saying that since I've known you. When's it going to happen? What're you going to say?" Billy did not notice how Johnny's eyes narrowed as he listened to his buddy's spiel.

"Oh, I don't know. I'd probably just say something like 'Sherry, darling, come away with me, and be my love and we'll do everything your heart desires, from here to Las Vegas, to Paris, to wherever —' "

"On your salary?"

"We'll go dutch. Now don't interrupt— 'to Paris, to wherever, and live the life you want to live and make all your dreams come true.' What d'you think?"

Bruce guffawed. "And if she says no?"

"Well... I guess I'll offer to buy her a beer." Johnny grinned, but his mind was already turning over the other side of the coin—what would she want— and realizing that it would take some study.

"You boys best get on home now, its after closing time and you both got jobs—at least today," said Bruce as he shooed them affectionately out the door, locking up behind them, and turning to his closing rituals, before he made the climb to his bed. It had been a good night, a very good night indeed.

The next day, Johnny took a sick day, much to Billy's surprise. "I got something I got to do," was all he said, and Billy went off to the line worried that his friend was getting into something that he would later regret. Not that Johnny had ever been a font of information about his comings and goings; quite the contrary. But there was something different about today, something Billy couldn't quite put his finger on. Something devious and calculated; something for that unfathomable enigma, Frenchie. He never asked what it was that tied those two together—everyone thought they were made for each other. Madame Rosa said they had spent many lifetimes together. Billy blushed as he thought that, knowing what Johnny would say about "Madame Rosa and her bag of tricks." But he often stopped by to see her and ran little errands for the woman, who was fond of this young man and repaid him with advice and consultations. She had read his palm and promised love in the future, but wouldn't say when so that it would be "fresh, unexpected." Maybe it was all hooey—so Johnny always said. But it meant something to Billy, touched some part of his heart with a homely hand and made

him happy. And she was so right about Frenchie and Johnny; she even said it was pride that ripped them apart in every reincarnation, and if that wasn't apparent to them, it was distinctly obvious to everyone else.

But what was it this time? For years they had folded into one another like two halves of a peach, then quarreled, bickered, fought, made up and did it all over again. Not this time; for months now they had not spoken to one another, though each followed the other with well-disguised longing and a barely subdued passion whenever such looks could be hidden. Billy never knew what had happened—he only knew when.

It was just after St. Patrick's day. Not immediately after, but shortly thereafter; Bruce had been trying to get him to drink up the last of the green beer—for the third day in a row. He just couldn't reconcile himself with the idea of throwing anything away. Johnny had refused, Frenchie and the girls too. But Billy, with his perpetually wanting wallet and no company to dissuade him, agreed to assist in polishing it off. He had had too much, way too much, and by the time he'd climbed the stairs to their rooms, he thought his bladder was going to burst and slammed the door open hastily to make a run for it and surprised them both—Johnny red-faced, Frenchie red-eyed—before continued his charge into the bathroom. As he stood there at his task, hand braced against the wall, he worried about the two of them and what it was this time. When he came out, they were gone, Johnny to the shore where he stayed for two days, getting docked for it, but never saying a word about it. He spent several nights sitting in the window to the fire escape, sucking on a High Life and staring at the street. Frenchie and the girls were not to be seen at Bruce's place for two whole weeks, though Billy saw them heading into the Flann O'Brien one night—sacrilege.

In the end, a sort of unofficial truce was called—after all, they couldn't all abandon Bruce—but the patchwork was done slowly, beginning with Billy and Sherry, and helped along by Bruce. Until this week though, Johnny and Frenchie had not spoken, and avoided all contact, though they yearned toward one another in mute agony like separated twins.

Billy tried, unsuccessfully, to worm a little information out of Sherry. Usually there was no trouble doing just that; there was a woman who could talk! But when it came to the fight with Frenchie, mum was the word and there were no two ways about it. He certainly couldn't ask Frenchie herself—he was a mere peon to her—and it was no good trying Candy, who spoke only to Bruce and then only of cars. She was more closed-mouthed than Johnny. Not without good reason; there wasn't a soul around who didn't know the horror story of her step-father, and all

the years and tears before the end of it, when Candy put a stop to her mother's torturer with a cast-iron skillet. She was fourteen. There was a sadness in her bearing that made her beauty both more arresting and more unapproachable, but she stuck to Frenchie, loyal and true. A pair like that, well, it was kind of intimidating, for sure.

Billy was intrigued by and worshipped these three women, though he would have been mortified to have to admit it. Nonetheless he thought about it now and then, when the thoughtful kind of mood was upon him; at the shore, at night, or working the late shift. Maybe it was because he was raised by a woman alone; not that he understood them any better. Women would always be a glorious mystery to him. But he liked their company, in fact preferred it to men's, except for Johnny, and fell in love just about everyday. Not Johnny; he wanted only Frenchie, though he couldn't quite ever get along with her, and had no time for other women. In that way, there was something almost ruthless about them both. Maybe that was part of what was wrong. Who knew?

Johnny waited until Billy had gone muttering off to work, then quickly showered, dressed and even shaved, occasionally losing himself to thought while pondering his reflection. He wasn't entirely certain what he was going to do, but a plan was beginning to form in the far reaches of the back of his mind. He lacked information, so that's what he had to have first—and soon. After all, he only had a week.

He walked out into the morning sunshine and breathed a sigh of relief that the heat had not yet had time to reach the boiling point. No doubt it would, yet again, but while it was still bearable, he would enjoy it. It seemed like forever since he had played hookey from work, except for those two days when he and Frenchie fell apart. And those certainly hadn't been fun; he had wandered in a fog on the shore both days, barely aware of where he was or where was going.

But he didn't want to think about that now. He was going to get Frenchie back. All he had to do was get this girl. If he was smooth enough, it could be done, surely it could, even if she was the proverbial shy virgin, and a Catholic one at that. Not that that necessarily meant anything. After all, Frenchie was a 'good Catholic girl' too, or so she always claimed.

He turned down the avenue past Bruce's, quiet and empty, even the neon signs off. Upstairs, asleep no doubt, was the proprietor. Poor

Bruce—twenty years or more with a broken heart; that's no life to live. Much as Johnny liked him, he had avoided his conversation a lot in the last few months. It was just too close; he kept seeing his own face superimposed on Bruce's, saw himself tending the same bar, with a picture of Frenchie out in back where no one could see the heartache, pumping out the beers and listening to all the conversations in the hope of catching some word of the one he loved. No—it was too much. He was ashamed of his feelings and his evasion of his old friend, but he couldn't force himself to do otherwise.

Soon, it would be different. He turned the corner at 10th and began to look around. He wasn't there yet, but you never knew—she could be out and about even at this time. It was still pretty early. He couldn't believe that he had got used to this hour so quickly. All that talk—the day after graduation, they all said, they would sleep late, that day and every day thereafter. Sleep all day, stay up all night; sure. Just two years later and he awoke at dawn without an alarm clock and rarely stayed up past midnight. It was the kind of thing that he tried not to think about too much; or else he'd think of those Bruce songs where people died piece by piece when they gave up their dreams and stared vacantly at the factory gates.

But he wasn't really like that, he reminded himself. His only dream had always been Frenchie, nothing else. And his dream was about to come back to him. He looked up at the house. It had been red at one time, a rich though fake redwood kind of color. Not that he had ever seen a redwood, but he did know pine when he saw it, so that made the redwood false. It was odd, the contrast of overall shabbiness with spotlessness; the whole house was kind of run down but not for want of trying. Everything that ever broke got fixed, though not replaced; there was a trim little garden of petunias in front and no doubt a vegetable garden around the back, he would have bet good money on it. Clean windows glinted back the morning sun. Crisp sheets flapped loudly on the line that ran out from the back corner. Three bikes of various sizes were leaning very neatly on the front porch. This home was ruled by an iron fist, no doubt about it.

As he stood there, trying to decide which of his vaguely sketched plans to put into action, the question got decided for him.

"Kitty, Lydia, Jane!" The voice had to be hers. "Shake a leg, or you're going to miss your day-camp ride!" He could not see in the windows because of the sun, but through the openings he could hear the sounds of morning rush: the clatter of spoons on bowls, the young girl voices, and

the intermittent yapping of a puppy. A minute later a heavily-dented red station wagon, badly in need of a muffler job, pulled up, beeped twice, and three young kids burst out the front door, jumped off the steps and got in the car. She had caught the screen door before it had a chance to slam, and now waved to the driver from the porch as they pulled away.

Her gaze drifted to him and as it did he continued his walk up toward the porch. "Hi."

"Hello." It was the same voice all right. The long black coils were temporarily constrained by a red bandanna, in sharp contrast to her green cotton dress. Christmas in August, he thought and it added to his smile.

"Is this where Benny Beauchamp lives?"

"Used to. He lives up in the city now. Why you looking for him?" Not suspicious, but certainly cautious; not without good reason—that brother of hers was nothing but trouble, and ugly to boot.

"Well, I heard in a round about way that he might be selling his Mustang and wondered, you know, if he had yet?"

She laughed, but kindly. "Well, you've missed out twice then. He wrapped that car around a cement pylon off the interstate."

"Ouch!"

"He was lucky—couple of broken ribs and a bump on his head. He got a few days off work. Then he took off to find work in the city. For some reason he thought this neighborhood was bad luck."

They both laughed at that and he appreciated the sound of it in her mouth and the ways it echoed across her features. She was indeed beautiful. She was observing him as well.

"Aren't you John Marlowe?" Her voice was shy now.

"Yeah." He tried to guess, wasn't she about two, three years behind him in school?

"I'm Valotte. I bet you don't remember me but I was a sophomore when you were a senior with my brother." And as she said it, he did remember; she had been thin then, asexual—none of the generous curves she now sported—hair wrapped tightly in pigtails. He could never believe that such a pale little figure could be related to that ball-of-fire Bennett. But she had some power of her own, no doubt; he just hadn't noticed it then.

"I remember you."

"You still go out with Frenchie Dupree?"

"Not now." Well, that was true enough.

"Oh."

"Well—"

"Oh, I guess I better get to my chores. You got things to do too, huh? I have to get things done before my mom gets home, she's working double-shift a—"

"I was wondering, if maybe you'd like to hang out with me for a little while?"

"Oh, I have my chores... " But her voice trailed off and it made him hopeful.

"Come on. It's going to be a beautiful day. Not so hot as it's been. What do you say?"

"Oh, I better not," she said, but her eyes were trying to delve deeply enough into his to decipher his intent. It had to be tempting—her summer had probably been filled with many days of 'chores' and of sending the little girls off to day-camp and of wishing she were at the shore, like the others her age, newly freed from the bonds of required education. He was suddenly curious what her dreams were.

"Come on! Let go out to the shore. I bet you haven't been to the shore all summer. Am I right?"

She smiled. "Ooh, that's my weakness, all right." A stray breeze fluttered her curls. It looked like they were straining to be free of their bondage. It headed her into his direction. "Well, I don't know... "

"Come on. You deserve a day off now and then don't you?" He held out his hand. She looked at it as if somehow she knew it was more than just a day at the beach, almost as if she guessed what was there behind his thoughts and what lay ahead. But then that vision evaporated, she grinned broadly and clasped his hand.

"All right! I quit!" In one motion, she pulled off her bandanna and tossed it over the handlebars of the nearest bike. "Just let me lock up."

"Okay. I got to go get my car, it's parked around the corner."

"See you in a minute!" She danced across the porch, letting the door slam behind her. He turned and walked back to the lot behind Bruce's to get the car he shared with Billy. They called it The Gem. It was a '69 Chevy Impala, ugly as sin and just as indestructible. As he backed out of the lot, he waved to Bruce's head which he could see on the second floor, and Bruce raised his hand in return, probably wondering what he was up to, taking off on a work day.

He pulled up at the curb and she ran out again, laughing. "No wonder you're looking for a new car." He grinned back at her and thought, he was really going to enjoy this day.

Frenchie put the kettle on to boil and dully speculated whether she was going to lose her job. Probably not; although Mr. Norton had sighed deeply before giving her the sick day she asked for. She couldn't trust on that soft spot he had for her forever. He was still a foreman first, last and always, as they all knew too well. But more likely than not, something was going to have to give and she couldn't afford to hire someone to come in and look after her father.

Not that he would let anyone do it, either. "All I need is my girl," he would tell her proudly, stretching out his frail hand to grab hers. It was what she hated most.

Her giant of a father had shrunk into a sighing invalid. The strong hands that had thrown her into the sky as a young girl, whirling her onto his shoulders for a ride whenever she thrust her arms up to him. His booming laugh rang out through the house when he came home from work each day, clanging his lunch bucket on the countertop, the lunch he ate high on girders over the city. The man who had won her beautiful mother, fair and square, over Bruce—and despite what he had told her, she knew it had nothing to do with the infamous T-bird. No, it was the bright blue eyes, the voice of gravel and grit, and most of all, those mighty arms. She used to think that he carried the steel beams himself without help from a crane and built the houses single-handed. Even when she realized his mortality, she had not quite gotten over the myth of his strength until now.

When she brought his breakfast—the usual weak tea and oatmeal with a sprinkling of brown sugar—he lay, as always now, on the sofa in the darkened front room. For all the irritation and peevishness his illness brought out in her, she couldn't quite get rid of the guilt she felt for it. He had been okay for so long after all. He held her together after her mom died—literally—holding her hand every night when she went to bed, falling asleep in the chair next to her, still holding her hand when she awoke in the morning. And in most of the seven years since then he had kept the memory of her mother alive and her natural optimism as well.

But in the last year things had begun to change; was it just her growing independence, that now took her more and more often away from this little dovecote house and her devoted father, that left him too much to his own devices, few that they were? He didn't hang out with his buddies at the T-Bird like Johnny's father (who often sent over a round for them "to drink to the old man"), or have them over to play poker on weekends, as she remembered he once used to do. She could

immediately call up the picture of those nights: her mom stirring up a big pot of chili, leaning her red head over her dad's hand to gauge his chances, laughing at the men's jokes, waving away the putrid smoke of Chet Briggs' cigar that he always insisted on bringing, because "that's what poker games were really for."

No, what usually happened during those years was that she came home, with Sherry or Candy or both, or sometimes Johnny and Billy. They'd do their homework, then watch "Gilligan's Island", "The Partridge Family" and "Wild, Wild West" (her favorite). He would sit in the Lazy-Boy, feet up, reading the paper or a Louis L'Amour paperback, seemingly oblivious to their adolescent conversation (though a chance comment now and then betrayed his close attention to their every word). Then she would make dinner for him, proud of her skill as a short-order cook. Later they would do dishes together, trading off washing and wiping, and singing along with Roy Orbison, Jimmy Rodgers, and the Drifters.

Until he fell sick, she never really thought about it. What child would stop to consider whether the world was built for her own special requirements? It was a knowledge learned in pieces, a slowly dawning understanding that grew from accumulated disappointments. But when she shrank back from the vicissitudes of experience, her father was there to peel off the doubt and bolster her self-assurance again.

"Hey, how's my girl?" he whispered, the painfulness of even this effort evident in the lines on his face. When had her father begun to be old? "You know, you didn't need to stay home with me today. I can shift for myself still."

She smiled quietly at him while she snapped open the TV-tray. "You know you shouldn't exert yourself too much. Dr. Polidori said so."

"Oh, forget her. I'm getting stronger now and I'll be up and about soon —" He tried to raise himself to a more suitable position on the pillows.

She fought the urge to scream as she maneuvered the teapot and bowl onto the tray. It was bad enough, without his feeling the need to pretend to her, as if in some absurd way he was still trying to take care of her, though his body was no longer capable of the task. It made her crazy with love and guilt—but mostly it made her want to run away. She looked down on his face as he ate—for her sake—and heard in her mind Roy Orbison singing "Running Scared", and wondered just what she would do when it happened. She couldn't imagine life without him.

With her mom, it had all happened so fast—and she was after all, so

young then—that she had no time to consider how to handle it. Instead she was plunged headlong into grief and surprise, but her daddy was there. But this time...

What about Johnny? It was a question she asked herself often in recent weeks. She loved Johnny; sometimes she felt she was born loving him, like she was born loving her parents. She would never let him know how much he had hurt her, but she did want him back. In part it was just practicality—there was simply no one else for her. Somehow she just knew that too. So it was him or no one. But it was more than that; she wanted him back because she wanted the contact, the tie to the earth. With her father slipping away before her very eyes, she felt herself drifting too, and she thought she might disappear as well if she did not ground herself in the warm reality of Johnny Marlowe.

The only other people she was close to were Candy and Sherry. Sherry was too much of a dreamy cloud, too insubstantial for the link she required. And Candy—well, Candy relied too much on her for that sense of reality. It was just too dangerous to put those bonds on each other. In her mind she saw it always as two walls shifting unstably under the burden of supporting a steel girder. No, it would never be steady enough. Candy was more of a risk than she, and Frenchie worried often what was to become of her, this beautiful young woman blighted by a horrible incident, public scrutiny and the perpetual remembrance of the event. What ever happened to happy families?

"Good oatmeal, Claudine," said her father appreciatively as he made efforts to eat the hot cereal. He had never used her nickname, not once in all these years. Perhaps he suspected its origin. No, more likely he just liked her real name and its association with her mother. "You know, I don't need to be coddled. If you've got the day off, why don't you go to the shore today and enjoy yourself? You need to get out, get a little color. What do you say? Hm?" He really did like her to get out and enjoy herself—at least on good days. But he had woken this morning in such pain that she could not leave him, and though it had subsided since then, she feared leaving him alone in the dark, feared the pain's resurgence and the picture of him lying there in mute agony.

"We'll see," she murmured, and it touched her heart bitterly to enact this role-reversal as she mouthed the parental by-words 'we'll see.' Can I have a bike for Christmas? We'll see. Can we go to the circus on Saturday? We'll see. Will my father feel strong enough for me to go to work tomorrow? We'll see. Frenchie fluffed the pillows behind his head, poured a little more tea, kissed his forehead, and carried the half-

empty bowl back out to the kitchen. She ran hot water in the bowl, staring absently out the window at the fish-shaped thermometer. It really was going to be a nice day—not so hot as the past week had been. Maybe she would actually go out to the shore, though she would have to see if she could borrow the Impala from Johnny and Billy. Closing her eyes, she could nearly feel the sea breezes in her hair and feel the sun's warmth on her skin. It could be just what she needed. She could call Johnny at work—it was nearly break-time.

Frenchie sat down at the kitchen table and flipped through last week's People, one ear attuned to her father's shiftings and sighs. She would wait for him to fall asleep and then she would go. In the meantime she would read about the latest celebrity affairs, and speculate on Johnny's likelihood of success in their bet, or whether he would even go through with it.

Sherry lifted her hand in a wave, hoping it was Billy, but it was Johnny and he did not even see her. The car swept by and left her behind as she continued on her way to the bus stop.

Off to the shore, no doubt. Figures—first decent day in weeks and she had to go to work of course, no, it couldn't fall on Monday, her usual day off. I should play hookey like Johnny, thought Sherry, I really can't bear another day in that cold department store selling magic collagen enhanced creams and lotions to a bunch of wheezing old women, telling them with a straight face that of course it will banish those pesky wrinkles and bring back the first innocent bloom of youth. Oh no she couldn't take it, not another day, but then what else was there to do? She still thought now and then of being a beautician but you know, that was so much studying and getting out of school was what she had been waiting for all those years, except when it finally happened, it wasn't what she thought. Instead of being free, staying up all night and sleeping all day, she suddenly realized that the rest of her life stretched out before her, endlessly, monotonously, and hanging over her head. Sherry knew she wasn't like Frenchie—to whom wonderful and exciting things would happen sooner or later—or like Candy—to whom not-so-wonderful but exciting things had happened—and probably in the whole long course of her existence nothing much would happen to her. She had a vague picture of something happening with Billy - oh, you know, the usual married etc. and happily ever after. But in the last year or so she had been

more and more uncertain about that idea; not that she was any less in love with Billy and his goofy jokes and his cute smile, but something else...

When she looked at Frenchie and Johnny (well, until the trouble recently) she grasped that there was something there that she did not have. Was it passion? Was it true love? Was it destiny? It was hard to be sure. But there was a lack, a space, a hole in her or her life that was full and rounded and beating in the love of her two friends. Even without knowing what it was, Sherry understood that she would not find it with Billy either, because she had never felt a spark of it when they were together though she felt a lot of other pleasurable feelings.

Maybe that was normal though—she never saw any evidence of Frenchie and Johnny's specialness in her parents, or anyone else's for that matter. They all seemed of varying degrees of happiness or contentment or discontent—except for Frenchie's parents. She only remembered Frenchie's mom a little—she recalled more often the picture of her in the red T-Bird and Frenchie's dad's stories about her. For some reason, Sherry always pictured Patsy Cline and Frenchie's mom together for no reason she could fathom, but it was a tie she could not unbind nor even unravel to discover the reason for its existence in the first place.

But her parents, Frenchie's, they had had that kind of "specialness" as she thought of it. Sherry suspected, though she did not share this feeling with her friend, that her father was really pining away for his wife and that even life with Frenchie was not enough to keep him happy for very long. Probably he had just waited for Frenchie to grow up and marry Johnny, and when "the trouble" started (Sherry tended to think of things in quotation marks—it made them more defined), he must have got impatient and tried to bring them back together.

And hadn't it worked? They were talking these last few days, talking and smiling even. She could almost picture Mr. Dupree dying with a smile on his face, happy that his Frenchie had Johnny and that he was with his wife again. Sherry just knew there was a heaven, the way she just knew that Frenchie's and Johnny's lives were more important—no, not more important, but more special than hers, or even most people's. She never resented it, oh no, what would be the point? It wouldn't make her any different than who she was, would it? And she liked who she was, she was all right. But she knew, if no one else did, that there were special people and then there were "just plain folk" as her father always said, just like there were movie stars and then there were the people in the audience. That's just the way it was.

She hoped Mr. Dupree would die soon, he seemed so unhappy. Sherry knew that Frenchie would be happy once she settled with Johnny, if she could just not be so stubborn. They were made for each other and the sooner she owned up to that fact, the sooner everyone would be relieved. She had seen the grin on Billy's face last night as Johnny and Frenchie stood together at Bruce's window talking, their heads now close together, now looking out the window. What did they talk about? She wondered. Frenchie had looked out the window a lot. Probably shy of meeting that gaze. Cool, very cool; there was something of James Dean and Elvis in that look—why, Sherry puzzled, were the Fifties always the epitomé of cool—and it made her stammer and blush even more than she usually did, she could hardly ever talk to Johnny unless it was in the middle of some fun they were all having and she didn't stop to think but only laughed and talked without a thought. But cool—that was Johnny all over. She recalled in high school how much she had basked in the reflected cool of those two, how much she still did, but it was less important now. It mattered over everything back then. And she was even more timid around Johnny then, too. The only person Sherry was more frightened of was Benny Beauchamp, who one day picked her up, threw her over his shoulder and ran with her down the hall, whooping like a wild man. She could still feel a pang of the terror that had enveloped her that day; everyone knew that Benny had knifed one of the teacher's and he was only allowed in school because his poor mother had seven children and no husband and couldn't very well take care of her wild son too.

Well, maybe he hadn't really knifed a teacher—after all so many people believed that Candy had killed her step-father with a cast-iron skillet when she had only cracked his skull open. People that evil didn't die so easily, Sherry knew, or they wouldn't all be walking around starting wars and kidnapping children. And poor Candy—after that, how people talked, and worst of all, her mother blaming her for driving her husband away, even after all the years of threatening to kill him herself. No wonder she never said much, Candy that is, not her mother; her mother still talked non-stop, mostly criticizing every little thing that Candy did, so it was no wonder that she ducked out all the time, sometimes coming down to the store to amuse Sherry with her shrewd if vicious comments on the passing customers. Sometimes she just wandered around, sometimes all the way out to the shore or in to the city. She used to hang around with Frenchie after they graduated, but since Frenchie went to work that wasn't possible, although for a brief

time Candy had worked there too. But one day that mean old foreman, Mr. Norton, had chided her about some imagined short-coming and Candy had turned and walked out. She just did not care what anyone thought about what she did. Sherry guessed that maybe that was the good thing about all that mess.

Sitting down next to an older woman who seemed to float in a cloud of Tabú, Sherry suddenly remembered that there had been someone else in the car with Johnny, and that it was not a blonde head, but a dark one. Maybe it was his mother and he had to stay home to take her on some errand. Oh no! She had forgotten her mother's prescription to take to the pharmacy. Now was she going to hear about it... .

"Did you really enjoy yourself?" asked Johnny as they pulled up chairs to one of the umbrella-covered table outside the A&W with a tray loaded down with burgers, fries, onion-rings and shakes. It was a little late for lunch and they had the whole patio to themselves.

"Oh, yes! Thanks so much for bringing me." Val, as she had asked him to call her, laughed deeply and joyfully, "I didn't realize how much I've been cooped up this summer. But with Jane and the twins only going to day camp, and Lizzie in summer school—she failed home ec, can you believe it—and Mary baby-sitting for the O'Riordans most of the time, well, somebody had to be home to hold down the fort, and it was usually me."

"You really do a lot."

She waved it away. "I just do what's got to be done. It's that way in most families our size—even with two parents, I guess. And it's so hard for Mom, what with usually working overtime or an extra shift, we all really chip in and work together to keep things going. I don't know how we'd really get it done otherwise." She looked at Johnny curiously. "Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"I have two sisters, but they're a lot older, so in a lot of ways it was like being an only child."

"That must be a real luxury—or else real lonely." Johnny shrugged. "I love my family, even when they get on my nerves. It's hard to imagine life without them. I guess that's why I'm still there."

Johnny sensed a little wavering hesitation in her last words. "But if you left, what would you do?"

Val twirled an onion-ring on the end of her finger and smiled. "Oh, I

don't know... "

"I bet you do."

"Well," she looked at him appraisingly, not without a little apprehension, but with the pleasant weight of the day tipping the scales in his favor. "You might find it hard to believe... "

"What?"

Her eyes sparkled and the day seemed suddenly to be even brighter. "I'm going to be an actor!"

"That's nice," he smiled.

"No!" She hit his arm lightly. "It's not nice—I mean a real actor, not a movie star type of actor."

"Oh, a stage actor."

"Yes, a stage actor." She laughed again; he liked it. "You got something to say about that?"

"No, no. I guess a lot of people want to be actors, though."

"Yes, but too many do it because they want to be famous. I want to be good at it. It's what I want more than anything."

It was his turn to smile. "More than you want to be with your family?"

She sighed. "Yes, but it's not so easy. I know that once I leave, I probably won't see a lot of them. I'll be in the city and they can't get there so often, especially Mom, and I'll probably be spending my time waiting in line for auditions or just waiting tables."

"True enough."

"Thanks for the encouragement!"

"Well, at least you seem aware of the realities of that kind of life."

"Oh yeah. It's hard—but it can be so worth it! There's something that happens when it's just right, it's like nothing else, like suddenly everything is one and it just flows." Val looked suddenly embarrassed. "You probably think all this is pretty silly."

"No, not at all."

"Are you harboring a secret wish to be an actor too?"

They both laughed at that. "I might make a good piece of furniture for the stage, but that's about it. No, I just meant that people are interesting when they talk about what they like. Like my dad, I swear the only time he comes to life is when he talks about the Raiders."

"A big fan?"

"No! He hates them, but he really hates them with a passion, but hating the Raiders is so important to him that it brings him back from the dead."

"Everyone has to have a passion."

"Or else they die."

"Oh, I think everybody has a passion, but some people let them kind of get away. It's not the passion they lose, it's the hope of attaining it."

"I suppose."

"What about you?"

"What about me?"

"Well—what's your passion."

He considered. He certainly couldn't say it was Frenchie. But he had the sudden feeling that if he didn't have one she would part his every last hair to find one. "Oh, I don't know."

"Come on, confess. I did!"

"Ah, you good Catholic girls."

"I'm not that good."

"I think you are."

"Very nice, but you didn't answer my question."

"Maybe it's you."

"Only maybe?"

"You know how it is—saw you in the school play, fell in love, worked up the courage to talk to you —"

"Two years later!"

"I was always a little slow for my age."

"Oh sure. What was the play?"

"Charlie's Aunt."

She pressed an imaginary buzzer. "Wrong. Try again."

"Hmmm, Our Town?"

"No! Guys and Dolls."

"Did you play a guy or a doll?"

"Very funny. I had the female lead, she was a Salvation Army woman." She drew up her lips in spinsterish primness. "I sang too."

"Do you tap dance?"

"As a matter of fact I do! We all do. My mom worked as a dance instructor for a long time when dad was still alive. She taught us all. And Dad—she said he was the real Waltz King."

"She sounds like a really terrific mom."

Val nodded and said, "She is." She looked down at her watch and gasped. "And I better shake a leg if I'm going to beat her home and the kids too. Do you mind?"

"No, ma'am. The chariot awaits."

"You goof."

Candy sat in the deliberate darkness of her room in the attic and listened to the scraps of fight that rose up even to these rafters. Always the same argument; only the cast rotated, a different co-star now and then, maybe every few months. But the happy opening always ended and the fights began again because there was never enough money, where did it go, you spent it, no you did, no I didn't, you never gave it to me, and around and around and around. Then it would either get worse—and she would be ready for that—or they would get a new co-star. And the whole thing would begin again.

This time, it would not get too bad; she was beginning to be able to gauge them with accuracy. She knew that this one did not have enough fight in him. He did not go at with the same passion as her mother did. Of course, they never got too out of hand anymore. Once was enough. They both knew that. It never got that bad again. And whenever it heated up too much, Candy would appear and her mother immediately cooled it and told him to hit the road, and something in the looks on their faces usually convinced the guy to do it, even if he was in the staggering stage, because they all drank.

Candy wouldn't have minded all the stares at school and the pitying looks of the neighbors and the tactful nonchalance of her friends, if only something had really changed. But it seemed that they had only exchanged one big evil for a series of smaller ones. And her mother still drank, fought, fell down, cried, and had to be dragged or carried to bed; that had not changed from the time she could first remember. It was for that reason that Candy did not drink more than her usual two beers—and only those two because it was easier than explaining why she did not like to drink.

The arguing tones from below ebbed again. They would rumble up again shortly, but this was to be no brouhaha. It was safe to go. She jumped up on the bed and bounced for the skylight, missed, cursed her mother for being short and bearing short children, bounced again, higher, grabbed the ledge, chinned herself, reached out and pulled herself up and out with snake-like shimmies. Candy stood up and swung her gaze around the house. Not too much to see—a sleepy August afternoon, still early enough for post-lunch siestas—or other afternoon naps. The shades were pulled down in the Norton's bedroom, which usually meant that the lady of the house had had groceries delivered and Chuck Hong, Jr. was getting his usual tip.

Candy walked gingerly to the edge of the roof and dropped over the ledge to the rope fire escape ladder. She climbed silently down to the window of their lodger, old Mr. McGowan, and paused. It was perfectly quiet. She leaned over toward the window and peeked beneath the blind and started back.

He sat there, at least seventy years or so old, naked as the day he was born. Just sitting.

Candy shook her head and continued the climb down, jumping the last three yards. People were strange, that was about the long and short of it. Of course maybe he was just hot, though truth to tell, it wasn't nearly so hot today, not at all like the heat of the last two weeks. Oh well, not that it mattered much.

Where to? Good question. She sidled past the open windows where it was still round three ("You don't care about me —" "I do, baby, I do —" "You only care about yourself—yourself and my booze —" "No, baby, that's not it —") and walked down the street towards the T-Bird, though she wasn't ready to go there—not this early. Though she liked Bruce a lot (he was practically the only person apart from Frenchie that she could relax and talk to) she somehow still found it intimidating to go in alone and speak with him, even though she was sure he wouldn't mind. Still...

She wanted to go see Frenchie, but Sherry had called earlier to say that Frenchie was taking a sick day which meant that her father was having a painful time of it and perhaps it would be best not to disturb her. It was hard; she really needed to see her, but she respected the privacy.

Besides, she felt guilty. Candy thrust her hands down into her pockets and forced herself to admit that she was waiting for Frenchie's father to die. Not to get him out of his pain; nor to get Frenchie out of hers; but to get Candy out of her own because she could not stand very much more of it. She was afraid to tell Frenchie yet—who anyway had too much on her mind to bother about this. But surely she would let her move in there, if only for a little while. And Frenchie would need someone after her father died; they were so close—it would be like losing part of her own, like when his wife died. Candy remembered better than any of them because it was about that time that she began to notice everything.

She remembered the funeral and the reception, and the broken way Frenchie and her father had both looked, like a piece of each of them had been forcibly ripped away. And the people there handing them food and flowers and kissing them and saying what a tragedy it had been, tsk-ing about the beauty lost and the sudden unexplainableness of it and god's plan and behind all the mooing and warbling Candy heard the

truth: a kind of righteous satisfaction in so many of the voices that seemed to say "How dare she anyway be so beautiful and free and happy? How dare he have her? How dare they both have a beautiful daughter and love and something more than we'll ever have?" And from that day she knew that she'd have to protect her friend because people resent what they cannot attain and hate what is set apart.

But even then, there had been Johnny. And she could not protect Frenchie from him, because she wanted him and Frenchie generally got what she wanted. What she was most afraid of was that right after her father died, Frenchie would go with Johnnie and she would be left alone again. She did not trust Johnnie. No surprise there—given her experience, she felt justified in her customary, sweeping mistrust of humans in general, and of Johnny in particular.

Was it just that hooded, snakish look he always had, that kept his thoughts and motives in the dark? Candy was used to open if ugly fights and did not trust closed-mouthness. She recalled the storm-gathering silence of her step-father just before he sprang at her mother, grabbed her neck, and started rapping her skull against the oak kitchen table. From the corner where she had been cowering during the shouting and screaming, Candy hurled forth with a roar out-sizing her small frame, grabbed the skillet of cold potatoes and struck his head with a glancing blow. He spun across the room, releasing her mother who slumped over the table, then fell to the floor, bleeding profusely. Candy knew, when she raised the skillet again, that she was going to kill him and it just felt like a white heat in her brain, there could not be anything wrong with it.

But her mother had whispered, "No!" She had paused, the heavy skillet beginning to weigh on her wrists. "No!" her other repeated, coughing and spitting to clear her throat. With a cry, Candy dropped the skillet and ran to her mother. They sat together and rocked and sobbed, and he lay there still but breathing, and finally her mother clawed her way up and called "911" on the kitchen phone. There were hideous bruises around her neck, her face was pinched and old. And they came and took him away, the attendants looking anxiously at her mother's injuries, but she waved them away, arms still around her daughter, who was drifting into a catatonia.

They slept that night together in her mother's bed, her mother drinking only little, lying there silently by her side, occasionally reaching over to brush a lock of hair from Candy's face.

But the next day the complications came—going down to the police

station and filling out the papers, making statements, seeing the people gathering outside, including the local news station. Candy did not leave the house. Each time her mother returned the lines in her forehead carved more deeply, and her hands shook more before the first drink, and she looked with growing resentment upon her daughter.

And soon the recriminations began, the drunken sing-song litany of transgressions that were Candy's fault: the unwanted attention, the presence of the police and the neighbors, the absence of her husband, now she'd never get another man... It was more than she could stand, and so Candy lay on her bed, hoping she might disappear or fly away, listening to the rise and fall of her mother's voice, the occasional smash of glass. Now and then the door would fly open and her mother would appear, tear-stained, half-dressed, roaring incoherently, and Candy would stifle the rising gorge of disgust, turn to the wall, and vainly try to plunge her fingers in her ears.

Then one day slammed open, but it was not her mother, it was Frenchie and Sherry, and she was so glad to see them that she cried, embarrassed, but could not find her voice to croak a greeting. Frenchie rooted through her drawers while Sherry dug into her closet for her school bag, and they stuffed it full of underwear and socks, then gently lifted her up and, supporting her between their shoulders, walked swiftly down the stairs, out the door and down the street, oblivious to the stares of idlers, all the way to Frenchie's bedroom, where Candy slept dead to the world for a whole day. And the next day she went back to school, glaring at those who dared stare, comforted by Sherry's nonsense and Frenchie's quiet authority. One day her mother simply appeared and she went home, though things were fairly restrained for a time; Candy was certain from that instant that the next time she left, she would not come back.

So when Frenchie broke it off with Johnny a few months back, Candy inwardly cheered though she knew her friend was suffering, and hoped that it was finally over. And until the past couple of days, she had begun to believe that it was. But now —

She knew that she was overly attached to Frenchie. Perhaps it was really just jealousy of Johnny that made her this way. Candy had tried to imagine once what it would be like to kiss Frenchie, and she thought it would be nice, but it didn't raise any particular passionate feeling. She knew she didn't want a man, but maybe she just couldn't love anybody. Maybe she was simply not a lover of anything. She just really wanted everything to go away. She wanted to stay with Frenchie because Frenchie was the most real thing in her life and she felt sometimes that

she was slipping away from the world, and did not know what to do about it except to cling to Frenchie.

Candy had reached their house without realizing her feet were going in that direction. She stood on the porch and considered whether she should ring the doorbell, but instead leaned over to peek in the window, saw Frenchie's dad asleep on the sofa, hopped off the porch and trotted around to the back. She looked through the white curtains of the kitchen window to see Frenchie asleep too, head cradled in the crook of her arm, cheek resting on the glossy page of a magazine. She stared at her friend for a moment without realizing that she held her breath, then began tapping lightly on the window.

Frenchie awoke to the knowledge that her cheek was sticking to the article on Prince Charles she had been reading when she dozed off. And there was a tapping at the window. She smiled at Candy and crossed the room to unlatch the back door.

"Oh, I can't believe I fell asleep! What time is it?"

"Three fifteen. When did you fall asleep?"

Frenchie laughed. "About eight. Oh boy, this has been a wasted day."

"Well, you must have needed the rest."

Frenchie looked at the bags under her friend's eye and thought the same thing, but said nothing about it. Their voices were low, so as not to awake her father. She knew that if he had stirred she would have woken up, but she went in noiselessly to check on him and remove the cold tea things.

She and Candy sat quietly around the kitchen table, caught in the limbo of a late summer afternoon. Not enough time had passed for August to lose that last-chance feeling of having school just around the corner. They felt like they should do something to make use of the day, but a lethargy had set in.

"So what's the deal with you and Johnny," Candy finally asked.

Frenchie smiled. "A bet."

"What kind of bet?"

"Need not concern yourself," said Frenchie and smiled again.

Johnny backed the Impala into its accustomed spot and turned off the

engine. He tossed the keys idly up and down as he walked back to their rooms, thinking back over the day.

He had actually been taken by surprise when they pulled up at her house and she leaned over quickly and kissed him on the side of his mouth and uttered a breathless "Thanks!", hopped out of the car and poked her head back through the open window.

"I really enjoyed it! Thanks John."

He swallowed the dumb look that he knew was on his face and managed to say, "Come out with me again tonight."

Val laughed. "I've got way too much to do. We have laundry to finish, and I haven't even started dinner."

"Tomorrow."

"Uh-uh. Brownie troop meeting at our house."

"Come on. Give me a break. Say yes."

"Well, Friday, maybe —"

"Yes."

"Okay," she grinned. "There's something about you John Marlowe that makes it hard for me to say 'no'."

Who's seducing whom, thought Johnny. "Pick you up at eight?"

"Sure, I'll be here. Just watch that you don't end up with a careful of my little sisters, if they all decide to fall in love with you, too."

"Does that mean you're falling for me?"

"Thinking about it," she laughed and turned away, walking swiftly and smoothly up to the porch, across it and in through the door, where she turned briefly to wave before letting the screen slam behind her.

So he had driven back here, puzzled now by the pleasurable day and the notion that he might enjoy the company of a woman other than Frenchie and wondering whether she had anticipated that chance. And if she had, what she expected to happen—was Frenchie confident that she would triumph in any challenge for his heart? Or was it her way of getting rid of him? He felt the blood rush to his face. All he knew was that she wanted to teach him a lesson of some kind, and if somehow he could bring to mind just what it was that she had said that bad night, he might know what it was.

But it did not come back to him, the desperate lies he told because he thought that's what she wanted to hear and when re figured out that she didn't it was too late. He had been all at sea anyway, because he couldn't really understand what had upset her, just understood that in a flash she slipped away from his touch, and made him fear for the first time that he did not really have her, though he imagined her always as knotted

securely to his side. She was not only upset, but angry—and to this day he did not know why.

Johnny brought his key up to the door, but with his touch it swung slowly open and he drew back. Then he saw Nicky the Priest sitting on the sagging sofa and he relaxed a little.

"Johnny," he called as if it were his home.

"Nicky," he answered and seated himself at the table in the middle of the room.

"I see you and Billy have really done a lot with the ambiance here."

"We like it."

"Enough small-talk; I came to tell you something." He didn't seem to be in a hurry to divulge his message. Nicky was looking quizzically at Johnny, while he studied Nicky himself through half-closed lids, and worried what the visit might mean. It could be almost anything. Nicky was not especially dangerous himself, but he had no objection to running errands for some nefarious individuals. Wrapped in his infamous "Coat of One Color" as Candy always described the shabby green army-issue, he look like a loose assemblage of malevolent interests of no particular creed, his bony legs thrust out, black snakeskin boots crossed at the ankle. "You don't have to worry about Bennett Beauchamp."

He didn't wonder how he knew, but he was wary nonetheless. Nothing came for free from Nicky, and anyway he dreaded mixing up someone like Val in the company of this character. "Why's that?"

"He went of to L.A. with a couple of friends—or at least they were heading in that direction. I wouldn't be surprised though if they got stopped by some cracker sheriff in Arkansas and ended up 'workin' on the chain gang', like Lee Dorsey sang. Remember that song?"

"No."

"Well, I think that's the one. So don't you worry none about Benny old boy, he won't be back too soon. You go ahead and bust that cherry of a sister of his."

Johnny quelled the wave of anger he felt and said nothing.

"That is what you're hunting up these days, isn't it?"

Johnny shrugged and stared stonily back.

"Well, I was just checking. See you know, I got this friend who has been interested in Frenchie for some time, but being too much of a gentleman, he's never made his move. But with you out of the picture, well, I'm sure he's going to move right in." He looked questioningly at Johnny, who, relieved now that he knew the point of this excursion, stretched back in his chair and yawned.

"Well, Nicky, you know Frenchie always goes her own way, same as always."

Nicky chortled. "Yeah," he said, scratching his pockmarked chin, "Ain't no man ever told that woman to tow the line. That's partly the problem, I suspect. But maybe that time's coming soon." He smiled at Johnny who got a quick picture in his mind of the things that crawl on the dark side of big rocks. "Yes, that time is at hand, I do believe."

"Don't underestimate the power of that woman," said Johnny as casually as possible. No, he did not worry about Frenchie, she could take care of herself and probably half the earth's population too, but he was insulted that this slug had the gall to even mention her name.

Nicky leaned forward with unmistakable menace. "Everyone's got a breaking point."

Billy closed the door of Madame Rosa's behind him, lost in thought. She had said it was the end of a long line this weekend, the conclusion of that snaking rope of coincidences that had held these two souls together through so many lifetimes, and he did not want to believe that. Maybe it was just crap as Johnny said, he thought miserably, as he climbed the stairs, but something inside him knew that wasn't the case. It wouldn't necessarily end badly, she reassured him—but it could. He couldn't bear the suspense, though. He wanted everybody to be happy, himself included. How could that be if Johnny and Frenchie weren't together. Look how miserable they all had been the past few weeks while the two sparred in silence! It just had to work —

Reaching the door he heard the murmur of low voices, and paused, ear to the wood. For a moment there was only silence, then he heard Johnny speak. Time stretched interminably until he heard the other: not Frenchie's. Male; vaguely malicious; he turned the knob and strode in. Both heads turned as one, quickly, but seemingly without concern.

"Hey Johnny."

"Well, Billy-boy! Long time, no see! How's it hanging?"

"Nicky. Heard you joined the Follies."

"Oh, I get around, I do." He smiled without a trace of humor and began to get up. "Now, don't you forget what I said," he turned the smile on Johnny.

Johnny did not get up. "Be seeing you Nicky—maybe."

"Oh, you'll be seeing me. In your dreams, Johnny Ninety-Nine, in

your dreams." He looked at Billy, who stood stubbornly at the door, waiting for Nicky to leave. Nicky grinned at him like a crazy skull and turned back to Johnny. "Better be careful of the Billy-goat Gruff here, looks like he might be dangerous."

Johnny waved him off and did not turn around. Nicky went out and closed the door behind himself. Billy crossed over to the couch and sat on one of the wiggly arms. "What was that all about?"

Johnny exhaled violently and swore. "He wanted to let me know there was someone else interested in Frenchie, so I should be willing to move aside."

"What're you going to do?"

"Nothing. Frenchie can take care of herself. Anyway, I don't like anyone trying to tell me what I should or shouldn't do. I'm tired of going around corners, of waiting, of being told 'no' by everyone that's in my way. Things are going to change, now."

Despite this dramatic pronouncement, Johnny only moved to the window and stared silently at the alley below. Billy, unsettled by Nicky the Priest's visit, nonetheless felt a thrill of promise leap up in his heart. Surely he was declaring his decision to get Frenchie back, come hell or high water. Things were going to be good again. Frenchie and Johnny would be together, he would finally get into Sherry's good graces, and maybe even Candy would be happy. Sure, there was nothing that could stand in Johnny's way once he made up his mind.

"... and then she wanted to know if our special collagen-enhanced night cream could 'subdue the ravages of the special skin difficulties of the mature woman', and I couldn't help it. I just opened my mouth and said 'No, ma'am, nothing's gonna get rid of those wrinkles but death', and she looked at me with her mouth kind of flapping open and closed like she couldn't believe I really said that, and I just stared back at her like I didn't have a brain in my head, and she finally just walked away. Oh sure, laugh," and they were, "but I was just lucky Ms. Norton wasn't in or I'd be looking for a new job tomorrow."

"I can just see it," Billy was still laughing, half-slumped in his chair, "You should have said, no, you should have said, 'I'm sorry but we're out of industrial strength, ma'am!'" And he howled wildly at his own joke, catching even Candy with his humor, and she broke into a wide smile again. It was a good night.

Best of all, Frenchie and Johnny were across the room at another table,

heads close together, talking, talking. It could surely mean just one thing, thought Sherry, hard times are over. Hard times were over, happy days are here again! When they had come in, Frenchie went straight up to Johnny, linked his arm in hers and walked him over to the table and there they had sat, for more than three-quarters of an hour already, long enough for a very bubbly Bruce to stop by twice at their table, though his eyes were always on the other one.

It was good, it was very good, because if it hadn't been for that, Sherry would really have begun to be worried. Maybe it was just the sudden cool this evening, but the air seemed different today, everyone seemed different, and well, she didn't know what, but something made her feel that there was a need to panic, that she ought to be doing something, but she didn't know what, and it just put her in a dither, until Frenchie grabbed Johnny's arm and they walked off together. She still wasn't completely settled, oh no, there was still that funny feeling—and maybe Frenchie's dad had something to do with it too, maybe, she hadn't really thought about that too much, but really! it wasn't something that any of them wanted to dwell on—that a decision was hanging in the air, well, it probably was, and until their negotiations ended, a truce was called, and everybody would be happy again! And Sherry, she would celebrate, she would, she was going to celebrate by asking Billy out. Yes, that's what she was going to do—just look at him there, laughing and smiling and just looking as cute as could be, she didn't care who knew it, she just had to clear away all the uncertainty of the years, all the years when she had wondered whether he really liked her, and knew that she really liked him, even though she went out with other guys, because, well, she had to go out with somebody, and he had never, not once in all these years, asked her out.

Maybe he didn't like her, maybe he just hung out here with her because he was Johnny's friend and she was Frenchie's. Maybe he just thought of her as part of the T-Bird. Maybe he was in love with Candy—huh, no chance there, not that Candy wasn't beautiful, but never, not a chance of anything happening there. Something had happened to Candy that made her different—even before the skillet-thing, though it was hard to think back that far, she seemed always the same, just quieter.

Oh surely Billy did like her, maybe he just thought she was indifferent. That could be, but how? Didn't she give him about a million and a half signals? Oh men were so slow sometimes! But if you made the first move, oh boy, sometimes they just couldn't take that. They looked at

you like you were a slut—and worse, a slut with bad taste! There was just no winning, oh why bother!

Still, look at those two, they're so right together. She knew she couldn't be just like that, but didn't she deserve to be happy with someone? Yes, she did. A sign; that's it. She would wait for, a sign, a definite sign, something unmistakable, and then she would ask Billy.

Now, what would it be?

"And then?"

"Well, we stopped at the A&W on the interstate, ate a late lunch and then I dropped her at home."

"Now, now. Not so fast."

"What?"

"What did you talk about at A&W?"

"Stuff, you know, the usual." What was Frenchie up to now, why did she want all these mundane details? He had already made up his mind that it would be tomorrow, and it would be finished and the whole thing would be over and done. He didn't want to mess up that poor girl's life anymore. He just wanted what was his, he wanted it now, and he was done fooling with all these games. Frenchie had won, fair and square, and he would admit it as soon as it was necessary, but first he had to get the job done. But why did she have to beat it to death.

"Usual what? Tell me. What's she want to be when she grows up?"

"An actor."

"Ha! She hasn't got the right looks for the movies."

"No, she wants to be a Broadway actor, the 'real thing'."

"Figures. Actually she was pretty good; I remember her in Guys and Dolls. She dances well too."

"Her mother's a dance instructor, or was," he said absently. Something Sherry was saying had Billy practically on the floor. Even Candy was smiling.

"Ah, so it was true confessions —"

"Frenchie, what's the deal? What do you really want from me?"

"Just the gory details." She laughed but it sounded a little flat. There were dark circles under her eyes and he suddenly remembered that Billy had said she took a sick day today as well.

"So, did you play hookey today too, Frenchie? Billy says Mr. Norton wasn't too happy to have us both call in sick today."

Frenchie sighed. "You're going to make me lose my job at this rate."

"Hey, I'm just holding up my end of the bet."

"I never said it had to be during the day. That wasn't one of the conditions."

"Well, I had to get my background information."

"Johnny Marlowe, boy detective." She smiled at him. "Speaking of background, you heard any word of Benny? Not that any word would be good."

"As a matter of fact, I heard today that he's headed off to the West Coast. So that's not likely to be a problem."

"Oh. Where'd you hear that?"

Before he had a chance to answer, Bruce sidled up with a couple of drafts. "We didn't order a new round yet, you trying to drum up business?" asked Johnny kindly.

"On the house!" boomed Bruce.

"What's the occasion?" asked Frenchie archly.

"Buddy Holly's birthday," Bruce answered without hesitation. "He would have been forty-six today."

"We'll drink to Peggy Sue," laughed Johnny. And Bruce went away beaming, ignoring the beckoning of a nearby table and returning to smile to himself behind the bar.

"Where were we?"

"You were going to tell me where you heard that about Benny."

"Oh yeah. Lucky me. Nicky the Priest stopped by."

"Did he? What did he want?"

"I just told you."

"No, that was what he told you. What did he want?"

"He wanted to tell me that if I was willing to step aside that there was 'a certain gentleman' that would like to have you for his very own."

"Oh please! That scum-bucket! Does he really think I would even consider—" Frenchie's eyes flared in that feisty way he had not seen in many months. It was seeing worth Nicky the Priest just to behold it again.

"It's just that he thought since I was seeing someone else, he could make his move. When we get back together, he'll give up."

"Don't count your chickens, Johnny. You haven't upheld your end of things yet."

"Call it off, Frenchie." He said it quietly but without pleading, which he knew would be fatal. But it didn't matter.

"Not a chance, Johnny, I'm ahead of you, still. I don't make idle

threats."

"All right, you're tougher than me. You win. I love you. Let me come back to you."

She looked at him critically. "You know, you're almost right. But not quite. So I can't let you out of it yet. You've still got something to learn. And I don't think you can learn it any other way. And you don't love me—you don't know what love is."

"Sure I do, Frenchie."

"No, Johnny. You don't."

Bruce had a dream that night—it had to have been the linguine, that cheese was bad, he was sure of it the next day. There was that dry taste in his mouth and the greenish feeling in his stomach, and of course, the dream.

It all started with Buddy Holly, who pulled up outside in a red T-Bird. He called up to Bruce, who was looking down from his second floor bedroom window.

"Come on," yelled Buddy, "We gotta go somewhere, Big Bopper."

It sent a chill through Bruce to hear himself referred to that way, but his feet started to move without his volition, and the next thing he knew, he was down in the lot and noticed that the T-Bird was parked in the Impala's spot. Where are we going, Buddy, thought Bruce.

"Here, there and everywhere," said Buddy, slapping Bruce on the back and surprising him with the fact that he could read his thoughts. "Jump in."

And they were in and suddenly—in that way dreams cut through space and time—they were outside Jimmy Dupree's house and Buddy motioned him up to the window. From the couch Jimmy waved at him through curtains of gossamer. "I'm going to see Claudia," his lips seemed to say, though Bruce could not recall hearing the sound of those words.

"Where's Frenchie?" he asked Buddy. "I have to tell Frenchie. She's going to be upset."

"Relax, Daddi-o," said Buddy. "She knows; she's getting ready. She knows what's happening. In fact, she knows about everything." They walked around to the other side of the house and there was Frenchie, standing in her bedroom in her nightgown, cutting her beautiful hair with a pair of scissors.

Bruce cried out, "Frenchie!"

She turned to him and said sleepily, "I'm in mourning. My pride has died and I cannot hide."

"I don't understand!"

"Come on, rave on," said Buddy. "We still have things to do, places to go, people to see." They got back in the T-Bird, started up the engine, turned on the radio—Don McLean was singing, and Buddy laughed—popped the clutch, and roared off into the night to land outside the window of Billy and Johnny's rooms. Only Billy was there.

"Where's Johnny," Bruce called to Billy.

Billy was juggling and didn't seem to hear him. But he answered anyway. "Johnny went to see a priest. He's looking for words of love. Hi, Buddy. Sorry you died. I would have been there but I have this juggling to do."

"No problem, Billy," drawled Buddy, with a wink at Bruce. "We do what we can with what we have, am I right?" All at once they were back in the car. "You know what it is now, don't you, Bruce?"

"No! I don't understand! Tell me, please."

But Buddy only smiled, tooted the horn, and opened the door. "Sorry, old man, gotta motor. If you don't grow up, you don't grow old!"

And now Bruce was back at his window and Buddy waved from down in the lot and 'peeled out' with screeching tires and an echoing laugh. "Wait! Wait! I still don't understand!" But the lot was silent and the night was dark and he slept again, and did not remember his dream.

It wasn't so much that he planned it, but he did have a definite idea of how the evening would progress. He was grimly determined that it would work out or die trying. It was going to be tough, and he did not relish the pain it would cause, particularly as a lot of the pain would be to his heart, but Frenchie had turned this knife in his heart too deeply to pull it out except with an immense effort. Tonight he would make that attempt.

As he backed out the Impala, listening to the oldies station play "Not Fade Away", he racked his brains for the hundredth time or so to figure out what Frenchie had meant, why she always insisted that he did not love her.

When had he done anything else? From the first time he laid eyes on her, they were, what, two, three? He knew she was his, as surely as he

was hers. Never for a moment had he doubted it, even now. But for some perverse reason, Frenchie wanted to fight fate and she was driving him to this. Well, if she was going to drive him, he was going to get there, maybe sooner than she could have expected.

This was going to be it though—no more. It would be finished and done and over with for sure and he would not allow it to happen any more. No one had any right to Frenchie but him, and no one had any hold on him, but her. It was the same both ways, even-steven, as they used to say. Frenchie broke his heart by sending him away and now she wanted her own broken with this innocent girl. He didn't understand it, he really didn't. But if that's what she wanted, then by god he would do it, but he was going to do it tonight and have done with it, and there was no power on heaven or earth that could make him take it one more day.

Three short blocks—it was still too early, so he drove around past the grocer's, up past the hardware, into the empty lot behind the abandoned school to turn around and head back the other way. He caught sight of his reflection in the rear-view mirror as he checked for traffic and was surprised to see the grim lines of anger that were set into his face. He had to lighten up a little before he picked up Val, or he would not be able to accomplish his task.

He sat idling at the entrance to the school-yard. This was the school they had gone to, before the ravages of inflation whipped through their neighborhood and people left to find jobs and the classes shrank, so they had to consolidate the schools and close this one; so now the kids who should have attended it threw stones through the few remaining windows and painted rude legends over the walls with neon spray paint.

Here in this parking lot they had played tag and kickball and dodgeball and Red Rover. Red Rover, Red Rover, let Johnny come over. If you ran fast enough and pushed hard enough, you got through and you got to take someone back with you to your team. Otherwise you were 'out'. Johnny never got put out, because he knew what kids had the weakest grip and he ran right for them, head down, with all his power. It was cruel, but the teachers always put Frenchie and he on opposite teams and he would have to go get her. He never waited for her turn, because when it was her turn she would run straight to him, but of course he could not let her through, because then they would have lost. It struck him now that he should have simply let go, because then Frenchie would have brought him back with her, but he had never considered it—kids are so competitive.

He pulled back out into the street, turned and turned again. The

summer was waning because the sky was darkening earlier and earlier. As he pulled up to the curb, the pinks were fast becoming purple. He could see that the lights were on in the Beauchamp home, in fact, practically all the lights seemed to be on. And the Beach Boys were blasting out the windows of the house.

Johnny smiled. Surely their mom was working the late shift again, he thought as he walked up the steps to the front porch. But as he looked in the window he saw them all in the livingroom, even the dog, all the brightly burning lights casting a golden glow out of the house.

They were dancing.

The six Beauchamp girls and their mother were dancing. Arms waving, feet flying, nimble legs twisting, crossing, kicking and leaping. "Twist!" yelled their mother and they all twisted. A minute later, Valotte called out "Watusi!" and they all began to do that odd dance. "Mashed potato!" squeaked the youngest Beauchamp, who must be Jane, he recalled and they all mashed like crazy. Another minute and the twins screamed out, "Swim!" and it was as if the room had been turned into a noisy aquarium as the seven ladies swam their way through "Fun, Fun, Fun!" As he watched them dance, and sweat, and laugh, and smile, and share a family craze, Johnny felt a tightness grow in his stomach and then explode in his brain. Because here was the missing jigsaw piece. This was missing from his life, here was the emptiness that haunted him, and he suddenly understood that he knew nothing, felt nothing, and was in fact a big empty void. It was what was wrong with his whole life. Frenchie had been right as usual; he did not even know the meaning of love.

And when he looked up once more from his thoughts, he looked right at Val, and she seemed so alive and full of love that he knew she was his true destiny and that was why Frenchie had picked her out. He recalled the intense way she had searched every face on the avenue that day, scouting for just the right one and the way she had known, known when she spotted Val that here was love, walking talking living love.

And she smiled at him, yelled something to her mother and sprinted to the door, half out of breath, grabbed his arm and pulled him after her, into the house with the puppy nipping and woofing at his ankles.

"Mom, Mom!" she fought to be heard over Brenda Lee. At last Lydia lifted the needle off the stack of records, and they all began talking at once. Finally the mother of the clan picked her way forward to shake his hand, laughing and apologizing for her sweaty palms. Johnny was glad, for she would not be able to detect the sweat in his own.

"It's so nice to meet you, John. Val says she enjoyed her day at the beach so much."

Johnny shuffled his feet uncomfortably. "Well, she seemed to need a little fun."

"Yes," said Val's mom, giving her daughter a big squeezing hug, "I forget sometimes that she does, too. I don't want her to get old and worn-out before her time like me." Johnny's voice rose quickly in protest and was joined immediately by the girls. No way could this fresh-faced woman with her short, bouncy crop of glistening black hair be called 'old and worn-out', no way.

"Well, now that Mary's done baby-sitting for the summer, you two can trade off a little."

"Aw, Mom!"

"Hooray!"

They all laughed. "After all, I know I can't hold her here forever, now that her wings have grown." A special look passed between the mother and her oldest daughter, and Johnny could tell that there were few secrets in this family and no fear. He blinked at the spectacle of pretty women before him and felt an epiphany rising within his heart that he could not yet understand.

They followed the two out to the porch and ranged around them to wave good-bye, and the lights from the house seemed to cast a golden light of benediction around the group of them. He walked Val to the sidewalk and leaned over to unlock the door.

"John?"

"Yes?"

"Do you suppose we could go to the Thunderbird?"

"The T-Bird?"

"Yes. I've lived around the corner from it for most of my life, and I've never once been inside it."

It must have been a sign of some kind, some kind of test. It was one thing to get enlightenment, it was quite another to put it into practice. "Sure," he said, turning the lock back. "Let's go."

They turned and walked down the cracked sidewalk, crossed the street passed under the neon fins of the sign in the window and walked in through the jingling bells of the glass door. There was no parting of the Red Seas, the ground did not open up and swallow them into a Lost World; in fact, at first no one seemed to notice that they had come in. Until, that is, they passed by the table where Billy was playing a bachelor's game and he saw the two of them, while his shot was in

motion, and the cue continued out of the grip of his right hand, through the guiding arch of his left hand and clattered noisily on the surface of the table. Then people looked up.

And once they looked up, a lot of them did double-takes, and he hoped that Val did not notice, that many heads were bent in gossip. In vain, he looked for an empty table, when he heard the voice he had dreaded.

"Johnny," she waved from the back corner. "Join us!" There were looks of horror in the eyes of Candy and Sherry, the latter nearly hitting the table with her gaping mouth. They looked from Johnny to Frenchie and back again. Johnny tugged at Val's arm, who—luckily—had been distracted in looking around the bar, taking it all in. They weaved through the Friday night crowd and deposited themselves at the table.

"Val, you know Frenchie and Sherry and Candy?"

"Hi."

"Hello," mumbled the two in numb stupefaction.

"Why, you're Benny Beauchamp's little sister, aren't you," smiled Frenchie, sweet as pie.

"Yes, I am. And you're John's old girlfriend, aren't you?" Not mean, but no nonsense, cards on the table.

Frenchie laughed, Sherry giggled hysterically, and Candy just stared. But the moment served to relax things, if only slightly. "Look, I won't bring up embarrassing moments from the past if you let me dance with him, now and then. Deal?"

Val grinned. "No problem." She looked over at Johnny, who was leaning back, trying to catch Bruce's attention.

"This round's on me," burst out Sherry. She hopped up and headed towards the bar, snagging the still reeling Billy on the way. "What the hell is going on here," she hissed at him.

Poor Billy couldn't be quite sure if the world had turned upside-down or if he had joined Golden Earring in the Twilight Zone. Johnny with another woman? Sherry questioning him in a gestapo voice? In the T-Bird on a Friday night? It just couldn't be! "What?"

"What is he doing here with her?" Her eyes got even wider, "and why is she being so nice to her?!"

"I don't know!"

"Well, what are we going to do?"

"I don't know!"

Sherry paused hopelessly. "I guess I'll get a round." Billy stared at her. "Well! Do you have a better suggestion?" He shook his head and

stood mutely behind her, still shaking his head in wonder. "Six please, Bruce."

"As you wish, Sherry." Bruce had been in a good mood all night, though he could not think why in particular; he just had a feeling that his luck was changing and the anxiety of the last few weeks had finally passed. He was breathing easier than he had for days and found himself humming "Everyday" under his breath for the last few hours. He set the glasses on a tray and pushed it across the bar and smiled—and saw Sherry's pinched and surprised face and his jaw dropped. "What's wrong, dear."

Sherry could only sigh deeply, take the tray and turn back toward the corner. Bruce saw the same look in Billy's face and became even more worried. His eyes followed them back to the table and suddenly he had to sit down.

"I don't think your friends like me very much," remarked Val as they danced to "Calendar Girl" in front of the jukebox.

"Why do you say that?"

"They all keep staring at me."

"Well, you are very beautiful."

"Thank you, but that's not what I mean. It's more the look of disbelief in their faces."

"You don't miss much, do you?"

"You forget, I'm an actor. I have to study human reactions very carefully."

"Oh yeah."

"The funny thing is," she continued, "that the one person you'd expect to be upset, isn't."

"Frenchie?"

"Yes. She almost seems pleased. Unless she's a better actor than me."

"I don't think so. It's not the kind of thing she's ever been interested in practicing."

"I didn't think so."

They danced for a while in silence. "Johnny?"

"Yes?"

"Where do you live? Near here?"

"Yes."

"Let's go there."

He pulled away from her to study her expression. After a minute, he asked, "Are you sure?"

"Uh-huh."

"All right. Let's go."

"Do you want to say good-bye to your friends?"

"Nah. Let's just slip away. It would be nice to have some privacy."

And so they weaved their way slowly out to the door, turned and disappeared. From the table in the corner, Frenchie smiled, got up, walked to the bar and filled her beer from the siphon, turned and walked out the back door to the lot and stood waiting. She wondered idly where the Impala was. She listened to the pigeons cooing in the rafters. Half her beer was gone before the light on the third floor snapped on. While she looked up, Johnny crossed to the window, threw up the sash, and knotted a white sock on the top bar of the fire escape. Frenchie downed the last of her beer and went back into the bar.

"Johnny?"

"Yes?"

"I've never done this before." Pause. "Does that matter to you?"

"I don't know."

"I think it would be nice to be with you."

"Okay. I'll—I'll make it as nice as I can."

"Kiss me, Johnny." He did, and it was so very nice. He kissed her again to erase the feeling of Frenchie's lips, but they were embedded in the memory of his skin and his fingers and he fought away the confusion. He had to be in the present moment now. Val let her hand stray from his neck slowly down his back like a drop of sweat and he pulled her closer, then reached up to bury his hands in her heavy black coils as he drank more and more deeply of her sweetness. She was pulling his shirt out, unbuttoning it and running her hands over his chest. He sighed in a growing sense of arousal and pulled her shirt off over her head. Val shook her hair out again and he buried his hands in it again while he leaned over to run his mouth over her breasts. Then she took his hand and led him over to the dilapidated couch. He helped her lie gently on its uneven surface and pulled off the remainder of their clothes. He tried to be as gentle as he knew how, but still she cried out when he entered her, and in his mind he saw the golden light of the house and the smiling faces of her family, and the yapping little dog.

"I can't believe he brought her here!"

They couldn't believe that Billy was just as upset as they, or that Frenchie wasn't. Sherry still stared in disbelief at the leader who sat complacently sipping another beer.

"Don't you care!" It was exasperating. Candy agreed mutely, shocked to the core.

"You guys just don't understand," said Frenchie very quietly.

"I should say not!" Billy burst out. "You didn't even seem to notice that she was here—and she was gorgeous!"

Sherry frowned. "You didn't have to mention that."

Frenchie laughed. "It's all right. Maybe when you're older... "

"Very funny."

Billy sat down. "Look Frenchie, I know you think this only concerns you, but it concerns all of us." She looked at him quizzically. "I mean it. We all belong together, not just you and Johnny. The last few months since you two have been fighting—"

"Not fighting, really."

"Well, whatever you want to call it, but the last few months have been miserable for us all."

"That's right," piped Sherry. Candy nodded.

"And we're not going to go through it again," continued Billy. "I can't take it, none of us can. Just tell me now—is it over between you two? 'Cause I have to know. "Cause if it is over, I don't know what it is I'm going to do, but I'm going to get out of here. I just —, I —, Frenchie!" he had jumped up again, "Is it over or what?"

They all stared at her, waiting for her reply. She looked over at Bruce who was pretending very hard not to listen. "One more for us all," she said with a wink.

"Johnny?"

"Yes, Val?"

"Do you believe in dreams?"

"Sure. Like the man said, if you don't have dreams, you probably have nightmares."

"I believe in my dream. I just wonder if I'm deluding myself, if I'm

fooling myself into thinking I'm special... "

Her voice trailed off and he looked up at her in the moonlight. He reached up to smooth her hair. "No, you have to believe that you are special or you won't get anywhere in this life. I think most people end up selling themselves short, and getting what they're paid for it."

"Think so?"

"I'm sure of it now." And he was, oh yes.

"But —"

"Even Frenchie said that you were a good actor. She saw you in Guys and Dolls, said you were a good dancer too."

"Really!"

"Yeah. Besides, I could tell the first time I saw you that there was something special in you."

She smiled. "The first time?"

"Well, when I saw you again, for the first time."

"So I really should go after my dream?"

"What else can you do? Is there anything else that would make you happy?"

"N-no."

"Well, then you have no excuse. And don't try to use your family for that. It won't work. Besides, eventually they'll get sick of you and throw you out."

She considered it. "I know."

"You see, I've found out recently that if you turn your back on your dream, even for a short time, something can happen to it. So it's best not to take your eyes off it."

"That sounds like a good idea." She laid her head back down and soon they were both asleep.

Frenchie awoke to a sound she did not recognize and was not certain that she heard. She sat up and listened but it did not repeat. Finally she pulled on her robe and went out of her bedroom and down the hall, and tapped on her father's door. He did not answer, so she opened the door without a sound and let out a cry.

He lay on the floor, half out of bed. She rushed over to lift him back on the bed, threw her arms around him, and hoisted him into the middle of the bed, but it was already too late. His body was cold and limp and her daddy was gone, gone, gone. Frenchie stared in disbelief and horror

and then she burst into surprised tears.

Billy checked his watch again. They must have fallen asleep, he thought bitterly. He blew on his hands. Autumn was already coming into the air. It was so depressing.

"Billy!" He looked up behind him. It was Bruce. "Come on up, Billy. You can bunk here for the night."

"Okay." He crossed the lot over to the back door. After a moment, Bruce arrived and unlocked the door, then ushered Billy up to the apartment on the second floor. He sat him down on the sofa with a brandy 'to take off the chill.'

"It's all so upsetting," said Bruce eagerly.

"Yes," answered Billy despondently.

"Is it over? It can't be, can it?" His eyes studied Billy intently.

"Honestly Bruce, I don't know." He lay back on the sofa. "I just don't know."

Bruce sighed. "Good-night Billy."

"Good-night."

Johnny awoke with a strange feeling of freedom and loss. He had the feeling somehow that he had shaken off a sickness that had dogged him for far too long.

But then he realized that he was alone. He stood up and stretched, cat-like, stiff from the terrible sofa. And he saw on the table a note. Oh, a note. He walked over and picked it up.

John -

Thank you for everything.

I know that you are right, and

I am going to grab that dream

before it gets away or I think

about it too much.

He read it again, folded it up, and slipped it in his back pocket. Then he took a shower, dressed, and went over to get his car. No use getting a ticket on top of everything else.

He walked over to Tenth in the cool dawn air, noticing that summer was surely over already, and knowing for the first time in his life that he was glad. It was not a time he'd ever care to repeat.

The Impala was covered with a delicate coat of dew which gave it a fuzzy look in the soft morning light. He wiped off the driver side of the windshield, then turned back to put the key in the lock, when he heard a screen door slam.

"John?"

He shaded his eyes with his hand. It was her mother. He hesitated for just a second, then walked up to the porch. "Hello Ms. Beauchamp."

"I got a note from her," she said, laughing, a little uncertainly, and he noticed that she had been crying.

"Me too." He pulled it out of his back pocket. She glanced at it briefly then sat down on the steps. After a moment, he sat down beside her.

"I knew she would go, but somehow I just never could prepare myself for it."

He nodded. He didn't know what would be helpful to say. The sun was catching her full in the face now, showing every line and wrinkle and suddenly she was more gorgeous to him than even Frenchie, though he could not wait to see her. "She loves all of you so much, she was afraid she'd never be able to tear herself away."

She laughed out loud. "Hard to believe, isn't it. This shrewish bunch of harridans! Well, we'll just have to pull on together until Val becomes rich and famous." She wiped her eyes and beamed at him, and he finally understood what Billy meant when he said that women were quite amazing really. "Well, I better get to work. Thanks for what you said, John. It means a lot."

He shook her offered hand and walked back to the Impala, waved once, got in and drove off to his parking spot. On an impulse, he walked around to the front of the T-Bird and started when he saw Bruce and Frenchie through the glass. He tapped lightly and Bruce came to let him in.

One look at his sorrowful face and Johnny knew. He went at once to Frenchie's side. "Oh Frenchie!"

She smiled at him and took his hand. Her eyes were puffy and red, her lips cracked and swollen, but she looked like a exquisite angel. "I can't believe he's gone," she said with a sob.

"When did it happen?"

"About three or so. I woke up and went down to his room —"

"Frenchie, we're all here for you, you know that?"

"Johnny, if there's one thing I've learned lately, it's that we're all alone."

"Frenchie, I love you and I'll do what I can to help you."

"I know."

They were silent for sometime. She still had hold of his hand. "Will you take me back, Frenchie?" He could feel Bruce leaning toward them both, hoping, waiting.

She smiled sadly at him through her tears. "Johnny, I never let you go."

Sherry dared to call in sick on a Saturday morning, not caring if Ms. Norton believed her or not. Let the old bag choke for all she cared, she just didn't care. It was not often that Sherry got mad, but when she did, watch out.

She was going to give them all a piece of her mind; Johnny, Frenchie, Val, Billy, even Candy. Stop making my life unhappy! she wanted to shout at them. Well, something like that, anyway. She wanted all the tension gone—she wanted Billy to ask her out! She was going to do it this time, really.

She turned the corner on the way towards Frenchie's house and passed the T-Bird and her mouth flew open. Inside with Bruce was Candy, talking earnestly at the bar and it wasn't even 10 am! But then she saw at one of the booths Frenchie on Johnny's lap, her arms thrown around his neck. She was standing there with her mouth open when Billy rapped on the window (which made her jump) and beckoned to her to come in.

A sign, she said to herself, it was definitely a sign.

From the same author on Feedbooks

Not Waving (1991)

A woman devolves into madness on a road trip to Las Vegas after an auto accident and several failed suicide attempts. The title comes from Stevie Smith's poem which features the lines, "I was much too far out all my life /

And not waving but drowning." Oddly enough, I wrote this long before I became an English professor (and it's nothing like my life, I hasten to add). It was rejected by one agent in Los Angeles for being "too relentlessly dark" (it was the 80s, dark was out).

Another Metamorphosis (1996)

Billy sure loved dinosaurs, but he never imagined becoming one...



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