



"looking so hard..."

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red numbering

looking so hard, chewing him with mint leaf eyes. But she had been spoken to. Half cursed, half blessed, He had burned the green away and replaced it with pure sight that damned her if she used it.

Footsteps, then a knock, interrupted her sad, dead-end thoughts.

The girl opened the door.

"Connie?"

"Who else?"

"It's me, Pallas. I called my father again. So. You know. He's meeting me in Tulsa. I came to say goodbye."

"I see."

"It's been great. I needed to. Well its been forever since I last saw him."

"That long?"

"Can you believe it?"

"Hard to. You've fattened up."

"Yeah. I know."

"What will you do about it?"

"Same as always. Diet."

"I don't mean that. I mean the baby. You're pregnant."

"I am not."

"No?"

"No!"

"Why not?"

"I'm only sixteen!"

"Oh," said Consolata, looking at the moon head floating above a spine, the four little appendages--paws or hands or hoofs or feet. Hard to tell at that stage. Pallas could be carrying a lamb, a baby a jaguar. "Pity," she said as Pallas fled from the room. And "pity" again as she imagined the child's probable life with its silly young mother. She remembered another girl, about the same age, who had come a few years ago--at a very bad time. For seventeen days Consolata had been inside, alone, keeping Mary Magna's breath coming and going; the cool blue light flickering until Mary Magna asked permission to go, bereft though she was of the last sacrament. The second girl, Grace, had arrived in time to hold off the fearful loneliness that dropped the moment the body was removed and let her sleep. Mavis had just returned with Lourdes water and tk. Consolata welcomed the company which distracted her from thoughts

of eviction, starvation and an unconfessed death. Minus papers or patron she was as vulnerable as she had been at nine when she clung to Mary Magna's hand at the railing of the ship. Whatever help Lone DuPres or Soane might offer could not include shelter. Not in that town.

Then the girl came. Cupful of tears just behind her eyes. and something else. Not anxiety, as might have been expected, but horror for the work of her womb. A repulsion so severe it cut mind from body and saw its flesh-producing flesh as foreign, rebellious, unnatural, diseased. Consolata could not fathom what brought on that repugnance, but there it was. And here it was again in the shout of another one: "No!" Terror without alloy. With the first one Consolata did what she knew Mary Magna would have done: quieted the girl and advised her to wait her time. Told her that she was welcome to deliver there if she wanted to. Mavis was jubilant, Grace amused. Both drove off to shop for the expected newborn, returning with booties, and diapers and dolls enough for a kindergarten. The girl, sharp in her refusal to have the midwife attend her, waited quietly sullen for a week or so. Or so Consolata thought. What she did not know until labor began was that the mother had been hitting

her stomach relentlessly. Had Consolata's eyesight been better and had the girl's skin not been the color of coal, she would have seen the bruises at once. As it was she saw swellings and wide areas where the skin showed purple underneath, rather than silver. But the real damage was the mop handle. Inserted with a rapist's skill--that mercilessly, repeatedly between her legs. With the gusto and intention of a rabid male she had tried to beat the life out of her life. And, in a way, was triumphantly successful. The five or six month baby revolted. Fiesty, outraged, rivited with fright, it tried to escape the battering and battered ship that carried it. The blows to its delicate skull, the trouncing its hindparts took. The shudders in its spine. Otherwise there was no hope. Had it not tried to rescue itself it would break into pieces or drown in its mother's food. So he was born, in a manner of speaking, too soon and exhausted by the flight. But breathing. Sort of. Mavis took over. Grace went to bed. Together Consolata and Mavis cleaned his eyes, stuck their fingers in his throat clearing it for air, and tried to feed him. It worked for a few days, then he surrendered himself to the company of Merle and Perle. By that time the mother was gone, having never touched, glanced at, inquired after or named him. Grace called him Che and

Consolata did not know to this day where he was buried. Only that she had said tk over the three pounds of gallant but defeated life before Mavis, smiling and cooing carried it away.

Just as well, thought Consolata. Life with that mother would be hell for Che. Now here was another one screaming No! as if that made it so. Pity.

Reaching for a bottle, Consolata found it empty. She sighed and sat back in the chair. Without wine her thoughts, she knew, would be unbearable: resignation, self-pity, muted rage, disgust and shame swirling like curls of paper from a dying fire. As she rose to replenish her vice, a grand weariness took her, forcing her back to the seat, tipping her chin on her chest. She slept herself into sobriety.

Headachy, dry-mouthed she woke in desperate need of a toilet. On the second floor she could hear sniffles behind one door, singing behind another. Back down the stairs, she decided to catch a little air and shuffled into the kitchen and through the door. The sun had gone leaving behind a friendlier light. Consolata surveyed the winter-plagued garden. Tomato vines hung limp over an occasional fruit, black and soft in the dirt. Mustards were pale yellow with rot and inattention. A whole spill of melons caved in on themselves. Heads of

chrysanthemums drooped, mud brown, stricken. A few chicken feathers were stuck to the low wire fencing protecting the garden from whatever it could. Without human help gopher holes, termite castles, evidence of rabbit forays and determined crows abounded. The corn scrabble in neatly harvested fields beyond looked forlorn. And the pepper bushes, held on to by the wrinkled fingers of their yield were rigid with cold. Despite the dirt grains blowing against her legs, Consolata sat down in the fading red rocking chair.

"I am nothing," she whispered. "But tell me. Where is the rest of days, the aisle of thyme, the scent of veronica you promised. The cream and honey you said I had earned. The happiness that comes of well done chores, the serenity duty grants us, the blessings of good works? Was what I did for love of you so terrible?"

Mary Magna had nothing to say. Consolata continued to sit in the refusing silence, more wondering than annoyed by the sky, in plumage now, gold and blue-green, strutting like love requited on the horizon.

A man approached. Medium height, light step, he came right on up the drive. He wore a cowboy hat that hid his face but Consolata couldn't have seen it anyway. Where he sat on the kitchen steps a

triangle of shadow covered him.

"Who is that?" asked Consolata.

"You know me, girl." He leaned forward and Consolata saw that he wore sunglasses--the mirror type that glitter.

"No," she said. "I can't say I do."

"Well, it don't matter. I'm just passing."

"You from the town?"

"Uh uh. I'm stone country. Got anything to drink?"

"I suppose. Inside."

"Oh, well," he said as though that settled it and he would rather go thirsty.

"Holler," said Consolata. "One of the girls'll bring you something." She felt light, weightless as though she could move, if she wanted to, without standing up.

"Come on," said the man. "I don't want to see your girls. I want to see you."

Consolata laughed. "You need your glasses much as me."

Suddenly he was next to her without having ever stood up. Smiling like he was having (or expecting) such a good time. Consolata laughed again. It seemed so funny, comical really, the way he had

flitted over to her from the steps, and how now he was looking at her--flirtatious, full of secret fun. Not six inches from her face he removed his hat. Fresh, tea-colored hair came tumbling down, cascading over his shoulders and down his back. He took off his glasses then and winked, a slow seductive movement of a lid. His eyes, she saw, were peppermint candy.

In candlelight on a bitter January evening Consolata cleaned, washed and washed again two freshly-killed hens. They were young, poor layers, with pins difficult to extract. Their hearts, necks, giblets and livers turned slowly in boiling water. She lifted the skin to reach under it, fingering as far as she could. Under the breast, she searched for a pocket close to the wing. Then holding the breast in her left palm, the fingers of her right tunnelled the back skin, gently pushing for the spine. Into all these places--where the skin had been loosened and the membrane separated from the smooth flesh it once protected--she slides butter. Thick. Pale. Slippery.

Pallas wiped her eyes with the heel of her hand and then blew her nose. Now what should she do?

This last phone call was not very different from the initial one. Just shorter. But the frustration at not being able to speak, to say anything was the same. And she remembered the helpless anger when she had first called her father last summer.

Jesus Christ where the hell are you? We thought you were dead. Thank God. They found the car but it's bashed to hell on one side and somebody stripped it. You okay? Oh, baby. *Daddy*. Where is he, boy is his ass over. Tell me what happened. Your bitch mother's not making any sense as usual. Did he hurt you? *Daddy, no*. Well, what? Was he alone? We're suing the school, baby. Got them by the short hairs. *It wasn't him. Some boys chased me*. What? *In their truck. They hit my car and forced me off the road. I ran and then--* They rape you? *Daddy!* Hold on sweetheart. Jo Anne get me that detective guy. Tell him I got Pallas. No, she's okay, just get him, will you? Go ahead, baby. *I'm* Where are you? *Will you come and get me Daddy?* Of course I will. Right away. Do you need money? Can you get to an airport, a train station? Just tell me where you'll be. Wait. Maybe you should call the police. The local ones I mean. They can get you to an airport. Tell them to call me. No. You call me from the station. Where are you? Pallas? Where you calling from? Pallas, you

there? *Minnesota.* Minnesota? Jesus. I thought you were in New Mexico. What the hell's up there? Bloomington? No, St. Paul. Are you near St. Paul, sweetheart? *I'm not near anything, Daddy. It's like country.* Call the police, Pallas. Make them come get you you hear? *Okay, Daddy.* Then call me from the station. *Okay.* You got that? You're not hurt or anything. *No Daddy.* Good. Okay now. I'll be right here or Jo Anne will if I go out. Boy what you put me through. But everything's going to be okay now. We'll talk about that asshole when you get back. Okay, now? Call me. Love you, baby.

But she had not called anybody. Police, her mother or him. Until last August. He was furious, but wired her money to get home.

If they had laughed behind her back before Carlos, if they had joked at her expense then, it came to her only as a light sensation, an odor upon entering study hall; an eye slide as she turned away from her locker; an unstable smile as she joined a crowded lunch table. She had never been truly popular, but her address and her father's money hid the fact. Now she was an open joke (Pallas Truelove ran off with the jaaa-ni-tor don't you love it?) no one tried to hide. She was back in that place where final war begins, deep in the poisonous waters of high school, where eternity is a walk down

the hall or a suck of water from a fountain. Where aside from the exchange of food, clothes and toys, there are no good intentions. Where smugness reigns, judgments instant, dismissals permanent. And the adults haven't a clue. Only prison was as blatant and as frightening. Beneath the ritual scratched a life of subdued but gnawing violence. Students who lived in apparently peaceful well-regulated homes were overtaken by a cruelty that visited them as soon as they entered the lobby. Cruelty accompanied by laughter and a mask of juvenile glee. Yet nothing could disguise for long its reach and its ache.

Pallas tried. But the humiliation wore her down. Milton pumped her about her mother. He had been warned about the consequences of marrying outside his race, and every warning had come true. But Pallas was vague, noncommittal. He was still pursuing a lawsuit against the school for its lax and endangering atmosphere, not to speak of its criminally inclined employees. But the "victim" of the "abduction" had gone willingly; and the destination of the "across state lines" journey was the "victim's" own mother. How criminal could that be? Was there something going on in the father's home they should know about? Something that made her want to escape

to her mother? Furthermore nothing untoward had happened on school grounds--except the repair of the "victim's" car and safe guidance home. Also the "abduction" took place during the holiday when the school was closed. Moreover the "victim" had not only gone willingly, she had cooperated and deceived to voluntarily accompany a man (an artist, even) who had no priors and whose demeanor and work at the high school was exemplary. Had she been assaulted by him, sexually? The "victim" said No, no, no, no. Did he drug her, give her something illegal to smoke? Pallas shook her head, no remembering that it was her mother who did that. Who were these people who hit your car? I don't know. I never saw their faces. I got out of there. Where to? I hitched and some people took me in. Who? Some people. In a church kind of place. In Minnesota? No, Oklahoma. What's the address, phone number? Daddy, give it up. I'm home, okay? I don't want to have to worry about you. Don't. Don't.

But Pallas didn't feel well. Everything she ate added a pound in spite of the fact that she threw most of it up. Thanksgiving she spent alone with food Providence had prepared. Christmas she begged relief. Milton said No. You stay right here. Just Chicago, she said, to visit his sister. He agreed, finally, and made all the arrangements.

Pallas stayed with her aunt till December 30 when she took off (leaving a reassuring misleading note) for Oklahoma. At the airport she hired a car and driver to take her all the way to the Convent. Just a visit, she said. But she knew all along what Connie said was true. Now what?

Consolata tilted the fowl, peered into their silver and rose cavities. Tossed in salt and scoured it all around. Then she rubbed the outer skin with a cinnamon and butter mixture. She added onion to the bits of neck meat, hearts and giblets speckling the broth. As soon as the hens were roasted brown enough and tender she set them aside so they could reclaim their liquids.

Lukewarm and shallow the tub water rose only to her waist. Gigi liked it deep, hot, loaded with bubbles. The plumbing in the mansion was breaking up: producing colored water, heaving and sometimes failing to rise to the second floor, well water passing through a wood fed boiler nobody other than herself was interested in. She alone made a nuisance of herself trying to bathe in gallons of piping hot water. Seneca had helped out bringing several pails of

steamy water from the kitchen stove to the bathroom. Better than nothing, she supposed. For bubbles she poured in grains of Ivory Snow and whipped the water up as best she could. The result was a disappointing slime but. Better than nothing. She had asked Seneca to join her in the tub, got the usual refusal and couldn't resist teasing her about the infrequency of her bathing. But she knew why Seneca always said no. Gigi had seen the bloody toilet tissue but only felt in the dark the ridges on Seneca's skin. Blunt and obnoxious as she could be, Gigi could not ask her about them. The answer might come too close to the bleeding black boy scene.

Gigi stretched her legs out and lifted her feet to admire them. As she had done many times when she ran them up K.D.'s spine while she lay in the tk and he sat with his naked back to her. She missed him, now and then. His chaotic devotion, full of moods and hurts and yearning and lots and lots of giving in. Well, she had dogged him a bit. Enjoyed his availability and adoration because she had so little experience of either. Mikey. Nobody could call that love. But K.D.'s version didn't stay fun for long. She teased, insulted or refused him once too often and he chased her around the house, grabbed her, smacked her. Mavis and Seneca had pulled him off, waved kitchen

equipment and got him out of there--all three of them answering his curses with better ones of their own.

Ah, well. This is a new year, she thought. Nineteen seventy five. New plans since the old ones turned out to be trash. When she finally got the box out of the floor, she whooped to find it full of certificates. The bank officer was tickled to death and offered her twenty-five dollars for the pleasure of framing them or putting them in a display case for the amusement of his customers. Not every day you could see documentation of one of the biggest scams in the West. She negotiated for fifty and stomped out of the bank ordering Mavis to just drive please.

She would encourage Seneca to leave with her. For good this time. Get back in the fray. Somehow. Somewhere. Her mother was unlocatable; her father on death's row. Only a grandfather left in a spiffy trailer in Alcorn, Mississippi. She had not thought about it too carefully, but now she wondered exactly why she had left. The fray, that is. It wasn't just the bleeding boy or Mikey's trick about the couple making out in the desert, or the short guy's advice about clear water and entwined trees. Before Mikey the point was lost to entertainment and adventure. Provocative demonstrations,

pamphlets, biker, police, squatters, leaders--none of it was serious. Gigi lifted dripping wet hands to readjust the rollers in her hair. "Bastards," she said aloud. And then, not knowing who were the bastards that infuriated her so, she slapped the awful bathwater saying "Shit!" with each hapless stroke. It calmed her after a while enough for her to hold her head in her hands and whisper, "No. You just weren't tough enough. Smart enough. Focussed enough. No staying power. You thought it was going to be fun and that it would all work. In a season or two."

Gigi was not the crying type, even now when she realized she had not liked herself in a long long time.

Consolata peeled and quartered small brown potatoes, simmered them in water seasoned with pan juices, bay leaf and sage before arranging them in a skillet where they turned darkly gold. She sprinkled paprika and seeds of blackest pepper over them.

tk [Mavis here]

Six yellow apples, wrinkled from winter storage, were cored and

floating in water. Raisens were heating in a saucepan of wine. Consolata filled the hollow of each apple with a creamy mixture of egg yolks, honey, walnuts and butter, to which she added, one by one, the wine-puffed raisens. She poured the flavored wine into a pan and set the apples down in. The sweet warm fluid rose.

The little streets were narrow but straight. But as soon as she made them the flooded. sometimes she held toilet tissue to catch the blood, but she liked to let it run too. The trick was to slice at just the right depth. Not too light so the cut yielded only a faint line of red. Not so deep it swole and gushed over so fast you couldn't see the street. Although she had changed map to her thighs, she recognized with pleasure the traces of old roads, avenues that even Nora was repelled by. One was sometimes enough for months. Then there were times when she did two a day, hardly giving a street time to close before she opened another one. But she was not reckless. Her instruments were clean, her iodine (better than Mercurochrome) plentiful. And she had added aloe jelly to her kit.

The habit, begun in one of the foster homes, started as an accidnet. Before her foster-brother--another kid in Mama Greer's

house--got her underwear off the first time, a safety pin, holding the waist of her jeans together where a metal button used to be, opened and scratched her stomach as Harry yanked on them. After they were tossed away and he got to her panties, the bloodline excited him even more. She did not cry. It did not hurt. When Mama Greer bathed her she clucked "Poor baby. Why didn't you tell me?" and Mercuriochromed the jagged cut. She was not sure what she should have told: the safety pin scratch or Harry's behavior. So she pin-scratched herself on purpose and showed it to Mama Greer. Because the sympathy she got was diluted, she told her about Harry. "Don't you ever say that again. Do you hear me? Do you? Nothing like that happens here." After a meal of her favorite things, she was placed in another home. Nothing happened for years. Until junior high school, then the eleventh grade. By then she knew that there was something inside her that made boys snatch her and men flash her. If she was drinking Coke with five girls at a dime store counter she was the one whose nipple got tweaked by a boy on a dare from his singering friends. Four girls, or just one, might walk down the street, but when she passed the man sitting with his baby daughter on a park-bench, it was then he lifted his penis out and made kissing noises. Refuge

with boy friends was no better. They took her devotion for granted but if she complained to them about being fondled by friends or strangers their fury was directed at her so she knew it was something inside her that was the matter. She entered the vice like a censored poet whose suspect lexicon was too supple, too shocking to behold. It thrilled her. It steadied her. Access to this under garment life kept her own eyes dry inducing a serenity rocked only by crying women, the sight of which touched off a pain wild enough and triumphant enough she would do anything to kill it. She was thirteen and not cutting sidewalks when Kennedy was killed and the whole world wept in public. But she was eighteen when King was killed one spring and another Kennedy that summer. She called in sick to her waitressing job each time and stayed indoors to cut short streets, lanes, alleys into her arms. Her blood work was fairly easy to hide. Like Eddie Turtle, most of her boy friends did it in the dark. For those who insisted on answers she invented a disease. Sympathy was instant for the scars did look surgical.

The safety available in Connie's house had become less intact when Pallas arrived. She had spent a lot of time trying to cheer and feed her for when Pallas wasn't eating she was crying or trying not

to. The relief that descended when the girl left last August disappeared when she returned in November--prettier, fatter, pretending she had just stopped by for a visit. In a limosine, no less. With three suitcases. It was January now and her night sniffing could be heard all over the house.

Seneca did another street. An intersection, in fact, for it crossed the one she'd done a moment ago.

The table was set; the food placed. Consolata looked at the women's faces and told them "If you want to stay here you have to do what I say. Eat how I say. Sleep when I say. And I will teach you what you are hungry for."

Consolata lifted the fowl, peered into their silver and rose cavities. Tossed in salt and scoured it all around. Then she rubbed the outer skin with a cinnamon and butter mixture. When they were brown enough and tender, she withdrew some of the prep from the