



God Help the Child Draft

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ONE

She slept with him for two months. Then he said, "You not the woman I want."

"Neither am I," she said, and as soon as she heard herself, it was as though she'd made bail. As though she'd spent two months or so in a holding cell without arraignment or lawyer, and suddenly the judge put the whole thing off: "Pay a little bit now, and we'll get back to you." It never occurred to her to protest, to whine, wail, or accuse. He said one thing; she agreed. Not to say the affair hadn't been pleasant, even thrilling, at times. But it wasn't

earthshaking; not let me spend my life with you. Certainly nothing like your average double page spreads of couples standing in surf-fierce and frowning with sexual lightening, beneath a sky re-adjusting itself to the shine of their skin. Nor had it measured up to the cries in any old R and B song—some red and black tune with a beat arranged to accommodate fever. She had not even looked down through the windows at the walkway beneath her balcony when he left. Instead she opened a bottle of x wine and sank into the sofa cushions, the suede and silk as comfy as any arms. In a minute she would call Norma; tell her all about it. Or not. Probably not. There was so much going on at work. A regional manager was like a captain and had to maintain the right relationship with the crew. Sylvia Inc. was small but blossoming; making waves finally in x. Shedding its frumpy past. What used to be Sylph Corsets for Discriminating Women had changed its name to Sylvia Apparel before going hip with six new products, including YOU, Girl: Cosmetics for Your Personal Millennium. That was hers, all hers—the idea, the name, the packaging... With that slam dunk, regional manager was hers without contest. And the megabucks told the tale.

ride, "How you like that, Lotus Ann?" she smiled at the smile on the wine glass. Maybe that was the woman he wanted. But Lotus Ann Bridewell was not cash, a available. Lotus Ann was a seventeen year old kid who dropped the name right after highschool and was Ann Bridewell for two years until she interviewed for the job at Sylvia Inc. and began calling herself Bride with nothing anybody needed to say before or after that one sweet syllable. Customers and the sales reps liked it, but he did not. He called her 'baby' most of the time. "Hey, baby." "I need you, baby." And sometimes, "You my girl?" The only time he said 'woman' was the day he left.

Thank you, thank you, Jesus. No more dallying around with a mystery man with no visible means of support. A felon if ever there was one, though he denied it; said his weekly appointments in tk were tk, not reports to a probation officer. Actually, the timing was perfect. With him gone, out of her thoughts, she could not only concentrate on the launch of tk, she could keep the promise she'd made to herself long before she set eyes on him. According to the prisoninfodotgov/paroleboard/calendar, it was time. loves of evil women

come Afternoon was rainy in the city, but as she drove farther north the summer sky became flawless. Bride selected a classical music channel for the two hour

ride, but didn't raise the volume. Aida's cries muted by nappa leather was more suited to her already racing pulse. Twenty-five thousand dollars in cash, a three thousand dollar Continental Airlines gift certificate and a promotion box of YOU, Girl products were tucked into a Louis Vuitton shopping bag. Could take you anywhere, almost. Comfort you, anyway. Help you forget. Take the edge off bad luck, hopelessness, and boredom.

One ought to be able to enjoy scenery this spectacular, but the highways, too many lanes, exits, parallel roads, over passes, and signage were so thick it was like reading a newspaper. Tk

Bride clicked the windshield wipers off and slowed. The Norristown exit was easily missed and the prison had no sign for a mile beyond the ramp.

Right outside Norristown, in the kind of reclaimed desert California was famous for, Decalon was an excellent site: near a small town whose population could serve visitors, provide guards, cafeteria workers, health workers and, most of all, contractors' laborers who were always improving the site, repairing the road and adding wings to accommodate the increasing waves of evil women committing violent crimes.

Twice before she had driven to Decalon, but never tried to enter. Those

times she just wanted to see where the monster had been caged for twenty-one of her twenty-five to life sentence. Today was no different. No need to enter, even if she had fabricated a reason to. The monster had been granted parole and, according to the Penal Review Notices, Sofia Huxley would walk out of the gates Bride had put her behind.

Decalon was the one place a Jaguar was embarrassing. Behind the curbside buses, old Toyotas and second-hand trucks lined the road or took the few spaces in the parking lot left by prison staff. Bride's car, sleek, rat gray with her name on its vanity plate looked aggressive. Like the sinister white limousines parked there sometimes, engines snoring lightly, chauffeurs leaning against glacial white metal. Bride never stayed long enough to see the kind of passenger who would need a driver to leap to open the door. She imagined a Grand Madam impatient to get back to her designer linens in her tasteful high-rise brothel, or maybe a little hooker-ette dying for a return to the private patio of a smooth, hip club where she could celebrate the rip and burn of her prison-issue panties with friends. No Sylvia products though. The line was risque enough for the hooker-ette's clients, but not expensive enough. Still, she might own some YOU. Girl sparkle eye shadow, or the gold flecked lipstick.

years Today there were no limousines , unless the Lincoln Town was a modest one. Just worn cars and trucks, quiet children, animated family members. A solitary man sitting on a bench at the bus stop reached into a box of cereal, scouring its corners for the last crumb of sugar. He wore ancient wing tip shoes and brand new jeans. His baseball cap, the brown vest over a white long sleeved shirt, were obviously given clothes ones chosen from the shelves and tables of Goodwill stores. Unflappable, legs crossed, he sat there like a prince in disguise, examining an O of dry cereal as though it were a fat cherry hand-picked especially for him by grounds keepers to the throne. Dainty, thought Bride. Tk

Huxley, Sofia aka 071140, would not be released during visiting hours. She, and if there were other parolees, would emerge as a separate lot. By 4:30 only the Lincoln Town was left. A lawyer, thought Bride. An alligator briefcase under his arm. Furtively competent, connected to the root and crown of the justice tree.

Tk A quick glance at the speaker followed by a deep one searching the road. Suddenly, there she was. Unmistakable because of the height. Six feet. Still. Twenty-one years had not dwarfed the giant Bride remembered. At eight

years old, Lotus Ann could not believe a woman taller than the bailiff, the judge, the lawyers, as tall as the police and almost as tall as her own husband, was anything other than the "filthy freak" stricken parents called her. "Look at her eyes," women whispered in the restroom. "Cold, like the snake she is. At twenty? How could a twenty-year old do those things? Are you kidding? Just look at those eyes. They're old as dirt." Twenty plus one years later the eyes were more like a rabbit's than a snake's but the height was unchanged. Everything else had. Parolee 071140 was thin as a rope. Size three panties, Bride guessed. An A cup bra, if any. She could not help registering how much those features would benefit from Miracle, or better still, Firmaline Wrinkle Softener, and Juicy Bronze would restore needed color to the whey colored skin.

Bride stepped out of the Jaguar, not sure of anything but the absolute necessity of being there. Not wondering or caring if Sofia recognized her, she slid into the moment and spoke.

"Need a lift?"

A quick glance at the speaker followed by a deep one searching the road.

"No. Thanks. I don't."

Her mouth is tremble-y, now, thought Bride. It used to be hard, a straight razor ready to slice a child. A collagen shot and Tango—matte, not glitter—would have softened it, influenced the jury, maybe, except there was no YOU. Girl back then.

"Somebody picking you up?"

"Taxi cab." She was answering a stranger, dutifully, as though used to it. Not "What's it to you ?" or even "Who the hell are you?" But going on to explain further. "I called a cab. I mean the Desk did."

Bride was reaching out, to touch her elbow, prelude to convincing her not to waste her money, when the cab rolled up. Fast as a bullet, limber as an acrobat, Sofie reached for the door, tossed in her tk nylon carrier bag and followed it.

"Wait," called Bride, but Sofia, leaning toward the driver's ear, ignored her. The taxi drove away negotiating the U turn like a NASCAR pro.

It wasn't at all hard to follow her. Bride even passed the taxi in a playful attempt to deceive. It didn't work because she saw, in the rear view mirror, the cab slow and turn toward Norristown instead of the exit ramp. Shoulder gravel splayed with Bride's effort to brake, reverse and catch up, murmuring, "Mrs.

Huxley. Mrs. Huxley. Don't."

She followed them at a respectable distance. Every now and then they passed colorful houses built in the fifties and added on to repeatedly until each resembled a kindergarten drawing, sitting quietly in wide deep lawn. Blue, white, yellow with pine green or blood red doors seemed to be the preferred color scheme. A mall as pale and fresh as lemonade announced the beginning of the town. Just beyond it, where a road sign identified Eva Dean's Motel and Restaurant, the taxi stopped. Bride parked the Jaguar across the street, squinted at the plate glass thinking, she is too meeting someone. After a few minutes at the check-in desk, Sofia Huxley turned and, showing no interest in her room assignment, went straight into the restaurant and took a booth by the window. Like a slow student she studied the menu, lip reading while running her finger under the offerings. Watching her, Bride sighed, "And this is the woman who once taught pre-schoolers, cut apples into rings to resemble the letter O, doled out pretzels as B's, slit watermelon chunks into Y's. All to spell out 'BOY'—whom she liked best, according to the women whispering in the courtroom toilets. Maybe she preferred an alphabet she could eat. Fruit had figured centrally at the trial and as Bride watched the waitress place dish after

dish before her customer, she wondered what a felon's first post-prison meal would contain. She was eating like a refugee, never taking her eyes from the food; stabbing, scooping, slicing, helter-skelter all over the table. She took no water, buttered no bread. The gobbling took all of nineteen minutes. Then she paid, left and hurried down the walkway. Key in hand, tote bag on shoulder she hesitated. Suddenly she darted into a narrow break between two stucco blocks of rooms. Bride abandoned her post and ran after her, pausing when a retching sound clarified the motive. Backing away, Bride hid behind a SUV, then bent down to attend to her ankle strap until Sofia collected herself and unlocked the door to 3B.

The knocking should be strong, Bride decided, authoritative, to get the automatically obedient response an ex-con was trained to.

"Yes?"

"Mrs. Huxley. Open the door, please."

"I'm sorta sick."

"I know. Open the door." Bride's voice, a combination of power-to-fire-you with a hint of administrative understanding—the one that worked on insecure and or unproductive reps—worked now. Sofia opened the door wide and stood

there barefoot, a towel in her hand.

"Yes?"

"We need to talk."

"Talk?"

Still, no "Who are you?"

Leading with the Louis Vuitton bag, Bride pushed in past her. The odor of Wizard, Rain Forest, was overwhelming.

"You're Sofia Huxley, right?"

She nodded.

"Let's sit down. I have something for you." Bride held up the shopping bag. Sofia didn't look at it. She gazed instead at Bride's shoes, the high lethal heels, the dangerously pointed toes.

"What do you want me to do?"

Such a soft accommodating voice. Knowing after twenty years that nothing was free. Nobody gave away anything at no cost to the receiver. Whatever it was: cigarettes, magazines, tampons, stamps stationery, Mars Bars or twenty-five large, it came with strings tough as fishing line.

"Nothing. I don't want you to do a thing."

Sofia's gaze traveled up to Bride's knees, poking out from a skirt cut from a yard and a half of white Egyptian cotton. Not enough to cover the head of a mullah.

When her eyes met Bride's they were opaque, no inquiry at all reflected there, so Bride answered the question a normal person would have posed.

"I saw you leave Decalon. No one was there to meet you. I offered you a lift."

"That was you?"

"Yes."

"I know you? You know me?"

"My name is Bride."

"That supposed to mean something to me?"

"No, but look what I brought you." Bride hoisted the shopping bag to the bed spread and reached into it. On top of the gift package of YOU, Girl she laid two envelopes, one slim one with the airline certificate, the fatter one with the hundred dollar bills totaling twenty-five thousand. Not much, if you thought of it as one thousand dollars for each year of her full sentence.

"What's that for?" Sofia looked at the items as though they might be

infected.

"It's all right. Just a little something to help you."

"Help me what?"

"Get a good start. You know. On your life."

"My life?" She sounded as though she needed an introduction to the concept.

"Yeah. Your new life."

"Why? Who sent you?"

Bride laughed. "You don't remember me. Lotus Ann. Lotus Ann Bridewell. At the trial? I was one of the children who—"

It was swifter than the way she had gotten into the taxi. Changing from slightly stooped penitent to un-defeated acrobat, Sofia Huxley knocked Bride to the floor, then leaned down to beat the life out of her. Wild, hard-fisted, screaming "You! You!" she pummeled Bride's face. Then she dragged her to the door and threw her out of the room, the way sanitation workers handled plastic trash bags—one hand at the neck, the other on the bottom—easily graceful out of habit. Bride lay on the pavement with just enough sense to search out her teeth with her tongue. The motel door slammed, then opened.

Bride's purse, shopping bag and all it had held flew through the air and bounced off her back. Before she could rise to her knees, the door to 3B opened again, this time a black spike heeled shoe arced toward the prone and bleeding Bride. Her teeth were all there but her mouth belonged to somebody else.

After crawling for a few feet, Bride tried to stand. Her legs worked, but when she tried to pick up her purse and the other items scattered on the walkway, she discovered her right arm was helpless. She collected everything the best she could with her left hand, dropped all of it in the shopping bag and limped on one shoe toward her car. "The manager," she thought. "I'll report her to the Motel's manager. Then the police." One hour of freedom, barely tasting parole, 0071140 was going back to the place she'd left that very afternoon. Bride caught a blurred look at her face in the side mirror. One closing eye was enough to convince her she didn't want to use the open one to see anybody but a cop. No staring manager, guests, or hamburger chomping patrons. After pushing her purse, shopping bag and bits into the passenger seat, she slid inside. The absence of pain, she knew, meant it would be deep when it came. One-armed, having to lift and steady her right hand with her left

to turn on the ignition, Bride peeked into the rear view mirror. Her mouth, bloody and swelling, looked as though it was stuffed with uncooked liver; the right side of her face was scraped. "Uh," she moaned. "Uh. Uhh." Police was all she could think of and once the problem of shifting with her left hand was solved, she drove the two miles into Norristown's main street where she saw nothing. Nobody. Her breathing was beginning to sound like snoring. The raw liver in her mouth blocked her throat and her nose wasn't working. Just when she thought she would have to brake or pass out, she saw the sign: Police Department, directing her to a lot behind a thrift shop. When she pulled up to its entrance she didn't have to lean out of the window to see another sign: Closed. With one-eyed inspection she could barely make out the rest: Sheriff back at 6:00 p.m. Clerk, Abbey something, had banker's hours. Mon Wed Fri 10:30 a.m. til 3:00 p.m. Oh God, she thought, with a burst of clarity. Of course. What would be the point of keeping regular office hours? With a four hundred bed women's prison five miles away and the State Trooper's headquarters on its site there would be no need for anything other than a homey police station just capable enough to hold teenagers and a drunk or two.

Hammers of pain were starting and as she rummaged her purse for the cell phone, Bride started to cry and was crying still when Norma answered.

"Later, perhaps," the nurse smiled. "When the doctor gets back."

Neither Bride nor Norma could hear her departing footsteps, so they waited a full minute before Norma whipped out her cosmetic mirror and let Bride see the damage.

"Ruined," whispered Bride.

"No, it's not. Give it time. Remember what Grace looked like after her face tuck?" Norma was as jittery with optimism as she was with curiosity.

"A surgeon did her face. A maniac did mine."

"Well, tell me, would you? What all happened?"

"I'm tired. Hungry, too." Tk hours had passed since her breakfast of half a blood orange.

"Here's applesauce. And juice." Norma fiddled with the carton, trying to stick in the straw.

"I want a steak. Raw."

"Who's going to chew it for you? Not me. I'm off meat."

Bride held the mirror closer. A quarter of her face was fine. The other three fourths cratered. Hateful black stitches around her slitty, puffy eye, bandages on her forehead; her lips so U-bangi she couldn't pronounce the 'r' in 'raw.' Codeine had stopped her jaw from hurting, but it was stiff, immobile, like her right arm. Under the pale flowered hospital gown, her ribs were encased in steel bands disguised as white strips of gauze. Worse than any of it, however, was her nose; nostrils wide as an orangutang's under gauze the size of half a bagel. Near it, her un-bruised eye cowered, bloodshot, practically dead. Norma could chatter all she wanted, but Bride knew her job at Sylvia Inc. was lost. How could she persuade women to improve their looks with products that could not improve her own? There wasn't enough tk foundation in the world to hide eye scars, a broken nose and facial skin scraped down to pink hypoderm. Assuming all this would fade, she would still need plastic surgery which meant months of idleness, hiding behind sun glasses and floppy hats.

"Don't sweat it," Norma had said. "I've already talk to Fayed, and Joanna, too. They said take all the time you need. Insurance pays for everything. Just keep in touch, they said...for the fall launch...."

"I can't eat, I can't talk, I can't think," Bride's voice was whiney; her words without consonants.

"Hey, girl," said Norma. "Pity party's over. We've got to get you out of here. This is a dump. They don't even have private rooms. The whole place is an emergency room, with one wacko nurse and two doctors living fifty miles away. Do you know how long it took to get anybody to even look at you? Anybody with a license, I mean. That nurse had lettuce in her teeth and I doubt she's washed her hands since graduating from that internet nursing course she took. "

"You don't think that doctor did a good job?"

"Who knows? In this trailer-park clinic? I'm driving you to a real hospital—with a toilet and a sink in the room."

"Don't they have to release me? I mean a doctor has to?"

"Please. We're leaving. I bought sweats. No decent hospital out here but they got a very hip Wal-Mart.[des.tk] Come on. Up. I'll help you. We'll get some frozen ice pops or slurpees on the way. Or a malted. That's probably better medicine-wise or some tomato juice, chicken broth maybe.... Oh, Bride. Don't look like that. It really is going to be all right."

Norma drove slowly because every bump and turn made her friend wince. "No. No. It was a guy."

"I didn't know you were twenty eight. I thought you were my age. Twenty-two. I saw it on your driver's license. You know, when I was looking for your insurance card for the forms I had to fill out. You don't look it, though. Even now your one good eye looks twenty-two." Norma laughed, hoping it would get a chuckle through that space ship mouth. It didn't.

"So who was he?"

"Who was who?"

"The guy who beat you half to death."

"Did I say it was a guy?" Bride couldn't remember her telephone conversation in detail. Just the 'Norma please you gotta come help me' and the best directions she could manage to the rear of the thrift shop where she was parked. In the couple of hours or so it took her friend to get there, she must have slept—maybe fainted a couple of times as the pain began its hammering. When Norma arrived, Bride might have said anything. The job at hand was to get into Norma's car and leave her own properly locked and parked. Somebody from a long time ago. She wasn't there. Probably dead by

now." "Who else? You telling me a woman did this?"

"No. No. It was a guy."

"Was he trying to rape you?"

"Yeah. I suppose. Something scared him off, I guess. He banged me around, threw me down and just took off."

"He didn't even take your purse, wallet, anything?"

"Sweet, I guess."

"Why didn't whoever scared him stay and help you"?

"I don't know!"

Norma backed off. Bride was sobbing, or trying to. Her single open eye wasn't up to it and her mouth obviously hurt too much to continue. After a few miles of silence, Norma made her voice as casual as she could.

"What were you doing up here, anyway?"

"I came to see a friend."

"You find him?"

"Her. No. I never found her."

"Who is she?"

"Somebody from a long time ago. She wasn't there. Probably dead by

now." "You have to speak, Lotus Ann. Say 'yes' or 'no'."

Norma turned her head to glance at Bride. Whoever it was, the almost rapist must have rattled her friend's brain pan. Otherwise, why would she tell such a silly lie? Like a kid with soiled panties saying "That wasn't me did it." There was \$25,000.00 cash in the un-stolen purse and an airline gift certificate, not to speak of samples of YOU, Girl products so new they hadn't been launched. He might not want any Nude Skin Glo, but free cash?

Tk

She really was a freak. The eyes. The quick change from dutiful, obedient to feral predator. From slack-lipped to fangs. From slouch to arrow. Bride never saw the signal—a grip of neck cords, a shoulder flex—nothing announced the onslaught.

Bride was only eight years old, still little Lotus Ann, when she had lifted her arm and pointed a nail bitten finger toward the young couple sitting at the long table.

"Is the woman you saw here in this room?"

Nod.

"You have to speak, Lotus Ann. Say 'yes' or 'no'".

"Yes."

"Can you tell us where she is seated?"

Lotus Ann raised her arm, slowly, to avoid knocking over the paper cup of water the lawyer had given her.

"Relax. Take your time, Lotus Ann."

And she did. Slowly raising her arm, her hand in a fist until the arm was straight. Then unfolding the fore-finger. Pow! Like a cap pistol.

Sofia Huxley opened her mouth, as though to say something. She looked shocked, unbelieving. But the finger pointed, pointed so long the lawyer lady had to touch her hand, say "Thank you, Lotus Ann," to get her to put her arm back down.

Outside the court room she was petted, embraced, smiled at by mothers exhausted by tears, drained of anger but not despair; heart-broken fathers gave her a thumbs-up. Dearie , pleased and proud of her brave little girl, led her away and they descended the steps of the court house in a cloud of 'April and Dawn' wafting from her mother's clothes.

This was the worst part of healing. Not the traces of pain, nor the slow

approach of her face to normalcy. But the hours of nothing to do but recall. Her eyes were well enough to cry from, so she did, off and on throughout the lonely days. Visits from friends annoyed her; television was idiotic, print made her dizzy and plot lines were beyond her grasp. Vases of gorgeous flowers, over packed, overdone, the way all California florists prepared them, made her nauseous. Even music irritated her. Vocals, both the beautiful ones and the mediocre, depressed her; instrumentals were worse. Obviously something awful had been done to her tongue for her taste buds were gone or in hiding. Everything tasted like lemons—except lemons which tasted like salt. Wine was a waste since percodan produced a thicker, more habitable fog.

Tk

She didn't even hear me out. I wasn't the only witness, the only one who turned Sofia Huxley into 071140. She has no family anymore. Her husband is in another prison and still un-paroled after seven tries. No body was there to meet her. Nobody. So why not accept...help instead of whatever check-out counter or cleaning woman job she had been given. Rich parolees didn't end up cleaning out toilets at Wendys. Bride was not just hurt by the broken jaw, arm, ribs you-name-it, she was ashamed of her injuries. Fact was, she had not

fought back. She had just lain there, unresisting as Sofia beat her. She would have died there, probably, if the attacker, her pale face gone apple red, had not grown tired. But Bride took it all—not a sound, not a single defensive gesture. Weary and panting Sofia had dragged her to her feet, pushed her through the door. Bride could still feel the hard hands clenching neck skin, her behind, and hear the crack of her own bones hitting concrete. Elbow, ankle, jaw. The long slide and rip of arms grabbing for balance as she fell. Her tongue searching through blood for teeth. And when the last item was thrown at her, the spike-heeled shoe, she had simply crawled away. Once again, taking it. “You are not the woman....” then pretending it didn’t matter.

Tk

Although it was boring at first, looking for white only clothes—winter white, summer white—Foam spurting from an aerosol can made him laugh, so he lathered with shaving soap and a brush. A handsome thing—boar’s hair swelling from an ivory handle. It ought to remain in the heap she tossed in the trash: toothbrush, mouthwash, strop and straight razor. The things he had taken: two books in a foreign language he could read but not speak, a notebook and the leather bag full of mysterious tools that swung from his shoulder like a purse suggested hurry as well as finality. Everything else, toiletries, clothes, items easily replaced,

he'd left. For reasons she couldn't explain, (surely she didn't want keepsakes) Bride had picked through the trash bag, retrieved the shaving brush and bone handled razor and placed both in the medicine cabinet. When the door clicked she stared at her face in the mirror.

"You should always wear white. Only white and all white all the time."

Jeri, the buyer who called himself a "total person" designer, was insistent.

"Not only because of your name, but because of what it does to your skin.

Makes people think of white chocolate every time they see you. Yummy!"

"Or Oreos?" she asked.

"Classier," he hissed. "Godiva."

Although it was boring at first, looking for white only clothes—winter white, summer white, spring white—it got more interesting when she began choosing colors for accessories.

"Listen, Bride honey. If you must have a drop of color confine it to shoes and purse. But I'd keep them black when white simply won't work."

"What about jewelry? Gold? Some diamonds? An emerald brooch?"

"No no," said Jeri. "No jewelry at all. Pearl dot earrings, maybe. No! Not even that. Just you, girl. All mink and milk. Everybody's dream, believe

me. And with your body? Puh-leeze."

Bride did as he directed and certainly cut a stunning, unforgettable figure. Loved by all. Well, adored anyway. Double-takes everywhere.

Six weeks and the stitch scars were hardly visible. Her lips were back to normal, as were the nose, the eye, the elbow, the jaw. Only the rib area remained tender and, much to her surprise, the scraped facial skin had healed the quickest. The face she examined in the mirror was good as new, almost, so why did she feel so bad, so sad? Bride opened the cabinet and removed the shaving brush, fingering it, letting the silky hair tickle. She looked again at her reflection. Slowly she brought the brush to her chin, stroking it. Then the jaw, the underside, then up to her ear lobes. Trolling above her lip she felt faint. "Soap", she thought. "I need soap." She tore the fancy paper from a "luxury bar" sported by an up-scale spa, dropped it in the soap dish and wet the brush. Stirring the creamy lather on the lower part of her face took her breath away. She paused; gathered herself and proceeded. The look was astonishing. How wide and lustrous her eyes became; how elegant her nose; her lips so kissable she touched them with the tip of her little finger. It wasn't too long before she clasped the razor, awkwardly. How did he hold it? Some finger arrangement

she couldn't remember. She would have to practice. Meantime, using the razor's dull side, she carved dark avenues through swirls of white lather. Splashing water on her face she realized the satisfaction that followed was unparalleled in her brief lifetime.

Working from home Bride had the best of all worlds: a delicious combination of authority, self-pity and slake-able desire. Calling the shots for promotional material, assignments and so on was fulfilling, but too easy. Feeling legitimate sorrow for herself was better. The thrill, however, was tucked in a little kit where the shaving equipment lay. When desire swept through her, she could stroke the boar's hair down her cheek or, if she chose or needed to, she could indulge herself in full. Numbering the many ways she had been wronged was strengthening. In that warm vat she recalled and reimagined both powerful and trivial incidents of rejection. "She's real pretty under all that black." Raised by a mother who never attended parents' night or school plays; the low expectation people had of her because of her color—business courses instead of college track; community college instead of a four-year State while working the cosmetic counter in the day; becoming a

buyer finally, after promotions were parceled out to white girls dumber than planks; even the move to Sylvia was marred at first by a question of her style, her dress. So she consulted Jeri on her own and, stealing his comment on the uniqueness of the style he invented for her—Just you, girl—sky-rocketed to Regional Manager. All along the way brief, meaning failed, relationships: the would-be actors, musicians, artists, players waiting for her paycheck like an allowance; others already professionally successful treating her like a medal, shiny, mute testimony to their prowess. None giving, helping—all disdaining her work, her ideas, baby-talking her through what she thought was serious conversation before finally locating a more reliable source of pocket lining or ego enhancement elsewhere.

Then him.

So independent. Tender. Tough. Funny. Open. Honest. So seemingly fascinated by her. They had joking arguments about sexy shades of lipstick; grave ones in which he explained why he despised the whole idea of make up. He could make feeding ducks popcorn an adventure. And no routine morning/nightly snatch for him. His appetite for sex was intermittent—periods of evangelical reticence following an earthshaking need to erupt. Then, suddenly

out of nowhere, literally nowhere, "You are not the woman..." and vanishing like a ghost.

Dumped.

Like always.

Even Sofia Huxley, of all people, dumped her. She could have said "no thanks," or even "get out." Unless physical brutality was prison talk. Instead of emphatic words, savagery, blood letting was required in case the other inmate was retarded. Bride was not sure which was worse, sudden inexplicable abandonment or sudden unjustified assault. Ripping a heart or crushing a body. While she could admit she may have startled Sofia with a memory of guilt, it should have been obvious that her motive, her gesture was all about forgiveness. But there was no such excuse for him. The day before "You are not..." they had had lunch in her office: lobster salad, Smart water, peach slices smiling lazily in brandy.

Stir-crazy, tired of wandering in her condo—a west coast version of a New York loft, all light, space and loneliness—Bride donned another white uniform, shorts, halter, thong sandals; tucked the shaving kit in her bag and snatched up

a magazine and sunglasses. Norma would be pleased that she had taken a bracing walk, sat in the park, casually, calmly reading. Her long legs crossed, her manner cool. Dog walkers and seniors visited the park this time of day. Later on runners and skaters. Seldom a mother and child. In this neighborhood, children had play dates, guarded by nannies in patios, play rooms, pool side or in restaurants designed for their glee.

Bride chose a bench near a phony pond where real ducks sailed. Deliberately not thinking of him or popcorn or lectures about the difference between wild drakes and yard birds; studiously blocking a memory of cool messaging fingers, she flipped the pages of O Magazine. At the sound of slow footsteps on gravel, she looked up to see a white-haired couple strolling by, un-speaking, holding hands. Their paunches were the exact same size, although his was lower down. Both wore colorless slacks and loose t shirts with faded language, front and back, about peace. Theirs was the long, intimate life together that evoked such envy, dog minders snickered and yanked leashes for no reason at all. They moved slowly as though in a dream. Steps matching, looking straight ahead like people called to the space ship where, at last, a door would slide open and a tongue of red carpet roll through. There they

would ascend , hand in hand, into the arms of a benevolent alien and their smile, accompanied by music so beautiful, so familiar, would bring you to tears. Bride reached into her bag and having found the shaving brush, diddled it lightly, privately, until she was soothed.

"No kids, though."

Norma chose the restaurant. Something semi-chic, a formerly hot, now barely hanging on, place catering to a few tourists and the decidedly un-hip. She must have thought the pretty food, the male waiters with red suspenders emphasizing their bare chests would call Bride back from the dead—the hibernation her friend had been insisting on for tk weeks. Although there was no medical evidence, Norma thought Bride was behaving in a classically post-rape manner. Tiny steps forward into action, into a social life, were needed. No pressure, just a quiet dinner in a failing restaurant with cute but harmless beef on display. The evening air was too cool for the sleeveless white shift, transparent in interesting places, that Bride wore, but Norma was encouraged by the effort taken. Even she, who knew, could hardly detect the scars. In all, Bride was as striking as ever. *Somebody I was trying to help. She would have killed me if she could.*

They talked offce through the appetizer, the subject collapsing with the

mahi mahi. *don't know her.*

"I want a vacation. Go somewhere." Bride nudged the fish away from the pine nuts. *ce.*

"OOOh. Where?" *the script. Let me have the whole plate, please.*

"No kids, though." *tell it. How when she was 35, in the third grade, a*

teacher "That's easy." *green building, some of the students' and school work*

her story "And no parties."

"Say what?" *the script. Let me have the whole plate, please.*

"Settled people. I want to play shuffle board on a deck. Bingo, maybe."

"You're scaring me."

"No, really. Just quiet. Nothing louder than waves lapping, ice melting in plastic glasses."

"Aww, man. You're still in shock. Don't make any plans till it wears off. You won't know what you want til then."

"I do know. Listen." Bride drove fork tines into the fish, breaking it into raggedy layers. "I lied. I lied to you. That was a woman beat the hell out of me. Somebody I was trying to help. She would have killed me if she could."

"A woman? Who?" *No?*

"You don't know her."

"You don't either, obviously."

"I did once."

"Bride, don't give me scraps. Let me have the whole plate, please."

It took merely tk to tell it. How when she was little, in the third grade, a teacher in the kindergarten building next to the main school, played nasty with her students.

"I can't hear this." Norma palmed her forehead.

"You asked."

"Okay, okay."

"She was caught and sent away," Bride said.

"Good."

"I testified."

"Even better. So?"

"I pointed. Pointed her out. Said I saw her do it."

"And?"

"They put her in prison."

"Got it. End of story. No?"

"No. I. I. Thought about her, off and on. You know?"

"Uh uh. Tell me."

"Because. She was just twenty."

"So were the Manson girls."

"Now she's over forty. And I thought she probably had no friends."

"Poor thing. No kiddies in the joint. What a drag."

"You're not hearing me."

"You better believe it. Of course I'm not listening to you. You nuts?"

Who is this female alligator, besides being pond scum, I mean. She related to you? What?"

"No."

"Well?"

"I just thought she would be lonely."

"She's alive. That not good enough for her?"

Bride sighed and signaled the waiter. "Again," she told him, nodding toward the apple martini glasses.

"None for me, cookie," said Norma. "I need cold sobriety."

The waiter obliged with a killer smile full of bright and bonded teeth.

"I don't know why I went. What I do know is I kept remembering her. All these years. In Decalon."

"You write her? Visit?"

"No. I've seen her only twice. Once at the trial; and once when this happened." Bride gestured toward her eye.

"Idiot. You put her behind bars! Of course she wanted to put your lights out."

"She wasn't like that before. She was gentle, kind."

"Before what? You said you saw her twice. At the trial and when she clocked you. But before you said she taught next door and you saw her diddling kids, so..."

The waiter leaned in with the green drink.

"Okay. Three. Three times."

Norma touched the corner of her lip with the tip of a fingernail, thinking, the woman must have molested Bride too. But she was in the third grade, she said. Maybe..maybe...Is that why she couldn't forget her, went to see her with presents? Because she liked it? This was thick and getting thicker. Maybe Bride was an undeclared lesbian. But why would she be? The company was

practically run by lesbians; their customers included trannies, straights, gays—anyone who took their looks seriously. No, no, not so thick, after all. Must be the guy. Lover man walks, she feels down, so she goes to make nice with a female child molester she helped convict.

"Waiter! Honey. I've changed my mind. Bluveldt. Rocks. Double it. "

The waiter winked. "You got it," he said, hitting 'got' with what must have earned him a telephone number in Missouri.

"Look, girl friend." Norma turned to Bride. " Think about it. What made you feel so sorry for her?"

"I don't know. I guess I wanted to feel good about myself. Less disposable. Sofie, that's her name, was all I could think of, someone who would appreciate...some...without strings...

"I get it."

"Really? Do you?"

"Absolutely. The dude splits, you feel like cow flop, you try to get your mojo back, but it's a bust. Right?"

"Right."

"So we fix it."

"How?" it was destabilizing. Had the plastic surgeon done it, on his

own? "Well not with no Bingo." one prescribed? Bride felt dizzy. Okay, she

though "What then?" then. Like Jeri preferred. The light-headedness stopped

but no "Blingo!" She reached for the shaving brush but, fearful of ruining

her m "You called?" asked the waiter. stroking her cleavage. The phone rang.

"Your car, Miss Bride."

Everything had turned out perfectly. Hair, dress, makeup. She was to be the main attraction at the celebration. A company award, was it? Or a surprise birthday party. Something as important as it was lovely. In any case, a crowd awaited. Was there a limo coming? Surely she did not have to driver herself. And where was it? A hotel? The uneasiness of the questions only added to the excitement and kicked up the level of satisfaction at her appearance. Just the earrings, now. One carat diamonds. Now what? Jesus. They wouldn't go in. The platinum stem kept slipping away from the lobe. She looked closer and discovered they were not pierced. How could that be? Bride had had pierced ears since she was eight. She never wore clip ons. Never. Pearl dots usually, as per total person Jeri. Diamonds sometimes. Tk But there they were: virgin earlobes untouched by a needle, smooth as a baby's thumb. It was more than

disconcerting; it was destabilizing. Had the plastic surgeon done it, on his own? Side effects of the medicine prescribed? Bride felt dizzy. Okay, she thought. No jewelry, then. Like Jeri preferred. The light-headedness stopped but not the anxiety. She reached for the shaving brush but, fearful of ruining her make up, had to be content with stroking her cleavage. The phone rang. "Your car, Miss Bride."

If she faked sleep, maybe he would just leave. Whoever he was, she didn't want to face him. The touch of his lips on her shoulder was light; then a finger shifted her hair behind her ear. Murmuring as though dreaming, she smiled without opening her eyes or turning toward him. He moved the bed clothes and went into the bathroom. Bride sneaked a touch to her earlobes. Nobody at the Celebration had mentioned the absence of earrings. Strange, because all through the speeches, the diner, the dancing, her re-formed lobes were so much on her mind, she couldn't concentrate, causing her to laugh too long at a witless joke, to drink twice what she could gracefully hold, to flirt like a prom queen candidate with no chance at all of winning, which is how whoever he was got in her bed. She tasted her tongue hoping the film belonged to her alone. God.

He was dressing now and calling her name. Would she have to look at him? She pulled a pillow over her head and hear him chuckle. Then kitchen noises as he made coffee? No. Not coffee. He was pouring something: orange juice, water, V eight? A few minutes of silence, then steps, next a tick on the night stand, followed by the click of a lock. Door closed. Bride peeped from under the pillow to see tent-folded note paper next to the clock. Telephone number. "Fabulous." And his name. Happiness—not a company employee.

Slowly she rose and entered the bathroom. There were traces of steam on the shower glass beyond which the mirror, clear and sparkling, re-ran what she had seen the previous evening. Ear lobes as chaste as the day she was born. This is what crazy must be, she thought, and reached for the shaving brush. There was not a single hair in the pit of her arm, but she lathered it anyway. Then the other. A new idea surfaced. Later on, when she felt like it, she would repeat the delight on her pudenda. Now won't that be tricky with a straight razor? Tricky. O yes.

The room always seemed unlit although nothing was hidden. Grown up lady

things covered the vanity. Tweezers, cotton balls, round boxes and square perfume bottles, hair pins in a saucer, tissue, eyebrow pencils, mascara, nail file. And over it all the smell of sweet, cheap face powder.