

Quercus

a journal of literary and visual art



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cover image

Heidi Hernandez

untitled

2002, mono-print with colored pencil, 6 inches x 9 inches

inside back cover image

Becky Swanson

untitled

2003, Black and white print, 5 inches x 7 inches

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i have a pen, feels like a needle,
it's no wonder you think i'm crazy . . .

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Never Hollow

"Now I'm not a poet . . .
I'm not going to start talking about
the night
and how it's a skin on the wind
'bout how it never ceases to make itself hollow
'bout 'why' it does, 'where' it is
I'm just gonna tell it like it is
I wanna die"

I once heard
about a limping coat rack,
maybe even saw sections of it,
there, maybe there, but never here.
About how it collected rust and complacency,
that there is some regret
(hate)
but it will pass
(rage)
maybe wither, maybe shrink
into something tight crimson.
I once heard about a patient, dangerous girl who had an air
that was open and closed,
maybe had some driven, upturned glances
there, maybe there, but never here.
About how she turned and drums pounded,
she looked at you and time
stopped goddamn stopped.
I once heard
about how you could lie
to keep people green, but still keep your voice
full of thick splinters
as it drips you hollow.

If I could just remember . . .
There, maybe there, but never here

—Karen Stone

A hunter,

you endeavor to detect
life, manicured—
shaded life-blood arranged
into quilt-patterned
perfection.

But minor tones and tactless misdeeds
arouse emotion-particles,
arresting fury between teeth.
Vulgar avenues of ancient syrup
careen across skin,
baring the hatred that sears,
that lava composed
of rancor and delusion.

Sincerity melted down
sticks to the skin—
a rooted residue
that boils down
to how you dissipate.

—Karen Stone

Drowning Shoreline

"I'm thinking about taking some time . . ."

Can't find quiet refuge,
not in your arms
or anywhere you linger.

Frustration sets in thick
broken eyes lend
no reassurance from your side.
Backing down from the idea of you
cold and quiet here.

Saw you yesterday morning—
blankets pulled tight around your dreams
not letting me in
fearing chills of winter
would seep into your walls.
I danced around the edges
hoping I'd make it into a daydream—
realized by your eyes
that I can't get anywhere,
no quiet refuge in this picture.

Lifting my arms to protest the fight.

"The bottom line is you don't know how much . . . how I feel . . ."

Thinking about getting out.
My breath starts to tighten
and I'm choking on residue.

Make me stay;
show me the weight of your skin
or let me slip between long silences.

"Don't fool yourself into thinking things are simple . . . nothing
never is . . ."

Bent the will to break over you.
Stiff eyes don't move meanings forward.

The push and pull from your hands
tingled my soul—
moments paused as shadows met
the break of day with clarity
and all other thoughts fled.

A stretch of open highway behind me.
Glimpses of what could have been
stuck in the mirror.

Taunted me from twenty feet away,
could never get that close
nowhere near inside of you.
Woke up in a cold sweat
not remembering where I had laid my head.
Couldn't find you in the darkness
afraid I've moved away.

"Keep telling yourself that kid."

And I am perpetually waiting
to swallow my own dreams.

Tongue-tied.

Danced with quiet tones—
made it smooth to swallow.
Melody blended on my skin—
morning laid itself open on yours.

Overexposed the pictures.

Punctured the moon,
released my dreams.

—*Alicia Levi*

A Stab at Zen along the Neris

Quickly past
The Duke who dreams of
Iron Wolves.

Before dawn,
west along the Neris,
a slow run.

Warm under
a near-saffron coat,
rhythmic breaths.

My lost hat
Disturbs the black quiet.
Breath in, out!

Bright lights of
ten thousand things, the
Neris returns.

Yellow dawn
teases out men who fish.
Stomachs growl.

Gaunt men fish.
But return nil to
the Neris.

'Neath tiny floats,
nameless silver fish
hook themselves.

No name fish
gasp their last in bags
of plastic.

I blush hot,
not from exertion,
but shame.

I return
past the Iron Wolf who
dreams of men.

—Randy Richards ('71)

Among Sturdy Trees

Carefully you planted me among sturdy trees,
Torso bent with fervor, bleeding
Thumbs and knuckles and knees.
Blindly rooted in parched soil,
You knead and knead
My viscid needs, my wick-thin roots.

You didn't know
A birch is left barefaced
When peeled and pruned.
My catkins droop like bristly tongues
Unfettered, thirsting, waiting
For ruin, my keeper.

Wringing and lingering,
Never heeding your starch-cracked hands,
You peel and peel and say:
'You are every girl,' you are not
Limb-stamped and downtrodden,
A fleck in the copse.

—*Carrie Chesney* ('02)

we both have been here and left
we went to where the music ran
like wine and the wine like water
and autumn came year round
where I knew the scent of morning
and could taste it when we talked of dreams
like we knew something
built our house of elastic walls
collaborating composing ourselves
collapsing into rhythms the sounds of my life
and our breathing
we lived in a photograph there in a moment
the snapshot of my liquid soul
spilling over on the kitchen table.

—Amy Falvey

the wind came under our roof
last November stirred the sky
they told you
there's no spinning gold from hay
without some magic
we've all seen too many
dead fairytales

the terror in the night moves
you can't see anything
but you feel it crawling on your skin
when death comes knocking at your door
maybe you've known it forever

these are the crosswalks the railways the train tickets
we came here to forget
before we all grew up

all out of ourselves

walking on oceans and drowning in puddles
we spoke of the brave, bowed our heads,
kneeled down to pray
so damn scared we couldn't breathe
clutching nothing as if it were the world
like we could carry the universe
in a tiny shell

didn't know the first thing about this

we just held hands and held on tight
rolled down the windows kicked off our shoes
the road was clear and empty
and we knew

we knew better than to try any harder

—Amy Falvey

Bent around the waxes and wanes we are driven into the deep
waters build around us like walls the mighty tides
overcome us
we sit inside the crystal ball drowning outside
murdering words and faith and time with such recklessness
losing the shore and swimming home we tell them all
we met our demons somewhere between goodness and
mediocrity and we couldn't come back until we knew
where we'd been they told us to go to the water feel how it
moves through our fingers
and we said it flowed like God.

—Amy Falvey

Si ha't mich verwunt
Rehte aldurch min sele
In den vil toetlichen grunt,
Do ich ir tet kunt,
Daz ich tobte unde quele
Umbe ir vil guetlichen munt.
Den bat ich zeiner stunt,
Daz er mich ze dienste ir bevele
Und daz er mir stele
Von ir ein senftez kussen, so waer ich iemer gesunt.

Wie wirde ich gehaz
Ir vil rose varwen munde,
Des ich noch niender vergaz!
Doch so muet mich daz,
Daz si mir zeiner stunde
So mit gewalt vor gesaz.
Des bin ich worden laz,
Also daz ich vil schiere wol gesunde
In der helle grunde
Verbrunne, e ich ir iemer diende, in wisse umbe waz.

—Heinrich von Morungen (12th century)

She wounded me
Right through my soul
Down to its mortal depths,
When I told her
That her sweet mouth
Drove me mad and tortured me.
I asked it once
To press me into serving her,
To steal a gentle kiss
For me from her. I would be healed forever.

Why is it I began
To hate her rosy-tinted mouth,
Even now still on my mind?
That hour torments me yet
When she sat there before me
With such power.
Of this I have grown tired
And therefore would prefer
To burn, a healthy man,
In deepest Hell, before I serve her more, not knowing why.

—*Translation: Nancy Hayes*

Willow

(Reflection on Psalm 1)

Life gnarls my steadfast trunk
and fissure-scarred bark.
Branches cascade, canopy conceals;
roots seek life-giving Water.
Spear-shaped leaves stretch
to bathe in the ever-flowing Stream.
Despite frost and flood, I hold steadfast
on the riverbank where I'm planted.

I battle the wind that determinedly blows
my arching arms in distracting directions.
Often I choose to be pliant to others,
weaving my boughs into baskets of love.

When God alone is looking,
I lift my limbs heavenward
weeping in joy and praise.

—Nancy Flaherty

The Color of You

You were rick-rack red
On cotton curtains hemmed and white
A red-ringed lunch-counter coffee cup
A first red apple bite

And you were cherry-red red
Meat and stem and stone
They tamped down subtle shades around you
Green and brown and bone

But you were red and tints of red
Bloody red and pale pink wine
And you were theirs and his and his
But the red of you was never mine

—*Renée Bushā*

Hallowed Haunts

You are my watercolored ghosts.
You bleed into the finite features of my world.
I often wonder if you are portable
or secured by faintly painted chains to the specific.

Do you drive the snowbirds south,
far from the last street corner you stood upon
or the house you pointed to
on Sunday afternoons?

Perhaps you are only held here
by the deep white valleys of my paper mind,
waiting, until the page your color slides across
is finally discarded by hands that never knew.

—Renée Bushā

Geulah: Redeemer and Redeemed

Redeemer and redeemed,
Standing side by side
By the shores of the sea,
Waiting to share
Yet one more act
Of wondrous redemption.
As if
Walking out of Egypt
Was not enough.

By the Redeemer's breath
The sea would divide,
The redeemed walking
On dry land
Where but moments before
The ocean's depths stood.
Walking
Toward relative freedom:
More than they had,
Not as much as they wanted.

The Redeemer would redeem
But never enough
To satisfy.
Yesterday's redemptions
Were so easily forgotten,
Were so quickly replaced
By the desire for more,
In a never ending cycle
Of redemption and thanklessness.

"I give you freedom!"
"We want fleshpots!"
"In this barren wilderness
I feed you with manna!"
"Where are the fruit?
Where are the vegetables?
Where is the meat?"

The litany continues
Across the generations,
Across the millennia.
The Redeemer
Is redeeming us still
From the persecution and oppression
That have so long been our lot;
From hunger,
From need,
From ignorance,
From fear,
From so many forces
That seek to destroy us,
Body, mind, and soul.

Yet still,
Our cry is for more:
More possessions,
More comfort,
More pleasure,
More wealth.

When will we,
The redeemed,
Learn to appreciate
God's wondrous redemptions?
When will we
Be able to say,
Indeed, to shout and to sing,
"Mi chamocha ba-eilim Adonai?"
"Who is like unto You, Adonai,
Among the gods that are worshiped?"
And truly mean it?

—Rabbi Henry Jay Karp

Snowy Revelations in an Intimate Winter

I spent an intimate winter,
conversed with cocoa as memories filled my nostrils,
danced in the fireplace, burning images reappearing behind blue
 pools,
grew warm in a white embrace, bringing the angels back to me,
enjoyed death and examined life,
contemplating the value of each and preferring the former,
realizing that as my friend melted, I would gain a future
and lose a past.

—Jackie Wristen

Memory

Never mind the name,
I am universal,
I am in love and in hate.
I am language,
I am the face
of spontaneous determination.
I am a gust of cultural influx,
I am the opposite
of monotonous exaggerations.
I am the collection of dust,
always changing
to different worlds,
creating heaven and hell
under the same spell.
I debate what's written.
I am the encounter
between alphabetic
and electronic assemblages.
So many hear
but do not listen.
Here I pray
in faith or fear,
a vantage point
encrypted by mere
bits and pieces,
dynamic performances,
splendid mixes,
a bold balance that
generates composite images.
And I'm not the percent
you think survives.
I create on my left
and choose on my right.
As if I was a race,
all the cars
speed to the same red light.
Here with limbless answers
umbilical blisters
cut that city
into transient midnight,

pale thoughts
tread the undertow
of a snail slouching whisper,
Who's in charge here?
I really would like to meet her
upon the exit of signs.
Is there anybody there?
I can't breathe through
these segregated eyes.
I am rural deception,
a glimpse of intimate
seams and stitches
shimmering at the edge of perception.
I am a burst
of tangible dimensions,
a remover of obstacles,
a spiral window
open to a logical moongate,
a mirror of indigenous canopies
mapping my celestial landscape.
I am the air of vocal vulgarity
decorated in auspicious colors.
I am the height
of a rare sunset
cursing winter and summer.
I am social,
I'm controversial,
I operate in a recombinant fashion.
I'm an extension
of what already is
and what will loudly happen.
Imagine . . .
I am sounds of a verbal avalanche.
I am the basic unit of contemporary art.
I am a storm of swords
diverse as the universe's stars.
I am swift as unspoken magic,
with my wand
my words can bond
adopt new forms

visions of seamless fabric.
I am one of many.
A soul with attitude,
experience me.
I partake of multitudes.

—Angel Austria ('02)

We All Have Rocks in Our Pockets

The night sky is not black;
it's deep blue
like my soul on a Saturday night
after Everywhere's closed
and I'm stumbling up the alleyway alone
and it's deep enough, but we don't jump in
because we are all afraid of gravity
weighing us down
like a Woolf
with rocks in her pockets
standing at the bottom of the River Ouse
waiting for life to wash away,
but it never does—
it's ripped from our bodies,
stripping existence away
like a rattle stolen
from a child in church.

The moon casts dim light everywhere
for that's all she can muster
and she wants it to reach
the bowels of this world,
and maybe it has
just by falling on me
stumbling through.

—Jeremy Burke ('99)

Grass Rustling in December

Two days since
Christmas passed too quickly,
so I change into walking clothes:
 khaki pants,
 old boots
 from construction days gone by
and a heavy coat from the basement
despite it not being so cold.
 I find a pair of thin brown chore gloves
 in the pockets
 and am all set.

As I walk around the house,
calling Boone out from under
 the porch
 until I hear him scrambling
along up behind me
 with his nose scanning
 the still-frozen ground
 for some long-lost scent,

I try to remember
walks from my past
along the path that
 sprawls before me this
 December afternoon.

Unlatching
the rusty hook
on the gray weather-
worn gate of my childhood
reminds me of my great grandfather's
hands and my helping him with great-grandfather
tasks such as pond fishing and finishing root beer floats
 on long summer evenings.

And I cannot think of him now
without seeing him
wandering

over the hills
of Clinton County
dressed as Saint Nick
with a pack on his
back full of gifts
for the children in
one-room schoolhouses
scattered
among our neighbors' fields and pastures
and especially not today
so near the now catholic holiday.

The pond lies capped
at the bottom of the hill
by a slowly melting pane of ice
and cradled by the bank
I walk across
on my way to a steel gate
now only barely covered in flaking red paint—
the mythic icon
of my childhood days,
full of adventures outdoors,
kite flying and apple picking.

I know this is not true,
but my memory suggests it
and I am not in the mood
for quarreling.

On top of the hill
the wind,
as it whisks past the dry switch grass,
delivers in a hushed tone
the message I long to hear,

but I guess I am still not ready for
the wisdom of grass rustling in December.

—Jeremy Burke ('99)

To Be Myth

Alone

in the back room of Yen Ching's
the ambience is nicer than you'd guess.

Green walls intimate,
upside-down teacups anxious

yet poised,

fat Buddha laughing silently in the corner.

The front rooms are so dark the farthest chairs disappear.

The hostess brings me a pot of tea.

I pour a cup

and think of my mother

pouring her afternoon cup

at home safe from the wind

but watching the leaves fly past her

kitchen window silent as a prayer.

Soup sipped from a big soup spoon breaks the silence

startling even myself.

I join the Buddha in silent laughs at my own jumpiness.

I finish with Billy Collins and close him up

set him aside

to focus on shrimp-fried rice

and two crab rangoons.

Delicious.

Long after my plate is pushed aside

I sit

sipping from my small white cup with the blue ring

and ponder myself as a dragon—1976—

about rats and monkeys

where I'd meet one

why I should avoid dogs when I thought I've always liked them

or at least they've liked me.

I decide the dragon is a good fit

if only because they're mythical and

I want to be myth.

I sip one long last sip and rise

from my lair

to pay my hostess.

The bill is \$4.75 and I smile

as my father would
at getting a meal for such a good price.
Thanking her, I turn
and amble out the door,
tail lashing behind me.

—Jeremy Burke ('99)



Jim Purcell
untitled

2003, oil on canvas, 36 inches x 48 inches



Meghan Connor
Aegis

2004, oil on canvas, 24 inches x 22 inches



Jayne Lunn
The 7 of Us

2004, oil on canvas, 12 inches x 24 inches



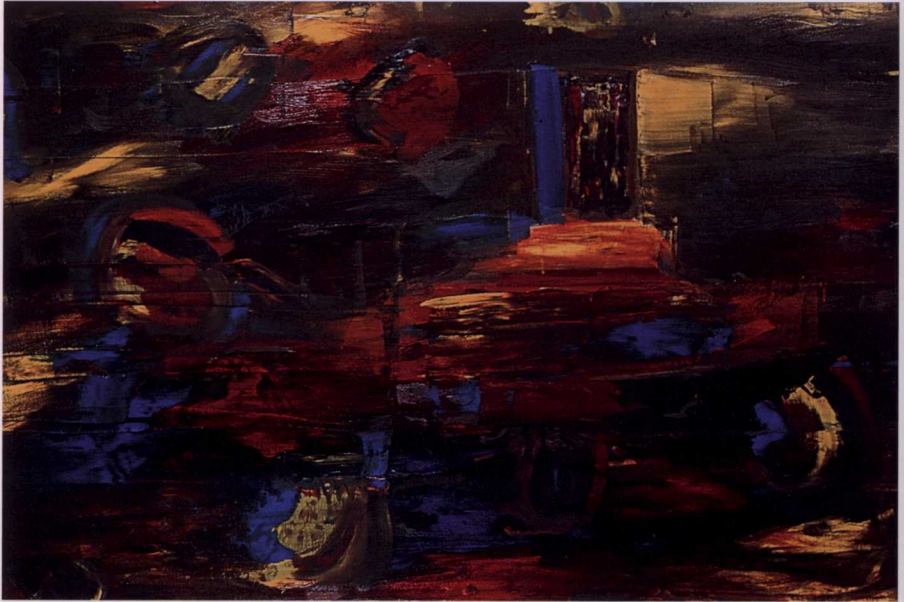
Dana Soedt '03
Traveling Realizations I

2003, oil on board, 6 inches x 6 inches



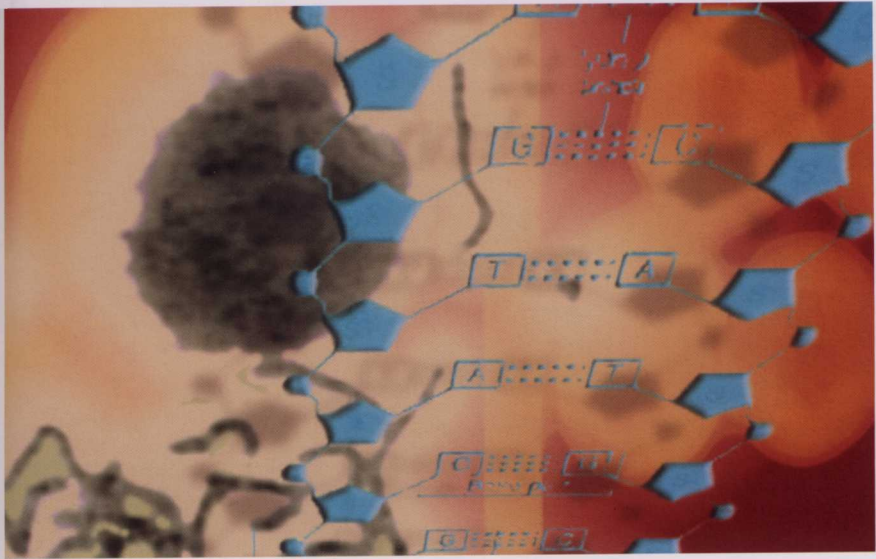
Dana Soedt '03
Traveling Realizations II

2003, oil on board, 6 inches x 6 inches



Andrew Moeller
untitled

2004, oil on canvas, 36 inches x 24 inches



Aaron Holst '94
Strategy I

2004, serigraph & acrylic paint on masonite, 48 inches x 30 inches



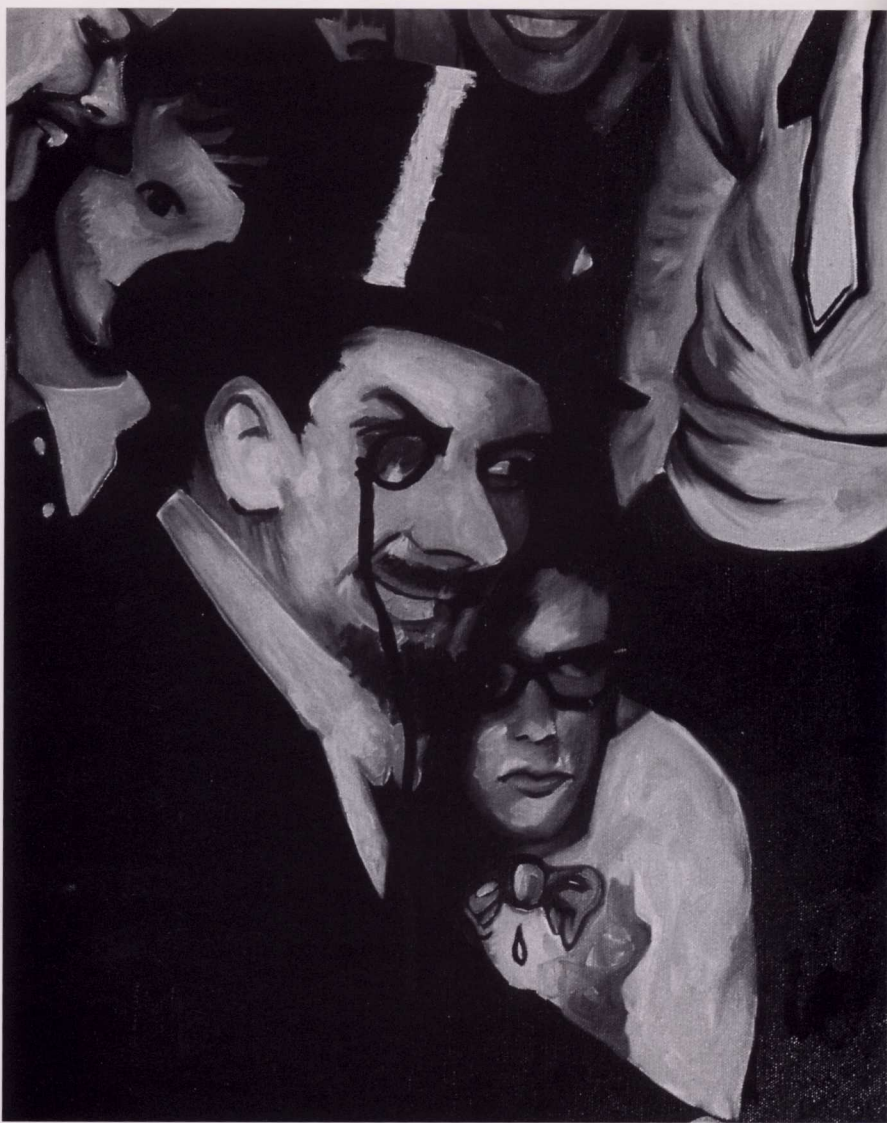
Leslie Bell '72
The Gregarious Pilgrim

2003, oil on canvas, 45 inches x 40 inches



Leslie Bell '72
Susannah without the Elders

2003, oil on canvas, 45 inches x 40 inches



Heidi Hernandez
untitled

2004, oil on canvas, 16 inches x 20 inches



Heidi Hernandez
Self-portrait

2004, oil on canvas, 24 inches x 36 inches



Katie Kiley '74
One-Pointed Concentration Mudra

2003, black and white intaglio print, 9 inches x 9 inches



Julie Townsend '87
Practice

2002, mixed media, 18 inches x 24 inches



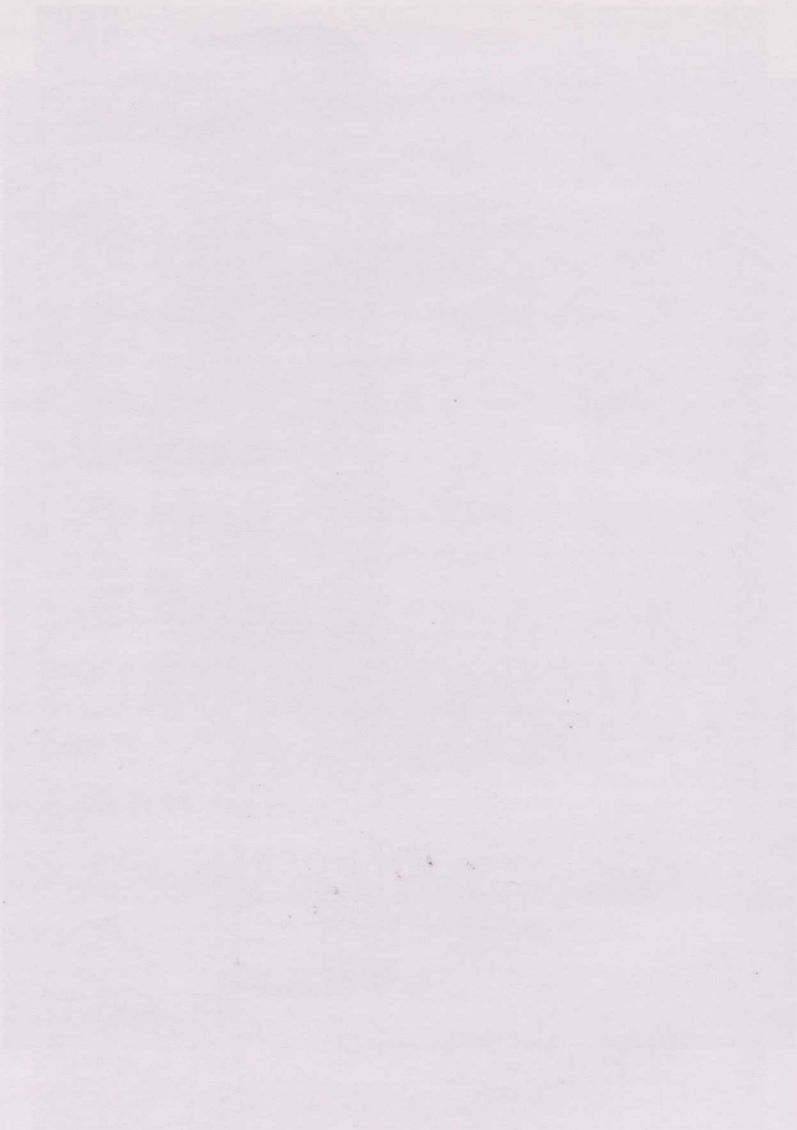
Gretchen Stabile
untitled

2004, oil on canvas, 44 inches x 48 inches



Karin Kuzniar '98
Correspond

2003, oil on paper, 27 inches x 42 inches



THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
PRESS

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS, U.S.A. 1968

The Open Highway Road Trip Blues

The road is manic, a concrete vein that lives and ebbs and flows grinding under tires. We're caught. We're manic ourselves, laughing, screaming at each other, screaming songs at cars we pass to see if old women think we're insane, heads bobbing in unison to a beat they can't hear through panes of glass and the chasm of air whipping around and between our cars. Music fuels the energy. We cling to it, ride it out. Gotta keep it up. Gotta stay on the edge. Gotta be glad to be moving somewhere. Can't just become the old women. Need the edge, the lust for motion. Hands latched onto steering wheel, steering wheel latched onto wheels, connected to tires gripping the concrete, keeping this whole pile of frazzled nerves and pounding hearts and pistons together and moving.

I'm driving like an Indy 500 racer, burning holes in the eyes of drivers in front of me through their rearview mirrors, gliding around them with supple acceleration that sets me back against my seat and presses my gray matter against the back of my skull. I am all powerful—I can see the whole world stretched out in front of me connected with one unending ribbon of highway and all I have to do is not lose my edge.

When beside me, Steve groans, "Damn it man! Pull over. I have to piss!"

So it has come to that, has it—insubordination. Thirty-seven miles ago no one had to piss so badly we had to abandon the road. The rest area exit ramp leaps at me, blending with the panorama of scenery flowing past. I'm torn. Don't want to lose the edge, don't want to lose momentum, but I don't want Steve to kick my ass or piss in my car. So when it seems almost too late and everyone is yelling and the only thing I can make sense of is Joey Ramone launching into "Blitzkrieg Bop," I give a twist to the wheel. Machinery moves and we're hit with the forces of deceleration and a right turn all at once and the whole weight of all of us and the car seems to be thrown onto the left front tire clutching the arc of the white line running down the edge of the road leading into the rest area. We float. The car is lighter, gliding, drifting rather than jerking, easing to a stop, parked at an angle. Then I turn off the ignition and The Ramones are jerked back, swallowed into their microphones as everything gives way to quiet.

It's a relief. To be finally not going. Everything pressed to the back of my body, blood, brains, guts, etc., finds its way back to its usual place. A door pops open and fresh, cool air wafts in on a

breeze. It has been hours since I felt a breeze that wasn't manufactured. We were our own self-contained universe, a rocket traveling through deep space. Now we're grounded again, a part of the world, connected, not moving but being. The car is inanimate again, like the road, just pavement hard under my shoes. Everyone is oozing out of the car, stretching, taking a few cautious steps with legs that seem to have gone unused for so long that we doubt they will work again. It's a dispersal. Everyone has their own course now. Steve is waddling to the bathroom as fast as his legs can carry him without releasing the torrent bottled in his bladder. Kevin has mastered walking again and is off to purchase sodas. Jill and Dave are wandering off, on their own, angling toward a point in the distance in an empty pasture that hasn't quite turned green where a solitary windmill is standing sentinel, the only other building we can see from here in any direction.

I stand and revel in motionlessness, feeling the air move around me solitary and unguarded. The scent of dry grass fills my nostrils and I breathe it in, enjoying smells that aren't filtered and artificial. I wonder why I didn't want to stop. The highway seems insignificant now, just a line of cars passing by, missing the scope of the world, fixated on just one of three-hundred and sixty degrees. It has rained here recently; the ground feels soft underfoot, almost spongy.

One by one all my fellows use the restroom and I go there myself. This building is the shrine of the interstate people, a temple built to serve only them, dedicated to maps and weather information, the things we need to guard us on our journey, the scripture of the road. From the sights and smells inside it could be almost any public restroom anywhere, but you'll never find it unless you're on the road. There's no attraction here, no purpose for a restroom in the middle of fields and nowhere, but the highway is here.

Outside again, I stand for a while just looking around, at picnic tables with roofs made to look like teepees and, out in the distance, trees that are all growing along the line of a creek they conceal from my view. It's empty and peaceful here, no rush. I want to lie down on the crinkly grass, watch the torn clouds drift by and think of nothing. I want to go off and live by that creek in the distance, drink in the serenity of the world, and not see another human being for days. I think this as I slip back behind the wheel and click in my seatbelt.

I can feel it again. The dreaminess drains out of my friends' faces. It seems like their voices were just un-muted or I just came up from underwater and can hear them again. The engine and Ramones come to life together. I let out a yell and pound the dash as I back out, shift into drive and release the brake. I feel the energy surge, cascading into me as I'm pressed back into my seat. The edge. The road. Riding the concrete vein. Kevin screaming "BLITZKRIEG BOP" at a middle-aged woman standing by her minivan who can't hear him through his window. Back on the road. The edge is back, surging, a ribbon of concrete stretching out before us into forever.

—Sean Bachman

The Joy of Angels

Ethan McDonald had been in the dusty little fishing village of San Pablo about a week. He was alone, and his solitary exploration of the out-of-the-way hamlets of Mexico was about to end. It would be hard to leave the narrow cobblestone streets, the white-washed adobe houses, and the pervasive smell of Mexico—the perfume of a thousand tropical flowers mixed with the odor of the charcoal fires grilling freshly caught fish, or tortillas.

That afternoon, as he sat in the weed-grown little plaza, the happy, brassy sound of a mariachi burst upon him, playing a popular catchy two-step he knew as “Jesusita En Chihuahua.” The music rose and echoed joyously through the village from a little house a short distance away. He walked closer, and saw the musicians, in front of the house. There were two guitarists, two trumpeters, and a violinist, paunchy men in dusty black charro suits, their tight trousers and black vests decorated with silver ornaments. One tune finished, they started another, and continued to pour out the happy music.

“Who is giving the fiesta?” he asked Doña Clementina, the proprietor of the little fruit stand next to the plaza. “Am I invited?”

The music could be heard throughout the village.

“It is not a fiesta. It is the Angelitos, Señor Ethan.”

“Angelitos? Little angels? What would that be?”

“It is for little Lupita Oviedo. Just two years old.”

“A cumpleaños, then? A birthday?”

“No, señor. The Angelitos. Lupita died yesterday. Such a happy, smiling little girl. Paludismo, the doctor said, but, *quién sabe?* There are so many sicknesses about. The music is for her wake. Since she was a little child, without sin, she is an angel and will go directly to Heaven. It is a joyful occasion, you see.”

He looked at Doña Clementina in dismay.

“A joyful occasion! A little child dead and it is a joyful occasion? How can you say that? A little child . . . what a monstrous idea!”

“It is a happiness, señor. She is in Heaven. God called her there.”

Shaken, Ethan walked back to the plaza and sat alone on one of the rusty iron benches. The brassy, happy music had now, to him, become unutterably sad. As he looked toward the house, a somber little lad of perhaps four years, dressed in his Sunday clothes, came walking down the street, carrying a large bunch of white flowers. The boy disappeared into the house, and the music became even faster and more lighthearted.

As the trumpets sang out in unison and the big guitarrón thumped out the beat, sadness overwhelmed him. Sitting on the iron bench, he wept, the tears coming uncontrollably from deep within him, wave after wave. He wept in infinite grief for a little girl he never knew, a child of God whom he had never seen. A shining new angel was in Heaven, sent on her way by the raucous music of the fat, sweaty men with the trumpets and violin and guitars. It was a weekday, and the plaza was almost deserted. He sat on the iron bench into the night, long after the music had stopped and the village had become quiet, except for the soft lapping of the waves on the dark beach. He had awakened that morning a carefree youth. Now he had suddenly come face to face with the age-old mysteries of the meaning of life and the injustice of death. He tried to understand, but it made no sense. Death and youth and beauty and joy and sadness were all mixed together. It made no sense.

The next day there was no music. A small procession wound up the hill in the blazing sun to the graveyard. At the front were a group of little children, carrying flowers, tropical flowers that spread their fragrance on the soft breezes that blew from the ocean. Two men carried the tiny wooden coffin on their shoulders, and women in black, with black shawls covering their heads, followed behind.

"Ay, ay, ay! Ay Dios!" the women wailed, unconvinced now that it was an occasion for joy.

The father, a soldier, followed behind the coffin bearers, mournfully lighting firecrackers. The smell of the burning powder mingled with the sweet scent of the flowers. Now a boy with a drum joined the mourners. He beat a slow tattoo as the group made its way through the palm trees.

Ethan did not follow the procession. He was an outsider, but he felt a kinship of grief with the people trudging up the path. Grief not only for Lupita Oviedo, but for all those little ones all over the world who are both cheated and rewarded by dying before their time.

He remained in San Pablo only a few days more. He sat by the ocean, under a huge laurel tree, and tried to understand. The ocean lapped at his feet, grinding rocks into sand with infinite patience, just as it had for millions of years. He knew there must be a message there, but its content eluded him.

—Ralph G. Smith ('47)

Golden Years

"I don't think I'm going to like it."

The old woman stood in the doorway of the small apartment in the Golden Years Retirement Complex, looking in. Her thin hands grasped the walker before her. They shook slightly in spite of her tight grip.

Rose Mason was shrunken and stooped with the weight of eighty years on her frail shoulders, and her white skin seemed almost translucent. She was a vision of fragility, delicacy and age, like the Dresden figurines she kept on the top shelf of the old glassed china cabinet in the house on Fenton Street.

Rose squinted intently at the shiny new kitchenette just to the right of the entryway, then at the small living room with its sofa bed, smoke detector and ceiling sprinkler. On the far side of the room a sliding glass door opened onto a tiny balcony with a black railing.

"I don't think I'm going to like it," she said again, quietly, glancing at her daughter, who stood beside the kitchen counter.

Rose's daughter, Claire, crushed out her cigarette with a nervous thrust, sending the ashtray clattering down the formica countertop.

"Come on now, Mother. You picked out this apartment yourself, you know."

Her voice was sharp, but trailed off on a note of weariness. She squeezed the balled-up handkerchief in her hand.

Rose looked quizzically at her daughter.

"I picked it out? . . . Oh yes. I'm so forgetful. You showed it to me, didn't you . . . ?"

"No. It was Mr. and Mrs. Jackson, last week. They thought you shouldn't be living alone any more, and they brought you here

to look.”

“Yes. I forgot.”

She hobbled a few steps into the living room. Claire fluffed a pillow on the sofa and motioned for her to sit down.

“You know you can’t stay alone anymore, Darling. You’ve been independent for a long time, but you might fall or something, and no one would know.”

“If I fall, just leave me there. I’ve lived long enough. I don’t know why God keeps me alive.”

“Stop it, Mother. We all love you. We want you with us as long as possible.”

“I never thought I’d have to go to a rest home . . .” A tear rolled down her sunken cheek.

“For heaven’s sake, this isn’t a rest home! You have your own apartment, and they give you your meals, and they clean and you don’t have to worry about cooking or paying bills or anything.”

“I could have stayed where I was. My own home. Maybe a woman could come in to clean for me. And how about Mimi?”

“Your cat, Mimi? Mother, Mimi died last May, remember? And you fired everyone we hired to help you with the house.”

“Yes, I forgot.”

“You’ll be happy here, I know you will. The only other thing we could do is to have you live with George and me, and we’ve already tried that. Remember? You moved back after one week.”

“Yes. It wasn’t my home. I remember.”

Claire sat down beside her mother, a mist of tears in her eyes as she put her arm around the old lady’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry, Sweetheart, I’ll come to see you every day after work, and there are lots of nice people here for you to meet. You’ll like it.”

Rose looked vacantly at her daughter.

“I guess it’s all right. Maybe I’ll like it.”

—*Ralph G. Smith ('47)*

Slaughterhouse Blues

The inside of the car looked like a slow movie, reeling itself away, frame by frame, in the passing flashes of the streetlights. I had my right hand under my leg and my head on the window. Smoke from my cigarette twisted and turned into itself.

I was getting frustrated because she drove and drove and drove and wouldn't take me home. I shifted my weight and closed my eyes for a second. She put her hand on my thigh. My hair crunched on the window as I turned my head. I saw her for a while and then she went away. She had a sad look on her face, like she knew something about me that I didn't. I hated the songs she played while we drove around.

"Take me home, please."

She pressed her fingers into my thigh. I looked out the window and back at her. A teardrop rolled halfway down her face. I looked away.

"No."

I was drunk and didn't feel like arguing. We drove for a long time, past houses and through gutter steam. All the trees were bare and black against the night sky, looking like cutouts, or their own tangled constellation. She wouldn't take her hand off me. I leaned my head on the rest and stared down at her hand. She had the ring on that I made out of a quarter. It flashed.

Finally, she turned into the parking lot of a closed grocery store and stopped the car. She took her hand off my thigh and put the car in park. I looked over as she was reaching up to touch my face. I pulled my head back, and she put her hand back on my thigh. It was too cold to walk, otherwise I would have. She still had that look on her face, but then it was constant and glowing in the darkness and the light. I stared out at the parking lot. The heater hummed and the radio played. I put my hand on the window and thawed a print, then watched it ice back over itself.

"I know it'll just take some time. We need to . . . things'll work themselves out."

"No." I stared at my frozen-over handprint. "No, it's not going to work."

"Peter."

I looked at her and raised my thumb and pointer finger. "I got about—"

"Peter."

I looked way. "Just take me home."

Everything she said was broken from crying. "But just last week . . . everything . . . was fine."

"No, it wasn't."

"Yes, it was."

"No."

I looked over; her body was shaking. She had her eyes closed and their lids looked like cockroaches because she wore too much make-up. Black tears streaked down her face. I couldn't stand how pathetic she made everything feel, so I started to yell.

"Take me home!"

She cried harder. "No."

"Goddamnit Tara, take me home."

"I-don't-want-to."

I opened the door and put out one foot. She grabbed my arm. There was a windy, cold pause while we stared at each other.

"No. Fine. I'll take you."

She slid a finger under her eye and put the car in drive. I put my foot back. She acted composed. I closed the door and turned off the radio. We didn't say anything on the way back to my house.

Tara went to pull in my driveway, but the car only made it in a bit before it kind of slumped into a stop. I looked down and saw her foot moving on the gas pedal. The tires hummed and slid in the snow until they dug down and hit gravel. Her foot kept moving while rocks popped away from the wheels, pinging the underside of her car. I looked forward and put my hand on the door latch. I was nervous. She stopped gassing and put the car in park, turned the dome light on, and looked over at me. I stared at her for a second. Her tear streaks looked like they'd been drawn on. I opened the door and stepped out of the car.

Snow crunched under my feet, and the air made me choke. It was so cold that all I wanted do was get into the house. I didn't hear her leaving as I walked to my door.

"Peter."

I turned around. She still had the dome light on, and I could hear music coming from the open window. She was leaned over the seat, looking out at me, and had a tormented look on her face, like the way I'd seen geeky kids look at people on playgrounds when I was in grade school. I stared at her for a second, turned back around, and walked towards my house. The last things I heard before closing my door were her wheels slipping in the snow and

gnawing into the gravel.

I had our pictures to remind me that the closest thing to the truth was still a lie.

Mrs. Shipley made me do the homework assignment the first day I went to J.B. Young. It was 8th grade, the third quarter of my fourth junior high school. I didn't do the homework.

I can't remember being nervous when I walked into class the next day and sat at my desk. After the bell, and a pause from Mrs. Shipley, the class got settled, and she adjusted her glasses.

"Exchange homework with your neighbor," she said.

I looked up and then to my right. Hunched forward, in the desk next to mine, was a drape sheet of blonde hair, with an arm coming away from it, with a hand, with a piece of paper, tapping the shoulder of the person in front of it. I thought for a second and put my paper on her desk. She looked over at me and then down at the assignment. It didn't have much on it besides my name. I wasn't ashamed or embarrassed; I thought it was funny. She gave her paper to the person in front of her.

The next day, I gave her my paper, and she gave me hers.

"Nikki," I whispered, "cheat for me."

I started to laugh, and she looked over at me. "No."

I did most of my homework after that.

We talked a lot after class.

"I hate math class."

"So do I."

I'd pause my talking while staring at the floor.

"What other classes do you have?"

"English, social studies, gym, music, French, and history."

"Oh Yeah?"

"Yeah."

When we got to high school, Nikki and I used to skip class all the time and wander around. Sometimes, when it was cold, we'd go to this doughnut shop and smoke cigarettes. We even went to her house and watched soap operas one day.

We were drunk, sitting in the back seat of our friend's van. I smelled her breath, then felt her lips, then tasted her spit.

Nikki's ass drooped off her back, like a big teardrop. Her pants were down around her knees, and her shirt was pulled up just below her bra strap. Sunlight caught the little hairs on the small part of her back and made them more blonde than they were. She stretched her neck around and looked over her shoulder and down at me while I sat there with her butt in my face. I looked up, and she was smiling. I went back to work.

"Are you done yet?"

"Woman, does it feel like I'm done yet?"

She bent her knees, leaned back, and hit me in the face. I started to laugh.

"Quit."

"Hurry up."

"Hold still."

She laughed. "Hurry up. I'm cold."

"This was your idea."

It was the last semester of our senior year of high school. Her mom didn't care if I spent the night. We'd stayed in bed most of that day, screwing around and then smoking, and talking. Her mom was at work. In the afternoon, Nikki got an idea. She rolled over and told me.

"No, it'll be fun. I used to do it all the time at my baby-sitter's house."

I laughed.

She faked a serious voice and said, "Nook, let's do it."

She called me Nook.

"We'll scare everybody. It'll be funny as hell."

I put my face in a pillow and said, "It won't scare anybody; it's stupid."

I rolled over to the edge of her bed and put a pillow over my ears, but I could still hear. I was on my stomach. I felt the blankets move, and then I felt her straddle my back and start pushing my neck.

"Come on, come on, come on. I want to do it."

I twisted my body around, turning over without getting her off me. She bent forward, let her hair fall on my face, and stared at me. It felt like being in the blanket forts I made when I was a kid.

"Get off."

"Nope."

I bit a big clump of her hair.

“Come on, come on, come on.”

Between the paleness of her butt and the red of the lipstick, the whole thing came out looking like a moon-faced clown.

I ran my finger across her upper thigh. “I think I missed some spots.”

She looked back at me.

“I definitely missed some spots.”

“You can’t shave my legs anymore.”

“I don’t want to.”

She tried to back into my face again, but I moved.

“Quit.”

“Are you done?”

“Yep, I think so.”

“I wanna go look. I wanna go look.”

She ran into the bathroom with her pants down. It looked funny. She came out and stuck her butt toward me.

“Are you sure it looks okay?”

I looked for a minute and started to laugh. I stood up, walked over to her, and bent down to look. I acted like I was examining something important.

“Mmmmmmmmm.”

“What?”

I smacked her and stood up. “Looks fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

She jumped up and spun around, smiling. “Good, it’s your turn.”

She walked over to the chair, sat down, and motioned for me to come over to her. I did. I felt stupid as she reached around me, undid my pants, and pulled them down around my thighs. I stepped forward and turned around. She laughed.

“This is stupid; you’re stupid.”

She laughed harder, and I felt ridiculous, but then I started to laugh.

“Pull your shirt up.”

I did, and she reached out and smacked me. That was funny. She bent over and shook.

“That’s it. I’m done.”

I reached down to pull up my pants.

"Come on."

"Nope."

"Come on."

Things went on like that for a while.

The lipstick felt cold on my butt.

"I don't have enough room down here."

"Stop smacking me."

"Ha ha ha ha."

"Yours probably got smudged from sitting down."

"Do you think? No way. This is expensive."

She smacked me again and laughed.

I didn't look at mine when Nikki finished. She said it looked good. We spent the rest of the afternoon mooning cars from her front porch as they went by her house.

Tasha.

"Ha ha ha."

I joined the Army three months after graduation and dropped out six weeks later. I missed Nikki and hated the Army. I rode home on a bus from Charleston, North Carolina. It took forever. When I got off the bus, Nikki was waiting for me in the parking lot, and she looked so pretty and smiled so big that I thought the air was going to explode.

I got a job at a meat-processing plant and Nikki waited tables. We rented a small apartment, bought second-hand furniture, and she decorated with anything she could find. We had a clock that looked like a beaver and was too heavy to put on the wall, so we set it next to the T.V. We slept on a hide-a-bed in the living room. One time we were wrestling on it and it broke, so we got a mattress and put it on the bedroom floor. On Sundays we'd sleep in and then order pizza, smoke cigarettes, and watch T.V. all day. I didn't like leaving for work.

Being with Nikki was like finding homesickness I'd forgotten about, like the place I was before I was.

Christie.

I was nineteen when I started my job at IPB. I had orientation for four days, and then they took me out to the processing floor and showed me where I was going to work. There weren't any windows. The cows' bodies were skinned and purple; they were hooked through their tendons and swung and dangled all over the place. People in hard hats, bloody frocks, and rubber boots were everywhere, cutting small pieces of meat from bigger pieces of meat and throwing it in on conveyor belts. The floor was always a mess of fat and blood.

The winter after Nikki and I moved in together, I had to work overtime, all the time. We didn't see each other very much because we worked different shifts, and she was normally sleeping when I got home.

Since I was tall, they had me run a band saw. I cut the hindquarter of the cow in half at the ball-and-socket joint. When I'd hit the joint just right, a blob of purple, eggy stuff would come out. The meat came to me on a chain, from behind where I was standing. It would hit me sometimes. The piece I cut was heavy; it weighed about one hundred and fifty pounds.

I woke up one morning rubbing a pillow.

:One of the refrigeration units that they used to keep the processing floor cold was close to where I worked. It would blow on me; sometimes the dangly fluid that hung from the meat would get caught in the draft and slap me in the face.

:I didn't need a knife to do my job, just two hooks.

:I wore a hard hat, rubber boots, and a frock.

:There was a rolling table connected to my saw. The piece of meat was too heavy to just push through.

:The table would roll back and hit me in the thigh when I wasn't looking.

:The saw screamed when I ran a piece of meat through it.

:A layer of fat would build up in the table. I had to spray it with water.

:The water would get in my boots, and I couldn't stop working

and pour it out.

:After a while, my hands would get sore.

:My buddy, Quberto, who ran the saw across from me, would always bang his hooks on the table and yell, "Viva la Raza." Other people around us would yell it too.

:The money was good, and I liked the people who I worked with.

:When I cut the hind quarter, I'd push one piece down a shoot and the other onto a conveyor belt.

One Saturday, when I was getting to the end of a fifty-hour week, I got one of my hooks stuck in a piece of meat. The meat went down a shoot, and I did too. My back and shoulder felt miserable, and I didn't want to work anymore.

"Are you sure you can't finish the shift? You got the day off tomorrow."

The bosses wore yellow hats. I looked down at the floor.

"We can send you to the nurse, but she might put you on light duty, and you could lose your grade-pay."

Not very many other people in the plant could work my job. I looked up at him. His face was chapped and he looked old. They had me in a small office.

"I don't need to go to the nurse."

"Okay, go ahead and take a couple more minutes and go back out."

"Okay."

Every time I ran a piece of meat through the saw, I felt like yelling.

My body wanted to fall apart when I got home. Nikki was awake. She looked up at me and smiled as I walked through the door. I put down my lunch box, looked over at the beaver, and walked to the couch.

"Look at my hair."

She'd gotten it cut short that day, and it was up in a ponytail, like a small paintbrush on top of her head.

"Look."

I took a deep breath and said, "I can't tell. Take it down."

She undid the ponytail and shook her head. She looked boyish. I looked away.

"What's wrong? Don't you like it?"

"Yeah, I like it."

"I think it looks cute."

She ran her hand over my forearm a few times. Then she rubbed the tendons in the crook of my elbow. I bent my arm and squeezed her hand.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Peter?"

I let go of her arm, and she ran her fingers through her hair while I told her what happened. She hugged me.

"Go take a shower, and then we'll go to bed."

I didn't want to stand. She pushed me and smiled.

"Go take a shower, stinky. You stink."

I went into the bathroom and took off my clothes. I got lost in the shower steam, and the hot water felt like an orgasm running over my body. I almost fell asleep.

I got out, dried off, and stood in front of the mirror until the steam went away. I looked like a wet monkey, and my legs had purple dots all over from the bruises, from the table.

Nikki was sitting up on the mattress, Indian style, when I went into the bedroom, with a towel in my hand, still drying my hair. She'd washed her face while I was in the shower, and it looked like an apple. Her glasses were on the floor next to the bed. She patted the spot next to her and smiled.

She rubbed my back and kissed my neck while I lay there with my face in a pillow, coughing. I think that was the only time I fell asleep before she did.

I hooked it. I cut it. "Viva la Raza."

Nikki and I were having sex as I tried to put my key in the door. I could see my breath. It was spring, the windows were open, and the rain on the roof sounded like people clapping. I opened the door, and ashy light from the T.V. fuzz blasted around the room. She ran her hands across my chest, and her chin doubled up when she looked down at me. I took off my shoes. Street light wedged into the room. Raindrops ran down the screen, and their shadows streaked over her pale body like black tears. I walked back into the bedroom. I reached up and touched one of her breasts. Curtains flapped in the breeze. I took off my clothes. Oh my god, oh my god,

"Oh my god."

Carrie.

Sarah.

Daisy.

Blair.

She was curled into herself under the blankets. I put my knees on the mattress and fell over onto her. She woke up as I was hugging her

"Nikki?" I whispered. "Are you pregnant?"

She rolled over and looked up at me.

"What are you doing?"

I smiled and said, "Are you pregnant?"

"What time is it?"

"Nook, are you pregnant?"

I called her Nook.

"You're drunk."

"Are you pregnant?"

She cocked her head up and blinked.

"No, I'm—Why are you naked?"

"Are you pregnant?"

"No!"

"Do you wanna?"

She rolled over and went back to sleep. I put my clothes on and lay there next to her, staring at the ceiling spin, while the heater kicked on and off.

I hurt my back a couple more times.

Tasha, Tasha, Tasha, Sonya, Leah, Rachel, Jen, Amy, Tasha, Kelly, Kory, Tasha tasha tasha was black, black like a void, black like a nightmare . . .

The fluorescent lights buzzed while the salesman walked next to us, and talked. I stared at an old couple while they stared at a couch. It was Sunday, and the night before, Nikki and I decided what we were going to do.

She propped herself up on her elbow, looked down at me, and said, "Let's do it. It'll be crazy."

"Yeah."

"What do you want to get?"

"I don't know. We can go a few places."

"Where?"

"I don't know."

"Yeah, we'll shop around."

She rolled over, hummed to herself for a while, and then stopped.

I had a weird feeling while I waited for Nikki to get ready. We went all over the place.

She squeezed my hand, and I looked over at her. Her hair was pulled back so tight that I thought it was going to rip off her face. The salesman was pointing. I wiped my nose with the back of my hand.

"This set over here comes with the couch, the love seat, and the chair. It has an ottoman, a coffee table, and three end tables. The leather is all treated, so it won't stain."

He smiled, Nikki smiled, and I smiled. I wasn't sure if it all could fit in our living room, but the way they had the floor model set up looked real homey. The salesman quit smiling and just sort of lingered around. Nikki and I walked over and sat on the couch. She worked herself into where she was sitting and then acted like she was very relaxed. I leaned back and felt good.

"Do you think we need all these places to sit?"

"It'll be great." She smiled and pointed at the love seat.

"Sometimes we can sit over there, and sometimes we can sit here." She patted the couch, and then pointed at the chair. "And sometimes, you can sit there, or I can sit there." She stabbed the air with her points. "We can put our lamps there, and there, and there. Or we can buy the lamps too." She looked up at the salesman, like a question, and he nodded out of his vagueness.

"Yes, we can include the lamps."

She looked at me and smiled. And then she kind of head-butted me. I looked down at her hand in my hand, next to the leather. I liked the contrast of it next to her skin. I rubbed her shoulder with mine.

"I'm almost going to fall asleep; this is so comfortable."

The salesman smiled and patted something in his pocket.

"I like it. Let's get it."

"Nook, do you wanna?"

"Yeah."

"Okay."

"Let's do it."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

We walked over and sat at the salesman's desk. He got on his computer.

"We are offering the twelve-months-free financing, if you're interested in that."

"What is the total?"

"You want everything, correct? The lamps too?"

"Yeah."

He hit some keys on the computer, waited for a second, and then told us the price.

"You have twelve months to pay, with no interest?"

"Yes, twelve months."

I looked over at Nikki and she nodded. The salesman saw us nod and started hitting more keys on the computer.

He looked over at us and said, "We just need to run a quick credit check." He looked down at our hands and looked up. "You aren't married?"

"No."

"One of you needs to be the primary purchaser. We can put both of your names down, but since you aren't married, we can only have one primary purchaser."

Nikki and I looked at each other for a while. We were both smiling. I looked back over at the salesman. He picked the phone up and put it on his shoulder.

"I can call it right now; it just takes a minute."

He put the phone on his ear and dialed some numbers. After a while he looked over at me.

"What is your social security number?"

I told him.

"And yours?"

She told him.

"And your annual income?"

I told him. He looked over at Nikki, and she told him.

While he was printing up the receipt, the salesman looked over at us and said, "Just remember, interest does still accumulate on the principal amount you owe, even through the first twelve months. If you don't pay the entire amount you owe in that time,

the interest that accumulated will be added on to the principal.”

He ripped the receipt away from the printer, I looked over at Nikki, and we both looked back at him.

“Even though you’re not paying interest, it does still accumulate. If you don’t pay the amount you owe within the first twelve months, you will also have to pay the interest that accumulated on the principal during that twelve months.”

I said, “Okay, that’s fine.”

We signed the receipt and stood up.

“Thank you very much. It is going to take about a week for the set to come in from the factory. During that time you will not be charged interest. We will have it delivered the same day it gets here.” He gave us one of his cards. “If you have any questions, feel free to call me.”

He gave us a strange look and then shook Nikki’s hand. He turned to me, and I felt embarrassed raising my hand up because I couldn’t open it all the way or close it all the way anymore.

I lit a cigarette when we got in the parking lot. Nikki jumped on my back while we walked to the car, and I started to run.

“Let’s go. Let’s go. Let’s go.” She kissed me on the cheek. “I can’t wait until it gets here.”

“I can’t either.”

Nikki got all twenty candles lit, and her face seemed detached in the glow. She came over to me and strapped a birthday hat on my head. They delivered our furniture on my twentieth birthday. When I got home from work, Nikki was sitting on the couch, and she looked so proud of herself that I started to laugh. It smelled leathery in the apartment.

“I spent all day arranging it. Doesn’t it look awesome?”

I sat down, and the leather made a crunching sound. It felt new and uncomfortable, but the more I looked, the better I felt.

“Yeah, it looks good.”

She looked around and said, “It looks good.”

I nodded.

“It looks good.”

“Yeah.”

“How was work?”

“Fine.”

She sang Happy Birthday to me, and we ate my cake on the couch. After we got done eating, Nikki turned the light on, and we sat there and stared at everything for a long time. She'd tried to set it all up like the way it was at the store, but there wasn't enough room. We slept on the couch that night and in the morning made jokes about the over-stuffed furniture in our over-stuffed living room.

I'll smoke another cigarette and drink another beer. I'll fall asleep. I'll wake up.

I banged one of my meat hooks on the table and got Quberto's attention. He smiled and said, "Viva la Raza," loud enough so I could barely hear it. I cut a piece of meat. All the Mexican guys around us banged their hooks and knife handles and said, "Viva la Raza." Quberto was looking at me. I pointed at one of my wrists. He laughed and reached for the stopwatch that he wore around his neck. He put down his hooks and held up nine fingers. I looked over my shoulder, at all the meat swinging on the chain, coming toward me: 165 minutes worth.

I planned it that night so I'd get home at just the right time. Nikki was sleeping. None of the lights were on in the apartment, and I was glad. I put my key in the lock and opened the door. Her warm body sighed in the darkness. The room looked like it was under water. The outline of her curves under the blankets. I took off my shoes and put down my lunch box. I put my cold thigh on her warm thigh. On my way back to the bedroom, I hit my shin on the coffee table and fell over the couch. I lay there next to her, staring at the ceiling spin while the heater kicked on and off. It felt like a firecracker went off in my stomach when I heard the bathroom sink running. She giggled in her sleep. The water went off, so I got in bed and acted like I was sleeping. She put her leg between mine. Blood ripped through my ears. I fell asleep. I heard the door open and quit acting like I was sleeping. Nikki's face shined in the darkness and the light. I woke up and listened to the beaver tick. I smelled rosewater, and her face looked so slick that it seemed like the air was sliding off it. I fell asleep. She walked over to the light switch, and I closed my eyes when she flicked it. I sniffed. I smelled her getting close to me, so I looked. She was sexy in her

pajamas, standing in front of the bed. I smiled.

"Nook, are you pregnant?"

"Where were you tonight?"

I acted dumb. "Working."

"Are you sure?"

"Totally, totally, totally."

I held out my arms for her to come over to the bed. She stepped away.

"Pete, you were working, tonight, until just now?"

I wanted her to turn off the light. "Definitely, definitely, definitely."

She shook her head. "Debbie saw you."

I looked away, and open and closed my hands.

"Debbie saw you."

I got mad, shut my eyes, and said, "What?"

She sat down on the bed. "Debbie saw you at the bar. She saw you."

"The fuck are you talking about? Debbie didn't see shit.

I wasn't at the bar."

She pushed me on the shoulder. "Pete, Debbie-saw-you-at-the-bar."

I mocked her. "Debbie-didn't-see-me. I-wasn't-at-the-bar."

"Liar."

I wiped snot away from my nose and got up to turn off the light. She stayed on the bed. I lay back down and put my face in a pillow. She got up and turned the light back on.

"Liar. You're a liar."

I rolled over and looked up at her. She was walking back toward the bed. Time fell off her face.

"I'm a liar? Huh, Nikki? I'm a fuckin' liar?"

She sniffed and got closer. "You lied."

"You lied."

"I don't—"

"I guess we're both just a couple a fuckin' liars then, ain't we?"

She sat back down, and there was a pause, like the room was holding its breath.

"Debbie saw you."

"Fuck Debbie, and fuck you too. I saw you."

Everything was broken up from her crying. "Fuck you."

I started to laugh. "Well I guess I didn't see you. Close enough, though."

"You cheated."

"You got a lot a fuckin' nerve."

"You . . . cheated."

"I didn't cheat on shit."

"Pete, Debbie-fucking-saw-you."

"Nikki, this all sounds like something I've heard before."

Her eyes yawned open, like I thought they were never going to stop. She straddled my waist and started punching me. I didn't know what to do.

"Whore."

She punched me again. I didn't even try to stop her.

"Whore."

"I'm not a whore."

She punched me again.

"Whore, whore, whore."

She spit on me and punched me. Everything spun, like toilet water. Her fists made smacking noises on my cheeks.

"I fucking hate you. I fucking hate you."

I got sick of laughing and getting punched, so I grabbed her wrists. She pulled her arms away, and I almost puked from being so mad. I sat up in bed, knocking her off me, and grabbed her shoulders when she sat up. I threw her into the wall; her back hit first, and then her head snapped. She sat there for a second and then stood up and stumbled over to a chair. Her body was heaving. I didn't know what to do.

"You're a piece of shit, just like your brothers."

Everything fell over.

"You're a piece of shit."

Everything fell over, and I got madder.

"Fuck you."

"Fuck you."

I got up, and while putting on my clothes, said, "Yeah, that's right bitch, fuck you."

She sat on the chair and cried.

"Piece a shit, huh? I'm a fuckin' piece a shit?"

A teardrop hung from her nose.

"Fuck you."

I spit on her and then banged my shoulder on the doorway as

I left.

... black, very black, black like 500 dollars and a fifty-mile drive.

I drove around for a while and then went to my friend's house and banged on the door until he answered. I stayed on his couch that night.

When I woke up, it took me a minute to figure out where I was. Jim was sitting on a chair, staring at the T.V. I sat up and he looked over at me and smiled.

"The fuck did you do last night?"

I lit a cigarette and watched the T.V.

Before leaving for work, I was bitching to Jim about my shoulder. He gave me an Oxycotin, and I crushed it and snorted it. Before too long, it felt like I'd been dead for a while and then woke up to something, not alive, but different. Everything felt moist. The meat wiggled and twisted while my saw screamed through it. I didn't even feel it when it happened, just saw the blood faucetting onto the table from the tear in my glove. The doctor gave me some stitches on my hand and told me I couldn't work for a while. I stayed at Jim's house for the next couple nights. It felt like there was a balloon inside my stomach. I went back to the apartment one day to see what would happen. Nikki wasn't there, and she hadn't been for a while. Everything smelled leathery. I went back into the bedroom, and it looked like the rooms moms keep for their dead kids. I stood there for a minute and then went to leave because I didn't know what to do, but stopped when I saw a note on the floor, in the kitchen. The beaver ticked. Nikki's sister was married to a Marine who was stationed in Camp Pendleton. Dimpled, cranberry clouds floated towards the creased, Nebraska, sunset horizon. Silver-dollar moon arched over the Colorado highway. Rest stops with no lights. I 80. I 70. I 76. I 15. Aunt Lou's Café. Ft. Morgan. York. Denver. North Platte. Grand Junction. Utah morning: craggy silhouettes, staggering out of the earth like unfinished and upright jigsaw puzzles. Nevada, Nevada, nevada, arizona california. A dust devil with no hoola hoop, wiggling, wiggling against desert landscape. Red, flashing antennas stab at the sky and float by the highway, through the night. Time goes by like jumping off a bridge. I got a room, right off the highway, in a place called The Beachwood by the Ocean. She left me the address and the phone number. Copper-tone, patchwork clouds skidded across the California sky. Nikki was standing in the parking lot of The Beachwood by the

Ocean with her arms out, in front of my car. The sky in her glasses looked like church windows. Her hair flapped in the wind. As I walked to the other side of the car with my clothesbasket, I saw her arms drop to her sides, like banana peels. Wheels on the highway howled. I went back over to where she was standing, and she moved out of the way so I could open the door. I stared up at the time-elased sky and started the car. Wind chilled my neck. Nikki stood there by the door, with her back to me, and didn't say anything. I waited for a second and put the car in reverse. She turned around, and her chin doubled up when she looked down at me. I went to say something, but then it looked like she was going to say something. We didn't say anything. I saw her in my mirror when I was pulling out of the parking lot. Driving with my shoes off, on Highway 5, somewhere north of L.A., I stopped at a gas station to use the bathroom. While I was peeing, I looked down and saw that I'd forgotten to put on my shoes. In the Meat Market, an older lady who I worked with looked at me from the other end of the bar. "You're not old enough to be in here. How old are you?" She laughed when I said "Thirty-five." Her face moved up and down in the darkness and the light, and her sheets smelled like all 365 days in the year. She wiggled her tongue through my mouth while her calluses crusted down the center of my back. Right before I came, she said, "Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me."

—Peter Lamp

Old Friends, Old Scores

I'd just heard it from one bill collector, didn't want to hear it from another. "Listen, you'll get paid when I—"

"Is this Riordan's Investigations?"

Something about that voice. "Yes, and you'll get your money when—"

"Wally?"

No one had called me Wally in years. "Who's asking?"

"Norma Meadows," she answered. "I mean—"

"Don't explain."

I'd known her when she went by Sally and lived in a three-room bungalow with her retarded brother and elderly mom in a part of town no one went to after dark. But that was long before she moved, changed her name, met Harry Meadows, and inherited his substantial assets when he died last year. I last heard she lived in France with a younger man.

"Hi, Sal."

"No one's called me that in years."

"No one calls me Wally anymore either."

"What is it now?"

"Doesn't matter. Call me Wally. What brings you back?"

"I need to see you."

I don't like dogs. Big ones, small ones, it doesn't matter. And I especially didn't like the one on Sally's lap. I did like how the years had treated her. In that gown, she too could have brought back Lazarus.

I did a slow top-to-bottom-and-back-again once-over. "You look good, Sal."

She smiled like she knew what I was talking about. But she didn't return the compliment, and she didn't bother to get up.

"Good to see you, Wally."

"Nice room you got."

"The town's improved their accommodations. This hotel almost gets four stars."

"The mayor thinks it's worth five. What do you call that thing in your lap?"

Sally brought the dust mop to her face for a nuzzle and a coo. I didn't like its squeaky little yip, either. "Harry," she said. "After my late husband."

"I meant to send you a card, Sal. Sorry to hear about it."

"Did you mean to send one for my mom too?"

"I'm not good with cards."

"Forget it. People die."

"While we're on the topic, I'm also sorry about Jerry" I said, referring to her brother. The discovery of her mom and Jerry on election day in November five years ago had even gotten the partisan poll watchers talking to each other.

Sal's face burned crimson and her eyes turned stone-like and mean. "Like I said, people die." She pushed Harry to the floor and composed herself. "A drink, Wally?"

I checked my watch. "Not before noon."

"Nice to hear you're a professional."

"What's on your mind, Sal?"

"I'm looking for someone."

I took a deep breath and said to myself, Don't make it him. Not him. Then she said it anyway. "I want you to find Tony."

She knew I couldn't say no. Still, I put up what resistance I had. "He just got out, Sal."

"Then it should be easy."

"So easy you could do it."

She pointed to the table. "Hand me my purse." The lace bag felt heavy and awkward, as if it held a snub-nose along with her car keys and lipstick.

She dug through her purse and pulled out a money roll. That got my attention. She laid out the bills, one on top of the other. "I've been away, Wally. You know the town better."

"I got between you two once. I didn't like the way it turned out."

She peeled off more bills.

I swallowed to keep from salivating down my chin. "Don't waste your money."

She laid out another stack like it was nothing of value to waste, and looked at me as if to say she had all day.

She knew me too well. "I'll see what I can do."

Back in high school Sally was one of those girls you wanted to take to a drive-in but not to the prom. She had this way of pouting her lips and turning her head that convinced you she knew about life's secrets and wanted nothing more than to share them with you. People told stories about Sally, but it was all smoke and no

sizzle.

And then there was Anthony Valario.

Tony excelled in football, basketball, and baseball, and had scored a full-ride to the state university. If you wanted to see Adonis, you looked at Tony Valario.

But in those days Tony also spent more time in detention than he did in the classroom. He had a temper he couldn't cage and a habit of not stopping until he got what he wanted.

As a junior he had Sally, lost her, then wanted her back. He couldn't. By spring break our senior year she was mine.

His flaws followed him to college where he lasted three semesters before even the coaches gave up.

Sally's dreams were bigger than our city. Soon after graduation she returned my senior ring and moved. Later, when Tony lost his scholarship and came home, I stayed out of his way. I still heard about him. Sometimes he made news by doing things he shouldn't. Then five years ago he got into real trouble over a business 'misunderstanding.' On the Halloween night he stomped a man near death over a late payment, he'd gone too far.

After that Tony had done his heavy lifting in the weight room at the state correctional facility until he had walked out last week a free man.

Baker remembered the good old days before Gideon, Escobedo, and Miranda had ruined everything. His knees were shot, his mid-section covered his belt buckle like a window shade, and one look at his face told you his blood pressure was higher than a kid on ecstasy. Now that he was in the twilight of his career, the chief had given him a desk, a comfortable chair, and absolutely no responsibility.

"You look awful, Riordan," he said. "Looking for credit protection?"

"Good one, Baker. Got a donut back there for me?"

He patted his gut. "I see your old girlfriend's back."

"Word travels."

He waved his arm taking in all that surrounded him. "I'm in the middle. I hear it all."

"What do you hear about Anthony Valario?"

"Tony? As I remember you two had a falling out in high school. I found you in Folger Park unconscious. Broken bones,

lacerations, bruised kidney. Went to the hospital, didn't you?"

"Time hasn't taken your memory, Baker. What's new with Tony?"

"Don't you read? He's out."

"Sure, I read. But is he back?"

"If he is, he hasn't stopped by to say hello. In fact, he hasn't said anything to me since I jailed him that Halloween for beating up the old guy."

"Aren't you told about ex-cons in town?"

"Budget cuts, Riordan. Slows down communication. Say, this have anything to do with Sally Wilcox?"

"She goes by Norma now, remember?"

"Sure, I know. Marries an old guy, he croaks a few years later and leaves it all to her."

"She's had her share of bad luck, Baker."

"I'd say losing her husband's good luck."

"I'm talking about her mom and brother."

Baker laughed. "That's a tragedy, Riordan, not bad luck. Had those volunteers not stopped to take her mom to the polls, we might never have known. They smelled it first, then tried the door. They called us when they saw her on the couch decomposing. We found Jerry in the basement with a broken neck. The coroner said a stroke got Mom a few days before Jerry tripped over his own laces. Judging by the wrappers, he'd been living on Halloween candy. We kept the stuff about the laces and candy out of the paper. Imagine the fun people would have had with that." Baker rubbed his shoulder. "Shame though about Tony letting himself go. He could sure hit a curve ball."

"Let me see the file."

"What's this, open records week? Come on, Riordan."

"Won't your bad knees let you stand?"

"It's the joint. The hinge or something like that. The doctor explained it once."

"You need to retire, Baker. Ever think how better life would be fishing on Pine Lake instead of sitting here?"

"All the time. But then I'd miss the excitement."

"When was the last time anything exciting happened to you, Baker?" He looked perplexed. "So long ago it's painful, right?"

He shrugged. "What's pain?"

"Having creditors who want what you can't give them. You

can help me with that.”

“Sally your client, Riordan?”

“The file, Baker.”

“There’s nothing there. Go see his old partner, Darrell Tate. He might know something.”

“Thanks, Baker.”

When I reached the door, Baker called, “Riordan.”

“What now?”

“Arresting Valario that Halloween.”

“No comprende, Baker.”

“That’s it. The last time anything exciting happened to me.”

Darrell Tate did too little to be living so well. He liked red cars that went fast and cushioned seats in the back of lounges. I found him in the rear booth at Taylor’s Hideaway.

“I don’t need your services today, Riordan.” Tate circled a horse he liked with a red pen.

I sat down. “Maybe I got a tip for you.”

He circled another horse. “I don’t need tips, I need winners.”

“We all need winners, Tate.”

“What brings you here?”

“Tony Valario.”

He put his pen down. “That’s a name I haven’t heard in a while.”

“He’s out, you know. I want to see him.”

Tate sat back and removed a smoke from his inside jacket pocket. I didn’t like the way he smiled as he put the lighter to the cigarette. “What’s your interest?”

“I’m doing an old friend a favor.”

He nodded. “We all need old friends. Even those home from France.” He smiled again.

“Like I said, I’m helping an old friend. You and Tony were partners.”

“Sure, we did business together. Only he went too far and ruined a good thing.”

“That good thing involved loaning people money they couldn’t repay?”

“We provided a service.”

“It’s called loan sharking, Tate.”

He gave me a life’s tough shrug. “They needed a favor,

Riordan. We took the risk."

"Not a risk if you held title to their meager possessions."

"It's called collateral. You're a businessman. Even you like getting paid for your services. But Tony's a hot head. If he didn't get his money, he took it personally. Anyway, I'm legitimate now. I play by the book."

"I hear business is good."

He shrugged. "I do okay."

"Anxious to have your partner back?"

"I don't need a partner. Say, you want a drink?"

I looked at my watch. "I'll take a bourbon."

He waited until the drink arrived before saying, "But you're asking the wrong questions."

"Tell me Darrell, what are the right ones?"

"What did your old friend say about her late husband?"

"Didn't say much. Named her dog after him."

"That's sweet. Remember how Harry Meadows died?"

"His ticker stopped while he was changing a tire."

"Imagine, Riordan, all that money and the guy doesn't call Triple A."

"It happened at night on the interstate miles from nowhere."

He nodded. "Exactly."

"What are you implying, Tate?"

"And she walks away a rich widow."

Tony's old man still ran the dry-cleaning store I took my shirts to back when a starched collar mattered to me. A lot had changed since those days. For one, the neighborhood that once housed hard-working ethnic families now sheltered dice-throwers and skin-poppers. The other change was more personal. Back then Valario's walls showcased pictures of Tony scoring touchdowns, making baskets, hitting home runs. Not any more.

Old man Valario acted friendly at first. When I asked about his son, the temperature turned January in Minnesota.

"I remember you. You went to school with him." He shook his finger at me. "He's not welcome here, not for what he did to his mamma. Broke her heart, he did, same as if he killed her himself."

"I'm in charge of this year's class reunion. Thought you might have heard from him."

"Class reunion. You think my Tony's interested in that? Go

on, get out of here." When I hesitated, he reached for something under his counter. I got the hint. I dropped my card near the register and left.

Sally called, but having nothing to report, I didn't call back. Besides, I had a new client curious about her hubby's extracurricular activities. I tracked him down at a mountain resort where he drank Irish coffees with a young snapper so cute I was jealous. By the time I got back to the office, even the jazz musicians at Max's Backbeat were home in bed.

I don't mind an occasional cigar, but I hate cigarettes. So when I smelled smoke in the hallway, I grabbed the gun from under my jacket and entered.

He stood at the window looking into the night. Smoke from his nostrils drifted to the ceiling. He turned and stubbed out the cigarette against the trashcan. "I've been waiting for you, Wally."

I holstered the gun. "Congratulations, Tony. You're a free man." Even in the smoky dark and flashing red neon from the all-night diner across the street, I could tell his once boot-black hair had lightened. He looked mortal now, like someone even I could get a fastball past.

"First time since that Halloween night."

"And now you break into my office. Off to a bad start, Tony."

He smiled. "Pops had your card. After he stopped yelling, he said you dropped by. Mind if I smoke?"

"Yes."

He pulled one out anyway and tapped it against his thumb-nail. "I hear you're still chasing down poor saps who stray from their vows." He touched the lighter flame to his smoke and blew out the stream. "Angry wives pay well?"

"Better than angry husbands."

"I hear other things too, Wally."

"Prison changed you, Tony. I remember you as a talker, not a listener."

He turned back to the window. "I hear Sally's in town."

"And for some reason she wants to see you."

"All things come around, eh, Wally?"

"We had our fling."

"Sorry about your kidney. Nothing personal, you know."

"I don't even remember."

"I miss her, Riordan. I even miss her crazy kid brother. The whole family treated me good." He faced me. "Just give me her number."

"Sorry Tony. She contacts you, not the other way around." He still had Atlas shoulders and a body tapered like a yield sign. I hadn't forgotten about my kidney or the stitches or the hospital. As I watched him, my jaw tightened. "And get away from my desk."

"What?"

"People in this office sit on that side, in that chair."

He looked more amused than offended. "Sure, Wally."

I sat and put my feet on the desk. "And stub the smoke."

He took his time but did everything I ordered. He had to. I had something he wanted. He crossed his legs. "I'm also looking for Tate. I went to see him, but he moved the business."

"He works out of Taylor's Hideaway now. But if it's a job you're after, I don't think he's interested."

"That's between Tate and me." He reached for a smoke, then remembered his manners. "Forget I even asked."

I tossed the legal pad over his head. He caught it like a routine fly ball. "Write down your number, then get the hell out. If Sal still wants to see you, she'll be in touch."

Sally stretched out on the couch to show me all her peaks and valleys. "I don't like people not returning my calls."

"Been busy, Sal."

She gave her dog a finger to lick. "Did you find him?"

I handed her the telephone number. "He's changed, Sal."

"We've all changed."

I waited for her to look at me. "But not all of us for the better."

"You're kind, Wally. You always were."

"Like being back home?"

"I drove by the house. Not good seeing it boarded up." Her mouth twitched. "It's the bank's problem now."

"You could buy it, Sal. Move back." I wanted to say we could catch up on old times, find that common interest, but didn't.

"No, Wally. Too many bad memories here."

"No one's saying there isn't, not with your mom and brother going like that."

Sal glared at me before lifting the page bearing Tony's num-

ber. "Thanks for your work, Wally. Take what you've earned and enjoy it. Spend it on yourself."

"Keep your money, Sal."

"I can afford it."

"I didn't work that hard."

"You found what I wanted."

"I renewed old acquaintances. That's enough. Besides, it's bad form taking money from friends."

"You're a good friend, Wally."

"Stay in touch."

The wife didn't like the photographs of her husband massaging the bare shoulders of the girl young enough to be her daughter. But the wife wasn't a friend, so I took her money and left her with the negatives and a husband who would soon be an ex.

Cross-ventilation and a fan couldn't remove the stench Tony left in my office. But then the corned beef hash and poached eggs couldn't fill the hole in my stomach, either. At least I had money to get three of my four creditors to relax. I answered the phone not caring if it was the fourth demanding equal treatment.

"Get down here," Baker said. "The chief wants to see you now."

Chief Dempsey's shoe and sock were on his desk. He worked an index finger like a saw between his toes.

"Don't bother shaking my hand," I said.

"Damned athletes foot," said Dempsey.

"They have sprays for that now."

He put on his sock. "Tried them."

I watched him double-knot the lace. "Baker tells me this visit's important."

"Sit down, Riordan." I did. "I hear you were looking for Tony Valario?"

"Where did you hear that?"

"Darrell Tate, among others."

"Sure, I saw Tate. Soon after that I find Tony in my office without an invitation."

"So you admit seeing Valario?"

"Couple of days ago. He's smoking now. Think his old coach would like that?"

"Smoking's the least of his trouble."

"Where you going with this, Chief?"

"Where were you last night around 11:00 PM?"

"Having a drink at Lane's Tavern."

"By yourself?"

"That's none of your business. What's this about?"

"Valario's been gone a long time, Riordan. Then two days after you go looking for him, we've got him on ice in the morgue."

"Tony's dead?"

"A head shot at close range."

"Want my gun?"

"We have the gun. Just no prints."

"Where was he?"

"Get this. On home plate at Legion Field. But his marbles got scrambled somewhere else."

"I was at Lane's. Ask Paul. We saw Chavez knock out Tafoya in the sixth."

"We'll do that."

"What about Tate?"

"He was at the track. He mentioned you."

"He mention anything else?"

"He did, but we can't find her. Sally Wilcox has left."

The luminous dial read 11:08 PM when I stopped near Folger Park, cut the engine, and sat back to wait. When convinced I'd lost the car following me, I got out and crossed the street still chewing on what I learned a half-hour before: Sally had checked out all right, but hadn't left town.

The stone hut near the pond was New Deal built. Sally suggested meeting there, just like she suggested meeting there when we were kids and life had promise. Despite the hour, Sally wore sunglasses. A scarf framed her face like a nun's habit. She had Harry on a short leash. He growled at my ankle.

"Oh Wally."

She tried to hug me as if we were still lovers, but I stepped away. I picked up her purse on the stone ledge, then sat it down. "I heard about Tony. Why did you do it?"

"That's not what happened."

"Then tell me. I've got the police chief asking questions and an unmarked car trying to find me. They have the murder weapon,

and your purse over there just lost a pound of muscle. And take off those damned sunglasses so I can see your face." In the moonlight her eyes were as red as Cornhusker Stadium on game day. "You've been crying, Sal."

She folded her arms. "Satisfied?"

She started to cry again. I had no choice. In my arms she felt like she once did. We were Sally and Wally, seventeen, and hiding in the New Deal hut.

"What happened, Sal?"

"Darrell Tate called last month to tell me Jerry didn't just fall down the stairs; he got shoved."

"How in the hell would he know?"

"From his partner."

"Go on."

"Darrell said Mom borrowed money to cover a brake job, the hole in the roof, a new washer, you name it. When she missed a payment, he said Tony got hot and went to collect himself on account of what happened between the two of us. He showed up to find Mom already dead and Jerry watching television. Darrell said Tony roughed him up, tossed him down the stairs like so much garbage, then made it look like an accident." She looked over the pond. "I would've helped her had I known. But I never called, and she never asked."

Digesting that news burned a new hole in my gut. "So you wanted me to set Tony up so you could kill him."

"He deserved it, didn't he, for what he did to my brother. But I didn't. I couldn't. Anyway, I was too late."

"Then the gun the chief has isn't yours?"

Her chin pointed towards the water. "I had no use for it any longer."

"A coincidence then? Tony getting killed like that?"

"Maybe there is a God, right, Wally?" Her head fell back on my shoulder. "It's all gone. Everything's gone."

"You've got money, Sal. You're still young. You're still beautiful."

"What good is it if I have no home? And if I don't have Harry?"

"Then you really loved him?"

She pushed me away; the dog yipped. "You're no different than all the others who said I married for money. Go to hell,

Riordan. We were happy. Real happy.”

“Be glad you had that, Sal. Not many do.” I wanted her back in my arms, but the moment had passed. “The police are looking for you.”

“They know where to find me.” She checked her watch. “They’ll be here in five minutes.”

At midnight a light still burned in Valario’s store. I stopped the car and peeked in the window. I didn’t see anyone inside, and the front door was locked. I went to the back in time to see Valario dump a water bucket into his neighbor’s yard.

I stepped from the shadows. “It’s not going to work.”

The old man jumped. “Oh, it’s you. I told you I haven’t seen Tony since he left. Now leave me alone.”

“You may think it’s cleaned up, Valario, but there’s stuff that will make your floor glow like a black-light poster.”

“Get away or I’ll call the police.”

“Go ahead and save me the trouble.” Valario sagged like a load of his wet clothes. “Let’s go inside.”

With his knowledge of stains, Valario had done a good job. But I knew even a bad criminalist could connect Tony’s murder to the store. “Why did you do it?”

“My Tony, what a waste. Goes bad. Destroys his mamma. Talent like that and he throws it away.”

“Twice he came by here. Maybe he wanted to patch things up.”

The old man spat. “First time he wants to talk. I tell him I don’t want to see him. He comes by again. We fight, we argue. I tell him I’m calling the cops if he don’t leave. He laughs. His own father, and he laughs. When he’s by the door, I don’t know. Twenty years I kept that thing loaded just in case.” Valario rubbed his eyes. “All that talent.”

“All that talent,” I repeated.

“How did you know?”

“Home plate’s a nice touch, Valario.”

“He had the swing, didn’t he? The next DiMaggio, he was.” Valario turned away to straighten the clothes rack. “I’m an old man,” he said. “I only clean up because that’s what I do every night. All I do is from habit. Days go by when the only words I say are to my wife.” Valario shook his head. “Sometimes she even answers.” He

went back to his work. "Think they'll be kind to an old man?"

I chased away the red-head with a dirty look and sat down in the cushioned seat across from him. He didn't look pleased.

"Celebrating, Tate?"

"I was. Can't say I am now."

"And all this time I took you for a fool."

"You're losing me, Riordan."

"You wanted Valario killed before he found you. If Sally had a good reason, maybe she'd do it. After all, she didn't like what happened to her brother. Some people think settling an old score will make them feel better."

"Why would I want that?"

"You were scared of him."

"Scared? I could handle Tony."

"I saw Tony before he died. Funny thing about that visit. He wanted to find two people. Sal, but that was mutual. And you, Tate. At the time I figured he needed work. Now I think he wanted to see you about Jerry."

"Jerry?"

"Sal said you fed her a story about her mom coming to you for a loan. When she missed a payment, Tony went to see why. By then Mom had crossed over, which meant the obligation passed on to Jerry. We both know how eager Tony could be when he wanted something. Any of this sound familiar?"

"Sure, it all does. But is this about Jerry? The guy didn't have two brain cells to rub together."

"So the world's a better place?"

He shrugged. "People like that cost money. Listen, the kid couldn't even tie his own shoes. To him, three squares meant a Snickers, an Almond Joy, and a Kit Kat."

"Where did you hear that?"

He smiled. "Tony, of course."

I smiled back. "Wasn't Tony."

"What are you, a soothsayer? Anyway, it doesn't matter if he told me or I read it. Tony still did it."

"Sorry Tate. Tony got himself arrested earlier on Halloween for busting some guy's chops, remember? He'd been locked up until last week. As for Jerry, they found him on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November. I know; I overheard two poll watchers talking as I waited to vote a straight Democratic ticket. The

cops called it an accident. By passing it off to Sally as another Valario overreaction, you hoped she'd take care of your problem."

"Better watch it friend. Next you'll tell me you're being followed by little green men." Tate laughed. "You got an imagination, Riordan, but didn't you just say they called it an accident? The kid tripped over his laces is how I heard it."

"After he went down the stairs, what did you do, untie them?"

Tate tasted his drink and glared at me.

I sat back and hooked my arms around the booth. "It almost worked. Tony's out of the way and you're thinking life's back to normal, only you made a mistake. You see, you know too much for someone who should know nothing. The laces and the wrappers? Never made it in the papers, and Tony couldn't have told you. Besides, he liked the kid. It was you, Tate. You did it."

He wiped a cocktail napkin across his forehead and gave a short laugh of disgust "So what? To get a ball rolling, you got to kick it, Riordan. Know what I mean? Just between you and me, this conversation never happened. I'll deny everything. Now beat it. I want to talk to my girl." Tate looked up when Baker limped over to us.

I removed the wire hidden under my collar. "Did you get it?" Baker leaned to one side favoring his bad knee. "Every word."

Tate tried to stand. "Say, what's he doing here?"

"I invited him. I thought he could use the excitement."

—James O'Gorman

from *The Desert Battalion*

Spring – 1942

Bob Hope and Bing Crosby were especially inventive with their lines during filming today. Could they have known that my mind was whirling with half-completed thoughts that had nothing to do with typing their every word? Luckily, my fingers were reliable enough to allow for my excessive habit of daydreaming. I watched my own fingers snapping down on the typewriter's keys with an intention of their own. God, am I typing the right letters? I'd often glance down to make sure my fingers were still moving, and during brief pauses skim through the pages of the finished "Road To Morocco" screenplay emerging from the grasp of the feed roller. The rhythmic clicking of the keys allowed my mind to wander ahead in anticipation of my 4:00 o'clock appointment. Every fifth second my eyes would dart up towards Paramount's studio wall where the clock hung. I began counting, two more hours, one more hour, half an hour to go.

Though my pink sweater was rather itchy, I was greatly relieved that I had chosen it for the Desert Battalion interview. The pink hue accentuated my suntanned skin and nicely matched the cream skirt brushing against my calves. Mrs. Edward G. Robinson would, no doubt, be looking for a certain type of girl for her organization. Pretty (but not overdone), fun (but not wild), confident (but not snobby). Though I was still unsure of what exactly the Desert Battalion was, I did know that it involved meeting Army men and attending socials. If Bob and Bing can wrap this up in another five minutes I'll have time to hail a taxi and freshen . . . RING, RING, RING! The studio's bell signaling a completion of the scene interrupted my thoughts, and David Butler, the director, rose from his chair.

"All right, people, good work for today. That's a wrap." I anxiously tore the script from the typewriter and sprang from my chair, heading to the secretarial department and dropping the screenplay on Caroline's desk on my way to the exit. I would not be sticking around today to chat with the girls, pick at the buffet snacks, or make eyes at the passing actors. As I ran from the studio to a nearby curb, I prayed that nobody interested in a conversation would follow. A slowing taxi neared and I immediately leapt into it.

"Fifth and Larson," I announced, peering into the driver's rear view-mirror. Soft brown curls swept across my shoulders, and a brown barrette gathered a token few up in place. "Pretty, fun, and

confident," I thought to myself.

"Jeanne DeBettignes," I quietly said to a secretary sitting behind a desk inside the building. She gave a slight nod and pointed with her pencil to a line of five women against the far wall. Upon joining them, I overheard their hushed whispers.

"Do you think Edward G. Robinson will be one of the judges today?" pondered a shorter girl with long red hair and arching eyebrows.

"I heard he was here yesterday," answered another out of the side of her brightly painted mouth. The famous mobster actor often served as one of the judges, because his wife, and head judge, was the founder of the organization. The secretary breezed over to drop an information form into my hands and scooted away just as fast before I had the chance to ask her any questions.

"The Desert Battalion!" declared the red-haired girl, imitating a manly soldier's voice. We broke into laughter, but I soon returned my attention to the paper and read aloud.

"To provide feminine companionship to lonely soldiers and sailors at the training stations remote from centers of population."

"Our mission!" the second girl in line chimed in.

"How terribly lonely they must be," I sighed. "Hundreds of thousands of men, most of them away from home for the first time." Our thoughts were interrupted by the sudden appearance of a judge from inside the interviewing room.

"One at a time, ladies," he said, escorting the first girl in. I watched the others walk through the door and out another one by one, and soon enough it was my turn.

"Jeanne?" asked a handsome 30-year-old man on the panel.

"Y-Yes," I stuttered, then cleared my throat, regaining composure. "I'm Jeanne DeBettignes." My pink sweater suddenly felt inappropriate and childish. I nervously tugged at the sides of my skirt and practically collapsed into the chair offered to me by Mrs. Edward G. Robinson. Her warm smile gave me assurance, and I straightened, ready for questions.

Fifteen minutes later, Mrs. Edward G. Robinson glanced at the other judges, nodded, turned to me, and said, "Jeanne, you're exactly what we're looking for: a nice, trustworthy, down-to-earth girl. We'd like to invite you to become a part of the Desert Battalion." She went on to explain that General Patton was seasoning, or toughening up, his crews in the isolated deserts of Southern

California. I later found out that this was in preparation for landing in the African desert. The soldiers' spirits, were down and our job—the Desert Battalion's—was to travel to the camps on weekends to talk with the men, entertain them, and accompany them to dances.

She also explained the importance of keeping everything secretive. "We can't tell anybody where we've been or where we're going," she explained. "The first trip is this weekend, will you be coming?"

* * *

"I should only be gone for the weekend," I pleaded to Caroline, my boss at Paramount. "You'll see me right back here first thing Monday morning." She shuffled papers around her desk and absently began pulling open her desk drawers in search of another misplaced office supply. I counted the seconds of silence following my question before repeating myself. "This thing I have to do, it's just really important and . . . well, not that typing the script isn't important, but it's just, this is different and I would really appreciate the weekend off. I . . . I know that I'm lucky to have gotten this job in the first place and there's really no reason that I should want a weekend off, but it's not even really just for me. It's a commitment. Of course my job is a commitment as well . . ." I began to notice the gray hue forming at the toes of my once-black dress shoes, and carefully eyed the delicate cracks caused by wearing them a year past their expiration date. I locked my left index finger inside my right hand and slowly raised my eyes to where Caroline had once been standing behind her desk. To my surprise, she had disappeared, and for a moment I felt like rejoicing in the possibility that she had not been present to hear my unsuccessful speech.

"Ah," she exclaimed suddenly, popping up from underneath her desk with an old yellow #2 pencil in her hand. Startled, I dropped my hands to my sides and jumped back a few inches. Her dull brown hair had become disheveled during her search, though she didn't seem to notice. During the commotion of her morning hunt, the top two shiny black buttons on her wrinkled white dress shirt had loosened, leaving a display of cleavage. I reflexively lifted my stare as Caroline leaned forward to replace the missing pencil to

its previous position in a worn green coffee can atop her desk. She placed her hands on her hips and began tapping her fingertips against the dark green skirt laboriously stretched around her growing lower half. I soon realized that Caroline was beginning to chew on the inside of her cheek, which always meant that she would soon be scavenging through her office for another hidden supply. During this habit of hers an indent would grace the side of her mouth and a long cheekbone would appear as her chin moved up and down. A stapler, pack of paper clips, or perhaps an extra roll of tape, what would she decide to hunt for this time?

I began backing towards the door and just as I allowed myself to accept her rejection to my proposition, she called over her shoulder. "Fine," she passively answered between the slams of filing cabinets doors as they opened and were instantly shut. She pulled a file and began flipping through several papers until one caused the pair of thick black glasses perched atop her head to descend onto the bridge of her nose and her finger to tap against her parted lower lip.

"Fine . . . I can have the weekend off?" I verified.

"Meralee will cover for you," she exhaled in reply, stepping atop her wooden chair and balancing while in search of one of the various unmarked boxes stacked in the shelves at the top of her wall. She carefully lowered herself off the chair and bent forward, setting the chosen box on the ground and searching through its contents. I remembered why I had tried to concentrate my eyes above her neck and for a moment considered cluing her in, but thought better of it and left before she had any reason to change her mind. As I walked out of her office, it occurred to me that during the entire year I had worked for Caroline she had never looked me in the eye during any of our conversations. In fact, I pondered with a half smile, I wonder if she's ever seen what I look like?

"Well?" asked Betty, who had been leaning patiently against the wall outside Caroline's office during our "meeting."

"Caroline's going to be attracting quite a few pairs of eyes on her way out of work today," I confided to my friend. Confusion spread across Betty's face for a moment and she paused to tilt her head in question. I continued walking along as Betty stared after me and then heard the stumbling of her red high-heeled shoes rapping against the floor as she caught my shoulder.

"Are you going?" she exclaimed, exasperated.

I looked my friend straight in the eye, anticipated her jealousy, smiled, and gave a single nod. Animation danced across every feature of Betty's face as she deeply inhaled through her nose and covered her mouth. I continued walking and decided to torture her for a few moments longer by not speaking another word of it.

"Betty," I finally said, pausing at the communal coffee pot, "We can't talk about this now. I wasn't supposed to tell anybody what I'm doing, remember?"

"Jeanne DeBettignes," declared Meralee, our coworker, appearing from behind the coffee pot. "I hope you're not worried."

"What would she be worried about?" sneered Betty in my defense.

"Well, just my proving that I'm a better script typer than she is this weekend when she's 'unavailable.' I mean, don't worry, Jeanne. I'm sure Caroline will hold your job for you while you're . . . what exactly are you doing this weekend?" Meralee took a long sip of coffee while locking eyes with me in a questioning manner. I observed her perfectly spiral-curved blonde hair, arching plucked brows, and rouge-covered cheeks with a sick feeling in my stomach.

"Family commitment," I answered shortly, breaking her gaze. Meralee raised her head from the coffee cup, closed her eyes, and purred, "Mmmmm" as she enjoyed the taste of warm coffee rolling down her throat.

"Well, surely that's a good enough reason for Caroline to give you back your job after she sees my exceptional work tomorrow, as well as my willingness to be available whenever she needs me."

Betty smirked, grabbed my arm, and mouthed, "Surely" over her shoulder to Meralee as we made our way to the exit.

"Have a good weekend," Meralee called after us sweetly.

* * *

Saturday morning broke through my window in sharp rays of sunlight. I knew I should've allowed myself more time to get ready and pack that morning before leaving for the Desert Battalion, but I was in no hurry. Masses of white fluff and a tightly knotted lavender quilt captured me in a meadow of warmth and calm. I felt incapable of throwing back the affectionate sheets and blankets and releasing myself from such a haven. I turned my face from the

beckoning sunlight and concentrated on the clock sitting atop my bed stand.

In an hour I'd be rolling along in a bus accompanied by fifty other girls, each with an agenda of her own. I worried whether I'd have anybody to sit next to on the bus, or if I'd be completely alone on this journey. My gaze traveled over to Betty, lightly snoring and tangled in her bed. If only she were coming, that little tension in the side of my stomach might disappear. She'd speak louder than the other girls and laugh too hard, but without doubt she'd lead the way for me. Betty would saunter up to the handsomest soldier in the room, throw her shoulders back, and carefully announce her name in an attempt to appear seductive. After the poor soldier's initial shock, she'd nod to me, look the soldier in the eye, and confide, "This is Jeanne." This weekend I was going to have to learn how to introduce myself. Panic washed over me at just the thought, and I wondered if I should write my name on the back of my hand as a measure of safety.

An hour later, the pink curlers had been anxiously ripped from my hair and a green knapsack was quickly thrown together. I joined a growing group of girls standing along Larson Street with colored skirts and painted nails. It was a hot morning in April, and most of them were groaning about the steamy conditions. Many exaggerated their discomfort by dramatically fanning themselves with hand motions. I stood in the center of their chaos and absorbed the heat of the sun on my cheeks with a smile. It seemed to replenish me, and I sucked in the smell of the sun floating in the air. Mrs. Edward G. Robinson suddenly appeared with dark sunglasses covering her face and a clipboard in her hands.

"All right, ladies, let's get going!" she boomed upon arrival. She was surrounded by girls with questions, but shook them off and boarded the bus. We formed a line and climbed into the bus, dragging our suitcases behind us. I immediately claimed a seat near the front of the bus and attempted to force the window open. I groaned in exhaustion when what little strength I had failed me, and turned my attention toward the bright blue suitcase suddenly thrown onto the seat next to me.

"Hi!" exclaimed a lively girl with tousled red curls halfway down her back. "I'm Vicky!" She moved her suitcase to the ground and fell into her seat, turning to flash me her sparkling smile outlined by full red lips. I was shocked to see the amount of

knee she revealed below the skirt, which matched her lip color, and wondered how she was able to balance on top of her three-inch high heels.

"Jeanne," I replied, returning her smile.

"Stuck?" she asked. I straightened in my seat and continued to study the coats of make-up covering her facial features. "The window," she continued. "Is it stuck?"

"Right, the window, yes, it seems to be." Vicky leaned over me and began forcing the glass upwards. I sank as far back into my seat as possible, conscious of the limited amount of space separating us. "There," she declared as a gust of wind squeezed through the space causing her curls to stir. Palm trees outside our window began to pass by as the bus driver eased onto the gas. Mrs. Edward G. Robinson introduced herself as "Robby" and began, one by one, asking our names. She appeared at the side of our seats and warmly greeted us with a genuine smile.

"Girls?" she asked, readying her pencil.

"I'm Vicky Tarone, and this is . . ."

"Jeanne," I interrupted, leaning forward, "Jeanne DeBettignes."

"Vicky and Jeanne," Robby repeated, carefully eyeing us for memory.

"So what are you going to do at dinner tonight?" asked Vicky when Robby moved to the next group of seats.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, some of the girls are going to dance on stage and I'm going to sing," she excitedly confided. "I'm a singer you know, only at bars and clubs right now, but someday I'll get a real audience to listen to me." Vicky seemed to be deep in thought and leaned back in her seat, carefully folding one arm over the other. She thought for a few moments, then turned to me. "You've got a great figure, the guys will be all over you."

"No," I laughed, pleased at the compliment yet embarrassed at the idea. Vicky reached into her skirt pocket and pulled out a shiny black tube of lipstick. I watched with interest as she pulled off the cap and twisted the tube until a brilliant shade of scarlet appeared. She placed the tube in my hand and encouraged me with a nod. Acting on the impulse of a thrill that had long been absent to my body, I generously applied the color on my lips and pressed them together.

"Over here," exclaimed a girl a few rows back. Vicky took the tube and tossed it back as excited laughter filled the bus. A few more tubes of lipstick emerged from others pockets and were soon being passed around the bus in a joyous ceremony. Vicky smiled broadly and laughed out loud at the commotion over the lipstick. She looked out the window, removed the excess lipstick from the corner of her mouth with her thumb, and shouted, "Boys, here we come!"

* * *

Our bus driver was required to take extra caution in regard to the secrecy of the locations of the soldiers and sailors at the desert training stations. He followed a route of unnecessary turns and detours through Southern California so that none of us would actually know exactly where we were. What Harry, our bus driver, didn't realize was that our minds were far from being focused on the location we were traveling to, but more so with the company we'd encounter at the location. For the majority of the two-hour trip, Harry's eyes would be locked straight ahead on the road, until we'd hit a bump. A smile would begin to itch at the corners of his mouth and, in anticipation of the bump, he'd begin to speed up and edge forward in his seat. As soon as the bus began to react, Harry would glance into his mirror to be entertained by the ladies' jumps and high-pitched shrieks. During the few empty seconds that Vicky allowed in our conversation, I would make a game of predicting the nearing of a bump by Harry's subtle actions.

We arrived at the training station a little after noon and began to quiet down a bit as we passed men in jeeps surrounding the area. Apparently these 'security' men knew something was going on but didn't know what exactly. The vastness of the desert met us as we climbed out of the bus and began sifting through the sand towards the mess hall. The sullen mood at the camp became apparent, and it almost seemed inappropriate for us to be entering into it wearing flashy red lipstick and high-heeled shoes. General Patton met us inside the mess hall with warm handshakes and a great amount of gratitude. He pulled Robby aside and chatted her up while she scribbled notes on her clipboard now and then. After a few minutes, General Patton invited us to lunch and then waved good-bye, explaining that he'd see us at the evening dinner and

social event.

White rice was served for lunch along with slices of chicken and a mix of vegetables. Vicky and I settled at a table along with two of the other girls, Gussie and Emily. We immediately noticed a group of scowling marine women a few tables down eyeing us with distaste.

"WACS," explained Gussie, picking the carrots off her plate. Our three pairs of eyes transferred from the glaring girls over to Gussie as she nibbled on a tree of raw broccoli, then carefully folded it into her napkin. She looked up, reached across the table to snatch a turnip from Emily's plate, and continued, "Your regular G.I. Jane's." We all looked back to the women who had turned their backs to us and were busily cleaning up their plates. They pushed back their chairs at once and leaving the dining hall, walked by our table. One girl in particular held my gaze with a fierce pair of brown eyes and an untrustworthy smile. She looked over each of us, noticing the cut and color of our dresses, and shook her head with annoyance. As soon as they passed us, we turned our chairs and looked after them as they walked out of the building in their dark lace-up combat boots.

It was quiet for a few moments until Vicky, who had been silent thus far commented, "So that's why the marines and soldiers have been so depressed!" We burst into laughter and shook off the accusing glares that had been given to us a few moments before. "What kind of companionship do you think they're able to provide?" she continued.

Harry had left our bags in the dust and driven back to a very different world. A world that was somewhat ignorant of the one we now found ourselves standing in. Vicky and I decided to be bunkmates and walked in the direction Robby pointed us, to cabin 32. The heavy door opened with a moan and revealed two cots with crisp white sheets neatly folded atop them. A few windows allowed a gentle breeze to circulate, and Vicky, unaware of the desperate appearance of the small room, began cheerfully unpacking her things. I placed my black brush and set of curlers on top of the dresser. A mirror hung above that and, after removing a coat of dust, I discovered a blurry image of myself. I forced a smile onto a face that, staring back at me, looked unappreciative of the trip I had been looking so forward to. I wondered if Meralee was sucking up to Caroline at Paramount and whether she had been able to

keep up with the script today. I edged onto the cot and leaned back, dropping each shoe with a clunk, and stretching my legs. A starchy pillow supported my head, and I folded my arms over my midsection, deciding that when I woke up, I'd be rested and more excited for the dance tonight. Drifting off, dreams of military uniforms and the sound of marine's legs snapping down in unison clouded my mind. I saw strong hands reaching out in hopes of a dance and my delicate hand fitting nicely into their grasp. Notes of music slurring together created the background in my dream and everything seemed perfect. Just as my lips began to part to allow a perfect gentleman to lean down for a kiss, bright shocks of yellow and orange exploded around all sides of me, and instead of pleasant musical notes, I only heard the rapid beating of my heart. Explosions sounded in deafening cracks and I felt the heat of fire against my skin. I woke from my dream in a sweaty panic, still feeling the warmth of flames on my legs.

* * *

Robby was knocking on our door a few hours later as Vicky and I applied finishing touches of rouge. "Girls," she called, letting herself in. "Let's go. We're all ready." We hurried outside to find all the girls fussing at each other's hair and pulling at their dresses. "Okay, let's remember to be perfect ladies," Robby directed. "You must dance with anybody that asks you and please, don't give these guys a hard time." We all nodded in agreement and began speed-walking towards the social building. Our bent elbows were moving double time to match the long strides we were taking as we made our way across camp. Consolidating into a single line upon reaching the building proved to be very difficult.

Tables were dressed with steaming plates of spaghetti and loaves of bread drenched with seasoned butter. Candlelight sent shadows across the room and danced on the faces of the men that stood before us. Their faces brightened upon our arrival, lines of worry and distress magically disappeared, and, suddenly aware of the "y" chromosome, they straightened up, removing their hands from their pockets. After a moment of observing the atmosphere, one another, and the music that began to play, we intermingled and were led to our seats by the men.

Beside me sat Jack, a 23-year-old marine with blonde hair

and broad shoulders. He had a habit of cracking his knuckles and slipping his arm around my back to roughly squeeze my waist. This frequent action always caused me to slightly jump and edge forward in my seat. Jack dominated the conversation at our table and always managed to slip a dirty remark into his stories. He didn't seem to notice the absence of my laughter and was clearly performing for his own entertainment. Remembering Robby's rules, I responded to him with a forced smile when he locked eyes with me. My interest, however, began to focus on John, the boy at the end of the table. He wound his spaghetti around a fork in perfect form, and while participating in conversation, a distracted far away look often captured his dark eyes. I allowed myself to stare in curiosity at John and wonder where he was drifting off to.

Emily leaned over to speak into John's ear, and as I leaned forward to overhear the conversation I suddenly felt the warmth of butter spreading across my lap. I jumped up in surprise, shrugging off the help of Jack as he attempted to dab at my skirt with his napkin. The slice of bread that Jack had dropped into my lap during one of his animated stories now lay on the floor after having left a visible imprint of butter on my new violet skirt. I excused myself to the kitchen sink where I scrubbed at the stain with a cracked bar of soap and cold water. I gave up and whirled around to return to the party but found myself face to face with John, who had followed me into the kitchen. He backed up, looked me up and down and spoke without any distraction in his eyes. "You look beautiful, can't hardly tell." He offered me his hand and just as I was about to accept, I remembered the firing and explosions that had occurred during my dream when I had accepted the offer of a dance. I hesitated, but shook off the frightening images of flames and fit my hand into his.

John and I spent the evening dancing together and silently looking into each other's eyes. When the music ended, we found a table and I prompted him to talk to me about himself and his family. John was from Oklahoma, and he confided that he greatly missed his dog, Lewey, and his younger sister Bethany. "What about your parents?" I asked with concern.

"Yeah," he replied turning his eyes away from me. "I miss them too." Vicky suddenly appeared on stage behind a microphone, commanding the attention of every man in the room. She swayed her hips while singing and occasionally bent down to touch the cheeks of the men closest to the stage. "What a character," com-

mented John with a smile on his face.

"Indeed. She's my roommate you know!" I laughed at Vicky's inviting antics on stage and took comfort that John seemed unaffected by them. The night soon ended and John walked me back to cabin 32 in the crisp night air. I worried about saying goodnight to him, uncomfortable with the thought that I might never see him again. I placed my hand on the doorknob and turned to memorize John's face and those eyes that had captured me.

"Good-night," he spoke, leaning towards me. I allowed his lips to briefly press against mine, and suddenly the explosions I had feared in my dreams were back. These, however, were not quite as dangerous. They took place inside my body and shot through my arms and legs. They seemed to feel more like fireworks than anything else.

Robby breezed by, asking if I'd be interested in returning the following week and, looking straight at John, I nodded. The following night, Harry was back with the bus and packing up our bags. As we boarded the bus and waved good-bye, we began to sing what would become our traditional weekend farewell song to the soldiers. The mixture of dust suspended in the air and girls waving out of the bus windows painted a permanent memory in my mind as we left the soldiers behind with only the words to our song:

"Good night soldier, till we meet tomorrow
Good night soldier, parting is sweet sorrow
Dance was super, the music divine
But now we find
That it is time to say
Good night soldier, taps are sounding out now
Good night soldier, lights are going out now
Dreams will enfold us
Of all the things you've told us
So—Good night soldier, good night."

—Lindsay Miller



