

NOVEL 2: TITLE TO COME

CHAPTER THREE - SWEET LITTLE SIXTEEN

‘...she’s got the grown-up blues.’

-- C. Berry

The rain had eased to a fine drizzle by the time they rolled up to the stoplight at Hornby, headed west down Georgia. Ahead, on the south side of the street, the pale limestone mass of the city’s grandest hotel loomed in the mist, and to the north, kitty-corner, the deco medical-dental building that used to house his uncle’s practice.

Leo leaned to the windshield and peered up at Jack’s old office window on the seventh floor and, several stories up, perched on the southeast corner setback, the nurse statue, a larger-than-life matronly figure decked out in nun’s headgear and sensible shoes. Sister Dia. Who, it occurred to him, might well serve as a conversation-starter. An icebreaker, something he stood sorely in need of just now: The silence that had been gathering inside the car since they set out five minutes ago was not a comfortable one. He pressed his face nearer to the rain-streaked glass and directed his passenger’s attention—tried, at least—to the figure overhead, one of three such nursing sisters of the Great War stolidly gracing the building’s foggy upper reaches. “See that statue up there,” he said. “That nurse statue? Know what they call them, the people that work there?”

The girl looked neither up where he was pointing nor over his way. Continued rather to stare straight ahead down Georgia Street, her expression as stony as that of the terracotta sister herself.

“The Rhea Sisters,” Leo continued after a moment. “Dia, Pyo and Gono...” He forced a chuckle, not a very convincing one, indeed as false to his own ear as the thousands of pairs of dentures fitted to thousands of pairs of jaws inside the tower over the years. “That’s what the doctors and dentists call them.”

Still no response. This was his third attempt in the last little while to get a conversation going and clearly this initiative was going to fare no better than its predecessors. Conversation-wise, it seemed she had shot her bolt at the outset when, slouching down the rainswept steps of the art school onto the Hamilton Street sidewalk, she had grimly noted that something in the vicinity ‘stank like dead fish’, that the weather tonight ‘really sucked’ and likewise the instruction they were being subjected to in the class they had just attended. Since then she had limited her utterance to a single curt request—demand—for a match to light the cigarette she brought forth from behind her right ear as they approached the car. Which request Leo, smitten by her perfect Mediterranean beauty, had fallen all over himself seeing to, with an over-eager servility he was unable to restrain and for which trouble he was rewarded with not the slightest word or gesture of thanks.

“The Rhea Sisters,” he repeated weakly, persisting with his bon mot in the face of her indifference, beginning in fact to babble: “Dia, Pyo, and Gono. Like, you know: Dia Rhea, Pyo Rhea, Gono Rhea... It’s a doctor-type joke, my uncle’s a doctor, he used to work there, he’s a urologist... like, diarrhea, pyorrhea, gonorrhoea... pyorrhea’s a gum thing, I think... a gum disease...”

Silence. Eyes steadfastly front, she took a last drag on her menthol, then jabbed open the no-draft and pushed the butt out into the night. “Yeah, I heard that one,” she said.

And failed to find it terrifically funny first time around, it was painfully clear.

“Oh?” said Leo. Reddening, he raised his gaze once more to Big Nurse roosted on her corner perch in the mists overhead. A snow-white gull was circling the statue’s head, about to touch down upon or possibly bespatter her terracotta wimple.

When he looked back down, the light was green. He eased off the clutch, sighing, feeling a bit bespattered himself. Dumped on. “Well, okay then,” he said. “Okay.”

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Eight minutes later they were through the park and across the bridge linking downtown Vancouver with the suburban North Shore of the inlet, driving into West Van along Marine at ten miles over the limit past the dark playing fields bordering the waterfront beyond the shopping center at Park Royal.

Leo cleared his throat and glanced sidelong for the umpteenth time at the moody occupant of his passenger seat. She was slumped down low with her arms folded under her breasts and her temple tipped against the side-window, radiating gloom and discontent and the musky scent of patchouli oil or some such funky fragrance as she stared grimly out at the side of the road, at nothing.

Nothing more had been said since his third would-be icebreaker smashed its prow up against her infrangible wall of glacial indifference back at the stoplight, and the fraught silence was beginning to wear on him. Hadn’t he already suffered his share of grief for one week -- more than his share -- at the hands of crazy teenage girls? What the hell was this one’s problem exactly? And whatever it might be was there any conceivable good reason even so why she couldn’t bring herself to offer some bare acknowledgement of his existence? Make some slight effort, no matter how token, to join him in conversation? Even the grandest of dames deigned to chitchat with the common folk from time to time, did they not? Accept tribute from their subjects and retainers? Exchange pleasantries with the people downstairs and the little people they crossed paths with in their travels? If Princess Grace and Jackie O. and the Queen could manage it, why not the brooding beauty in the seat next to him?

Warily, resentfully, he stole another peek at his uncommunicative companion. How sullen she looked, how very out of sorts and disagreeable. But how good, even so, with her shining chestnut hair, her bare shapely arms and satin olive skin, her hip-gypsy accessories: the silver-and-turquoise jewelry, the beads and leatherwork, the delicate ring glinting like a golden thread in her left nostril...

She had shed her sweater once the heater got going and Leo couldn't help but notice, as he had earlier, that she had opted to dispense with any sort of mammary stabilization and support system beneath her snug, wine-dark Danskin top. Not that she had much need of such: her breasts were small and high and exquisite.

Leo's gaze lingered yearningly on this glorious, unrestrained region for a moment. A moment and no more, but longer than prudent as it proved because when he looked back at the road the intersection at 13th was coming up fast. The slick black pavement beneath the traffic signal was splashed with red light and an oncoming car was halfway across his lane, committed to a left turn. He let out a little gasping yelp and stamped on the brake, pumped the clutch, yanked the stick-shift down. The Volvo decelerated sharply, engine roaring, but then lost traction and slid out into the middle of the intersection, where it bucked and shuddered and stalled scant inches from the turning vehicle's right front headlamp as it swung past.

A tense middle-aged face flashed through the beam of his lights as the other car—a sleek black Jaguar—squealed through its turn and raced off up 13th, horn sounding in belated protest. When it had passed from view, Leo shifted his wide-open gaze to a low forest-green building on the southwest corner: the West Vancouver Public Safety Building a.k.a. the Ambleside Cop Shop.

Hurriedly, he restarted the engine—no members of the constabulary were in sight, fortunately—and threw it in reverse and backed out of the intersection. His hands were trembling now and he felt a bit sheepish, but pleased with himself too, with his lightning reflexes. Not bad for someone awarded his driver's licence less than six months ago. Mario Andretti himself could have managed it no more neatly, nor A.J. Foyt. Stop on a dime.

He glanced over again at Miss Congeniality, hopeful she might prove at least a bit impressed by his performance, but could detect no sign this was so. In fact she appeared oblivious to their close call. Still slumped in her bucket seat, head lolling over against the window, staring across 13th at a radiant filling station on the northwest corner with a disdainful expression on her lovely face, as if offended somehow by the prominently advertised, limited-time offer of handsome, durable Melmac dinnerware absolutely free of charge while quantities lasted with every fill-up of ten or more Imperial gallons of Super-Shell...

Now the light changed and with it the tint of her sullen profile, from the palest of pinks to the faintest of greens, like that of some gaslit fin-de-siecle dancer or demimondaine out of Toulouse-Lautrec.

Leo returned his gaze to the road and put the car in gear and gave it some gas and they crept forward again, well under the limit now and still in stony silence, through Ambleside village, past the dark shops lining either side of the street, most of them shut for the night, the puddled sidewalks deserted but for the occasional dog-walker or strolling couple.

At 15th the light was red again. This time he managed to stop on the right side of the white line. Ahead, half a block up, the marquee outside the West Van Odeon brightened the north side of the street. He leaned forward, squinting, trying to see what was showing, but couldn't make it out.

His slight shift of position seemed though to succeed in effecting what near-collision had not, namely in getting his passenger's attention, stirring her at last from her brooding trance. She lifted her temple from the glass and sat up a little, unfolded her arms and stretched and pushed her hair back, then turned to him for the first time since they set out. For a long, disconcerting moment she stared directly at his sun-scorched nose, clearly curious, before finally raising her gaze to his own and muttering something. A question. When he failed to understand, she reached for the dash and tapped her forefinger atop the pack of Player's Filter he had set there, regarding him inquiringly.

Leo hesitated, less than delighted to grant the request after all her incivility, especially insofar as he was down to his last cigarette.

She tapped the blue-and-white pack twice more, widening her lovely, dark eyes. Her pupils were black and liquid, flecked with red from the traffic light.

He looked away, furrowing his brow, but soon capitulated under the pressure of her steady gaze. "Yeah," he grumbled. "I guess so."

She reached for the pack and pushed the bottom up and helped herself to the last remaining tenant. Foregoing the 'Oh-gosh-it's-your-last-one' expressions of concern, whether feigned or genuine, customary in such circumstances, she stuck it forthrightly in the corner of her mouth, then touched the tip of her forefinger to the unlit end of the white-filtered cigarette and looked at him expectantly.

The light went green. Leo eased off the clutch as he extracted his lighter from the fob pocket of his jeans and, keeping his eyes front, extended it her way and thumbed down the striker wheel.

A cool grip caught his wrist lightly and drew it over her way and again he caught the dark scent of her perfume as she leaned toward him, holding her hair away from the flame with one hand. It fell forward even so, brushing his forearm, her bare shoulder at the same time rubbing deliciously against his upper arm, skin on skin, with the immediate effect of hardening him below. His gaze cut sidelong and he beheld an intoxicating prospect of silky olive flesh and cleavage that had opened up down the front of her tank top as she bent to the flame; he felt suddenly sick almost with desire.

The smell now of burning tobacco. She released his wrist and straightened, threw back her head and exhaled a plume of blue-grey smoke. Then turned his way again and favoured him for the first time with a smile. A real one, warm-eyed, with no trace of mockery or irony.

A nice moment... long time coming—and gone immediately, shattered—annihilated—by a fearsome sonic assault, foghorn deep and heart-stoppingly loud, blasting from the megadecibel overkill air-horn of a humongous long-haul van with which he found himself engaged, when he looked back at the road, in a badly overmatched game of chicken.

He threw the wheel over hard right and veered back into his own lane as several tons of metal, glass and rubber—‘BEKINS’ lettered in green above the white cab, grimacing driver behind the wheel—tore past his left ear. The wind-blast of the van’s passing pushed them first over towards the curb, up almost onto the sidewalk in front of the Odeon—the lobby card outside the box office flashed by: a greasy-looking Dustin (‘Ratso’) Hoffman and whatsisface, the midnight cowboy, in denim and buckskin, the two of them freezing their asses in a New York doorway—then its backwash tugging them back over toward the median again, toward the oncoming traffic.

“God! Smooth move, Exlax!” This time she had noticed his lapse. “Do you drive much or what? Like how long have you had your licence?”

“Sorry,” he muttered, reddening.

“Cause I don’t think you’ve totally got the hang of it yet, do you. Like, could you PLEASE try not to KILL us before we get home? I’m way too young to die... my whole life’s ahead of me, okay?” She pointed at the dash: “Does that thing work?” The radio. Noticing it for the first time apparently. She snapped it on and twisted the dial across the band till she found some Chuck Berry, then clapped a hand to her mouth and bounced in her seat. “Hey, they’re playin’ my song!”

Said song being ‘Sweet Little Sixteen’. A Blast From The Past that for Leo conjured up a scene from early childhood, his fourth or fifth year, a vivid low-angle shot of his father and step-mother dancing across the worn checkerboard linoleum of their California duplex in their stocking feet circa 1958, as he and his new step-brother -- a crewcut, eight-year-old, infinitely more charming version of Russ, sporting Mouseketeer ears and a shy grin—looked on wonderingly from the doorway. On his father’s face, a joyful smile, delighted and unwary, a smile such as Leo hadn’t seen there in a very long while.

Salad days in Palo Alto. Grad-school days. Happier days. The two broken families reconstituting their remnants into a hopeful new whole, so happy in those early days to have found one another: the Canuck single father and his motherless son; the California divorcee and her fatherless boy; the four of them casting their lot together for another try at being a family together. The memory was a happy one, but melancholy, too, in light of how things turned out...

Leo’s passenger swiped the hair out of her eyes and laughed excitedly, animated for the first time. “This is so incredible! This morning they were playing ‘Sixteen Candles’, like when I turned on the radio, and now it’s ‘Sweet Little Sixteen’ and hey, guess what: Tomorrow’s my birthday, my sixteenth! Like is that synchronicity or what!”

Leo returned his eyes to the road and grunted noncommittally, though surprised to learn her age. He would have sworn she was older, eighteen at least.

“So aren’t you gonna say anything?” she asked after a moment, mock-reproachful, displaying a hint of coyness hitherto unseen.

“Like what?”

She gave him an odd look, and kept her gaze on him.

“Whoopee-doo,” he muttered after a moment, sullen, rolling his eyes. Serve her some of her own medicine.

“What? WHAT did you say?” She reached out and turned the music down a little.

“I said, Happy birthday, Sweet Sixteen.” This without much enthusiasm or sincerity; with in fact a fair bit of snarkiness. “Sweet’ Sixteen?” he grumbled under his breath. “SWEET?! ” He snorted in bitter amusement.

“Well you don’t have to be so sarcastic!” Her voice was shaking. “So RUDE!”

Leo looked over at her. Was she joking or what? “Are you joking?” he asked. “Or what?”

A distressed look on her face as she averted it.

“You’re NOT? You’re SERIOUS?” He gaped, then burst into shrill laughter, experiencing a surge of amazed outrage. “Well what the hell do you expect! First you want a ride home, you practically ORDER me to give you a ride, then you don’t say anything, don’t TALK... totally ignore me... act like I’m a cab driver or something... your bloody chauffeur!” He stamped the brake and they lurched to a stop at the 22nd Street light; he snatched up the empty Players’ pack and brandished it at her. “You take my last smoke!”—he threw it back down on the dash—“And now you want what? A cake? You want me to bake you a goddamn birthday cake? Sing you the song? ‘Happy Birthday, Sweet L’il One Six, Happy Birthday To You’?! Is that what you want? CHRIST! YOU ARE UNFUCKINGBELIEVABLE!!”

The light changed and he booted it and they leapt ahead, burning rubber; but then he eased off the gas and glanced over at her. Having unleashed this uncharacteristically bitter blast he felt a bit uneasy as to just how harshly he had expressed himself. Dimly he was aware that his anger may have been at least in part a product of the bittersweet, prelapsarian California memory.

The Birthday Girl was staring straight ahead now. He was dismayed to see that her lips were twitching and she was blinking rapidly, her large dark eyes bright with imminent tears.

“Sorry,” he stammered. He grimaced, made erasing motions with his hand. “I didn’t mean to uh. Happy Birthday... like really, many happy returns.”

Too late though to undo it. A tear leaked from the corner of her left eye and glistened down the side of her face and went over the sheer cliff of her exquisite cheekbones, landing upon the upper slope of her left breast, leaving a dark spot the size of a shirt-button on the burgundy Lycra material.

Leo stumbled on, ever more remorseful: "Sorry I uh... I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I... I'm sorry." He looked at her hopefully. "Okay?"

She turned away again.

"So..." he continued after a moment: "So it's your uh birthday tomorrow, eh? You'll be, like, sixteen? Tomorrow?"

She turned back his way and produced a little tut of annoyance with her tongue against the roof of her mouth, her jaw dropping slightly. "Are you hard of hearing or something?" She pushed the heel of her hand up her cheek past the corner of her eye toward her ear, erasing the tear-track and all trace of her vulnerability, then tossed back her auburn mane and frowned at him. "I mean, isn't that what I just told you?" Another little ticked-off tut. "And what's with your nose anyway? It looks SO gross, like Rudolph the Rednose Reindeer's got nothing on you. God!" She dragged sharply on her cigarette.

Leo reeled, shot down again. His hand flew up to his face; he covered his sun-blasted nasal region with three fingers, the area around it flushing to a matching shade.

Silence fell once more, cold and heavy like a block of ice from a tall building atop his skull, a sudden flash-freeze, instantaneous and total, like Crazy Glue.

They were moving through the block of shops at Dundarave now, slowing as they rolled through a blood-red puddle up to the stoplight at 25th. Catching all the reds tonight.

Ahead, on the north side of the street, another gas station, this one proposing to Put A Tiger In Your Tank—surplus to his requirements clearly what with a tigress already occupying his passenger seat. Maybe though he could have them fit her back there, however they did it... out of clawing range.

Across Marine on the south side, ocean side, lay a few last shops, then the road turned dark and the neighbourhood residential, which is how it stayed pretty much till you hit the village at Horsehoe Bay six serpentine miles downshore.

As they waited on the light, Leo reached down and shut off the heat – the windshield was fogging up—and lowered his own side-window part way and looked down 25th past the IGA supermarket on the southeast corner toward the waterfront. More red lights were flashing at the train crossing below Bellevue. The signal crossarm was down and a bell was ringing, a rapid monotone clanging like a pot or pan being beaten by a moron, or the finger-cymbal din of the Hare Krishna ecstasies downtown on the corner outside The Bay. Brick coloured boxcars rushed through the beam of a waiting automobile's

headlights, sparks showering from the steel wheels as from a welder's torch.

Now the caboose rolled by and vanished into the western night. A moment later the signal lights stopped flashing and the zebra-striped crossarm tipped back up to the perpendicular, pointing at the moon; the waiting car started forward across the tracks.

Leo caught sight of the pier now, smelled the sea. In the distance, way out on the black water, a big passenger liner, honeycombed with cabin lights, was moving west out of the harbour. One of the P&O ships, by the look of it—Oriana, Oronsay, Orsova headed for open water past the dark university lands on the far shore of the inlet by the mouth of the Fraser.

He drifted a little, his fancy lightly turning from present unhappy circumstances to thoughts of world travel, of voyaging forth by sea to distant lands, setting sail from the cold blue harbour of this sparkling northeast Pacific port bound for Honolulu and points east—Yokohama, Hong Kong, Singapore—or south by way of San Francisco to sunnier climes: Acapulco, Panama, Colon, Trinidad... equator-bound, there to rendezvous with tropical adventure and hot-blooded Latin romance.

He pictured himself taking his ease in unlikely hotel splendour, sipping a cool colada by his pool cabana... or lounging 'neath the palms on white-sand beaches lapped by gentle azure waters, warm as bathwater, clear as a fresh-washed pane of glass, blue as the sky last weekend atop the peak... Or delineating the undraped contours of some exotic local girl perhaps, in his thatch-hut studio, like Gaugin in Tahiti, sharing his hammock and sun-baked body with his tawny, lithesome model—and her sister, too...

A soft honk broke his reverie, a single horn-tap from the car that had drawn up behind them. It was the mildest and politest of honks, the motoring equivalent of a discreetly cleared throat, a gentle nudge to alert him to the fact that the light had turned green.

He glanced in his rearview as he ground the gears into first and a familiar round face awaited him there, that of Mrs. Muffy Orphington, his next-door neighbour. Accompanied by several or possibly all of her five moon-faced children, she was smiling and wagging her fingers in greeting. Before he could respond, though, her face fell, beaming good will displaced by bewilderment.

He shifted his gaze from the mirror to the occupant of his passenger seat and was alarmed to see that she had twisted round and thrown up an arm in order to waggle a finger of her own: the middle one of her left hand, with which—smiling fiercely, cigarette jutting from the corner of her mouth, eyes glittering like a Manson girl's—she was saluting Mrs. O. Apparently the honk, for all its light touch, had offended her.

“Jesus!” He grabbed her wrist, pulled the arm down. “What are you DOING!”

She wrenched free, gave him a murderous look. “Keep your hands OFFA me, man! Don't TOUCH me!”

He let out the clutch, none too smoothly, and the Volvo leapt forward, tires squealing. When he regained control and looked again in the rearview he saw that Mrs. Orphington's station wagon was back at the intersection still. The light had gone red again.

"JESUS!" He whacked the steering wheel with the flat of his hand. "That was my NEIGHBOUR!"

"You're kidding!" A look of incredulous delight, as if she couldn't believe her good fortune. "Really?"

"Yeah really." Leo pushed his fingers through his hair. "Like what is it with you? Are you MENTAL or something?"

She laughed merrily and unrepentantly, the first genuine mirth she had displayed thus far. "Your neighbour! That is SO hilarious." She dragged on her Player's, then tipped back her head and blew smoke at the sun visor, chuckling. "That's wild... sorry, man." She didn't sound sorry, not even a little. "What the hell." She shrugged. "Old biddy probably loved it. Something to tell the ladies at her next Tupperware party: 'The young people these days...'"

"Yeah, well, my parents are gonna hear about it, too," Leo pointed out. "And then I'M gonna hear about it... She's always coming round collecting for cystic fibrosis or selling Girl Guide cookies or whatever, and like yakking with my mother... And she's already uptight about us having draft dodgers stay with us. She thinks they're gonna give dope to her kids and undermine their moral fibre and lower the property values..."

His unruly passenger looked surprised. "You have draft dodgers staying with you?"

"Sometimes. Like when they first get up here we let them crash in the rec room and feed them and stuff till they find a job and get landed."

"Wow, that is so great! You must have really great parents!"

"Not really... I mean, they're okay, I guess. Like they're against the war and everything -- that's how come we moved back up here -- but actually they're pretty straight. They used to be Unitarians sort of."

"You're from the States?"

He nodded. "California. But my dad's from here, he was born here."

"My boyfriend's a dodger, I mean a resister. He's from New York City, he's a poet." She frowned, changed the subject. "So what's with your nose, anyway?"

Gingerly, Leo touched a fingertip to the organ in question. "It got sunburned last weekend. Skiing."

"God, it looks really gross, like AW-ful!"

He winced, hard enough that his seared sniffer twinged a little.

"Where were you skiing?" she demanded.

“Whistler.”

She was silent a moment. When she spoke her voice was subdued, barely audible. “My parents used to have a place up there... when they were still together. We used to spend a lot of time up there.”

She turned away and looked out her window at the roadside, then folded her arms and sank down in her seat, tipping her temple again to the lightly fogged glass. Leo could see she was shutting down on him, reverting to her sullen, brooding-in-silence mode, less agreeable even than her conversation.

“So... you’re not too happy with the class then, huh?” he asked, trying to keep the ball rolling. “Like with how it’s going?”

She lifted her head and dragged on her cigarette, then shrugged listlessly. “Not too. That Melanie or whatever her name is is totally useless, she doesn’t have a clue what she’s doing. And that Little Miss Sunshine act of hers is really getting on my nerves, the positive feedback bit, it’s so phony: ‘WONderful!’... ‘FABulous!’... ‘LOVE it!’... God! Shut up already!” She tossed back her hair and sat up, revived by her own mounting irritation. “I saw some of her stuff last month at this gallery in Gastown, like these paintings she did and I couldn’t believe how bad they were, all these stupid rainbows and Peter Max type We-All-Live-In-A-Yellow-Submarine type crap. God!”

Leo experienced a pang of insecurity, all too aware of his own meagre talent. “So uh how long’ve you been drawing?” he inquired.

She tapped ash out the no-draft. “About six months.”

“Six months!?” He had been at it a couple years himself but there was no comparison. “Wow.” He congratulated himself on his decision to pack it in. “How come you trashed that thing you were working on tonight?”

“Cause I FELT like it, that’s why!” She tossed back her hair again. “How come you turned seven shades of red when I caught you staring at my ass?” For reasons unclear to him, his question had angered her. She dragged on her Player’s, then jabbed it into the ashtray, embers flying, and snorted wrathfully, silver-blue smoke pouring from her nostrils dragon-style, as if his query literally had stoked the flames of her ire. Clearly emotional stability was not her strong suit.

Blindsided, Leo blinked several times in quick succession and began recapitulating the seven shades. “Oh wow,” he murmured.

“Sorry.” This time she sounded as if she meant it. “Don’t mind me, I guess I’m not in the greatest mood tonight. My mother’s friend who’s this therapist sort of, she says I tend to, like, misdirect my rage.” She bowed her head and touched a finger to the middle of her brow, then looked back up and over at him with pained eyes. “Like I’ve had a really crappy day. One of our cats got the budgie and chewed on his wing and then the toilet backed up and we had to call a plumber and THEN I had this huge fight with my old man.”

“Your dad?”

She clicked her tongue and rolled her eyes. “My BOYfriend! EX-boyfriend. I told him I don’t want to see him anymore... plus I’m getting my stupid period. Right on schedule.” She pointed to the southwestern sky where the moon had emerged from behind the dispersing clouds, bright and cool and full. “I’m a moon woman, like my cycle is totally lunar, just call me Moon Unit... Can you believe Frank Zappa named his kid that?”

“Named his kid what?”

“Moon Unit.”

“He did?”

“Uh-huh. And the other one’s called Weasel or something.”

“Like ‘Weasels Ripped My Flesh’?”

“WHAT?” She stared at him as if he were crazy. Apparently she was more familiar with the head Mother’s family life than his music.

“It’s the name of this album he put out...”

She snorted dismissively and returned her gaze to the road. They were coming to the end of the straightaway now, entering the narrow stretch that wound along the waterfront past West Bay. Leo eased off the gas a little and glanced over at her. She appeared calm. “I just asked about your thing,” he ventured, “‘cause I thought it was really excellent.”

“What, my sketch?”

“Right.” She gave him a fierce look, then relented. “Actually the abs were fucked, that’s why I X’ed it. But thanks for saying so.”

“If it was mine I’d’ve framed it, I’d’ve hung it up in the living room.”

“Yeah? How would your parents like that?”

Leo reddened, remembering the sketch’s content.

She raised an eyebrow. “What would your fat-face neighbour-lady think next time she came by marching in the Mothers’ March?”

“Uh maybe not hung it up. But I sure wouldn’t have trashed it, I’d’ve saved it. For my portfolio.”

“You’re that desperate, eh?” This though with a smile, flash of perfect white teeth.

Leo grimaced. “Uh yeah, actually. Drawing’s not really my thing, I don’t think.”

“So what’re you doing in the class?”

He shrugged. “At first I thought maybe it WAS my thing but now I know it’s not. Actually I think I’m gonna drop it, tonight was my last time... I might try the Super-8 thing next term though. “

“You’re into film?”

“Sort of. I mean, it’s something I could for sure get into, I think.”

“I’m doing this film right now, this movie.”

“Really?”

“Uh-huh. I’m this whore.”

He looked at her, then back at the road.

“Like I PLAY one, obviously. I’ve got a part in it. It’s this wierd sort of Western type thing.”

“Wow, that’s great!”

“Actually it’s just a teensy part... like zero lines. It’s this nude scene in this Wild West type whorehouse with all these other Wild West type whores but it’s cool ‘cause it’s tasteful and artistically justified and everything, and anyhow I’m not hung up about my body, like I’m not uptight about getting naked. I believe the human body is a totally natural and beautiful thing and I think Society’s thing about nudity is just SO repressive and like SICK!”

“Me too,” Leo hastened to agree. “For sure.”

Even so, she frowned at him as if he were somehow complicit in the repression.

He reached for his cigarettes with unsteady hand, then remembered she had just smoked his last one. Truth was, people who weren’t hung up about their bodies had his sincere admiration but he was by no means numbered among them, not by a long shot. In fact, of the many things with respect to which he was hung up and uptight (their number was legion), his pale, skinny body topped the list.

His passenger stiffened in her seat suddenly. “Watch it! You’re on the shoulder!”

“Whup!” He yanked the wheel over, got his tires back on the pavement. “Sorry,” he muttered.

“God! You drive like my grandpa before they found out he had cataracts!”

“Sorry.”

They travelled in silence awhile. When the warmth in his face subsided, he continued: “There was some kind of movie shooting up at Whistler last weekend. Is that the—“

“Uh-huh, that’s it.”

“So were you up there with them?”

“Unh-uh. They just went up for a couple days to do this one scene that happens in the snow but I think mostly they just wanted to go skiing and hang out... Bernie broke his leg. The producer.” She smiled but didn’t explain the humour in this misfortune. “They came back down to the main set a couple days ago... It’s up above the highway near Hollyburn, like up the mountain. It’s really cool up there, like they don’t have a huge budget or anything but they built this whole little town somehow, this funky little oldtime logging town in the woods... It’s really amazing, like everything’s super-authentic and old-timey,

even the insides of the cabins, the interiors. And the crew's real hip, all these old freaks from California mostly and a bunch of 'em are living up there and they like get high and trip out and party all the time. It's really wild."

Leo nodded warily, having had his fill last weekend of tripping out on mountains. "So have you done a lot of acting?" he asked. "Are you an actress?"

"Not really. I was Little Miss Muffet in first grade, like my class play, and I was just about Titania in Midsummer Night's Dream last year at my old school, like I learned all my lines and rehearsed it and everything but then I got into this big hassle with the guy who was directing it, he was the drama teacher, it was really stupid, he was a real jerk and he just kept hassling me and hassling me and finally I just said fuck you and quit, like at the dress rehearsal... God he was a jerk!"

"So how'd you get the part then? In the movie?"

"Marge is working on it. My mom. She's transportation assistant, she meets people at the airport mostly and drives them around and drops them off and stuff... so I've been up at the set with her a lot hanging out and we were up there a couple weeks ago and this weird-looking guy comes over, like at first I thought he was some kind of head case 'cause he seemed really kind of off the wall but turns out he's the director... Did you see Wild In The Streets?"

Leo shook his head. "My brother did, though. He told me about it."

"Well, Richard was an A.D. on it."

"Wow... What's that?"

"Assistant director. Or else he was assistant to the assistant or whatever. Plus he worked for Corman, too... Roger Corman. So anyway now he's directing, this is like his second picture, and he comes over and asks Marge 'Is this your daughter?' and she says yes it sure is and introduces me and everything and then they start rapping but he kind of keeps looking over at me while he's talking to her, like checking me out and then after awhile he asks me do I do any acting and I'm like 'Well I was Miss Muffet in grade one but no, not really' and he goes 'Well would you like to? 'Cause I think we may have something you'd be right for' and I'm like 'Wow for sure!' and then he says 'But there's something I'd need to explore with you, right up front' and I'm 'Uh-huh' and he says 'I need to know how you'd feel about taking your clothes off, like if the part requires it and it's done tastefully and everything. Would that be a problem for you?' and I'm like, 'No, that's fine'. So then he asks Marge 'Is it cool with you?' and at first it wasn't, like she wasn't too crazy about the idea at all... actually she totally hated it. Like Marge tries real hard not to be bourgeois anymore but she used to be this total Fifties West Van housewife when she was with my father, like before she went through her changes, and she's still actually pretty straight in a lot of ways, like deep down, even though she's WAY way better than she used to be... So anyhow Richard kept asking her about it and bugging her and finally she told him she'd talk to her group and see what they thought, so she did and they chewed on it for like EIGHT HOURS STRAIGHT!... It was amazing, I mean these women can TALK, it was their longest session ever... an' they finally decided it'd be okay if it

wasn't exploitive, which it isn't, and didn't objectify women, which it won't, and if it's done tastefully, which it will be, and also if it's like artistically justified and integral to the story and everything, which it totally is... like, if there was no whorehouse scene then the guy main character who's this union-organizer type guy wouldn't ever meet the girl main character who's this madam who runs the whorehouse and there wouldn't even be any story! So anyway Marge finally said 'Yeah I guess so' even though she's still not super-happy about it, and we're gonna do it next week... I even get to count it as school."

"School?"

"I have to keep a journal and do some sketches and give a report."

"What school do you go to?"

"This one downtown, it's a free school."

"Wow... So who's in it? Are there any big-name actors, like stars?"

"Not really. Leila Lemieux and Cedric Wooley are the only ones you might have heard of, I guess."

Leo nodded sagely and made appreciative sorts of sounds. She looked at him, surprised. "You've actually heard of them?"

"Heard of them?" He cleared his throat. "Have I actually heard of them?"

"Right. Do you know them?"

"Uh... actually, no."

She let out another exasperated tut and glared at him till he went red, then she sighed and continued. "It's not really supposed to be a star-type movie anyway. It's more of a communal thing, like a collective... one big family sort of... no ego stuff and no one's supposed to lay their trip on anyone else, not even Richard. The actors get to write their own lines and improvise a lot and stuff. It's totally fluid and—Hey! Gotta turn."

They were past the mini-mall at Cypress Park now, nearing Caulfeild. Ahead a sidestreet diverged from the main road. "Down there," she commanded. "Hang a left."

Leo cut across the oncoming lane, shunting them off Marine onto a narrow byway that wound down through a heavily treed hillside neighbourhood toward the shore of the inlet. Dripping cedars and tall laurel hedges crowded the road, walls of dark foliage broken at intervals by driveway entrances affording glimpses of gleaming late-model automobiles parked outside bright-windowed, late-model homes.

Up a hill, down the other side and round a bend, then the road forked. Leo's passenger directed him left again, a NO THROUGH ROAD sign flashing up in their lights as they headed down an even narrower tributary that plunged fifty yards toward the water before ending in a cul-de-sac.

"Over there." She pointed to a gap in the overgrowth, the head of a long, steep driveway.

Entering it, Leo caught sight of the ocean below: moon on black water, the lights of freighters at anchor and those of the city on the far shore. His view was quickly screened though by the wet vegetation pressing in on them from all sides and from above as well, blocking out the sky and making a tunnel almost of the driveway.

Brambles dragged across the windshield as they eased downhill, Leo riding the brake all the way even though the track cut laterally across the slope, doubling back on itself twice en route to bottom.

A house was fitted in among the evergreens at the foot of the driveway. The place was dark, the only light coming from an orange bug bulb burning feebly in the gable of the breezeway that connected the house to a small garage.

He swung through the breezeway and round the garage, a tight U-turn that pointed them back the way they had come; then stopped the car and, leaving his headlights on, twisted the ignition key. The engine shuddered and died.

The girl turned and looked past him at the house. "I guess Marge isn't back yet," she said, sounding a little forlorn. "She had to pick this guy up at the airport." She glanced over at the house again. "This technical advisor guy." She smoothed her hair back. "He was coming up from L.A." She sat motionless for a moment, gazing up the driveway at the lush, tangled garden revealed by their headlights; then sighed, reached round into the back seat for her tote bag and portfolio and set them on her lap. "Well, thanks for the ride, man," she said. "Sorry to be such a bitch. I guess I can be pretty hard to be around sometimes, like 'specially this time of month." She leaned back slightly and patted her belly and smiled. She didn't seem in a hurry to go inside.

Leo considered asking if she felt like getting together sometime, catching a movie maybe, though in fact he was none too sure he felt like it himself given her rough edges. His nerve failed him in any event but after a moment another, less risky expedient suggested itself. "Do you maybe need a ride next week?" he inquired. "Like, to class? Or back?"

"I thought you said you were gonna quit."

He shrugged. "I think I might go one more time."

"Well, sure, that'd be great if my-- No! I forgot, I'm not gonna be here next week."

"No?"

"I'm going to California for a few days." She grimaced. "With my old man."

Leo looked at her, startled. Didn't she say she'd broken up with the guy?

Her grimace took on a more permanent aspect, settled in as a frown. "God, he's such a jerk. He's wants to get into TV or movies or whatever, that's his latest fantasy, like he's trying to hustle this thing he wrote, this script he thinks is the greatest thing since Citizen Kane but I bet it's total garbage... Like supposedly he's got some kind of deal lined up down there, which I will have to see to believe." She

flipped back her hair scornfully. "Anyhow... he managed to score this really great place to stay somehow, in Malibu, someone actually LENT it to him, can you believe it, I guess they must not be the greatest judge of character, and it's right on the beach, I saw these pictures... He says I can stay there and he'll pay my plane fare and everything and I can do whatever I want, like just come and go and do my own thing... Like I know he's just trying to get on my good side 'cause he KNOWS he's been a total jerk and he knows I'm like SUPER mad at him and at first I said no way but then I thought about it and I thought, Well why cut off my nose to spite my face? Like why penalize myself just 'cause HE'S a total jerk, right?... So then I figured, Okay, what the hell, I'll go anyway and have a good time on my own, like hit the beach and hang out at the pool and work on my tan and stuff." She scowled. "But that doesn't mean I'm not still totally pissed at him though. Like he can do his deluded movies thing and I'll do mine and keep clear of him and if he comes near me I'll tell him to get stuffed."

"Sounds nice," Leo said, though in fact it didn't. He scratched the nape of his thin neck and knit his sunburnt brow, more than a little puzzled. Here he'd been picturing the 'old man' as some low-rent poet-hippie type who had just been given the gate and now it turns out he's Mr. Movies, still very much in the picture and indeed whisking her off on an expenses-paid California getaway. How could you compete with that?... But how was it, he wondered, that a draft dodger could be jetting in and out of Amerika and putting up at really great places in Malibu and picking up the tab for his girlfriend to boot? It didn't sound anything at all like the edgy young guys he saw camped out in his parents' basement, rolling their own and calling home collect and gathering pop bottles to finance the bus trip downtown to the offices of the Committee to Aid American War Objectors on East Georgia...

His passenger reached over and touched his arm. "Anyway, thanks for the offer," she said.

He looked at her blankly.

"The ride. Remember?"

"Oh. Right. You're welcome."

"Maybe the week after. Like if you don't quit." She smiled, holding his eye. "Or maybe even if you do. How 'bout I give you my number, you can call sometime if you like?"

"Uh great. That'd be great." Or would it?

She leaned his way and again he caught a whiff of her patchouli or whatever it was as she plucked his Rapidograph from his shirt pocket, then retrieved a matchbook from the ashtray and scribbled on the inside cover and handed it to him.

Squinting, he held it up to the dim amber light. "You're... Sylvia?"

"SylVIE. With an 'e'."

"So is your family French?" He slipped the matchbook and pen back into his pocket.

“No way!” She looked at him as if the suggestion were bizarre. “Greek and Irish.” She flipped her hair back. “How ‘bout you? What’s yours?”

“Leo.”

That little exasperated alveolar click again. “No, your NAME.”

“That’s it: Leo.”

“Leo?”

“Right.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Far out. Marge is a Leo... So what’s your sign, then?”

“Scorpio.” He divulged these auspices eagerly; the information often seemed to go over well with astrologically minded young women, though he couldn’t say why.

“Scorpio? You’re kidding.” She frowned. “That is so wierd, you don’t come across as Scorpio, like I don’t get that vibe at all.”

“What vibe is that?”

“They’re usually real intense and moody-broody and like... erotic, but I don’t get that from you at all. No offense. It’s a heavy sign. Like, Picasso’s a Scorpio, so is Charlie Manson. The guy Marge is seeing right now is one and he’s super-intense and like... Lawrencian. Did you see Women In Love?”

Leo shook his head, feeling a bit put out. Moody-broody he would never claim to be, much less super-intense; but erotic—what the hell did she know?

She shrugged. “Oh well, it’s all bullshit anyway, right?” She drooped her eyelids and blanked her expression and adopted a dumb-hippie sort of voice: “Like, what’s your sign, man. Duh...” She grinned at him, then turned away and leaned forward and peered through the windshield at a light shining through the foliage at the top of the driveway. “Here comes Marge,” she said, sounding relieved. Gripping her door handle, she gave it a tug and cracked the door open a few inches.

The light zigged across the property as it came down the driveway, then switched back midway down and zagged the other way, rounding the final bend a moment later with a squeal of tires and bearing down on them, a single kamikaze highbeam blasting light.

Leo flinched and threw a hand up against the dash, bracing for impact, but the newcomer braked at the last moment and slid to a stop a few feet off their front bumper.

“Shit!” Her voice was low and vehement.

“What? Who is it?” Not Marge, he had a feeling.

No reply. She squinted grimly into the harsh light.

Leo raised a hand to shade his eyes. When the dazzle wore off a little he realized he was looking not at a motorcycle, as he first had thought, but at a car with a light out. A red Mercedes roadster, one that looked to have seen better days: The front fender on the passenger side was crumpled, an empty socket where the headlamp should be. Despite the rain, the top was down.

Now the cyclopean beam dimmed and died, and the driver's door swung open and a man stepped out on the wet blacktop, blinking in the glare of their lights, as they blinked in his.

He was big and tall and fortyish, as near as Leo could guess, wind-blown and darkly handsome with thick sideburns and a head of salt-and-pepper curls.

"Shit!" the girl hissed again. "It's Vic!"

"Vic? Who's Vic?" asked Leo, trying for offhand but missing by a mile.

"My old man!"

"Oh." A stab of anxiety and incomprehension. "Uh-oh." He frowned, increasingly bewildered. "That's him? Really?"

The 'old man' didn't look anything like he would have expected. For one thing he really WAS old enough almost to be her father, and in fact with his dark-eyed Mediterranean looks he could easily pass for such.

Certainly there was no way he was a draft dodger, not unless he was still ducking Korea twenty years after the fact. Nor did he look much like Leo's idea of a poet, neither the young longhaired ones who came to read at his school last year -- three of them, little distinguishable from your garden-variety Kitsilano freak -- nor the older, corduroy-and-elbow-patches campus types, colleagues of his father, who sometimes turned up at his parents' departmental dinner parties. (And tended, Leo had noticed, to smoke and drink at twice the rate of the other guests.)

On the other hand, the guy DID look the part of the Hollywood player, insofar at least as Leo was acquainted with such from his reading of Harold Robbins and Jacqueline Susann: the imposing size and leading-man looks; the red sports car; the 'casual panache' with which he was dressed: sand-coloured, collarless, Nehru-ish sports jacket over a dark turtleneck sweater, and spanking-new blue jeans, from beneath the flared cuffs of which peeked the shiny caramel toes of his Frye boots.

Now he took a step toward them, squinting into their lights and smiling uncertainly.

"Look at that!" The girl's voice quavered with outrage. "He's fucking hammered!"

Leo looked as directed and saw that the newcomer -- Vic, was it? -- was wet and a bit dishevelled. His fly was halfway down, likewise his eyelids, and he appeared now that she mentioned it none too steady on his feet.

Sylvie scowled, breathing heavily – hyperventilating practically -- through her fully flared, Greco-Roman nostrils, putting Leo in mind of the big black bull in that old Bugs Bunny cartoon, huffing and puffing and glaring with homicidal (rabbit-cidal) intensity at Matador Bugs and his red cape. It struck him that were she and Vic to be transported somehow to the two-dimensional cartoon universe inhabited by the wascally wabbit and the big black side of beef, or join them in the pages of a comic book, her eyeballs would be pinwheeling; a thicket of typographical profanity -- exclamation marks and number signs, stars and spirals and little ringed planets -- would be bristling about her lovely head; and jets of compressed steam venting from her ears...

Now the man raised a hand to shade his eyes and called out in a thick voice: “Kim’erly? That you, Kim?”

Leo turned to his passenger. “Kim’erly?”

“Stay here,” she commanded through clenched teeth, staring straight ahead. A direct order, not to be challenged. She pushed open her door the rest of the way and stepped out onto the pavement and slammed it behind her.

Having first thumbed down the lock.

Significant? Leo wondered. Or simply habit? He looked back over at Vic, who stood motionless before them looking dazed, like the proverbial deer in the headlights, and it struck him that the man’s Mercedes was blocking his only escape route. He glanced down at his own unlocked door and gave some thought to putting down this button too but elected not to. For the time being. He did though wind his window back up.

Sylvie meanwhile had moved round to the front of the car to confront this Vic-come-lately in the brightly lit zone between the two vehicles. Her back was to Leo and he couldn’t see her face, but his view of her antagonist couldn’t be better. The man was well over six feet with the look -- slight paunch notwithstanding -- of a former athlete, and despite his soggy discomposure he managed to cut an impressive figure.

In fact, with his cherry-red roadster serving as backdrop and the sensuous young thing occupying the foreground, he looked a near-ideal answer to the question, ‘What Sort Of Man Reads Playboy?’ -- or would, at least, if the young thing’s body language were not so clearly hostile, if his red roadster were in a bit better repair, and himself likewise. If he were to drop a few pounds, say, and a few years; or at least zip his fly and suck in his gut and replace the sheepish expression on his face with something a bit more masterful...

Now, hesitantly, he took another step forward and said something to Sylvie in a low voice. With the door shut and his window up Leo couldn’t make it out. Nor could she, apparently. When she didn’t respond, the man retreated to his vehicle and thrust his arm deep into the back seat, reaching for something on the floor.

Sylvie stayed put, folding her arms and hooking a heel up behind her on the Volvo's bumper and settling back on the hood. The car sank beneath her weight, rocking on its springs, creaking and ticking. Wisps of steam, tinged faintly orange by the bug light over the breezeway, rose around her.

Soon Vic was back, bearing a gift-wrapped package the size of a large book, which he held out to her with a broad, worried smile on his face, like a nervous missionary hoping to ingratiate himself with the headman of some fierce, remote tribe that had cannibalized his predecessor.

But no such luck.

Sylvie (or was it 'Kimberly'?) kept her arms folded resolutely before her, hands tucked away under her armpits. She put her head down and shook it from side to side, refusing the bribe, her luxuriant chestnut mane, irradiated by the headlights, switching across her bare shoulders.

Vic threw open his arms in response and advanced on her, meaning it seemed to enfold her in his embrace.

A poor idea, and poorly received.

Leaning back, she fended him off with a straightarm to the chest, then slipped off the hood and stepped to one side and swung round to face him.

Vic backed off a step, looking ever more daunted. His smile was gone, a pained frown in its place.

Leo could see her face now, her grimace of displeasure. Her lips were moving, she was speaking, lighting into the guy. He couldn't make out exactly what she was saying at first, but the emotion with which she delivered her remarks came across clearly enough: barely restrained fury.

And soon wholly unrestrained.

The volume rose rapidly and now he couldn't help but hear the shrill, angry words: "...drunken bastard! ...stupid fucking present! ...me ALONE!"

Dismayed, he reached across his chest and poked shut the no-draft, then wound up his window the last quarter inch. When this didn't do the trick, he turned the radio back up and drowned her out with some music. The Stones, 'Jumpin' Jack Flash'.

Sinking lower in his seat, he stared miserably at the Mercedes blocking the driveway, longing to escape. Short of abandoning his car though, there was no way out.

'I was crowned,' yowled Mick Jagger, 'with a spike right through my head'.

Leo looked back at the unhappy pair. She was really letting him have it now, punctuating her verbal assault with emphatic little jabs of her forefinger directed at, though falling short of, her adversary's cardiac region. Her voice was no longer audible, thankfully.

Vic for his part began again to thrust the package at her, more insistently now.

She responded with a sweeping, get-outta-here gesture followed when he persisted by a forehand swat that knocked the thing from his hand and sent it skidding across the pavement towards a big, pear-shaped puddle at the edge of the driveway.

Vic looked down at it for a moment -- one corner was touching the black water -- then back up at her, his eyes bright. Getting angry at last, though he remained silent as she continued to berate him. When eventually she paused for breath though he found his opening and began to return fire, leaning down toward her, gesticulating passionately,

Sylvie reined it in a little, turned her head aside and clothes-pegged her nostrils with thumb and forefinger as she flapped a hand in front of her face to signify that his breath was less than springtime fresh; then she leaned forward again and went back on the offensive.

The two of them were going at it toe to toe now, hammer and tongs. Spitting mad, they were. Literally: a fine mist of spittle hung in the bright air around them.

Sylvie's emphatic little jabs had escalated with her fury to emphatic little karate chops, slicing the foot or so of space between them, gesture of severance and ultimatum: had it up to here... enough's enough... take it or leave it...

When one of these connected with Vic's paunch, if ever so lightly, he reached out and gripped her wrist. She wrenched free though, as she had from Leo earlier, and pulled back her hand and made a fist and threw it into his face, a wild overhand right that caught him flush on the cheek below his left eye.

Vic's head snapped back and he staggered, nearly went over backwards.

'It's alright now,' Jagger was heedlessly claiming, 'in fact it's a gas' -- which may have been the case vis-a-vis Jumpin' Jack but here in the driveway things were getting out of hand, more than ever the cross-fire hurricane... the strap across the back... the spike right through the head.

Leo turned down the volume a bit and held his breath, fearing massive retaliation and a consequent obligation to jump out and go to the aid of the rash maiden -- and likely get his ass kicked for his trouble.

It wasn't fair. He didn't even know this unruly Sylvie or Kimberly or whatever the hell her name was. Nor had he found a lot to like about her so far aside from the way she looked. Which, mind you, he liked very much. Even now, as freaked out and displeased with her comportment as he was, he remained keenly aware of her dark beauty as she stared wide-eyed at Vic.

Who fortunately seemed more stunned than angered by the lucky punch. Slowly, he raised a hand and laid it palm down against the side of his cheek, with a dumbfounded expression on his handsome, suckerpunched face. Leo was reminded of Jack Benny when flabbergasted by Rochester or whoever.

Sylvie meanwhile had clapped a hand over her mouth and spun away and fled for the house.

Vic watched her stumble across the blacktop up to the front door and throw back the screen and jab her key into the lock and push through inside. When she was gone from view he removed his hand from his cheek and shut his eyes and put his head down. Stood stock-still for a moment, then wheeled round explosively and slammed his fist into the side of the Mercedes.

Leo flinched and sank still lower in his seat -- but not low enough to escape attention, though his eyes were level almost with the dash now. Vic had turned and was staring straight at him with stricken eyes. Leo decided the time had come to lock up, and did so forthwith, reaching over and depressing the little plastic button.

Unnecessarily, it turned out. Vic quickly turned away and lurched round to the driver's side of his vehicle, holding his smashed right hand close against his chest. He thrust his left down into the back seat again, coming up this time with a bottle, a big twenty-sixer, which he clamped between his knees and uncapped. Grimacing, he tipped it up to his lips and imbibed deeply before eventually lowering it and screwing the cap back on and returning it to the back seat as he climbed in behind the wheel.

The door slammed and the Mercedes' engine roared and the single front headlight blazed into Leo's eyes then quickly cut aside, the beam sweeping over the breezeway and the front of the house across dark cedar siding and black windows as, with a squeal of tires, the vehicle withdrew, leaping back up the driveway in reverse almost as quickly as it had come down.

Leo found himself alone suddenly, dazzled and trembling. After a moment, he let his breath go, resumed breathing.

The radio was still on, he realized, a familiar soulful falsetto issuing forth at low volume -- the mellow Motown sound of Bobby Taylor and the Vancouvers posing the musical question 'Does Your Mama Know About Me?'. Their monster hit from a couple years back.

Which, for all his present distraction and rattled nerves, gave him a little thrill of civic pride, like it used to back in California whenever 'Surfin Safari' or 'Wipe Out' or 'Surf City' came on his transistor.

Now the song ended and a breathless Boss Jock informed him that it was 10:20 on a rainy Thursday night on the Wet Coast where he was getting a preview of a Solid Gold Weekend on 'LG 73. Time for 20/20 News.

A flurry of electronic bleeping heralded the calmer baritone of the news reader: Surrey teens critically injured when stolen car collides with semi-trailer... RCMP and city police seize LSD with estimated street value of \$1.5 million at Yew Street communal house... Trudeau to extend his Whistler stay through next week... Eight arrested at Parliament Hill anti-war rally... Lieutenant William Calley declared—

He twisted the ignition off, killing the radio and lights; unlocked his door and pushed it open -- but then stayed put for the time being, waiting for his night vision to recover from Vic's highbeam and for a course of action to suggest itself.

Night pushed in through the open door, cool and damp, smelling of earth and ocean, of coastal forest and one of the industrial products thereof: a faint rotten-egg odor wafting down from Woodfibre or Port Mellon or some other pulp mill up the sound.

Now it was almost perfectly still, the stillness of the week-night suburb. Quiet but for the faint far-off whine of an automobile engine -- the Mercedes? -- moving off to the east on Marine; then, when it had faded away, the ticking of his own vehicle's engine as it cooled in the night.

He sat a minute longer, watching the orange steam drift off the hood of the Volvo and considering what next.

To stay, or not to stay? That was the question. Whether 'twere nobler in the mind to get out and go inside and check on his troublesome passenger, offer succour and support if need be. Or best perhaps to leave well enough alone? Put it in gear and get gone while the going was good. Clearly there was much to recommend the latter, and he likely would have departed forthwith had it not been for that heady moment back at the stoplight when he lit her cigarette -- her touch and scent, her unironic smile, and the intoxicating view down the front of her tank top; that plus the detente they finally had come to enjoy (he had, at least) here at the bottom of the driveway just before Vic showed up.

He had liked her then, sort of.

And then of course there was the way she looked. Which went a long ways to boosting his tolerance of her less enchanting traits and characteristics.

With a hybrid emotion compounded of pity and lust he looked back over at the house and pictured her inside, weeping in the dark, distraught and all alone, just her and her exquisite gypsy face and silky cinnamon skin and lush body packed into that taut purple tank top, without so much as a mini-bra for support in her hour of need.

He shifted his knees toward the open door but still didn't get out, thinking now of her incivility and temper, her moody silences and, when she did choose to speak, her razor-sharp tongue. He remembered the evil light in her eye when she shot Mrs. Orphington the finger; and last weekend at Whistler, and how his involvement with that particular moody and troublesome girl had played out...

Once bitten, twice shy. Facing forward again, he pulled the door shut and reached for the ignition -- but then hesitated once more when he noticed his passenger's Cowichan sweater on the floor by her vacant seat.

And in back -- glancing over his right shoulder -- her portfolio.

Sighing, he let go of the key and pushed open his door again, climbed out and walked round to the passenger side to fetch the forgotten belongings, then made his way across the wet pavement, littered with cones from the pines and firs overhead, toward the house.

Arriving, he pulled back the screen, meaning to leave sweater and portfolio inside the threshold out of the damp. But hesitated yet again when he saw that the front door was ajar.

He stood on the soggy welcome mat a moment, shivering a little, irresolute; then, hearing faint sobbing inside, reached out and rapped a knuckle on the varnished oak.

The sobbing stopped.

He pushed the door open and put his head in. To his right, darkness; to his left, a thirty-foot hallway at the end of which a doorway gave on a dimly lit room beyond.

“Hello?” he called. “Sylvie? You left your stuff in the car...”

No response. He tried again. “Knock knock?... Anyone home?... Can I come in?”

Silence. He waited a moment, then bent to set down the belongings inside the door when her voice, barely audible, reached his ear from the room at the end of the hall: “Yeah.”

Straightening, he stepped ahead into a dim interior that smelled of incense and sawn wood and something less pleasant. Cat pee?

He pulled the door shut behind him and kicked off his running shoes and moved cautiously down the hallway runner past a dark, slightly sunken living room toward the room at the end.

The kitchen, it turned out. A shadowy figure was slumped on a chair at a table across the room by a black window. It was too dim to see her face, to make out her expression at least, the only source of light being a weak bulb behind the clock on the backsplash of the range.

“You left your stuff,” he said again. “In the car.”

She didn’t respond, nor look up.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

A long pause, then: “Yeah I’m okay.” A voice he hadn’t heard previously: subdued, even meek. He thought of the girl last weekend at Whistler. Nina.

He glanced at the wall adjoining the entrance to his left. “Can I turn the light on?”

“Okay.” A whisper.

He flipped the switch and the ceiling lights came on, one in the middle of the room and another over the little breakfast nook occupied by her table.

She raised a hand and shaded her eyes and squinted across the room at him, red-eyed; then quickly lowered her gaze. Eyeliner tracks blackened her cheeks.

“I brought your stuff in,” Leo said, holding up the sweater and portfolio, one in either hand, justifying his intrusion. “From the car.”

She nodded, blinking down at her hands on the tabletop as he moved toward her. Her fingers were long and graceful, the nails flecked with blood-red polish and packed with charcoal dust and in need of a trim. The knuckles of her right hand were red and swollen. One was bleeding slightly.

“Are you okay?” he asked again. He seemed to be saying everything twice.

She gestured vaguely, keeping her gaze turned down, and deflected his question with one of her own: “Would you like some tea?”

“Uh sure, that’d be--”

She was already up and moving toward the stainless-steel double-sink.

“ --good.”

Arriving, she lifted a copper kettle from the adjoining counter and swung it under the tap; twisted the handle and filled it, then took it over to the range and dialed up some heat and set it down atop a front burner.

Then, with her back to him, wrapped her arms tight round her midsection and stood motionless by the range, trembling violently. Her bare, shapely shoulders began to heave; she let out a gasping sob and covered her face with her hands and rushed from the room.

Leo stared at the dark doorway for a moment then set down the portfolio on the blond maple table and draped her sweater over the back of her chair and sat down in the one opposite it.

Alone now, he took a closer look at his surroundings, found himself to be in a standard rancher kitchen, much like his step-mother’s -- the very same colours even: harvest-orange Formica, bronze range, avocado refrigerator -- though maybe a bit messier.

Actually a LOT messier. Unkempt house-plants cluttered the place; dust bunnies in the corners; curling posters and sketches and batiks tacked and taped to the walls and cupboards; sinks stacked high with dirty dishes; a well-used box of kitty litter in the corner by the door leading outside, the clay granules spilling out on the floor and lending strong support to his hypothesis that the less pleasant smell was that of cat pee.

On the table before him were scattered the remains of a meal: Greek salad, sprouts, a half-full glass of apple juice. (Or was the glass half empty?) Also a copy of today’s Sun with Trudeau in ski gear on the front page; and next to it, facedown on the scarred maple, a pocket-book illustrated front and back with a portrait of a young woman and two ethereal adolescent boys, the three of them naked; and behind them a huge red-eyed bird of prey.

Herman Hesse again. DEMIAN.

Leo picked the book up and turned it over and scanned a few paragraphs, his eyes settling on a passage near the top of the lefthand page: ‘Yet, almost as soon as he had gone, everything he had said

seemed incredible. Cain a noble person, Abel a coward! Cain's mark a mark of distinction!' -- this bringing Russ immediately to mind of course. His very own treacherous elder brother

step-brother, that is -- and his shitty, unphiladelphic (albeit short of murderous) behaviour last weekend. Would a blood brother have treated him that way? A real brother?

He remembered now that there was a chance Russ might be at the house when he got back -- something had been mentioned about him dropping by to pick something up. If they did cross paths -- and he very much hoped that they would not -- it would be the first time since the weekend.

A ringing interrupted his uneasy thoughts. He looked up sharply from the book at the phone on the wall nearby, waiting for the second ring but none came.

A loud meowing instead. He looked over at the doorway as a fat ginger cat padded into the room; then, spotting him, put on the brakes and arched its back and hissed and spat before turning tail and bolting back out.

Now the kettle came on boil with a rising whistle. He set the book back down and stood up and went over and lifted it from the burner, exposing a ring of blue flame, which he gazed down at for a moment, mildly hypnotised, before shutting off.

He located a teapot and fixings on the counter nearby, and a choice of teas from which he selected English Breakfast over chamomille, raspberry leaf and ginseng. He dropped a bag in the pot, brought the kettle over and poured in a couple cups worth; then rounded up a little pitcher of soy milk, a bowl of unrefined sugar, and a plastic bottle of liquid honey, murky and unpasteurized, allegedly gathered from 'wild forest bees' in the south of Laos.

Some indoor agriculture on a modest scale lined the window ledges above the orange laminated countertop: various herbs in little green plastic pots; an avocado pit impaled on toothpicks and suspended in the mouth of a mason jar; bean sprouts germinating inside an egg carton; and down at the far end of the counter, a spiky, seven-leaved plant rising from a Folger's can, richly green. Beside it, some more lawful smoking material: a pack of Craven 'M'.

He put the teapot and fixings on a black lacquer tray, then went over to the cupboard by the sink and pulled back the door and beheld a collection of green-and-white ceramic crockery, asymmetrical and wonky-looking, clearly not the work of a master craftsman. Many of the pieces shared a common motif, namely asparagus -- slender little stalks of fired-clay asparagus, half life-size, curving round the circumferences of the plates; plaited together and doubled over to serve as handles on the mugs; and so on.

He chose two of what he judged the least lopsided mugs from the lower shelf and rinsed a couple spoons under the tap and added them to the tea tray then carried it over to the table and sat back down.

From the far end of the house came the sound of water moving in pipes. A toilet rumbled, a door shut, and a moment later Sylvie walked back in and crossed the room and joined him at the table.

She had washed her face and brushed her hair and looked slightly less desolated -- and very fetching.

"I made the tea," Leo said.

She nodded without meeting his eye. He filled both mugs from the pot and passed one to her. She received it with shaking hands and set it on the table and stared down at it for a long while; finally she let out a sigh and muttered something.

"Pardon?" he asked.

"Sorry 'bout the..." She gestured over her shoulder, implying the driveway outside. A slight smile, wan and rueful, as she looked up at him. "I guess I'm not the greatest company tonight, am I. Like I guess I'm probably not a whole lot of fun to be around, right?"

This was indisputably true. A whole lot of fun she was not, and Leo made no attempt to suggest the contrary. Instead he shrugged and reached for the bottle of honey and squeezed some out on his spoon and stirred it into his tea.

She bit her lip, blinking rapidly. Her chin had begun to tremble and tears seemed imminent.

"It's cool though," Leo hastened to assure her. "Like, no problem." He held up the sticky squeeze-bottle and pointed to the label and attempted to still the worrisome trembling and head off her tears with a little banter: "So is it the bees that are wild, do you think?" he inquired jovially. "Or the forest? Like, are they Wild Forest bees? Or wild Forest Bees?"

She stared at him blankly, then frowned down at her hands. "God, I can't believe I actually hit him..." The knuckle of her right middle finger -- the one she had displayed to Muffy Orphington -- was now wrapped, he saw, with a flesh-tone bandaid.

She smoothed the tape with a fingertip, gingerly, then abruptly flipped channels, veering in the blink of an eye from teary remorse to sudden anger: "But he DESERVED it! He's such an unbelievable JERK! God! He thinks he can just take off with his little moron girlfriend and like wreck everything and then just show up again out of the blue and pick right up where he left off and like buy me off with some stupid trip to L.A.!... Or like tonight, he thinks he can just APPEAR in his stupid red Mercedes, stinking of booze, with some stupid present in his hand and a big stupid grin on his big stupid face and everything's gonna be just hunky-dory again. Like hey, no problem, Vic... welcome home, Vic... God! He's so STUPID! He's such a FUCKING IDIOT!"

"Okay, take it easy." Leo nodded uneasily, getting the picture now, or so he thought -- the young girl and the aging Playboy Man; seduction, betrayal and abandonment; heartache and humiliation; hell hath no fury; etc. -- but then it all went murky again as she continued: "I mean, can you believe it, the nerve? He just up and splits one day, doesn't come home from work, dumps us after like fifteen years, doesn't

say anything -- doesn't even leave a NOTE! Just takes off for Maui or Palm Springs or wherever with that little moron girlfriend of his... his little Barbie-Doll -- that was her actual real name, can you dig it: Barb. What a joke, man, she's my age practically!... couple years older, like nineteen... she was his little moron SECRETARY when he was working downtown as a so-called promoter. I mean, what an absolute tacky fucking CLICHE, man! And then when he gets tired of her 'cause she's GOT NO BRAIN he thinks he can just start coming round again, acting like nothing ever happened, like it was no big deal and hey, what's the problem anyway?... like 'Oops, must've had my midlife crisis I guess, oh well what the heck'... I mean, we hadn't even HEARD from him till last month. NOTHING... not even a postcard... and then he even has the nerve to start taking cheap shots at Marge for finding herself a new man like a whole year later! God! He makes me so MAD! He makes me PUKE!" She protruded her tongue and made a retching sound, then reached for her misshapen mug.

Leo stared at her, increasingly bemused. What was this about Marge? What was she talking about? "So how come you said he was a draft dodger?" he finally asked.

She froze with the mug halfway to her lips, then very deliberately set it back down on the table and drew the back of her hand slowly across her mouth, staring at him all the while with big, horrified eyes as if he had asked why the radio receiver implanted in his brain by aliens kept telling him he must slaughter three newborn babes and drink their blood if Armageddon were to be forestalled.

"Draft dodger?" she echoed in a strangled voice. "What do you mean 'draft dodger'? DRAFT dodger?" Her eyes went wider still. "What are you talking about? Who do you think that WAS out there?"

Leo's gaze shifted across the room to the Frigidaire. A 'Today is the First Day of the Rest of your Life' poster was affixed with mini-asparagus magnets to the grubby green door. He looked back at her, with an uneasy feeling; a feeling in fact of impending disaster. "Your old man." He blinked rapidly. "You said he was your old man."

"Right, my old man."

"Right. Your boyfriend."

"Boyfriend? She put her head to one side and narrowed her eyes. "Boyfriend?"

"No?"

"You thought Vic was my BOYFRIEND!? ARE YOU PUTTING ME ON?!"

"I uh--"

"YOU ACTUALLY THOUGHT HE WAS MY ACTUAL BOYFRIEND!?" Shock and disbelief and, hard on their heels, revulsion, horror, and outrage. A veritable 'gamut of emotions' flashing across her lovely, expressive face.

Leo held up a hand, palm out. "Okay, okay... so he's not your boyfriend. Don't freak out."

“OF COURSE HE’S NOT MY BOYFRIEND! HOW COULD HE BE MY BOYFRIEND!? HE’S MY FATHER FOR GODSAKE! MY SORRY BLOODY EXCUSE FOR A FATHER!!” She jumped to her feet; for a moment Leo thought she was headed for the bathroom again but instead she strode across the room to the counter and snatched up the pack of cigarettes by the marijuana plant and helped herself to one. She flipped back her auburn mane and stared back at him: “Omigod! I don’t believe this! Vic’s like forty years old! Everyone says I look just like him! How could you think he was my BOYFRIEND!? What do you think I AM! What’s the MATTER with you!? That is just so... SICK!” She laughed wildly. “God! You’re incredible! You’re really something else! Like I guess you probably don’t belong to Mensa, right?” She put the cigarette in the corner of her mouth and turned away and went over to the range and turned the burner back on and bent down, swinging her stunningly callipygian, denim-sheathed ass his way as, approaching from the side, she dipped the tip of her menthol in the azure flames, holding back her hair back with both hands and wincing from the heat.

Leo stared at her, his face burning as if he had been slapped, cheeks reddening he had no doubt to approximately the shade of Vic’s Mercedes. Twice in a single week this confusion of fathers and boyfriends! Less than a week! What was wrong with him? But how could he possibly be expected to have known? What was wrong with HER!?

He sat up straight and struggled to speak, to voice his outrage: “Well, what the... what the... what the HELL do you expect?!” He pushed back from the table. “Christ! First you tell me you’re in a crappy mood ‘cause you had a fight with your old man, with your boyfriend, a ‘huge fight’ and like Duh!-cluck-your-tongue when I think maybe you mean your dad... then what’s-his-name shows up, Vic or Rick or Dick or whoever, and you’re like ‘Omigod, it’s my old man!’ and you jump out and get right into it with the guy, start screaming at him and like haul off and belt him! And then--” He drew a ragged breath, sobbing almost with indignation: “THEN I’m supposed to know somehow that THIS old man you’re having the huge fight with is your FATHER and the OTHER old man you had the OTHER huge fight with was your goddamn BOYFRIEND! JESUS! CHRIST!” He thumped the tabletop twice with the flat of his hand, then sprang to his feet, knocking the sugar bowl off the table. It hit the floor and bounced without breaking, showering brown granules of unrefined sugar across the floor.

Having goaded him to this extremity, his tormentor frowned down at the mess and let out one of her maddening little tuts. “Well you don’t have to get all worked up about it,” she said. “Like, all AGITATED!” And another one.

“AND YOU DON’T HAVE TO CLUCK YOUR BLOODY TONGUE LIKE THAT EITHER. YOU SOUND LIKE A GODDAMN HEN!!”

She leaned back against the orange Formica counter and looked coolly over at him, widening her dark eyes and making a mocking ‘O’ of her lips. “Ooo... he’s got a temper.” She dragged on her cigarette, blew mentholated smoke his way and smiled. “I was beginning to think you were one of those constipated types who always repress their emotions and end up getting cancer or going nuts one day

and killing their families or something, like one of those uptight robot pod-people types. I was beginning to think--"

"MAYBE YOU SHOULD BEGIN TO THINK ABOUT JUST SHUTTING UP OKAY!!" Letting the emotion flow free as could be. No pod person he.

"Whoa! Lion Boy roars his mighty roar..." She smirked infuriatingly, seemingly unfazed by his outburst; in fact she seemed strangely pleased, almost as if she welcomed it.

Leo trembled violently and turned even redder, to the extent that this was possible.

Grinning, she threw him even further off balance by striking a corny showgirl pose and rendering a little ditty: "C'mon and roar you Lions, roar" she half-sang, half- recited.

Leo recognized this as the fight song of the local C.F.L. team.

"That's what a Lion's roar is for," she continued. "Right?" She assumed a so-concerned expression and moved across the kitchen toward him: "Better take it easy, Leonardo... you look like you're gonna have a stroke." Arriving, she reached out and patted his arm, friendly now as could be, as if his bellowing were just the ticket to getting on her good side. "Actually, you wanna hear something funny?" She chuckled. "Vic thought YOU were my boyfriend. Like he thought we were making out or balling or whatever in the car. That's how come I smacked him. Which I shouldn't have." She shrugged. "But... whatever. Plus he made this really mean crack about Marge." She settled back down in her chair, reached for her mug.

Leo placed the palm of his right hand atop his head and turned away and went for a little walk around the room, rolling his eyes and muttering under his breath and making a succession of agonized faces. When he arrived back at his starting point, feeling a bit calmer, he sat back down across from her and placed his hands flat on the scarred maple tabletop and looked her in the eye and spoke in a slow, measured voice, enunciating carefully, as one might when addressing the very young or the very old or the very very out-of-it, the brick-short-of-a-full-load, the not-all-there: "So that guy" -- he jerked a thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the driveway -- "that Vic guy, your father, THAT'S who's taking you to California?"

"WAS taking me. I don't think it's gonna be happening now. No way." Her voice was rueful, her smile pained. "Like I've yelled at him before but I never hit him." She looked down at the table, at the cigarette between the index and middle fingers of her right hand, then raised it to her lips and dragged thoughtfully.

"So how come he called you 'Kimberly' or whatever?" Leo inquired after a moment.

A grimace of displeasure. "That's my OLD name, I HATE that name!" She assumed a high-pitched, lisping, little-girl voice: "'Kimberly... Daddy's l'il Kimberly'. God! It's so suburban... it's so totally white-bread! It's like a cheerleader's name! It's what Barbie'd be named if she wasn't named Barbie! It's probably her middle name, like Barbie Kimberly Mattel. Plus it's his girlfriend's name! He named me after

some bitch he was messing around with when Marge was pregnant with me!... his old high-school girlfriend. How's that for classy! And what kind of Greek names his daughter 'Kimberly' anyway? First thing I did when he split was change it, like legally."

"To 'Sylvie'."

"Right."

"Why 'Sylvie'?"

She shrugged her tan, shapely shoulders, with striking effect upon her tank-top decolletage. "Why not?"

Leo nodded hesitantly. A silence opened up. "So then he's not living here with you anymore, right?" he asked eventually. "Your dad?"

"Not since he took off with his little Barbie Doll." She tutted again. "I TOLD you that already... He'd LIKE to worm his way back in, like he's always coming round trying to suck up to us, 'specially since he found out Marge was working on the movie, but no way, no bloody way... That's his big deluded fantasy these days, the movies, that's his con..." She tossed her hair back. "He's SUCH a phony! He tries to come on like this big wheeler-dealer but he's a total loser... he's like totally flat broke since he got suspended. It'd be pathetic if he wasn't such a--"

"Suspended?"

"--prick. From this brokerage he was working for. They took away his licence, his broker's licence or securities licence or whatever, 'cause he was conning all these poor little old ladies out of their life savings with this phony gold-mine scam. Totally bogus... God! SUCH a sleazebag! Now he's trying to pass himself off as Mister Big-Shot Independent Producer!" She snorted scornfully. "Know what he's 'produced' so far? Get this: two dinky little sixteen-millimeter thingies for some community college in the boonies, like Surrey or wherever... these instructional things, they're like ten minutes long, they're for nurses in the nursing program. This guy Marge knows saw one of them, it shows you how to help a doctor whack a big hunk of skin off someone's butt -- like a plastic surgeon -- and use it to fix up their face when they've got cancer, like oral cancer... SO gross! And the other one's about how to change a bedpan in five easy steps or some stupid thing... the Heartbreak of Psoriasis or something... Like Darryl F. Zanuck is probably running scared, don't you think?... God!" She dragged hard on her menthol. "Plus he's turned into a total alcoholic. Like he's always drunk way too much but now he's pissed all the time practically. That's probably how come he's only got one light tonight, he probably drove his stupid red Mercedes into a tree on his way home from the bar! Or a little old lady or something. He probably--"

The phone on the wall rang again, and this time it kept ringing. Staring over at it, she let it ring three times more before picking up: "Hello?" She frowned and her voice went from wary to ice-cold: "Oh. You ... Uh-huh ... Un-unh ... No not really ... No, I don't think so ... I said NO! ... Listen, man, I told you not to call! I don't feel like talking to you right now ... A good time?" She grimaced. "Never ... never would be good." She slammed down the handset. "God! Why can't they just leave me ALONE!"

“They?”

“It was Jimmy. I’ve had it with him!”

“The boyfriend-old man?”

“EX-boyfriend.”

“Like, not to be confused with the father-old man.”

“Very funny ha ha.”

“The draft dodger.”

“Right... God, I can’t believe you thought he was taking me to L.A. No way could he pay my bus fare across town, he’s like the original starving artist.”

“Like, a painter?”

She shook her head. “A writer, I already told you that. A poet, he used to teach poetry writing at my school, like he’s really talented even though he’s sort of mental.”

“Mental?”

She sighed, then continued without elaborating: “He’s had his poems published in all these different poetry magazines, like in TISH and stuff and he even almost had one in FUCK YOU when he was only fifteen.”

“In...?”

“This famous poetry magazine in New York City called FUCK YOU, don’t ask me why.”

“Wow.”

“Like he went up to Allen Ginsberg after this thing in Greenwich Village, this poetry reading -- you know Allen Ginsberg, right?”

“He saw the best minds of his generation destroyed by madness.”

“Right.”

“‘Starving hysterical naked uh something something the negro streets looking for an angry fix’. At dawn.”

She nodded. “So he went up to him and showed him some of his stuff and Allen Ginsberg thought it was really great though actually I think he might have had the hots for him, too, ‘cause Ginsberg’s a fag and fags are always coming on to Jimmy ‘cause he’s got this face, he’s got these eyes and these eyelashes and he’s got, like, these cheekbones... like Andy Warhol even wanted to put him in one of his movies... So anyway Allen Ginsberg showed them to the editor of the magazine who’s a Fug now... you know The Fugs, right?”

“Sort of.”

“‘Kill For Peace’? ‘Dirty Old Man’?”

“Uh...”

“‘Coca Cola Douche’? Yuck...” She grimaced. “So Allen Ginsberg showed them to the guy – actually this was before he was one, I think, like before he was a Fug, the editor, or before they got famous at least -- but anyhow he told Jimmy he wanted to publish him but then they got busted for, like, obscenity ‘cause of the name and had to go out of business. The guy told Jimmy--”

The phone again. When she made no move to answer it Leo gave her a look and raised his eyebrows.

She shrugged. “Either it’s Jimmy again or else it’s Vic and no way do I feel like talking to either of those guys.” She glared at the instrument as it rang several more times, but then relented and lunged for the handset: “Yeah? Hello? ... Hello? ... Shit.” She dropped it back on the cradle, looking troubled: “I just realized it might be Marge. She was supposed to be back by now.”

“From the airport.”

“Right.”

“She was picking someone up.”

Affirmative nod. “This technical advisor guy. He’s supposed to tell Richard what Viet Nam is like. For the movie. He spent time there, he was a Marine, like a Green Beret or something.” Her gaze returned to the phone. “Damn. I bet it WAS her...” She put the tip of her left index finger in the corner of her mouth and started nibbling the nail.

Leo watched her brood awhile before attempting to revive the flagging conversation: “So then uh it’s just you and your mom that live here, right? Just the two of you?”

She nodded yes, distractedly; then withdrew the finger and frowned at him: “I already told you that. Why do you keep asking that?” She dragged on her menthol, exhaled; then started back in on the nail.

Leo reached for his mug and sipped tea. When he set it back down it listed way over, as lopsided as his own sketch of tonight’s models. “So uh who’s the potter?” he inquired. “Like, who does the pottery?”

“Marge. As therapy, sort of.”

Leo regarded the ill-crafted mug. Evidently his companion’s artistic ability was not a matter of genes. “Therapy?”

She nodded, sighed. “She was totally freaked when Vic took off, like she had this breakdown type thing, this actual nervous breakdown... like the thing about Marge is she used to be super-straight, like I was saying in the car... she used to be this super-bourgeois wifey-poo-mommy and when Vic split she had a really hard time, like she went through some really heavy changes and really lost it for awhile, like totally... she actually had to check into this clinic, like the funny farm, to get her shit back together and rest up ‘cause she couldn’t sleep hardly at all for like WEEKS, and then after she got home again she was still pretty bummed out and depressed and like messed up and she was seeing all these shrinks and stuff... but then she started doing this Gestalt-type stuff with this really great Gestalt-type therapist and finally she just kind of started to let go of everything, like all the bourgeois bullshit that was repressing her

and driving her nuts and, like, killing her spirit -- like Home & Garden and \$1.49 Day and the Cancer Society and all that stuff... the whole West Van suburban-matron trip basically... So anyway finally she just said 'Fuck it' and like threw out her Playtex girdle and all her make-up and false eyelashes and shit, and she let her hair grow and got into macrobiotics and lost some weight and started dressing hipper... and then she ran into this old girlfriend of hers from when she was young, Angela, they went to high school together and she belonged to this women's group -- Angela did -- and Marge started going to that, too, and getting her consciousness raised, and Angela was working on this movie that was shooting up here -- did you see That Cold Day In The Park?"

He shook his head, no.

"Sandy Dennis plays this weird spinster type? The director's the same guy that made M*A*S*H?"

"I think I heard about it but I didn't see it."

"Well anyway, Angela was working on it and she got Marge a job, like just as a flunky basically, a go-fer, but she kind of dug it, she liked the scene and she met some people, including Richard -- he was working on it -- and then after that she was out of work for awhile and we were running out of money and she was getting depressed again but then she got on with Richard when he came back up here to do his own movie, the one they're doing now, and she got a better job and now she's really got it together again, like way better than before... She looks really great for an older woman and she's got a new man who's really amazing and she's way way happier than she used to be and a lot more fun to be 'round, like than when she was with Vic the Prick..." She tapped ash from her menthol into the remains of the Greek salad. "So in a weird sort of way it actually turned out to be a positive thing for her, her whole big break-up-freakout thing... it was like this R.D. Laing type trip almost... like, you know, breakthrough not breakdown... Marge is pretty amazing actually, she's like that song: 'I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now'... that Byrds song."

Leo nodded. "Dylan song."

"Hmm?" Her eyebrows went up.

"It's actually a Dylan song I think... like it was The Byrds on the radio but Dylan wrote it."

A pregnant pause; then, with heavy sarcasm: "If you say so, Ralph J. Gleason." A long level look. "You're not some kind of Dylan freak, are you? It's like a religion with them? Going through his garbage and stuff?"

Leo denied the suggestion, regretting having picked the nit. He looked down at the table, his eye returning to the misshapen, asparaginous mug. "So uh what about the pottery?" he asked.

"What about it?"

"You started to tell me about the pottery or ceramics or whatever."

She frowned. "What's to tell?"

"But it's Marge's, right? Your mom's? Some kind of therapy?"

An exasperated look; then, grudgingly: "She was seeing a bunch of shrinks and therapists and this one guy told her maybe she should start throwing pots and doing ceramics, like for tension relief or whatever, so she tried it and she kinda liked it and then she really got into it..." She shrugged. "Like, no big deal."

"So what's with all the asparagus?"

"Nothing's 'with' it." She tutted irritably. "Marge just digs asparagus, that's all, like she's just really into asparagus, okay? She likes working with clay and it helps her cool out and keep centered and so what if it's not very good -- you're no Pablo Picasso yourself!"

"I didn't... I wasn't saying--"

"Like, even if you are a Leonardo!" She laughed her harsh laugh.

"I wasn't trying to say she--"

"Whatever!" She swiped back her hair for the umpteenth time and folded her arms like a club bouncer (albeit one with fabulous cleavage) and stared him down.

When Leo ventured to look back at her, she had her head turned and was looking across the room, yawning.

He followed her gaze over to the clock on the backsplash of the range and stared at it blankly for quite some time before eventually noting that the luminescent green hands were standing at 11:15.

"Uh oh." He straightened in his chair. "Is that the right time?"

"How should I know?" She shrugged sullenly, holding a grudge.

"I was supposed to have the car back." He pushed back from the table. "I better get going."

She nodded, relenting a bit. "Yeah, I'm pretty wiped and I gotta get up early, we're going on this field trip to Richmond tomorrow to look for mushrooms, like my school." She patted another yawn.

"Yeah? For like a cooking class or something?"

She gave him an amused look.

"Or biology?"

She smiled enigmatically and waggled her eyebrows but didn't reply.

Puzzled, Leo drained the tepid dregs of his tea, then set down the mug and rose from his chair. She stubbed her cigarette and did the same. Still smiling slightly, she led him out of the kitchen and back down the hall past the living room -- the drapes were drawn and the room dark -- to the area off the entrance, where she switched on a table lamp then leaned up against the wall by the sidelight adjoining

the front door and watched him step back into his paint-spattered runners and go down on one knee to tie the laces.

“Guess I better take you up on that--” She paused and gave way to another yawn. “On that ride after all. To class next week, like now that fun in the sun with Vic’s not gonna be happening.” She sighed, sounding wistful, mournful even, but then flared up defiantly: “And you know what, I don’t give a shit! I didn’t want to go with him anyway, he’s such a loser!”

Another of her lightning mood swings, it seemed. “Like I was only doing it to make Marge happy ‘cause she thinks I need to come to terms with my father figure or else my relationships with men’ll be, like, fucked. That’s the only reason...”

Leo, still down on one knee, blinked up at her like a bewildered suitor; this time she was the one who looked away. She smiled a wincing smile and, in a voice he could barely make out, came clean: “Yeah, and those grapes I can’t reach up there are probably sour anyway.”

He rose slowly from his crouch, startled by this flash of critical self-awareness. A facet of her character hitherto not much on view.

“Anyway...” She raised a hand and let it drop heavily, gesture of surrender and resignation and nothing-to-be-done-about-it: “Whatever...” She put her hands on her hips for a moment and frowned down at the threadbare Persian rug she was standing on, then drew a deep breath and squared her shoulders and looked back up at him forthrightly, having regrouped evidently, ready now to move on. “So. Have you got anything happening Saturday night? Like are you doing anything?”

“Uh--”

“Wanna catch a movie maybe? This special screening type thing?”

Leo shifted from one foot to the other and pushed his fingers through his hair. “What movie?”

“It’s this wierd sort of biker flick... it’s Richard’s first picture, like as director. They shot it in Death Valley before they came up here to do the one they’re doing now, this one’s his second... they’re gonna show it Saturday night, it’s like a preview or test screening or whatever... like it’s mostly finished but they haven’t released it yet and they want to try it out on an audience, get some feedback... they’re showing it at the Odeon... I was gonna go with Jimmy but I guess that’s not happening now either...” A sigh. “Actually there’s some kind of problem with it, with getting it released, like the studio or whoever’s being a real asshole about it, Marge says... It’s called ‘Biting Through’, that’s the title.”

Leo thought of hot dogs for some reason and experienced a pang of hunger. He realized that he hadn’t had anything to eat since late afternoon: “Biting through what?”

“Don’t ask me... he got it out of the I Ching, I think. Richard’s really into the Ching, he’s a Taoist sort of... Curt’s in it, the movie, like acting in it, he’s got a big part, he plays this badass biker.”

“Who?” His stomach growled loud and long.

“This outlaw biker dude who’s one of the main characters, supporting characters... he’s sort of like Lee Marvin in The Wild One, like where Lee Marvin’s the bad-guy bike-gang leader and Marlon Brando’s the--”

“No, I mean who’s whatshisname, Kirk?”

”Curt’... not ‘Kirk’.” She frowned. “He’s Marge’s new old ma-- I mean boyfriend. She met him on the set... he’s this amazing older man, he’s from L.A., he’s an actor and an artist and a carpenter and he’s into martial arts and all sorts of far-out stuff... he was friends with James Dean when he was younger and he hung out with Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady and he’s done all these amazing things and been all over the place, like EVERYWHERE. He’s an incredible human being, he’s fixing our sundeck.” She pointed to a battered marine-green tool box on the floor in the corner, evidence of the incredible being’s anticlimatic undertaking. “He’s coming over Saturday before the screening. You should meet him, and Marge too... like maybe you can come over here first for dinner and we can all go together, the four of us.”

Leo glanced sidelong at the door. “Yeah... maybe.” He reached out and gripped the handle.

“Uh by the way...” -- she hesitated, gave him an odd, tense look -- “I’m sorry if I gave you a hard time tonight.” She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, sighing. “Vic makes me crazy. Totally... like psycho.”

“No problem.” He refrained from pointing out that the hard time -- and no ‘if’ about it -- had preceded Vic’s showing up by quite awhile, had in fact commenced with her first approaching him before class and poking him harder than strictly necessary in the shoulder.

She looked away, perhaps sensing his reservations. “Plus it’s that time of month, I guess.” She moved closer and astonished him with a sudden hug, leaning her cheek up against his shoulder and clasping him round the waist and nudging his side with a wonderfully soft, uncorsetted breast. Her dark perfume again filled his nostrils as she whispered something he couldn’t make out; then she quickly disengaged and stepped away. She smiled without quite meeting his eye. “Anyway... give me a call... you’ve got my number, right?”

“Right.” And vice versa -- his pulse was racing, his heart aflutter. Likewise his loins.

“Okay, don’t forget.”

He nodded dumbly and pulled open the door and slipped through into the night.

*

Outside, it was chilly and still. The pulp smell had blown away, and the only sound reaching his ear was the faint stirring of the tide against the beach below the house.

As he made his way back across the cone-strewn pavement he skirted the big puddle at the edge of the driveway, a sheet of black glass roughly the shape of South America, mirroring the inky sky above.

A pale rectangular object -- the spurned gift -- lay at its far edge, partly immersed in the water.

Leo walked over and reached down toward his own looming reflection, and fished it out.

When he took it over to the breezeway for a look he saw that it was, as he had supposed, a book. A big, water-logged one, gift-wrapped in pink tissue-paper with a red ribbon and bow.

The water had rendered the flimsy wrapping transparent, and even by the weak light of the overhead bulb he had no trouble making out the cover reproduction of Manet's two bearded gentlemen picnicking in a forest glade with their lady friends, one of whom was hunkered down in the background, seemingly playing marbles or searching the ground for a lost earring or contact lense or some such; while the other, naked and self-possessed, calmly returned the viewer's gaze.

Above in black sans serif was the title: THE IMPRESSIONISTS.

When he turned the book over a scrap of paper slipped loose and fell to the pavement. A greeting card, he saw when he picked it up. A perky cartoon cutie on front, in ponytail and party dress. A birthday cake with sixteen flaming candles hung in midair to her left -- again Leo experienced a pang of hunger -- and a banner overhead proclaimed 'How Sweet It Is, Sweet 16'.

He brushed damp pine needles from the card and pinched the fold and flipped it open. Inside, a brown bank note -- a hundred -- and a handwritten note: 'For my beautiful daughter', he read, 'for my artist. Can't believe Baby Kim is sixteen! I know you're still angry at me, kid, and I know I deserve it but I hope you know that your old man adores you, loves you better than anything else in his world, a hundred times better. I miss you Kim, I really miss seeing you, I wish things could be different than they are. I know I made some mistakes, some big ones, I'm so sorry if I hurt you. Will do everything I can to make it up to you in L.A., that's a promise. Happy 16th, honey, with hugs and kisses and a whole lot of love from your ever-lovin dad.

P.S. Confirmed Malibu place today, we'll have it the whole week. Can't wait!

He stood in place a moment, given pause. Tipping his head back, he gazed up at the heavens, pondering the pathos of it. Silver clouds were surging across the black sky, moving briskly west on an offshore breeze; he could see stars now, and the moon, cool and full and radiant.

He lowered his head and shut the card and tucked it back under the ribbon, then turned and walked back to the house and pulled back the screen-door and set the ruined gift on the threshold, up against the front door.

Then returned to the car and climbed back in and started the engine and drove away up the steep, winding driveway, yawning against the palm of his right hand and thinking of the plate of fried chicken he saw that afternoon on the lower shelf of the refrigerator at home, hoping fervently that it had survived his father's mid-evening foraging and awaited him still.

And that Russ didn't.

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