

## **FATHER FIGURE**

All Rights Reserved © 2003 Ralph Robert Moore

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without the permission in writing from the author.

Published in digital format by *Bookbooters.com*, 2003

**For information contact:**

Bookbooters.com  
14 Tomstead Road East  
Simsbury, CT 06070

**<http://www.bookbooters.com>**

**ISBN: 1-59281-033-0**

*To Mary... Always*

*“...because you’re mine.”*

*—Screamin’ Jay Hawkins*

# FATHER FIGURE

## PART ONE: LOVE

It is wet here.

Beneath the glowing clouds of the night sky, below the wings beneath the clouds, over the sparkle of Anchorage, over the dark flatness of Glacier Bay, down the lanes of Seward Highway, south down the peninsula to darkness and woods, through the woods to the small town of Lodgepole, over the treetops of White Birch Park, down among the bushes, on the ground, a man climbed on top of a woman, putting her hands over her head.

She crossed her legs, thighs pressing shut.

He held her down at the elbows, sinking the angles of arm into the soft grass. Between the tops of her closed thighs lay a fold that couldn't be squeezed completely shut, a little smile of flesh covered with hair. The head of his cock angled its way easily into the smile, punching through to the hole below.

She moaned as the touch inside lengthened.

In the soft, dappled moonlight filtering down through the birch trees his raised buttocks lowered into the rhythm of a slow, sure pump.

Her mouth hung open. A long, long exhale, breath and sob.

She cocked her hips obediently.

Because her thighs stayed crossed, the flat back of his cock rubbed hard against her clitoris, until her clitoris swelled against the rubs, until her clitoris was ripe and round like a ruby grape.

Her face tilted back, eyes sinking in the shadows of her cheekbones, lips opening, rising up, framing the teeth below, twitching around breaths. When the tilt put her eyes below her chin, she looked up past the ghostly double image of her nose to his broad, wet face eclipsing the sky.

His blonde hair was dark. Sweat dripped off the curve of his smile.

Putting more of his weight on her elbows, he worked up to a faster pump, beating against her pubis with his in a left, right, center rhythm. The inner curves of her thighs began slipping in the sweat of

their tight hug against each other. Her breath changed. She inhaled gulp after gulp of the cool night air.

He saw the change, and slowed down.

Now again each separate push down was felt, deep up. She shut her eyes. Arms still held down at the elbows, her hands lifted off the grass, fingers fluid, like a signing of ooh's and ah's above the green blades.

Among the stiff leaves on the ground beyond her head he saw a movement. He looked down. Her black hair was tangled around her ears and throat, her face, still beautiful in late middle age, tight with suffering, lips forming vowels, eyes squeezed shut.

A foot away from the spread of her hair a leaf trembled, then tilted.

The leaf it overlapped tilted, then trembled.

He leaned farther forward, directly above her moans. Squinted as he pumped.

Across the dried veins of the leaf, with an undulating ripple, a brown centipede propelled itself sideways closer to her hair.

Letting go of her right elbow, crossing it with his own, he hovered his hand over the sliding movement, wetting his lips. He glanced down at her shut eyes, feeling the bang of her hips against his.

When he looked at the leaf again, it was flat and empty. He held his eyes still, waiting for movement to betray location. An outermost curl of her black hair shifted, and he saw the antennae end of the disappearance under. Pushing the hair to one side, he grabbed the double row of legs at its middle, thumb on one side, three fingers on the other, and flung it, acting so quickly it was only after it was in an arc away that he experienced the wriggly sensation.

Her lids parted, but barely, the gleam of her wide pupils showing beneath the still-crossed lashes.

With a kiss on each lid he started pumping more attentively. She might ask later. He would tell her. She'd shudder; rub her shoulders with the opposite hands.

Now his cock slid easily in and out, oiled repeatedly by her cunt, bouncing the round ripe grape above her cunt, feeding thrust after thrust to her cunt until her cunt molded to the shape of his cock, until the smell of her cunt and the smell of his cock became one musk.

Her cunt tightened greedily around the base of his cock, keeping it deep. He let go her hands and the fingers went right away to her wet

breasts, squeezing the nipples. Her thighs jerked up, long and beautiful, against the reddened fronts of his thighs.

When she was pumping up as fast as she could she took her fingertips off her nipples and ran her hands down his soaked spine, down to the swollen, hard muscles of his ass, cupping gratefully.

He propped himself with his elbows above her shoulders, put his hands on her throat. She looked up at him, pupils dilated.

On either side of her neck he placed a thumb. Both thumbs pushed inwards towards the front of her throat, trailing a wake of pulled skin, both top joints digging in deeper as the trails lengthened and widened.

Her hand touched his wrist. He hesitated. She drew her hand away. His thumbs continued advancing across her throat, passing roughly over muscle onto the sides of her windpipe, her hips jerking up harder and faster against him. When the two thumbs were so close only a massive ridge of her flesh stood between them she started banging her arms down on the grass to prevent herself from trying to pry his hands off her darkening windpipe. Finally, through the thinnest layer of pipe still not pinched shut, his thumbs could feel one another's round shape. She went rigid, her body shaking convulsively, locked knees lifting up between his legs, and as the first contraction of her orgasm was about to hit he shut her windpipe completely, shut the loud moan of orgasm inside her lungs, to let it ricochet inside forever.

Even after her eyes reopened and her tongue spilled out, her body below his still jerked up at him, pulling his own orgasm out of him into her. Even after that he kept his thumbs pushed together, even though the backs of his hands ached and felt on fire, until he was sure she was lifeless.

All became quiet. He could hear the lapping of Little Muncho Lake behind him, below the ridge of birch trees along its shore. He could feel the sweat cool on his body.

He worked his frozen hands off her throat, her head lolling back as he let it go. For a moment he felt like crying.

Leaning forward over her body, he kissed her forehead rather than her slack lips. After that he pulled himself stickily out of her, lying on top of her body with his cock across her stomach.

When he had his breath back, he looked over his shoulder.

His blonde hair was twisted into wet strands, his face splotchy, his blue eyes large and pale.

The look on his face was a request for reassurance.

\* \* \* \* \*

The four-story Lodgepole Apartments building stood silent on its hill. Window rows dark, moonlit outer walls awash with tree shadows.

Through a third floor window a moonbeam moved over carpet, wrapping ocher around a bedpost, rising up the grain, at the top popping off onto the bed, illuminating a curve of flesh, the ridge of bone between cheekbone and eyebrow.

Daryl Putnam lifted his head off his pillow, coughing. He lopsidedly propped himself up in the darkness on his elbows, squinting at the darkness above the foot of his bed, face handsome and bookish.

He coughed again. This time something hard and heavy rattled into his mouth.

The digital clock on the nightstand read 2:34.

He swung his bare legs over the side of the mattress, sitting on the edge, long, narrow feet touching down on the carpet by the nightstand's legs. He experimented bringing his teeth together. A painful crunch amplified itself through his facial bones.

He put his upturned hand under his mouth and spat in the darkness. Something wet and heavy hit his palm.

Lamp on, he stared dumbly at the gold and porcelain crown lying upside down across his lifeline. Although he had the crown put in nearly ten years ago, while living in Vermont, it still looked brand new. "Fuck."

He poked his tongue around his upper front teeth where the crown had been. All that was left was a swollen rim of gum with, at its center, the point of root to which the crown had been cemented. As his tongue tip probed the point it bent to the left, broke off, and fell behind his lower row of front teeth.

"Fuck!" He jumped to his feet, licking the curved backs of his lower incisors to scoop the tip out. His fingers felt around his lower lip, found the point. Against his index finger's top pad it looked like a tiny white arrowhead.

That was it. The anchor was gone, which meant the crown couldn't be recemented, which meant to fill the gap they'd have to drill a metal post up into his jawbone, which meant he'd have to live with a gap in his teeth because he couldn't afford it.

He stood in his underpants in the lamplight beside his bed. Took in as much air as he could through his nose, then opened his sad lips to

let the air out in a long, unhappy sigh. I'm all alone. I'm all alone, I'm less than ten years past my teenage years, and now I'm losing my teeth.

His head hung. His lips pressed together. Standing alone in the lamplight, he started crying.

After the worse of his sobs passed he swung his head slowly side to side, snuffling, trying to get out of his depression. Fucking tooth. Using his tongue tip, he pushed angrily against the root of tooth still hard in the socket.

As his tongue moved away the root itself fell out, sharp pieces landing on his tongue.

Head jerking back, he spit into his palm again, covering the shiny porcelain and gold crown with ivory shards and blood-flecked bubbles.

This time he didn't swear.

Hunching his shoulders, hearing his heart, he reached into his mouth, eyes blinking, and put thumb and index finger around the tooth next to the hole. As the two fingerpads touched the wet sides of the tooth he felt, between the pads, a shift. To be sure, he gingerly wriggled the tooth. It split with an audible crack.

He took his hand out of his mouth. "Fuck!" When he said the word the split tooth, still embedded in his gum, rattled.

He put his hand back in his mouth, grasping the slippery halves. Breathing around a squeamish hollowness in the center of his chest, he started pulling down.

Don't let me lose my grip. Please don't.

He pulled harder, shutting his eyes against the pain radiating up into his nostrils. Finally, with a muffled tearing sound, out it came, two red and white jigsaw pieces.

He rubbed his palm over his forehead, trying to think. I must have had an infection up there for some time but never knew—no discomfort, no bad taste.

His tongue tip explored the double socket. Something hard and jagged poked back.

His hand shook as it went back in his mouth.

The protrusion he could feel appeared to be the triangular tip of something wider under the gum.

Grasping the tip, he pulled down. The yank jerked his head forward, but only a little more of the tip pulled out. Determined, he pulled again, and again, head bobbing forward, the crawly panic in his chest rising, blood polka-dotting his tongue and lower teeth.

The piece came out with a rush, making his stomach flutter. Hoisting it up in his fingers he shuddered at its size.

What was it?

Going over to the lamp he stooped under its shade and held the jagged bone right up against the bulb, turning it this way and that.

Did I just pull out part of my skull?

His fingers worried over the front of his face. With a thump of dread he felt a deep, soft trough above the two sockets in his gum. His fingertips prodded up the trench, searching for its end. When they at last felt hardness again beneath the flesh he realized he had pulled out most of the bone supporting the right side of his nose.

I have to get to a mirror. He stumbled down the short hallway, banging along both its walls, to the bathroom.

The flat reflection looked back at him, a deep furrow from the upper lip to just below the right eye. He tested a smile. The moment his lips parted, the double gap in his teeth showed.

He exhaled hopelessly through his nose. With the force of the sigh one of his remaining front teeth started swaying.

His pupils widened. He brought his two rows of teeth together, lightly grinding them against each other. Creaks and cracks. When he opened wide again his lower teeth fell backwards, the upper ones falling out of the gums like pebbles.

Instinctively, he spat the mouthful into the sink. The broken teeth rattled around to the bottom, burying the brass stopper beneath white shards, and dark fillings from childhood.

His eyes met his reflected eyes.

Pressure increased across his shoulder blades, his ass, and the backs of his feet. In the mirror a spinning, he gets an erection. A wall presses up behind him, firm but pliant. The bathroom tilts dizzily backwards on its axis as the spinning in the mirror increases until there is no mirror, only spinning, until he is flat on his back and the spinning is above him, seen through half-opened lashes, a ceiling fan, his ceiling fan, he must be in bed, he's suddenly awake, coughing.

In the darkness, he lifted his head.

His tongue rubbed rapidly over the bumps of his teeth.

All there. All safe.

He rolled over, side of his face pressing into his pillow. It was what? Wednesday night, Thursday morning? Close to the weekend. Like every weekend, nothing to do though. No girlfriend. One channel on television.

He shifted his bare legs under the sheets, the movement making him aware he had a hard-on. His right hand reached down to his underwear, feeling the clothed vertical bulk.

Waking up in the middle of the night, trying to decide whether or not to make love to himself, like trying to decide whether or not to pee.

Getsi Gooner wore a low-cut blouse to work today. Yesterday. He always looked forward to seeing what she would wear. Eyes closed, he pictured the tops of her breasts, wondered again what her breasts looked like naked. What color the nipples would be. Do you know I've had a hundred orgasms thinking about you?

Masturbate? Don't masturbate?

He tiredly swept the sheet off his body, looking down in the moonlight at the clothed hump between his legs.

His thumb and three fingers slipped inside the warm hammock around his cock, pinky sticking out of the elastic waistband as if holding a teacup.

Blonde hair, but probably dyed. Legs a little heavy.

Maybe I won't jerk off to her tonight. He pushed his underwear off his hips, snagging the head of his cock under the waistband, cock tilting stiffly forward, the head, as the underwear went farther down his strong thighs, slipping free, banging back against his stomach.

Not Getsi. Not tonight.

At the age of twenty-five he had made love to less than a handful of women, but had masturbated thinking of hundreds. Girls next door, girls in cars, girls on television, girls he made up in his mind.

A few girls were favorites, girls he returned to in his fantasies year after year to picture them again, to imagine making love to them again although he never actually had, to imagine putting his lips on theirs again although he never actually had.

For each of these few girls a set fantasy would eventually evolve over the years.

With the girl who used to sit directly in front of him in two of his college classes at Vermont University, the fantasy was that he gave her a ride home to her off-campus apartment one day, and she invited him up.

Thumb propping his cock away from his stomach, his three largest fingers started rubbing the front of his cock.

She walks ahead of him up the enclosed stairs, intentionally. Shapely calves. There used to be an empty milk crate at the first landing; lately in this fantasy, the past year or so, a broad-leafed plant

instead. At the top of the last flight she turns around, and since he hasn't actually seen her in six years she still looks the same as she did back then, as she will fifty years from now if he still masturbates to her then, forever young with wavy red hair framing her face, her bright blue eyes, her freckles, her sloppy smile.

Always, she invites him in. Always, he says he should be going. Their voices in the fantasy always are at a volume below a murmur, like sleep talk. But would you come in just so I can make sure everything's okay? Nobody in the closets?

His left hand slipped between his legs, under his balls, stroking up lightly at the weight and the loose strands of hair.

She says she wants to get out of her day clothes, and turns on the radio before leaving the living room. The song that comes out of the radio changes over the years, staying contemporary. Daryl sits on the sofa, facing the doorway into which she exited.

His fingers tightened their repetition up and down his cock.

She returns from a different doorway, behind him. From where he's sitting turned half around he can only see her upper body because of the plants and books along the back of the sofa. She's wearing a long-sleeved top that also modernizes over the years depending on what he sees in magazines or on other women. As she rounds the side of the sofa her full body comes into view. Below the waist she's only wearing panties. Her legs are completely bare, all the way up to the pubis.

He stroked his cock more quickly, focusing on her legs, which in real life he had never seen. Getting close, he jumped over the scene of her teasing him with her bare legs, eventually, while laughing, climbing onto his lap.

Now they're in bed, him on his back, her straddling his hips, doing a slow bounce up and down on his cock, her red hair, longer for this part of the fantasy, falling forward over the sides of her face, only her smile and nose tip visible, red hair curling with blonde highlights around her freckled breasts. As always, he looks down at this point to watch her red-haired crotch press down against his black-haired crotch, down and up, the room behind her visible around their joined genitals each time she raises her cunt up to the head of his cock for the next plunge down, and as always in that rhythmic glimpse between their bodies of the rest of the room he sees the bottom of her opened closet, the colorful clogs on the floor, once the shoes she actually did wear in college but now high heels, and the hems of her hanging dresses, and

cardboard boxes along the back, why he puts that in this fantasy he's never known—

She lifts up again, the closet bottom becomes visible between their bodies again, and this time, in the sideways diamond between their genitals, among the shoeboxes and fallen hangers, he sees a pair of naked feet facing forward.

What?

She looks down at him, hair covering her eyes and nose but not her puckish grin, hands on his stomach as she pumps herself closer.

He slowed down his masturbating. Were those feet always there? Had he just happened to spot them this time? His hand slowed down even more, the fantasy in his mind growing dimmer, harder to see. He picked up speed again, bringing back the brightness, the toenails.

In his next glimpse between their bodies he can see the feet are a man's. One of the feet moves slightly, big toe flexing upwards.

There's been a man in this masturbatory fantasy I was never aware of, standing hidden in her closet, watching us.

He closed his eyes and imagined himself in the fantasy talking to her in that muffled sleep talk volume.

Slow down. Tease me. Keep only the head of my cock inside you.

She looks puzzled. Her moving lips don't synchronize with her words.

This is new.

But she starts cunting only over the head of his cock, so that he has an uninterrupted view between their bodies of the man's feet.

He had to see more. He pulled faster on his cock, getting closer to orgasm, looks around her body at the closet itself, peering at the narrow vertical spaces between the hanging dresses.

As his orgasm started to rise from his balls his sight gets clearer, the dresses' patterns more distinct, geometrics and daffodils, the spaces between the dresses wider, and as he came he sees into the shadows behind the dresses, sees the tall, thick, unknown cock.

His head fell back on his pillow, sweat on his forehead, warm sperm still sliding down his knuckles. What was a man doing hidden in one of his fantasies? Was he hiding in just that fantasy, or all of them? He looked at the pool of pearly sperm on his stomach.

He was now fully awake. He lay in bed, eyes open, staring up at the ceiling fan.

He sat up, turned on the lamp, found his Winstons on the carpet, and lit one.

The digital alarm clock on the nightstand read 1:53.

He walked on his knees down the mattress to the foot of the bed and turned on the small black and white TV separating the sleeping alcove from his living room. Closing credits for a Red Skeleton show from decades ago rolled up the screen. He consulted the Lodgepole Weekly, already folded back to the listings for the town's one television station, KLPT. He held the thin paper in his left hand, taking a puff on his cigarette.

Get out of bed? Don't get out of bed?

He abandoned the bed, rubbing his face, got dressed.

Daryl had never gone outside at night in his two years in Lodgepole. Walking down the carpeted hallway of his floor, past the numbered doors, he didn't know why he was going outside now. The night belongs to the young. Adults see the night through windows.

The bottom flight of tubular, green-painted metal handrails ended at a cement block cubicle. Radiator smell. In the far wall was a steel door. Across the waist of the door, a square bar.

He pushed down, hearing the dead bolt retract. Pushed harder, opening the heavy door.

The door still swinging out, the rhythm of the crickets thrummed loudly into the cement block cubicle. Cool black night air swept in, moist and dangerous, with a wet wood smell.

Past the hard rectangle of the doorframe, the Alaskan night spread horizontally, teeming with hidden adventures.

Daryl stepped over the portal.

The dirt road ending at his apartment building, High Street, was just a long driveway. He walked under the moon past the few private homes on the road, front yards quiet with cars on blocks, doorless refrigerators and lines of phosphorescent laundry, to the wider, also unpaved, Mountainview Lane.

At the dirt corner of High and Mountainview he looked down Mountainview's slope to the small business district. Lodgepole was laid out like a T with a circle on top. Mountainview, the main sidestreet, was the stem. The left cross bar was Lodgepole Road, paved only until the edge of town, where it turned into a one lane dirt road cut through the lodgepole pines for fifty miles to Seward Highway. The right cross bar was Alaska Street, Lodgepole's business district, paved. The circle on top was Little Muncho Lake, larger than all the rest of the

town, ringed by Lakeview Avenue, also paved, where the wealthy lived.

South beyond the lake, crowding the already small sky this close to the top of the world, was the Eyebrow Mountain Range.

The business district was unlit at this hour, the small brown bulks of shops and restaurants only dimly seen at this distance.

Daryl walked down Mountainview's slope towards town, staying on the right. Off the side of the road stood a densely packed forest of lodgepole pines, still brown and shriveled in May, their spindly trunks and shaggy tops making them look like truffids. In those woods, hundreds of different species crawled and hopped and slithered and padded all their lives under watchful eyes atop the pines, until the moment when the eyes swooped down, silent and widening, and each ground animal would, one time, fly, backwards.

Alaska Street was deserted. He walked down the center of the two-lane road, unyielding pavement beneath his shoes, glancing left and right at the dark storefronts.

Between where the blocks of stores on the southern side of the street ended, and private homes began, a well-beaten path curled down into White Birch Park, following along Little Muncho Lake's right shore. He stopped at the top of the path long enough to light a cigarette.

Here the trees were spaced at more civilized intervals, tall, delicate birches with elegant zebra stripes, leafless still, their pristine minimalism making the park look Japanese.

He could smell the cleanness of the lake. He stepped off the path, deciding to walk down to its shore.

Two rabbits, mating under a bush a few yards ahead of his big brown shoes, bounded away in parallel leaps. Green glimpses of the lake started showing between the trees.

As he was about to step down a small ridge to get closer to the water, he spotted, off to his right, a shape lying in front of a clump of blueberry bushes. The air was too dark to be sure from this distance what the figure was, but something about its form suggested a person.

He walked below the ridge so his descent would take him past the blueberry bushes.

By the time he was below where the person lay, he could see it was a woman. She rested on her back with one leg up, short skirt showing a generous glimpse of her thighs.

She was looking right at him.

Daryl slowed his walk, taking a puff on his Winston. He looked up the ridge at her.

She was propped against a small rise at the base of the blueberry bushes, bare arms resting at her sides. She looked pretty.

He squished across the wet mulch of dead leaves to a spot directly below her. He cleared his throat, because he hadn't talked in the nine hours since he had left work. "Hi."

She said nothing, continuing to stare at him.

He cleared his throat again, embarrassed. "I was out walking." He gestured nervously with his cigarette at the land around him. "And I saw you here, and I just thought, if it's agreeable to you, if you could use some company...."

He looked down and took a step closer, careful not to get so close as to alarm her.

He studied her face from where he awkwardly stood to see if she was angry or frightened or interested, and saw she was sticking her tongue out at him.

He laughed, shrugging his shoulders, feeling a little off balance.

"Didn't your mother ever tell you that wasn't a good way to meet boys?" He watched as the black hair by her temple waved slightly and a brown centipede wiggled out, crawling across her forehead towards her eyebrows.

Daryl made the childish reaction of putting his right hand over his mouth.

"Hey—excuse me, there's something in your hair." He moved closer, forgetting his shyness, bending over her. "I said there's something in your hair." He waved his hand in front of her eyes.

He backed off, and then tapped the side of her calf with his shoe.

Her knee came down, but too slowly.

The big round clock on the wall read 3:24.

Daryl switched on the overhead light, cone shining down on the dead woman on the table.

He stood by her head, looking down at her face. Unanimated, the face looked loose, the flesh slack across the bones, but she must have been beautiful while she was alive.

He went through her purse first.

It was a light brown, medium-sized bag with raised dots across the leather suggesting ostrich skin.

He drew open the zipper at the top.

The first contents he pulled out were blue facial tissues, three of them, all crumpled. He carefully unfolded each one, pulling them taut at their corners until all three were opened, flat and less wrinkled. None of the tissues appeared to have been used for any purpose other than dabbing at lipstick. He glanced again at her face, her still full lips. A smudge of red was left on her lower lip. The color appeared to match the color on the tissues.

With the tissues out of the purse he could see the rest of the contents more clearly. He took out a half-eaten chocolate bar; the consumed portion of it ghostly suggested by the spiral of paper and foil still attached to the untorn half of the wrapper. The name of the bar was in a foreign language, as were the ingredients. The language appeared to be German or Dutch.

Next out came a pack of Marlboro cigarettes. Flipping up the lid on the box, he counted nine cigarettes left. He inverted the pack. The tax stamp was Alaska.

A heavy, jewel-encrusted shell opened on its hinges to reflect Daryl looking down. He averted his eyes from the mirror, putting the case down on the table next to the tissues.

He uncapped both lipstick containers he found, rotating up their color. Dark red, like her lips, like the smears on the tissues. One lipstick was full and untouched, the other worn down to a stub.

He removed a wallet and put it on the table to return to later.

Holding the bag up to the light, he slanted it this way and that to see what was left inside.

Some toothpicks, their tops frayed, a few beheaded Marlboros, two Bic disposable lighters, one yellow, one green, and a scattering of loose tobacco along the interior seams of the purse.

The wallet was large, and made of dark brown slightly shiny leather. The flat claspless kind men usually carry in their inside jacket pocket. The material appeared to be either eel skin or snakeskin, judging by the long narrow strips of leather sewn together.

He set the wallet on its spine on the table, opening it like a small book. The left side held a sleeve for paper money and, beneath the sleeve, a zippered compartment. His thumb and forefinger grasped the tiny brass zipper tab and pulled down. His finger felt inside the compartment, sliding over the smooth lining, pushing into each soft corner. Empty.

He counted the money, mostly fifties and twenties. Seven hundred and eleven dollars.

The right side of the wallet displayed a row of credit cards slipped into individual leather slots running down the wallet's length. At the bottom, behind clear plastic, was her Alaskan driver's license.

Behind the row of cards was a sleeve. He groped his finger around in it and pulled out a one-inch by one-inch square of folded glossy paper, which felt thicker than it should.

He carefully unfolded the paper, pretty sure of what he would find. The innermost square was covered with a slightly granular white powder. Unfolded, the paper, a magazine page, showed a full-page color photograph of a nude blonde standing at the seashore, the line of blue horizon at her waist level. Her breasts, navel and legs puckered cubistically over the square folds in the picture. The back of the page showed the same nude woman in four smaller photographs, on her hands and knees looking over her shoulder at the camera, painting her toenails, staring out a window, lifting her knees and touching her clitoris with the tip of a vibrator. There was no indication at the top or bottom margins of either side of the page what magazine the page had been torn from.

He thumbed up some of the credit cards just far enough to see what they were, six Visa or MasterCards, one American Express Gold Card, and two gas cards. One bankcard was on an Anchorage bank, four on Louisiana banks, and one on Citibank in New York. All were in the name of Sylvia Gold.

The small picture in the driver's license was definitely her, although she looked older in the picture than she did on the table. According to the license she was 5'4" with black hair and brown eyes. The address on the license was in Anchorage. He did some arithmetic with her birthdate. She was fifty-five.

She was wearing black patent leather shoes, black pantyhose, a short black fabric skirt with a slight slit up the back, a wide black patent leather belt with an oversized, squarish brass buckle in front, and a sleeveless, dark red pullover sweater. No rings on her fingers, no bracelets or watches on her wrists, no necklaces, no earrings, and no pins.

Beginning with her shoes, he started undressing her.

The shoes slipped off easily. The soles were barely scuffed, suggesting they were new. Her feet were small, with strong arches.

He undid the buckle on her belt, fumbled behind the weight of her waist to release the catch on the back of her skirt, and pulled the long zipper at the back of her skirt down. Holding onto the hem he tugged the skirt gently off her hips, down her thighs, over her knees and off her feet.

He glanced at her black-covered legs. Even with the panty hose still on, he could tell she must have kept herself in excellent shape. The long lines of her legs were slim and well-developed, like a dancer's.

Curling his fingers around the elastic top of her pantyhose, drawing the band away from her navel, he peeled them down her legs.

She wasn't wearing underwear. The dark bush of her pubic hair stood out in contrast to the marble-like flesh of her lower abdomen and thighs.

He ran a hand up the inside of a naked leg, watching his long fingers glide over the pale, rounded flesh. The skin was smooth and youthful, even though rigor mortis was becoming evident.

Each blade of the shears ran over the sharpening stone with a rasp.

He brought the shears up to the side of her head, carefully tucking the lower, thinner blade under the collar of her sweater. Fingers flexing up repeatedly against his thumb pad he cut straight down the material to its hem, baring a shapely white shoulder, her left breast, her navel. He pushed the cut halves of her sweater off her shoulders, yanking them down her arms, under her buttocks and off her cold feet.

She lay naked on the table now. He stopped for a moment to look at her.

Why had someone killed her?

Her face was stunning, her breasts as full as her waist was trim, the swell of her hips tapering to a pair of beautiful legs.

Looking down at the tone of her skin, at the athletic perfection of her curves, Daryl was struck again at how youthful, even in death, she appeared. If he didn't know from her driver's license she was fifty-five, he would have guessed her age as mid-thirties.

Yet someone had decided to trash her.

He walked over to the front of the table and lowered his face to her opened mouth. He sniffed at the protruding tongue. The faintest scent of garlic.

His right index finger rolled her eyelids down one after the other, careful not to apply too much pressure against the soft bulges of the eyes beneath.

Small pinpoint hemorrhages showed on both rolled-down lids.

One hand on her nostrils, one on her chin, he delicately pulled her mouth open, the tongue retracting.

The beam from his penlight shone over the ridged, ruby interior of her palate and throat, making the backs of her teeth gleam. He angled the small, dentist's mirror around inside her mouth. Visible damage showed on her tongue. Hemorrhaging had risen up from her throat.

He clicked the penlight off, drawing out the mirror; it's curved edge hitting the back of one of her incisors, snapping it off at the gum line. The tooth fell with a chink into the back of her mouth.

Daryl straightened up, frowning. The gap was right in the front of her upper teeth. A tingle of dread wiggled at the top of his spine. Coincidence.

He went to reach in her mouth for the broken tooth with his hand, then checked himself and picked up a pair of tweezers.

Their sharp metal points shook slightly as they approached the fragment, which lay just above the opening to her throat.

Steadying his elbow between her breasts, the side of his hand on her chin, he carefully braced the slippery tooth between the tweezer's two points.

He lifted the fragment off her tonsils, the tooth shifting as he raised it, and quickly drew it out past her lips. He placed it on the table beside her right ear.

He shined the penlight at what was left of the tooth in her gum, trying to determine what had weakened it.

The dentin around the edge of the stub glowed hard and white, but the center, all of the pulp and most of the cementum, was brown and gritty.

It's just the shock of the tooth snapping off like that. It caught me off guard. But he stopped long enough to switch some more lights on in the room.

Coming back to the table he rubbed his palms together, cracked his knuckles. He lit a cigarette, taking a deep drag, blowing the smoke up at the cone of light, which made the grey smoke float horizontally above her body. He placed the cigarette on the edge of the table, lit end hanging over space.

Slipping his hand around her right wrist, he lifted it off the table's surface, turning her slim forearm to see the blue veins still evident under the pale skin. Through the plastic bag secured around her wrist he could see her long, delicate hand, the slight creases across her palm, the smudges of blue ink alongside the top joint of her middle finger, the

microscopic curls of horn along the rims of the fingernails she must have just recently filed. He realized with a start his thumb was unconsciously pressing into the bundle of tendons at the underside of her wrist, feeling for a pulse.

He put the arm down.

Standing at the base of the table he leaned forward, held her by her ankles, and slowly spread her legs apart, feeling the resistance of rigor mortis in the limbs.

Now he could see the vertical maroon line between the tops of her thighs, the twinned, plump nethersides of her buttocks, and the darkening discoloration along the backs of her legs where the blood, no longer moving, had settled.

Placing a thumb on either side of her pubis, feeling the soft, curly hairs against his thumb pads, he slowly stretched the split of her vagina open.

Stickily uncurling itself from inside the recess, a centipede feathered its way over the springiness of her pubic hair.

When it dropped down off the hair onto the tabletop he killed it with the bottom of a bottle, the crunch echoing in the silence of the room.

He pushed a paper under the centipede, legs still swimming along its uncrushed half, and slid it into a small jar.

He rubbed the back of his neck with both hands, looking up at the clock.

Putting a Winston in his mouth, he glanced at the half-full pack of her Marlboros on the table. The thought of smoking one of her cigarettes crossed his mind. Surprisingly, the thought aroused him. He lit the Winston.

Puffing on his cigarette, he reached under the foot end of the table on either side and unlatched it, the lower third unhinging downwards, her calves, because of their stiffness, lowering only slightly, sticking out in mid-air.

He knelt on the floor between her knees and placed his hands on her hips, pulling her pubis closer to him until his face was right in front of her vagina, his breath ruffling her pubic hair.

The faint scent of citrus wafted up to his nostrils.

Gingerly poking around inside her slit with a tongue depressor to make certain she was free of infestation, he opened up the tunnel of her vagina, moving his penlight over its spiraled interior, inspecting the condition of the vagina's round walls. Satisfied, he inserted a narrow

metal spatula inside her, gently scooping along the soft walls to snag clots of semen, which he scraped off the spoon into a collection jar.

He glanced to his left, where his hand rested on the rounded inside of her thigh. His fingers shifted slightly, feeling the coolness of the skin.

He took a break, going off to the side of the room to start some coffee brewing. He lit another cigarette, watching the hot, black liquid splash down drop by drop into the glass carafe.

When he went back to her, her calves were still sticking out in space over the bottom of the table. He picked up her driver's license again, studying the little picture. She looked like a smartly dressed, middle-aged woman with fading face and drooped shoulders.

But on the table she looked young, vibrant, and sexual, like a teenager who never has to draw her stomach in.

He checked the expiration date on the license and calculated that she must have had the picture taken about three-quarters of a year ago.

Sometime between then and tonight she must have met someone.

Flashing above her, he took a rotational series of shots of the abrasions fanning in from both sides of her neck.

He raised the bottom third of the table up again and resecured it, then rolled her over onto her stomach.

The lividity here was well established, the twin cheeks of her buttocks dark as eggplants.

Putting his hands palm down on her buttocks he spread them apart with difficulty, holding them open with his left forearm while he scrapped a thin spatula along the inside passage of her anus.

He rolled her onto her back again, the arms snapping around rigidly as though they had no elbows.

One more cup of coffee before I proceed, he thought.

The empty stainless steel table rolled heavily on its wheels to alongside the one where she lay.

One hand under her knees, one around the small of her back, he picked her up in his arms, like carrying a bride, and transferred her to the autopsy table.

When he set her down her body, brought against itself by his hold, stayed in that scrunched position on the shiny steel, as though frozen in mid-exercise.

He wheeled her over to the wall, her body wobbling with the movement.

His hands squeaked into a pair of white plastic gloves.

He pushed down on her chest, her hips rising.

Keeping one hand on her chest he put the other on her pubis, pushing down on both until her back straightened out against the metal.

He adjusted the overhead light, pulled the smaller table behind him closer. His plastic glove passed across the white paper on the smaller table all the way over to the right, to the largest scalpel.

He positioned the blade above her belly button, facing up her body, its curved tip dimpling the skin. Clearing his throat, he increased pressure on the hard tip until it punctured through the epidermis, through the layer of fat beneath; until he could feel in the handle the sudden release of resistance as the tip popped down into her abdominal cavity.

Not looking at her face, not looking at the rest of her body, he concentrated on his right hand as he pulled the blade slowly forward through her body, separating the flesh into two thickish halves, all the way up to her sternum.

At the sternum he rotated the blade ninety degrees, then cut along her lowest left rib to the table. Returning the blade to the sternum, he cut it along her lowest right rib to the table.

When he was finished, he had a Y-shaped incision in the middle of her body.

He lay the scalpel down on the table, using both hands to clamp the two open flaps of her abdomen apart.

Bending over sideways until he could look straight up under her rib cage, he extended a pair of needle-nosed scissors inside, snipping here and there, detaching enough of her lungs from the chest cavity to be able to wiggle them out.

They were heavy with water, especially in the lower lobes, which is what he expected to find. He placed them in a steel tub.

He glanced superstitiously at her face. It registered nothing.

Taking his time, he worked his way through the usual slippery chaos in the abdomen, turning each organ over in his hands to look for obvious indications before slipping them into the tub for later cross-section.

The last organ he removed was her heart, as red and purplish as an oversized, peeled plum. He held it in the palms of both hands, the slackened chambers sagging to the sides.

He added her heart to the pile.

Which way now, up or down?

He looked at her face, looked at her abdomen, and decided to finish up there first.

Taking up his scalpel he cut down through the muscle of her lower abdomen, bisecting her belly button, slicing deeper down through the hair of her pubic bush until the pubis itself separated into two parts, like cutting through a tire.

He reached into the slippery softness of her intestines, pushing them up onto his forearms to get them up out of her in one try. Holding them across his arms, he looked down.

Inside the glossy tube something dark shifted around, still alive.

He pulled out the entire length of intestines, and then cut through the top band, trying not to compress its circle.

Tilting the opened end up, he shone his pen light inside, the interior shadow lowering into the tube with the advance of the light, exposing the nine small heads greedily fastened to the interior curve of the intestine, ringing it like wet, living beads, their long, thin, boneless bodies floating down into the tube's shadows, switching like tails in reaction to the light.

He raised his head, speaking up at the microphone. "Subject infested with tapeworms, average length estimated to be..." He slid his gloved hand down the outside of the intestine, yanking more of its length up, feeling with his fingers, shining his penlight along the gleam, hearing the tape above him automatically stop in the silence and rewind to the last spoken word. "Average length estimated to be forty-five feet."

He snipped the opposite end of the intestine, folded the length up over itself to make it more manageable, and dropped it into a separate tub, where the loops slithered apart. He put a pane of glass across the top of the tub.

Her ovaries made him wince for her. He had expected to find two smooth, shiny sacs, but these were grossly deformed, with large, dark, blood-filled cysts massed lumpishly around both, making them look like blind, bulging eyes.

He glanced back up at her face, down at her perfect legs, both ends looking surreal flanking the opened abdomen joining them. He sighed.

"Chocolate cysts on both ovaries, average size between eight and ten centimeters in diameter. Presence also of yellow-brown nodules ranging from one to two centimeters in diameter, suggesting external endometriosis."

He did her neck last, carefully slicing into the throat. Each structure he removed, trachea, larynx, esophagus and tongue, was as damaged as he had expected.

On the side of her neck was an angry-looking red welt. He leaned over, shining his penlight back and forth across its shininess. "Sore or severe abrasion on the left side of the neck, in direct line with the jugular." Picking up his scalpel, he carved a wide, deep square around it, lifting it out for further study.

He moved on to her broken arms.

By the time he was finished, the birds were tweeting outside the windows below the ceiling. Daryl washed up, the frown on his forehead deepening.

For all the violence that had been done to her, he hadn't been able to find any defensive wounds at all.

There was none of the damage to her face he would have expected from this type of murder. Whoever strangled her did so from the front, meaning he would almost certainly have to strike her at least once during the struggle. And although her forearms were heavily bruised, and both ulna bones fractured, bruises and fractures were on the outsides of her forearms, away from where the killer on top of her would be, rather than on the insides.

Which suggested she hadn't tried at all to stop her killer.

Through the loudness of the alarm he saw 9:00 instead of 6:30 on his bedside clock. Head off the pillow, everything came rushing in: the dream, the feet in the closet, the dead body, the note he left on his supervisor's dark desk at five in the morning explaining why he would be late for work.

He took his time walking down Mountainview Lane towards town, enjoying the novelty of being outside in the middle of a business day.

Beyond the two-story buildings of town, the bright green wideness of Little Muncho Lake glittered, its center still frozen, ice the color of limesicles.

On the lake's far shore, stepping shyly out of the lodgepole pines, a straggle of deer sniffed along the cobblestones.

That autopsy was the first he had performed in over two years. It was reassuring to know he still had the courage to open a person, could still hold organs.

As he rounded the corner from Mountainview onto Alaska Street, stepping up onto the sidewalk that came with the town's business district, an older woman, once probably beautiful, now stylish, looked over her shoulder at him and smiled as she walked ahead on the sidewalk.

He smiled back.

From behind him, further up the slope of Mountainview, a loud, ugly voice said, "I can tell you're not wearing a bra."

Daryl turned around, feet still walking forward, but the sun filled his eyes, preventing him from seeing anything. He faced forward again, frowning.

In front of him, the back of the woman's shoulders rose. Her legs moved automatically against her skirt.

"Know how I can tell? 'Cause I can see those big, beautiful teats of yours swinging back and forth."

The woman lowered her coifed head, walking forward determinedly.

"Maybe if I keep talking about 'em, I'll see those fat nipples of yours get hard."

Daryl turned around. Blinding sun. Faced forward again.

The woman veered off the sidewalk, arms clamped across her breasts, dodging around a car, crossing to the other side of Alaska Street.

"Dumb stupid fucking hole. I'll core your cunt."

Daryl picked up his pace, the footsteps staying right behind him.

Outside the Lodgepole Grocery the bespectacled owner was up on a stepladder, fussing with the striped awning in the bright sunlight.

"You've got cancer."

The owner turned around awkwardly on top of the stepladder, holding onto his glasses with one hand, looking behind Daryl.

"You heard me."

The owner set his mouth, but said nothing.

Daryl kept walking down the sidewalk, the footsteps stuck behind him like a shadow.

Alaska Street was moderately crowded at this hour, men and women coming out of the doorways on their coffee breaks.

Daryl walked through the crowds, eyes straight ahead, feet rising and falling, arms swinging like an automaton.

Trailing behind his shoulders, the man started hawking up deep wells of phlegm, noisily spitting out the gobs.

Is he spitting at the sidewalk, or at the back of my jacket?

Daryl swerved towards a storefront, palms on the wall of glass, pretending to examine the pyramided display of *Slap* men's cologne.

The man's reflection passed over the pyramid, staring straight ahead.

Hands still on the glass, Daryl turned sideways to look.

Longish black and grey hair combed straight back. Stark features. Fiftyish. Eyes like an angry dog's.

Daryl waited until a safe distance had passed, then fell in step behind the wide shoulders and swinging arms.

Up ahead, a lanky woman wearing sunglasses, dress shop boxes dangling from her hands like suitcases, sidled away from the center of the sidewalk to the storefronts, moving forward timidly with one shoulder rubbing against the glass.

The stranger headed into her path.

She froze, then drew her rectangular boxes up around her breasts.

The stranger snorted. As he passed her he pointed his snout in her direction, letting out a loud, carefree belch.

By the time the two of them had reached the end of the shops, the stranger in front, Daryl behind, the stranger had challenged a dozen men and women. None had answered back.

They reached the residential section beyond the shops, elms and maples overhead, private homes on either side. At the end of the street, on the lakeside, the square beige corners of Sacred Heart Hospital stood above the treetops.

Daryl crossed the street. The stranger continued down, broad back getting smaller and smaller as he passed through the sunlight and limb shadows falling across the sidewalk.

The stranger stopped at the bottom of one of the driveways. At its top, on the left, a half wall of cement blocks separating properties. On top of the cement block wall was a long green box holding nine different-colored tulips.

A small boy alongside the wall lifted a watering can up over his head, tilting thin streams of water through the nozzle's perforations into the box.

The front yard didn't have a lawn, only a big oak with a tire hung from a lowering limb. On the square porch were milk cans.

The stranger stood at the foot of the driveway, pumping each leg up in turn, the extra long zipper on his fly buckling.

The face swiveled to stare up the dirt driveway at the boy, watching him conscientiously water each tulip.

"Those sure are pretty flowers you got there."

The little boy turned, holding the watering can aloft with both hands. Round eyes, open mouth.

"Whaddaya call those flowers, anyway? Those aren't roses, are they?"

The kid shook his head.

"Didn't think they were." He started slowly up the dirt driveway. "So whaddaya call them?"

The boy looked around nervously. "Tulips."

"Tulips! I thought they might be tulips." He walked past the boy to look at the tulips.

"They sure are pretty." He turned away from the tulips to the boy, blue eyes glittering. "Did you grow them yourself?"

The boy nodded shyly, watering can sloshing.

The stranger lowered his jaw. "Not all by yourself! I've never seen tulips this pretty before."

"My dad put in the dirt, but I put in the bulbs. I water them." He lowered the can.

"How old are you?"

"I'm nine years old," the boy answered solemnly.

"And when would these beautiful tulips be ready to be picked?"

"Pretty soon."

The stranger leaned forward to smell one, dark nostrils dipping into the cup of color. He studied the boy for a moment, black eyebrows arching. "I would imagine that someone who grows tulips as well as you do—" his large hand swept out over the nine—"must have something very special planned for them. Am I right?"

The boy brightened. "They're for my mom."

"I would have thought so."

"They're for Mother's Day."

"Well, I think your mother's going to be very proud." He looked at the row of tulips, each bowl of shapely petals enclosing a space of fragrance. Then he looked at the tight slit in the lapel of his houndstooth jacket.

The little boy stepped backwards, showing an uneasy smile.

"You're shy, aren't you, son?"

The boy rubbed his small thumbs over the perforated cover of the watering can's spout. "I dunno."

The stranger took a casual step forward. "I'd consider it an honor to wear one of your tulips in my lapel."

The boy let out an embarrassed laugh. "They're my mom's." He looked up at the stranger, scrunching his eyebrows together.

"Of course, of course. But surely your mom wouldn't mind if I took just one. One small flower still leaves eight, doesn't it?"

The boy's laugh became even more embarrassed. He looked around. "They're for my mom." He set the watering can down.

"Tell you what—I'll pick the least prettiest one."

The boy didn't say anything.

"Is it all right with you if I pick the least prettiest one?"

"If I say no are you gonna take it anyway?"

The stranger laughed. "No. I don't want to do that. I want you to give me one. Voluntarily."

The boy dug his hands into the pockets of his small jeans, jerking his head a few times. "Okay, but just one."

The stranger reached down and gave the boy a rubbing pat on his head. "Thank you." He turned back to the tulips, black and grey hair slicked straight back, blue eyes glittering. "Now then, I think I'll pick..." He scanned the tops of the tulips carefully, large hands on his knees, the boy standing tensely beside him. The stranger's eyes fell on the ninth tulip, a brilliant white one with shots of the purest pink deep in the flesh. The boy straightened with alarm. "I think I'll pick this one." The stranger's hand reached out quickly, thumb and index finger neatly plucking the head from the very top of the eighth stem.

The boy pointed in exasperation at the tall yellow bowl in the stranger's hand. "You picked it wrong! You're supposed to pick it from the bottom of the stem, not all the way at the top!"

"How stupid of me. Here, I'll pick this one instead." He snagged another tulip, the seventh, red one, mangling the stem so badly the heavy head wobbled.

"Hey, I said just one!" The boy looked at the remaining seven. "It took me a long, long time to grow these!"

The stranger bent over the boy's upset face, one black lock falling over his forehead. "You still have seven left. It's not my fault you didn't tell me how to pick it."

"Anybody knows how to—"

"Isn't that true?"

The boy made a sour face. "Well you got your flower now."

"It isn't the one I wanted though. I picked this one only because you rushed me."

The little boy stared at him. "Yeah well, I rushed you because you picked the first one wrong. For cryin' out loud."

"That's the one I really wanted, that one over there." The stranger pointed a steady finger towards the end of the row.

The boy's eyes shifted. "That's the one you want?"

"May I have it, please?"

"Swear?"

"Swear."

The boy stood back, mouth sickled. "Pick it."

"I have a much better idea." The stranger lowered himself onto his haunches in front of the little boy, so that he had to look up into the unformed face. "You pick it for me, dear." He spread his big hands apart. "That way there can't be any mistakes."

The boy warily considered. "I pick it?"

The stranger nodded quietly. "And then there can be no mistake." His left eyelid lowered, flexing a wink.

The boy looked down into the large face. "Which one did you point to?"

"That one over there, by the end."

The boy trudged over to the end of the window box.

The bloom was orange and pink, like a small tropical bird.

He put the bulb in dirt on Christmas, covering it.

Two months later a sectioned tip poked up out of the black.

Each day after school he'd check the slow green ascension, the gradual pastel separation above blades.

This time the earth gave back what was buried.

His hand reached up carefully over the edge of the long box, touching the hard stem for the first time. He tilted it, opposite side bulging and paling. His fingers felt between them the mortality he had twice envied the stranger feeling. The tilt lowered. With a moist crack, like celery breaking, the tulip tore free from its bulb.

"Not that one, Brandon. I pointed to the one next to it."

The little boy turned his head sorrowfully around, milk from the rupture sticky on his fingers. "Which one? This one?" He snapped the next one's head off. "This one? This one?" He yanked down the line.

"You forgot one." The stranger waggled his finger at the lone tulip still upright. "That's the one I wanted all along."

The boy marched up and snapped it off its stem, the brilliant white ninth tulip with the purest pink in the flesh.

The stranger looked at the blooms and bulbs scattered in the dirt driveway, then quietly picked the flowers up in his arms. "These were going to be for your mom, weren't they?"

The boy burst into tears.

"Don't be upset. There's a flower shop in town. You can buy all new ones."

"I can't buy any new flowers," the boy cried. "I spent all my allowance on the bulbs!"

"Then I guess you'll have to explain to your mother that you lost your temper and destroyed her gift."

"I can't do that!"

"Why not?"

"Because she's dead." The boy let out a fresh flood of hopeless tears.

"When did she die?"

"Long time ago."

"How long ago?"

The naked little face tilted up at the stranger and crumpled. "My mom died when I was born, okay?"

"Your mom died because you were born."

"My dad told me she really, really..." He burst into tears. When his mouth opened again, it stretched behind the mucous of his grief.

"Look what you did to her flowers." The stranger leaned over, blue eyes glittering. "Your mom's waiting down in the ground, down in the coldness people walk over, waiting for her flowers. Now there'll be none, because of you."

The little boy blubbered, reaching out his hands.

"These? These here? Sure." The stranger rearranged them in his arms to pass them over, but the one without a stem, the first one he plucked, and fell out of the bouquet onto the dirt driveway.

"Hey! Careful, you dropped one!"

"Where? Where?" The stranger started turning around, looking for the head that had fallen, forgetting the others still in his arms. One by one they fell as he turned around.

"Hey! Careful! You're—"

The stranger kept shuffling around, looking for the fallen flowers, black wingtip shoes stepping on all of them, breaking their stems,

flattening their heads, until all that was left in the dirt was a doughnut of trampled colors.

The little boy stopped crying. A line of saliva hung off the side of his lips. One eyebrow was twisted way, way up on his mottled face.

The stranger scraped the soles of his shoes clean on the side of the cement block wall.

He turned to look back at the frozen face.

“As before, again. In between, remembering nothing.”

He walked down the driveway to the road. In a moment he was behind the blue and white mail collection box, then behind the bough of an oak, then gone.

Daryl walked down the brightly lit main corridor of the hospital, past the rest rooms, water fountains and elevators, to the double glass doors at the end.

He pushed one half of the entrance open, stepping into the hospital's combination coffee shop and gift boutique. Mildred, white hair standing out from her head, was behind the register. He smiled, making his way around the kiosks of stuffed animals and get-well cards to the rows of tables at the rear.

Most of the tables were empty at this hour. Daryl sat by the windows overlooking White Birch Park, the lime green of Little Muncho Lake beyond.

Across from him, in the next row, a pretty black-haired girl sat facing him, smoking a cigarette while she read the *Lodgepole Weekly*, breakfast pushed to the empty opposite side of her table.

He picked up his menu.

Daryl had been eating at hospital coffee shops since his college days in Vermont. Good food, cheap prices. A grilled cheese sandwich cost eighty-five cents.

Mildred had followed him. “You’re late. Breakfast is over.” She pulled the order pad out of her apron’s waistband.

“I was up past midnight.” He thought about mentioning the autopsy, decided it would be inappropriate. “Does Gladys still have any of the meatloaf left over from yesterday?”

“I’ll check. Coke or coffee?”

Past Mildred’s slanted order pad, vibrating as she wrote down his choices, Daryl could see the girl. She was one of those dark-haired women whose face can look ordinary in repose, beautiful in the fade of

a smile. Above the spread of her cheeks her large dark eyes shifted as she read. Black bangs ended an inch above her eyebrows, making her round face seem even bigger. Below the table, her legs were crossed at a poised up and down angle, the pressure on the back of her right calf where it pressed against her left shin making the back of the calf bulge out slightly.

Her face and legs were both large for her body, making both more noticeable.

"Just coffee, please."

Mildred finished writing but didn't put the menu back between the sugar and cream. "I heard you had some excitement last night."

"Oh, yeah." He jiggled a Winston up from the pack. "You mean the body I found, right?"

She tucked her order pad back under her waistband. "The word is she was strangled." She looked at Daryl.

"That's right, that appears to be the cause of death."

The black-haired girl looked over. He glanced in her direction. She turned politely away, profile lowering.

Mildred pushed in the empty chairs of his table to get around to the window. She pressed her nose against the glass, peering down at the sloping park. "I saw it this morning when I got here, yellow bunting strung between the birch trees. There's black printing on it, but you can't make it out from up here."

"It says: 'Crime Scene: Do Not Cross'. Sheriff Cable strung it up early this morning after I called him from the morgue."

Mildred sighed, breath silvering the glass. "This is the first murder this town's ever had."

The girl was tapping the orange end of her cigarette on her ashtray's rim, her face half-turned to listen. Daryl gave her a quick, shy smile. She lowered her eyes, turning away, a smile on her own lips.

Mildred leaned over his table. "You did the autopsy on her, huh?"

Daryl nodded solemnly to hide his pride. He spoke just loud enough for the girl to also hear. "Yes, I did. It was one of the more interesting ones I've performed."

"You're just a lab tech though, right? Why didn't they get a real doctor to do it? There might have been clues on her body."

Daryl's face felt hot. "I am a doctor. I'm a medical examiner."

"So who do I have to kiss to get some service around here?"

The stranger from the sidewalk strode slowly up the aisle, snapping his heels down, stopping by Daryl's table, smoldering cigarette between his wide lips. He pushed the sides of his jacket back, putting his big hands on his hips.

Mildred pointed to Daryl. "This man is the one who found that woman's body last night in the park."

The stranger's face twisted with incomprehension. "I don't give a hoot. Do you work here?"

"Yes, of course I—"

"So you want to take my order, or what?" He drew another puff, pulling the red embers right up to his lips, then took the cigarette out of his mouth and carelessly mashed it in Daryl's ashtray, making the ashtray rattle. A silky strand of smoke rose up from the still smoldering butt.

Mildred, flustered, pulled out her pad and flipped over a page. "Have you looked at one of our menus yet, or—"

The stranger raised his voice a notch. "I don't need to see a menu. You sell soup here?"

"Yes sir, we sell soup, we have clam chowder and—"

"Tomato soup?"

"We do, would you—"

He jabbed a finger at her pad. "Write it down. What about sandwiches?"

"If you would care to look at—"

"I'm not looking at any menu. What do I need a menu for? You're standing right in front of me, for Christ's sake. You're the menu. Get me a tuna sandwich."

"Very well, sir. We have white bread, whole wheat—"

"Bread's for birds. Give me whatever you got. I don't even care if the slices match."

"Very well, sir." Daryl could see she was writing in high, jagged letters. "Just as soon as I'm through with this other gentleman's order I'll place yours with our cook."

The stranger shrugged disinterestedly, looking around to decide where he was going to sit. "Fine. I don't know how you can call someone a cook though when all they're doing is opening a couple of cans. You ought to call them a can opener." He flopped down heavily at a table across from Daryl, facing the girl.

Mildred turned back to Daryl. Her face was moist under her makeup. "Did you want anything else, sir?"

"No. That's all. Thanks, Mildred."

He looked around. He was the only other man in the shop. Head down, he put out the stranger's smoldering butt in his ashtray, feeling, between thumb and forefinger, the paper's wetness.

"Jesus, the people you meet in small towns."

Daryl glanced sideways.

The stranger was sitting back sloppily in his chair, seat of his pants right at the edge, head lolled back, fresh cigarette between his lips, looking up moronically at the ceiling tiles.

Lean body, big-boned profile.

"Yup, you meet all kinds of people in a small town like this one," he continued, talking to himself. He swiveled his face down from the ceiling, staring straight ahead at the girl.

She concentrated on reading her paper, brows shifting slightly to indicate she was oblivious to the world. The longer he stared, the redder her cheeks got.

The stranger tilted his head all the way over to one side, ear resting against his broad shoulder, looking under the girl's table. His fierce blue eyes traveled slowly up and down her crossed calves. He dropped his tendoned right hand off his tabletop, first resting it on the top of his thigh, then curling it inwards, two long, straight fingers rubbing the inside of his leg, near the top. He shifted in his chair, spreading his black wingtip shoes farther apart on the checkerboard tiles, letting them rest on the back edges of their heels. The two long fingers trailed further up the inside of his thigh to his zippered crotch, rubbing slowly.

He glanced sideways at Daryl. Winked. Pursing his lips together, he let out an admiring wolf-whistle.

The girl put a hand on her opened paper, flattening it to her tabletop. She looked directly across at him.

He broke out in a fanged grin. "Finally, I have your attention."

"I don't usually get wolf-whistled while I'm trying to quietly read my paper."

"I'll bet you do get your share, though." He grinned at her again, delighted. "I'll bet you get more than your share, and I'll bet you don't mind it one bit."

Her right calf swung in front of her left. Nonchalantly, her black eyebrows lifted. Daryl could see the whites under her pupils as she looked above the stranger's head. "I would like to be able to finish my

breakfast in quiet.” She swung her gaze over to Daryl, large, black pupils inviting him to share in her nervous amusement.

The stranger snorted. “You’re a real flirt, you are.” He rested his jaw on a palm, deliberately looking down at her calves.

She turned away, smiling embarrassedly at Daryl. Daryl smiled back, lifting his shoulders, heart pounding.

“You got a great pair of legs.”

She sighed heavily, looking around the shop.

“You ever wear shorts?”

She went back to her paper. “I suppose that’s really none of your business, is it?”

“Matter of fact, from where I’m sitting I’d say you got the best legs in town.”

She reached self-consciously under the table, not looking at the stranger, tugging the hem of her skirt forward, but it still remained above her black-stockinged knees.

Daryl balled his fists on the table, turning sideways stiffly, summoning up his courage. “Why don’t you leave her alone?”

The stranger glanced over at Daryl, giving him a dry look. “Why don’t I leave her alone?” He considered for a moment. “I suppose because I don’t want to. I suppose because I want to keep telling her over and over again what a gorgeous pair of legs she has. I suppose that’s why.” He blinked slowly at Daryl, waiting.

The girl tossed her long black hair, narrowing her eyes at the stranger. “Leave him alone.” She glanced at Daryl again, calf swinging more noticeably now, lowering her head, shaking it back and forth at Daryl, pupils up at the tops of her sockets. Can you believe this guy?

“Too bad you’re a virgin.”

“What? Says who?” She turned back to the stranger.

“I can tell.”

Her face went stony. “Oh?”

The stranger leaned all the way down to his tabletop. “I can smell that you’re a virgin.”

She reared her head back, black eyebrows knitted together. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Just like that. Any girl I come into contact with, even if they’re not right on top of me—” he swung his finger to indicate the distance between them—“I can tell. I can tell how many different men they’ve been with, the races, the ages, in order. I can tell whether or not they

enjoyed each man, by the smell. It's all there, out in the open. Layer under layer, smell under smell. And you, Betty Boop, are a virgin." He snapped his fingers, sniffed the air, brought his pupils to the left for a moment, and then nodded decisively.

She sighed, glancing again at Daryl, holding his gaze a little longer than before, then went back to her paper. "Uh-huh. Very interesting. Remind me not to wear this perfume again."

The stranger lowered his head to the table, rotated his face towards Daryl's watchful eyes, and then looked at the center of the girl's lap. "I wasn't talking about your perfume."

The girl, still reading, said nothing.

The stranger put his left hand palm down on the table, watching his right index finger push the large vein across the back of his left hand side to side. "Want me to tell you what you'll be doing tonight?"

She brought her wide face up over the top of the paper, long black hair sliding back, eyes angry. "You're a little old, aren't you, to be flirting with girls?" She gave Daryl a rueful smile, folded her paper into a square, pushed her chair back, and stood up.

"Can I say one last thing before you leave?"

She waited in the middle of the aisle, face and legs slightly big for her body, cocking a hip.

The stranger spread his hands apart, emphasizing the length of his arms. He grinned, raising his eyebrows. "You are a very beautiful young woman. I saw you. I made a pass. Okay?"

She stood before him, both hands behind her, holding her purse. She shrugged down one side of her lips, indifferently.

Still lounging, he held his right hand out. "Can you forgive a foolish old man?"

She hesitated, glanced at Daryl, and then walked over to the hand. Lifting her chin, she said, "If you promise to lay off, it's okay." She put her palm against his, the hollow of flesh between their thumbs and forefingers touching, the tips of her fingers barely curling around the side of his hand.

The stranger held onto her hand, putting his other hand over the back of hers so that only her wrist showed.

Daryl pushed his chair back.

The stranger's stark face jutted up at her, lips retracting. "I'm sitting here with the biggest hard-on in the world." Her eyes jerked down in shock. "Someday soon you'll beg me to run my hands up and down your beautiful bare legs while I fuck you."

Daryl's chair fell backwards as he trotted over. He came up from behind, reaching over the stranger's broad shoulders, encircling the wrists. The stranger pulled the girl even closer, her high heels sliding between his black shoes. He rolled his head all the way back, upside-down blue eyes looking up at Daryl from below Daryl's belt.

"Tah-dah!"

The stranger opened his hands.

The girl staggered back, arms waving, and fell.

Daryl let go of the other man's wrists, glaring down at him.

The girl propped herself up on her elbows on the floor, bringing her legs together, tugging down her skirt. She looked up at Daryl's offered hand, hesitated, and then took it.

He helped her to her feet. Bending his knees, he lowered his eyes to hers, looking into her flushed face. "You okay?"

Her black eyes glistened, squares of light floating across the pupils. "I guess so."

He put a hand in his pocket and pulled out a paper tissue, bringing it up to her eyes to see, then putting in her hand.

She tilted her face sideways as she dabbed under her eyes, trying a smile. "You must think I'm a big baby."

"No, not at all."

She put a ringless left hand up in front of her face, knuckles smooth. "I look like a real mess."

He studied her broad face, the wide-set eyes, delicate cheekbones, and long, black framing hair. "No."

Her eyes rolled to the bottoms of their sockets as she tried to think of what to say next.

Daryl tensed. "I was—would you like to join me for lunch?"

She dipped a hip like she was wounded. "I already ate." She reached out quickly, fingers trailing off his forearm. "You were like superman."

"Well, you know." He looked back at the stranger, who was staring up at the ceiling again, bored. Daryl bent his elbows back, putting his hands in his pockets. "This is—I've never seen you in here before."

"Oh, I eat here every day just about, yeah." She nodded to herself. "I never saw you in here though."

Daryl started nodding himself, looking around. "I usually eat around one or so."

She grimaced. "Another girl goes then." She tilted her head. "I don't like to eat at noon. It's so crowded. When you eat at eleven or one, it makes you feel different, outside things. Make me feel different", she corrected, lowering her head. She shrugged, not looking at him. "This is Thursday, I'll probably be here tomorrow at eleven, I guess." She gave him an up from under look.

"I could probably switch lunches. I could probably eat at eleven tomorrow."

She swung her upper body back and forth shyly, face not stopping the creep of a happy smile. "It's a date then, sir." One black eyebrow arched.

At the end of the aisle she twisted her shoulders around to wave the tips of her fingers at him before disappearing behind the kiosks.

He settled back in his seat, smiling at the salt and pepper, the chrome napkin holder, his curled hands.

Mildred came over with plates balanced up the insides of her arms. "I had Gladys put extra tomato sauce across the top." She transferred the plates off her arms onto his table. Biscuits with butter sliding across their puffed tops, meat loaf under bright tomato sauce, and green beans. "A big gentleman like you needs fuel." She glanced pointedly at the stranger.

"When you finish cooing, would it be too much trouble to bring me the food I ordered twenty minutes ago? Is there no can opener in the kitchen?"

"I have your order right here for you, sir. So sorry to keep a busy man like you waiting."

Daryl's tines sunk at an angle into the moist meat loaf.

The stranger unscrewed the thin metal top of his peppershaker, dumping the black and white contents into his tomato soup.

Both men ate without looking at each other; the stranger's exaggerated slurping the only sound in the empty-chaired coffee shop.

The stranger finished first. He went up the empty aisle slapping his bill against the back of each chair.

Daryl lifted a haunch to pull out his wallet, and then followed.

The stranger was at the front of the shop, a few feet from the unattended register, right bicep stretched over the glass display case, elbow bending down past the far edge.

As Daryl rounded the stuffed animals, the other man straightened.

Mildred bustled over. She took the stranger's three singles, rang up the sale, and gave him two quarters. Her hands went to the sides of

the register. "That's a nice girl that comes in here. Don't ever talk to her like that again." Her eyes pointed directly at him, creases, makeup, veins.

The man held the two quarters upright in his hands, touching their curves together, creating a hard, shiny cleavage between embossed eagles' wings. He rubbed the notched edges together, like knuckles bumping over each other. His blue eyes looked down at Mildred. "It was her legs. Women have legs for one purpose, and that's to transport the cunt between them to different locations to see what they can get in trade."

"I'm going to have to ask you to vacate the premises, sir." Mildred glanced at Daryl.

The stranger dropped the two quarters in the side pocket of his jacket. "I'm leaving." He banged the double glass doors apart.

Daryl put his bill on the counter. "Is he new in town?"

"He's been coming in every once in a while lately. Very demanding. Lives on the far side of Little Muncho, among the rich." Her fingertips touched the register's square keys, transferring Daryl's total.

"How about..."

"The girl?" Mildred gave a wobbly smile, scooping coins out of the register's tray. "Quiet, sweet. Comes in here almost every day. Always alone. Reads a paperback, usually." She held his change out for him, giving him a wise look. "Pretty."

Daryl looked nervously down at his palmful of coins. "You wouldn't happen to know her name, would you?"

Mildred drew her white-haired head back. "Sally Dolumbo. She pays by check. I don't remember the phone number."

Daryl felt his comparative lack of sophistication. He didn't have a checking account.

After Mildred went back to the kitchen, Daryl leaned over the counter to see what the stranger had been doing. Below a shelf of candy bars sat several different-sized cakes. Lodgepole, small as it was, lacked a bakery. Whenever there was a birthday, wedding or anniversary in Lodgepole, Gladys baked the cake. It gave her so much pleasure to do she charged less than the cost of the ingredients.

Each cake's aquamarine handwriting had been smeared, thumbholes punched through the rich frosting.

Daryl rode up in one of the hospital's elevators, surrounded by strangers, the small circular lights set in the elevator's ceiling shining

down on the men's wool suits, the women's bright hair. Through the metal walls he could hear the conversation and laughter of people ascending and descending in the adjacent shafts.

His department was on the ninth floor of the hospital.

The round clock on the back wall read a quarter to noon. The familiar smell of burnt microwave popcorn hung in the air.

He sat down at his desk.

It was strewn, like the others', with petri dishes, slide trays, short rubber tubing and pipets. A microscope stood next to his phone.

Under the microscope was a pink While You Were Out slip. Call Sheriff Cable. Nancy Costello signed it.

Today he was supposed to work his way through the three stacks of lab reports he had arranged yesterday by due date. He pushed them back to make room for writing his autopsy report.

Nelson and Getsi, his two fellow lab technicians, were over at Nelson's desk, Nelson sitting fatly on his small chair, fingering popcorn into his mouth, Getsi leaning against the front of the desk, filing her nails and bullshitting. She looked over at Daryl, dyed blonde hair and short skirt. Sometimes he wondered if she knew he masturbated thinking about her.

Daryl picked up his telephone, cradling it between ear and shoulder, waiting for the hospital operator to come on.

Nelson lumbered slowly over, six foot six and stout, empty belt loops riding on the rim of his pubic area. After two years of working with Nelson, all Daryl knew about his personal life was that he was married and collected hymnals. Sometimes women in other departments would call Getsi and she would say, for example, "twenty-seven", or "fourteen", meaning the number of days in a row Nelson had worn the same pair of pants.

Nelson settled heavily into the chair at the side of Daryl's desk, blue eyes magnified behind his black-rimmed glasses. "The tiny terror wants me to take my work back," he said grudgingly.

Daryl pushed two of the three lab report piles over to the edge of his desk. Both men sat silently.

Daryl broke the ice first. "I suppose this is because of the body I found."

"Yeah, someone mentioned it to me." Daryl could see the struggle on Nelson's face between aloofness and nosiness. "She's not a local girl?"

"I don't think so. Her driver's license gave an Anchorage address."

"Probably a hunter."

"She wasn't dressed for hunting."

Nancy Costello came around Nelson's bulk, thin, grey, four and a half feet tall. She fixed a stare at Nelson. "How long will it take you to get these reports out?"

Nelson reared his big head back, insolently pointing his face up at her. "I don't know, Nancy, I'm just getting them now. It's not my fault we suddenly have all these rabies cases." His stutter started, stopping him.

"Well, they were yours originally, and they have to go out." She glanced at Daryl. "My office."

Daryl stood up, gathering his notes, ignoring Nelson's teary pout.

"I found your note," Nancy started. They were seated behind the partitions that defined her office, facing each other, Daryl with his right ankle up on his left knee, feeling tense, Nancy with her shoes hanging above the carpet. "Normally of course we would expect you to be here on time, but under the circumstances, it's all right."

"I didn't finish until after five, so I—."

"That's fine. Did you get my note about Bob Cable's phone call?"

"Yes, I did."

"Where does the case stand now?" She fixed her good eye on him.

"I haven't called him yet, I was just going to."

"Do that first then. We really have to stay on top of this, Daryl. One of the reasons you were hired was because you said you could handle something like this."

"Oh, I can."

"Good." She spread her tiny hand out on her knee. "I'm having Nelson take back all his work, and Getsi's agreed to try to handle your blood counts for you, so you can concentrate on getting your notes completed."

"Thank you."

"Fortunately, we're not in our busy season yet. How long will it take you to get everything in order?"

"Well, I still have the cross-sections to do. Whom do you want me to give my tapes to for transcribing?"

"Can you transcribe them yourself?"

"I—if you want me to. It'll take a little longer, I'm not a typist."

"Please do it then, Daryl." She made a put upon smile. "We all have to pull harder since Alice left."

"I should be finished by the end of the day, or sometime tomorrow morning, at the latest."

"Good. Bob Cable wants to talk to you about your findings, so make time for that, too." That's so typical of her, Daryl thought, getting him to commit to a timetable and then throwing in a monkey wrench.

She leaned forward in her chair. "Jasper's very excited about this, Daryl. It's a good opportunity for us to show the administrators how well we can handle an emergency. We're both counting on you."

Daryl nodded. "I'm being very careful."

"That's very important." She fixed her good eye directly on him again. "We don't want any mistakes with this one." A few months back, around the holidays, Nelson had accidentally thrown out an entire batch of fecal samples Daryl was supposed to examine for occult blood. Through forgetfulness, Nancy had gotten it in her head that it had been Daryl's error. He was tired of correcting her each time she brought it up, so no longer did.

She shifted gears, lowering her voice. Her small jaw trembled slightly with determination. "There's no need for Nelson—or anyone else besides Jasper and me—to know the details of what you're working on. We don't want rumors spreading, and I don't want your work interrupted by him." She looked for Daryl's agreement. "I have to go to a staff meeting, I'm late already, but I wanted to talk to you when you first came in. I won't be back until around three. If you've already left to talk to Sheriff Cable by then, leave me a note so I know why you're not at your desk." She shifted gears again, an old woman's worry coming into her eyes. "Any idea who did this?"

Daryl shook his head. "Whoever did it was strong. Most of the organs in her throat were pretty badly crushed. It was probably a male. There's evidence she had intercourse not too long before she was strangled."

"Are you saying she was raped?"

"No, it doesn't look that way. It could be that whoever had intercourse with her wasn't the one who strangled her."

"Someone coming along afterwards." He saw her shift her eyes to the left, playing out in her mind the shared passion, the woman alone afterwards, the sudden hands around.

“Right. You know,” he shifted his ankle on his knee, not used to talking to her for such an extended period of time, “the weird thing though—unless I’m mistaken—is that all indications are she was naked at the time of the assault, and that whoever did strangle her then put all her clothes back on.”

Nancy looked up at him. He looked back.

The Lodgepole Police Department was Bob Cable. The Lodgepole police station was an easy chair and roll-top desk in Cable’s living room. No jail. Until last night, the only crimes in Lodgepole had been speeding and public drunkenness, solved with a ticket or a taxi.

Cable’s home was on Alaska Street, a few houses closer to the business district than the Hospital, and on the same side. The front yard, like a lot of front yards in small Alaskan towns, looked like an attic, useless furniture and broken appliances placed on the grass.

Standing by the front door, Daryl raised his knuckles to rap, but the door behind the screen was already swinging inwards.

Cable grinned merrily behind the mesh, short, slight, thinning black hair and a neurotic-looking face of mostly eyebrows and hollowed cheeks.

“Come in, come in.”

Daryl had never been in Cable’s house. Had talked to him only once before last night, when Cable had shown up in the lab technicians’ department looking for Nancy.

Daryl eased his way past Cable’s smiling face, smelling after-shave lotion and chicken soup.

Down at the end of the long hall leading off the front room, in the brightly lit, old-fashioned kitchen, Mrs. Cable looked up from cutting a raw chicken apart, and finger-waved shyly behind a big pot’s steam.

Cable led Daryl over to the sofa, ordering his two little stepdaughters to turn the television down. From their sitting positions on the carpet both swiveled their heads around, like mirror images of the same frightened girl.

Cable rested an arm on the sofa’s back, squeezing both eyes shut a few rapid times in a tic Daryl recognized from last night in White Birch Park. “You’re all finished?”

“Just about, yeah.” He sensed someone behind him. He turned around, accepting the unwanted cup of coffee Cable’s wife was timidly

holding out. She took a step backwards, hands spreading across the front of her apron, and Daryl realized he was supposed to taste the coffee to make sure it was the way he wanted it before she could go back to the kitchen. He took one hot sip, focusing on the pale curl of chicken skin clinging to the opposite rim. "Thank you."

"How's it look?" Cable raised his head on his thin shoulders, his neck stretching. He glared at his wife.

"I've got the typed report here." Daryl looked for a level spot amid the magazines fanned across the coffee table to set his coffee down.

"Honey, we have to have a little privacy to discuss this, could you do something about the kids?"

His wife kept staring at Cable. "Kids?"

They got to their feet and followed their mother out without glancing at their stepfather or Daryl, leaving December Bride on.

Cable brought his nervous face closer to Daryl's. "I didn't want them to hear the details. So you cut her up and everything?"

"I examined the throat organs and—"

"I couldn't do that." His dark, moist eyes rolled towards the entrance to the hallway, which was unoccupied. "Some legs." His eyes went into another squeezing spasm.

Daryl tapped the front of his nose with his fist, trying to decide how to keep the discussion on track. "May I call you Bob? Thanks. She wasn't raped. The person she had intercourse with had type A blood." He opened the file folder on his lap, feeling foolish now that he had bothered to type it.

"You know that from the sperm, right?"

"Right." He tried finding a comfortable position on the sofa that wasn't too close to Cable's face. "Here's the summary: she died from nonligature strangulation, meaning manual strangulation. She was strangled by a pair of hands, not a rope or a cord."

Cable nodded.

"Which means it probably wasn't a professional killing." He saw Cable's interest pick up. Daryl sat back, enjoying himself. It had been so long since he had discussed death. He remembered back to his intern days at Maine Medical Center in Portland. The curiosity all the student examiners felt when a murder or advanced disease was wheeled into the autopsy room. "Professional killers use cords, and they stand behind the victim. If they have to use their hands they still strangle from behind, closing off the windpipe with their eight fingers, four each

in opposition. Standing behind the victim you don't have to worry about the victim's punches or kicks, plus you can close off a much greater length of the windpipe than you can with thumbs."

"So you're saying there's no advantage to doing it in front?"

"You get to see the victim's face, but that's it."

"But she was definitely strangled?"

"I can tell by the damage to her neck organs, the presence of petechial hemorrhages on her eyelids, the abrasions in her throat, the water in the lower lobes of her lungs..." his counting-off right index finger reached his left thumb. "And so on and so forth. I also firmly believe all her injuries were antemortem. Before death. In other words, someone didn't kill her a different way, say by poisoning her or smothering her, and then cover up the true cause of death by strangling her corpse."

Cable shook his small head admiringly. "This sure makes my job easier."

"Wait, though. My point is that she was alive, and fully conscious, when she was strangled. But. There aren't any defensive wounds on her at all."

Cable pursed his lips; eyes steady in incomprehension, then looked back at Daryl. "What do you mean?"

"I mean she didn't fight back. At all. Usually with an act this violent you expect to see abrasions all over the victim's face and shoulders, because whoever the murderer is has to keep punching his victim to keep them down on the ground and then restrangle them until the cut-off of air is for a sufficient period of time to kill them. Both her forearms are broken, and the forearm skin's heavily bruised, but the bruises and the breaks are all on the wrong side on her arms. They couldn't have been caused by trying to fight off the attack. Plus there aren't any bits of blood or flesh under the fingernails, which you'd also expect."

"From scratching his face."

"Face, hands, whatever. The only wound on her body which could possibly be aggressive is on her neck, but it's very small and appears to predate the attack." Daryl pointed two smoky fingers at Cable, whose face was beginning to register the amount of paperwork this case was going to involve. "I'm also confident that when she was strangled she was nude—" Cable looked up—"but that after her death someone, possibly the murderer, carefully redressed her."

Cable looked off. "Creepy."

Daryl stood up, stretching his legs, leaving Cable huddled alone on the sofa, the glow from the television making the living room dimmer, reminding Daryl he had another stop he wanted to make. His right hand felt along his left wrist while Cable stared off, rotating the strap until he could glance down surreptitiously to read the time.

Cable raised his worried face up from his thoughts. "When did she die, Daryl?"

"When I examined her at the hospital rigor mortis was just setting in. That happens four to five hours after death. She must have been murdered around midnight."

"And there's no clues at all to who did it?" Cable looked up with a miserable expression.

"Sorry, nothing beyond the type A blood." Daryl remained standing as a hint that he was ready to leave. He watched Cable's closed face go back over the conversation. He was about to interrupt when Cable spoke again.

"And how did you find her?"

The question caught Daryl off guard. "I was out for a walk. I came across her."

"Out at midnight?"

"I—admittedly, I don't normally go out at night. Last night I did."

"Why?"

"Why?" Daryl snorted, looking around the faded living room. "I woke up. I had a nightmare. I tried to get back to sleep, but I couldn't."

"So you had a nightmare—about what?"

"My teeth falling out. It was very vivid."

"And you can't get back to sleep, so you decide to take a walk?"

Daryl looked at the little man on the sofa. "Yeah."

"So you walked down Mountainview into town?"

Daryl showed his palms to Cable. "Look, are you questioning me?"

Cable shook his head. "Sorry. It's just really strange." He didn't elaborate if he meant the murder or Daryl's behavior. "I'm not feeling well, I've got the flu or something. Can I impose on you?"

Daryl narrowed his eyes. "What?"

"Someone has to drive up to Anchorage to check out her apartment. Can I deputize you?"

"Can you—"

"Not tonight. I have to give the Anchorage police a courtesy call. Maybe tomorrow, though?"

Daryl didn't know what to say. "Tomorrow's Friday."

"Saturday then."

"Well, I—" He laughed. "I've never been deputized before."

Cable walked him to the front door. "I'm going to have this white powder you found in her wallet analyzed, but obviously it's cocaine."

"That's what I figured. I put 'white powder' in the report because we're not supposed to draw any conclusions."

Cable pushed the screen door open, stepping outside with Daryl into the Alaska evening, hushed and bright. "Did you weigh it?"

"Did I—" Daryl studied Cable's anxious face. "No, I didn't weigh it."

"Did you hear Gladys' dog got bit?"

"Yeah."

Cable gestured with his forehead at the bare stake in his front yard. "We're keeping Gracious inside for now." He jammed his small hands in his pants, looking up and down the quiet street. "There's a lot of wild dogs out there. People drive up through Canada on the Alcan with a dog for companionship, then when they get up here they can't find work. Some of those dogs are so big they eat as much as a human. The owners let them go and in a few weeks they're feral. Alaska's probably got more wild dogs than all the lower forty-eight combined. And they're breeding like crazy. I've been getting a lot more calls lately. It's like every rabid animal in Alaska is heading here to our little town. I took this as an eight-hour job, but there's no way I can keep up my patrols and the paperwork too. I try to talk to the mayor, but he doesn't want to hear it." His worried eyes looked at Daryl. "That's why I'd really appreciate it if you went to Anchorage for me. It'd be a big favor at the right time and I'll pay the gas money."

"It's not that. I don't have a car."

"Use mine. That wound you talked about on her, the older wound? Could it maybe be a knife wound or something? You already thought about that, right?"

Daryl stepped off the porch. "I don't even know if it's a wound. It could be a sore. I scraped it, but don't get your hopes up. It's ugly, but it's not what killed her."

Cable gave a discouraged shrug. "Venereal sore? Maybe it's a venereal sore?"

Daryl grinned going down the walk, shaking his head. He held up a finger and tapped the side of his neck, over the jugular vein. "I don't think so."

The House of Red Roses was in the middle block of the business district.

Daryl hurried down Alaska Street, stepping around the people exiting the buildings. He knew from a phone call he made before leaving the hospital to meet Sheriff Cable that the flower shop closed soon. On the same piece of paper containing the closing time he had written down Sally Dumbo's address, copied out of the saddle-stitched Lodgepole phone directory, and a carefully worded message to put on the delivery card.

Although Daryl passed the House of Red Roses twice a day, this was the first time he had ever opened the metal-framed glass door and stepped inside.

He closed the tinkling door behind him, shutting himself in a dim interior perfumed with the scent from hundreds of open flowers.

A glass walk-in cubicle on the left held an amphitheater of different-colored roses, their leathery leaves bluish in the cubicle's aquarium light. Oh, there are green roses now too, he thought nervously.

To his right, silvery heart balloons floated above sitting pandas.

A counter with a cash register crossed the back of the store, a doorway behind.

A husky, shorthaired girl in her mid-twenties peeked out from around the edge of the doorway. She came down the aisle in a sloppy San Francisco t-shirt, blue jeans an inch too broad in the beam, and sneakers.

"Hi."

"Hi, I called before, I wanted to find out about getting a dozen roses sent?"

Her round cheeks blushed. "Okay. Tonight?" She turned around to look at the empty doorway. "Andy? Come here a minute?" She looked him up and down. "You sending them to your girlfriend?"

Daryl started gesturing with his hands. "It's just someone I met, they had a rough day. I just thought it would be a nice gesture."

"I've seen you before. Walking past." She jammed her hands under the front waistband of her jeans, cowboy-style, while they waited

for Andy. Her close-cropped black hair showed the outline of her skull, making her eyes too large. "I moved up here a year ago from San Francisco." She shifted all her weight to one large hip, lower jaw dropping down and to the right, dragging the lips into a distortion.

A tall, white-haired man with a lined forehead stepped out from behind the doorway.

When he reached Daryl he formally shook Daryl's hand, giving a bashful, snaggle-toothed grin, his eyes looking away.

Daryl bobbed his head, as shy and excited as if he were picking out an engagement ring. "I don't know what type of rose to select. Are the—the green ones?—are they popular?"

The old man patted the air. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves." He put a gnarled finger up to the side of his cheek, facing Daryl but looking at a point to the left of Daryl's eyes. "You wanted delivery tonight?"

"I really did, if at all possible."

"I don't know about tonight. Sue? You think you could deliver more flowers tonight?"

The girl's eyes sparkled out of her square face. "Let her do it." She jerked her head sideways at the empty doorway.

Andy glanced at Daryl's shoulder. "It has to be tonight?"

Daryl's look focused on the whites above Andy's averted gaze. "I'd appreciate it."

Andy blinked a few times to himself. "I have a dinner engagement tonight. You couldn't take them yourself?" His eyes switched to a point behind Daryl.

Sue squared off in the aisle, facing the open doorway. "Want to come out here?"

Daryl raised his eyebrows. "I don't really know this girl. I'd kind of like to have them delivered." He glanced at the man's height, his white hair, his far-off stare. "For the impact."

The black-haired girl from this morning emerged from the open doorway in back, strolling halfway down the aisle before she double-taked Daryl. Her mouth, a full, straight line, dropped down but rose back up in a smile. Her first word to Daryl came out as an astonished laugh. "Hi."

"Hi." Daryl took a few aw-shucks steps back.

Sue poked Sally's shoulder, hard. "Want to get a grip? This guy wants flowers delivered to his girlfriend." Sue gave her a hard stare, making her voice lazy. "Do it."

“What?” Sally’s large, black eyes tracked slowly towards Sue, who had her hands on her hips. She shot a hurt look back to Daryl.

Daryl took a step forward. “No, wait, this is all a mixup.” He raised his hands up from his sides, holding air the width of her hips. “The flowers are for you.”

She flexed her black eyebrows down at him, eyes questioning. “How did you know I worked here?”

Sue poked her hard again, this time just above her right breast. “You clean up in back? Better have.”

Sally rotated her shoulder up and back, moving her breast away from Sue. “Cut it out.”

“Ooh, cut it out.”

Daryl took the opportunity during the exchange to sneak a look at her again. The shoulder-length black hair brushed away from the wide face, the large eyes, and the full lips. Not a beautiful face, sexier than that, a very pretty face, the face of the girl next door.

“I didn’t know you worked here. I wanted to send you flowers. Because of this morning.”

Sue switched an annoyed look of comprehension from Sally to Daryl. “So you don’t want any flowers?”

The roses stood in their aquarium light, petals beaded. Daryl gestured stiffly at them to Sally. “May I buy you a dozen?”

She rolled her head back childishly, flirtatiously, showing her throat, spreading her wide, red lips apart, bearing parted teeth. “No, you don’t have to buy me flowers.”

Under the pretext of his echoing smile he leaned forward, seeing within her opened mouth the pink, plump tongue lolled innocently to one side.

Sue bumped like a bully against Sally’s hip. “Stop being such a little tease.”

Sally gave her a push. “Shut up.”

“Are you off for the day now?”

“Huh? Yeah, I am.” She raised her eyebrows to him.

“If I can’t buy you flowers, can I at least take you out to dinner?”

Sue brought her hands back up to her hips, scowling. “Little Miss Popular.”

Out on the sidewalk, Daryl looked both ways at the curb while Sally was already stepping off, but then she stopped, waited for him to verify there was no traffic coming, and they walked together across Alaska Street, empty hands swinging next to each other.

On the opposite side of the street he held the door to the Open 'Til Eight Pizza Shop for her.

Inside, the place was half full with a mixture of teenagers, adults and old people.

Sally looked to him to decide where they should sit. He pointed to a booth away from the others, by the windows, following behind her bouncing black hair.

They slid in on opposite sides.

Daryl picked up the one-sheet menu, ingredients on one side, and three columns of small, medium, large prices on the other. The menu was trembling slightly in his hands. He made his voice come out relaxed. "Have you ever eaten here before?"

Sally left her menu flat on the table, eyes switching left to right from ingredients to prices as she pushed her hair behind her ears. "I usually get a pizza to go Fridays, to take home with me." She looked up at him, smiling shyly. "How about you?"

"No. Usually I just eat something frozen."

"Like ice cream?"

"I mean initially frozen, like a TV dinner."

"I know. I'm kidding." She winked at him.

"Oh." He smiled embarrassedly, looking down at the tabletop. "I take things too seriously sometimes."

"Nothing wrong with that. How about if we get one large pizza and share it? You can get what you want on your half, and I'll get what I want on mine."

Daryl nodded. "I'll have sausage and—"

"—Mushrooms, right?" She held her mouth open, grinning.

He reared his head back. "Yeah. How'd you know?"

She pointed at his mouth. "I was watching your lips and I could see them start to make an em."

He read the list of ingredients again. "How did you know I wasn't going to say meatballs?"

Sally sat back, giving him a smug look. "You already chose sausage. Chances are you wouldn't choose two meats." She looked at him challengingly.

He laughed, despite his nervousness. "You figured all that out in the short time we've been sitting here?"

She stayed sitting back in her booth, hands on the table, shrugging happily. "Yeah." She held his eyes, staring into them without saying anything more.

Daryl looked away, feeling desire. "Where are—you're not from up here, right?"

"No." She opened her purse, taking out a pack of Salems. He watched the petite ridge of her knuckles bend as she pulled a cigarette out. "I'm from Arizona. Flagstaff." She blew smoke towards the window. "I drove up here on the Alcan about a year ago, me and my station wagon."

"Alone?"

She smiled. "Yeah. I had no idea how far it was. Just gettin' to the Canadian border was a long trip. I figured, once I'm in Canada, gettin' up to Alaska would be like just crossing another state, right?" She goggled her eyes at Daryl. "It was like fifteen hundred miles! I couldn't believe it! I was in Washington—the state—and I had the maps out on my bed in the motel that night deciding what route to take up to here, kind of lonely and scared but excited, and that's the first time I started to really count the miles. Hi. Could we have a large sausage and mushroom pizza, please? And cola for me?"

"I'll have cola too. Are you sure you wouldn't want something else for your side of the pizza?"

Sally's large black eyes mocked him. "Sausage and mushroom's my favorite, too." She raised her eyebrows. "Honest. Could we have another ashtray too, please? Anyway, I found out then too there's only one way to get up here, on the Alcan."

"That's the Alaskan-Canadian Highway, right? I've heard about that." He lit his own cigarette and started to relax, glad she talked so easily.

She rolled her beautiful eyes at him. "All the way up through British Columbia it was like potholes with just a little bit of road around 'em. Plus for some reason, I never understood it—" her eyebrows pulled together—"every single pothole was meticulously outlined with chalk! And I mean meticulously. I pulled over a couple of times to look at 'em, and the chalk would follow along the rim around every little curve." Her long finger drew tiny configurations on her paper place mat. She laughed. "I mean, it made no sense whatsoever." She stopped to take a puff. "After British Columbia, though, going up through the Yukon, it got better. I was almost gonna turn around in British Columbia, but this guy pumping gas at one of the stations told me he did it once, and it got better the farther up he went."

He smiled, feeling a twinge of jealousy. Did the guy start up a conversation with you? Did you sleep with him? "Wasn't it lonely?"

She shrugged. "Not really. It gave me time to think through things. There was no radio to listen to. Part of the way they had one station, which was about the Canadian Parliament, which is like Canada's Senate, but then nothing. I saw a lot of animals, though. I even saw a moose in the middle of the road in the Yukon."

Daryl grinned. "Did you take a picture?"

She lowered her eyes, shaking her head. "I was too scared." She looked back up at him. "So how'd you get here?"

"I flew. Into Anchorage." Sally shrugged down the sides of her mouth, impressed. "I was working at a hospital in Portland, Maine at the time. I paid for the flight myself."

"So you're a doctor at the hospital here?"

"Actually, I'm—I work in the pathology department, examining lab samples. I'm a lab technician, that's my title. I do have a doctor's degree though."

"Oh." She raised her eyebrows to herself. "Well—being a doctor though, that's..." her eyes switched left and right, thinking. "Did they have any doctor jobs open at the hospital?"

"No. I don't—to be honest with you, I don't know why I came up here. Just to get away, I guess. Try something different."

"That's why I'm here. I guess we both came up for the same reason, huh?"

"Yeah." He sat up straighter. "I'm glad I did, though. I'm glad you did."

She looked happily away, a blush on the cheek he could see. "Me too."

It was still bright out when they left. This time of year, up near the top of the world, it was almost always bright out, except for a handful of hours after midnight.

Sally walked over to an alley between two stores, looking past the opposing walls at the lake beyond. She turned back to Daryl, hands clasped behind her, eyes bright. "Instead of going through town, want to walk to my place along the lake?"

They went down into the privacy of White Birch Park, the leaf buds already starting to grow on the birches, making the trees look like x-rays of themselves.

Once they were out of sight of the street, Sally danced a little bit ahead of him, turning around suddenly, hair swinging across her face. She grinned, pushing the hair back. "Know what I miss most being here?"

Daryl smiled back. "I give up."

"Big Macs."

"Big Macs, yeah."

"When I was in Canada, know what I had for breakfast every day? Oeufs MacMuffins. That's what they called 'em."

He snorted at the way she stressed the French word. They walked towards each other on the path under the birches, both still laughing to cover up their nervousness over what was about to happen, arms swinging, eyes shy and scared, arms swinging too far forward, and as they came up on each other and the laughter slowed their hands reached up, his right, her left, and he held her hand.

They stopped laughing, looking in opposite directions, mouths frozen in wide smiles, each feeling the other's hand in theirs.

Sally looked out over Little Muncho Lake, its waters outlandishly green, so sparkling clear you could see fifty feet down to the bottom. She raised her eyes to the flat ice floating in the middle, to the carpet of lodgepole pines sloping up the distant shore. Her lips worked for a moment. "You know, with that asshole in the coffee shop this morning, the only thing he did get right was the part about me still being a virgin." She stopped looking at the lake, but didn't look up at him.

They walked quietly hand in hand along the shore, passing through the slender, zebra-striped birches.

Eventually, they came out on Bumpy River, its thousands of cobblestones, in every pastel shade, tapering out of sight towards the base of the Eyebrow Mountain Range.

"I won't rush you."

She turned her wide face towards his, her serious look making her appear even younger. "I grew up in kind of an old-fashioned household, lots of brothers and sisters. I guess we were flirtatious, my sisters and me, but the boys never took it the wrong way. Up here, guys just expect you to sleep around." One black eyebrow jerked up.

"Have you dated much up here?"

"Who's there to date? The only men I see are coming in to send flowers to their wives." Her eyes looked off, up the cobblestones. "I think about that sometimes. Cooking in the kitchen with an apron over your dress, brushing the kids' hair so they'll look nice and neat for their dad. Then the door swings open and he's there in a suit with all these flowers in his hand, all these beautiful flowers just for you." She bent her head, laughing, wiping her eye with her free hand. "Daryl, don't

get the wrong impression. I—” She flopped her free hand up in the air. “We’ve only known each other a coupla hours and here she is talkin’ about husbands and wives and kids.”

“No, no, that’s fine.”

Her eyes rolled up to his. “I’m just really enjoying this, being able to talk to you. Usually I just talk to customers and myself.”

Daryl snorted. “Usually I just talk to myself.”

They walked along. “When I first came up here, after I got the job at the House of Red Roses, I went to a couple of parties Sue was going to, but...up here, everybody gets drunk at parties. There’s always at least one couple screaming at each other in a corner, I mean really shoving each other and slapping. Everybody just ignores it like it’s normal. Maybe it is, up here.”

They came out onto Lakeview Road on the lower, eastern side of the lake, where the middle class in Lodgepole lived. They walked in the middle of the paved road, like two kids. Up above them, in a sky so small this close to the top of the world it looked like an inverted bowl, making the horizon a curve instead of a straight line, a flock of Canadian geese flapped noisily across the moon.

“Sometimes I get lonesome for Arizona. Sue’s my friend, but she can get really weird.” She studied his face. “Do you wear glasses?”

She saw that she had caught him off guard, and smiled to herself.

“I’m nearsighted. Why?”

“You just look like you would. You have a very intelligent face. I can picture you wearing glasses, reading some book.”

They walked a little farther in silence, Sally studiously watching the fronts of her high heels advancing, and then she shrugged down one side of her mouth. “So have you dated much?”

She slowed them down in front of a nice-looking house set back from the road.

“I haven’t dated at all since I got up here two years ago. I’m surprised I still know how to date.”

She gave him a shy smile. “Well, you’re doing a pretty good job.” She let go of his hand, stood in front of him.

“You live here?”

“In back. In an apartment over the garage. It’s real quiet. Is our luncheon date still on?”

“You bet.”

She played with a strand of her hair, twirling it around a straight finger. “Thanks for the pizza. And thanks for thinking about sending

me flowers, too. That was sweet. I needed a boost after that jerk today.”

He thought of how happy he was talking to her, how lonely it would be back in his apartment, going over every minute of the date, worrying he blew it. It would be so nice to just stand here in the middle of the deserted street talking to her while the air got darker and the sky closer.

“I dreamed last night I lost all my teeth.”

“I’m glad you didn’t, they’re beautiful teeth.” She looked up at the moon, then at Daryl. “I guess I better get inside. Listen, I really had a great time. And I owe you a dinner. How about you come by here tomorrow around seven and I’ll cook for you? Want to?”

He brightened. “Yeah, that sounds great!”

“We can talk about it at lunch.” She nodded happily.

Daryl raised his hands towards her. She lowered hers off her arms. They looked at each other. Their arms started swinging slightly. They gave out a laugh to each other.

Daryl spoke first. “I think we’re both kind of shy.”

“Yeah.”

He touched her upper arm with his fingers, feeling her rounded flesh under the cloth. “I had a really great time, Sally. I know I didn’t talk a lot—”

“—Sure you did.”

“—But I will more and more. I’m not used to going out with someone.”

“Me neither.” She widened her eyes at him fetchingly; more flirtatious now that it had been decided they wouldn’t kiss just yet. “We’ll practice together.”

He grinned. “Okay.”

She looked shyly at her high heels on the pavement. “That’s a special time, before the first kiss.”

“Yeah.”

She leaned forward and touched his upper arm, smiling.

The final time he turned around on the road, where it crossed Alaska Street, she was still visible, standing in the middle of the street to give him a last, diminutive wave.

Daryl swung the front door of his apartment closed, the swollen wood stopping at the frame. Using a palm, he pushed the door into the

frame, and then turned the lock. He switched on the lights, chair and table legs dropping criss-crossed shadows.

He stood naked in his closet, holding his favorite pair of black trousers up to his jackets' lapels.

The back of his head fell with a thump onto his pillow, his blue eyes fluttering open just in time to see a great glob of sperm complete its arc a foot above his tensed stomach.

He decided against another cigarette, turning off the TV, My Mother The Car shrinking into a tiny, glowing dot that bounced up once then faded.

He woke up, rolling heavily onto his back.

His right hand lifted and landed on his eyes, trying to rub the sleep from his squeezed face.

The clock read 6:12.

He shut his eyes again, right hand drifting down for the sheet around his waist.

He stopped.

He lay perfectly still, eyes wide open in the darkness, hand frozen on the hem of the sheet he was about to pull up.

He waited.

There, it just happened again.

Body motionless, his eyes switched left and right.

Something heavy shuffled just behind the TV set at the foot of the bed.

He feigned sleep, shutting his eyes until they were open only enough to peer out through the lashes.

He couldn't swallow. His limbs were paralyzed with dread.

The shuffling moved rhinoceros-like to the side of the TV.

In the dimness of the approaching dawn he could make out something the size and shape of a turned around easy chair.

I'm looking at the back of my easy chair, he told himself. My easy chair's moved to the side of my TV.

He lay frozen, trying to keep his breath regular.

It's my easy chair.

The easy chair shambled around in front of the TV set, its back facing the bed.

His stomach started jumping.

Don't move. Maybe it won't notice you. Maybe it'll think you're sleeping.

His limbs started twitching. Tears tickled down both temples.

I don't know what it is. I don't ever want to know what it is.

But the squat shape, the start and stop rolling movements like no mammal...

It moved again, its front crawling hugely onto the foot of his bed.

The musty ammonia smell wafted up the sheets to him.

Early rays of light from the distant picture window revolved into his room, putting a glow on top of the TV set, spiking light into the coarse black fur bristled around the multi-jointed legs, each leg as thick around as a man's arm, but much, much longer.

Six of the legs flowed up onto the mattress. Through the prism of his tears he saw what he had thought was the back of his easy chair lower onto the foot of the bed, separating into three long, thick protuberances. On either side of the middle protuberance two stout, short black limbs, balled at their tips, fuzzily raised up.

Daryl started grinding his teeth.

The three protuberances suddenly reared up.

Three beautiful, longhaired women rose, attached at their navels to the circular trunk of the eight-legged thing below them.

One blonde, one oriental, one black.

They swayed, six bare arms undulating, as the thing shambled sideways on its multiple legs, moving clumsily to maintain balance under the burden of its top-heavy front weight.

The three women reached their arms out hungrily for the bed, faces imploring, lips writhing without sound, hands tearing at their streaming hair, three sets of breasts gleaming white, brown, black in the brightening dawn.

Daryl crawled backwards against the headboard, babbling, shaking his head as the three silently mouthed their pleas.

The oriental stretched her lithe body out over the sheets towards him, hanging onto the furred black feelers growing out of her side. Her grimy, agonized face strained towards him.

Daryl read her lips.

Fuck me.

Below where their navels disappeared into the rough black bristle, three vertical cunts popped moistly open and close.

Another long leg curled bonelessly up in the air, tapping its pad down on the mattress. He felt the weight growing at the foot of the bed.

He grabbed the lamp on his night table and flung it at the legs.

The bulb burst against the black bristle, flashing into detail the alien, sideways movement of the maw.

The thing reared back, its six breasts wobbling, knocking over the TV set and its stand.

The TV landed with an exploding crash.

Daryl flung himself over the half-wall counter separating the sleeping alcove from the kitchen, landing on his back on the stove, falling off onto the kitchen floor, back of his head bouncing off the linoleum.

He scrambled to his feet so fast he fell, scrambled up again, plowing backwards into the refrigerator, rocking it against the wall.

His broom slid out from the side of the refrigerator, clack-clack-clacking onto the floor.

He snatched it up, praying so fervently spittle sprayed over his jaw.

Crouching down, he aimed the broom's narrow end at the passageway between the kitchen and the living room.

Through the wall behind him came the pounding of a neighbor.

Daryl advanced slowly towards where the kitchen led into the living room, crouching further down, as he got closer. This has to be a dream. Like losing my teeth.

Sweat rolled down his temples. The end of the broom shuddered.

He slid his back up against the sink on the far wall, peering out into the living room.

The TV set lay on its back, screen cracked.

Against the distant picture window, the dawn light outlined his rental furniture. He stared from the passageway at each blurred chair and table, making sure it was where it should be, and the size and shape it should be, and that there were no other sizes or shapes out there where they shouldn't be.

He craned his neck out past the side of the counter, to the left. The carpet between the half wall and his bed was safe. The gas heater glowed behind its horizontal grill in the half wall. The night table was on its side.

Extending his arm, he poked the broom handle under the bed. From his angle, he couldn't get the long straightness of the handle far underneath.

Holding his shaky breath, he rapped the handle of the broom against the bed's metal leg. Hard.

Nothing came out from underneath.

Across the way from him, the short hall leading to his bathroom and the rear room laid boxed in darkness.

He cocked his head, ears tilting this way and that.

On the wall next to him was the switch for the hall light. He reached across the wall slowly, flicking the switch up.

The glass bowl on the hallway ceiling flared on.

It was holding itself sideways on the white interior wall of the hallway, eight black legs spread from ceiling to carpet. As real as the glass light above it, as matter-of-fact as the curtained shower stall in the doorway beyond it.

It didn't flee from the light.

Its three women raised out sideways, eyes shuttered, different-colored fingers sliding in and out of each other's cunts.

The tip of his broom lowered.

I can't handle this.

The thing stayed on the wall, eight legs motionless, six bare arms criss-crossing urgently as it masturbated.

All three women stared steadily at him while their wet fingers chugged inside each other, inside the thing. The oriental swayed her breasts side to side. The blonde pushed her lips out into a red-rimmed cup. The black rolled her abdomen.

Staring back, not knowing how fast the legs could move, Daryl fumbled his hand around the base of the fan on the countertop. Not turning around to look, he lifted the fan up, its oscillating weight making it hard to hold. He brought it around him, feeling its breeze on the side of his face. When he felt tautness in the cord he yanked very gently. Behind him, he heard the plug drop out of its socket, rattling onto the countertop.

The thing stayed still on the wall, the women blowing kisses, offering their slicked fingers.

The fan's oscillating weight slowed in his grasp, the spin within the wire cage doing a last rotation before freezing into a four-leaf clover.

The three bodies growing out of the flat trunk flexed forward, thin spines twisting sweatily, three sets of long hair hanging to the left; flexed back, six gleaming breasts jutting, three long throats stretched to the side; flexed forward.

The fan hit the forehead of the oriental, snapping her face backwards.

The broadness of it scuttled eight-leggedly up onto the ceiling of the short hallway, the Oriental's upper body flopping down brokenly, arms swaying straight down, the other two upside-down women beseeching with nipples pointing to their chins, inverted faces splitting around teeth.

After a motionless hesitation the thing crawled casually across the ceiling through the top of the doorway leading into the back room, joints and pads lifting around the top of the doorframe.

Daryl slumped against the wall. He started to close his eyes, but then popped them open.

Bad idea.

He studied the now empty doorway to the back room. His palms were slippery, so he laid the broom across the counter, wiping the insides of his hands on his bare thighs, sweat slicking over sweat.

Daryl poked his head through the doorway to the back room.

In his right hand he hoisted the broom, in his left, a heavy cast iron skillet.

Four blank walls, square ceiling, stacked boxes too short for anything to hide behind.

Opposite the doorway, on the rear wall, curtains flapped into the room.

He always kept that window locked, didn't he?

He advanced slowly towards the unfurling curtains, their lengths lifting to show the broad underside hems.

Some small dark thing lay on the carpet a few feet from the opened window. He didn't recognize it.

The top of his broom poked at it. When he was convinced it wasn't alive, he went down on his haunches over it.

The hems flapped above his down-turned head.

He lay the broom and skillet down on the carpet.

His profile turned around the object. It looked familiar, but out of place on the carpet.

He touched its side. Metal.

He picked it up.

Its heaviness fit in the palm of his left hand. It was the latch from the window.

He pulled the lifting curtains aside. The smaller, interlocking part of the latch was still in place at the bottom of the upper frame, but halfway uprooted on its paint-topped screws. Where the corresponding

latch should be on top of the lower frame, the wood was split and splintered.

The lower window was slid all the way up.

The outside screen was missing.

Past the white-framed upper panes the town of Lodgepole below was as much illuminated by the moon as the dawn.

He cautiously stuck his head through the open window frame, shadow of the raised sill falling across the back of his neck.

Nothing poised beneath the window.

The grey rectangle of the window's screen laid three stories below, on the lawn.

Nothing spread left or right on the shingles.

He opened his mouth, drawing in sweet, pure night air.

Before he had a chance to exhale, across the back of his neck he felt a tickling caress.

He twisted around in the open bottom half of the window, facing up.

The thing clung above the window.

The Oriental's arms hung limply, upside-down features of her face dislocated off its jaw. The blonde and black on either side both reached down for him, elbowing the dead weight of the oriental against each other.

He jerked back into the room. The Oriental's face slapped lifelessly upside-down against the top windowpanes, beautiful fish eyes reactionless.

He slammed the window.

Realized he couldn't lock it.

The three bodies descended topsy-turvy into view, hair hanging straight down, six large breasts flattening against the panes, two upside-down mouths pressing their pleas against the window, sickled lips fogging the glass.

Behind their bare flesh, the immense furred bulk loomed blackly, rotating clockwise and counter-clockwise around the window to keep the inverted faces dangling where Daryl could see them.

He rapped with his knuckles on one of the panes.

The two women grinned upside-down, tongues snaking out, reaching across the dead oriental to each other, white knuckles pulling on black nipples, black knuckles milking white nipples.

The four upside-down eyes stared in at him, pupils dilated with pleasure.

Let us in.

The thing behind jerked them down, faces disappearing below the sill, window filling with the three cunts buried in black bristle, middle one a motionless vertical slit, flanking ones showing the swell of clitoris below the two different-colored, inwardly spiraling holes of cunt.

Daryl backed away, stopping at the doorway. He turned and ran into the bathroom.

His bladder ached like a blade, but he bent under the vanity instead, pulling out a hammer and a jumping box of nails.

Back at the window, which was empty now, he hammered slanting nails along its frame, too much in shock to flinch whenever he struck his thumb.

Finished, he yanked on both halves of the window. Neither budged.

He returned to the bathroom, standing over the toilet. He pulled his cock through the front of his underpants, strength seeping out of him with his stream.

Plodding out to the living room, he winced at the crashed TV set, the splintered screen.

The clock on the floor read 6:30. Work started in an hour.

Is it really time to get ready for work, or am I just dreaming it's time to get ready for work?

Standing at the foot of his bed, he looked down at the rumpled sheets.

I'm not in bed sleeping. I'm standing, looking down at the empty bed.

He reached up to his face, lightly touching his lashes.

I'm not sleepwalking.

My eyes are open.

Daryl squared the first of Nelson's rabies reports on his desk. His phone rattled.

Sheriff Cable's wife. Her voice was high. Bob was feeling worse. He was being admitted to the hospital at noon, but he wanted to see Daryl before then.

The clock over Nancy Costello's cubicle read a quarter to eleven.

"I'm leaving for lunch in fifteen minutes, Mrs. Cable." He swiveled around in his chair, checking the black leather jacket hangered

to the top of his partition. "I'm meeting someone. Once he's admitted, I can stop by his room and we can talk."

"Could you hold on? Please?"

Daryl held on, lowering the phone.

"Mr. Putnam? Bob said to tell you he's scheduled for tests. All afternoon."

Daryl punched out the number to the House of Red Roses. Sue answered.

"Just a sec." The phone banged down on the shop's counter.

"Hello?"

"Sally, listen, this is Daryl."

"Hi!"

"Hi. I'm sorry, but we're not going to be able to have lunch today like we planned. I have to see the sheriff."

"Oh. Oh! Are you in trouble?"

"No, no—I'm working with him on that woman who was strangled." He put his fingers on the front of the phone. "He just called me now."

"Okay. What about tonight?"

"It's still on. I'm really sorry. I'm looking forward to seeing you."

"I've got everything planned. You like lobster?"

"Lobster?" Daryl smiled down at the perforated mouthpiece, picturing the enthusiastic face only a few blocks away. "What can I bring?"

"Yourself!"

A bottle of wine. "Sally?"

"Yeah."

He slid the top joint of his index finger back and forth across his desk top. "Sally, did you have any dreams last night?" He nuzzled the receiver against the cartilage of his ear, hearing Sue in the background complaining the shop was full of customers.

"I dunno. I'll be right there. Yeah, I did. I dreamed of a nun. She was sayin' the rosary. I looked real close at the crucifix and it was a real cross made out of wood. It kinda smelled like wood too, I think. There was a Jesus on the cross. He had little pins in his palms. Weird, huh?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Daryl pushed the moon-colored buzzer to Cable's house, screen door resting against his back.

An interior ding.

Cable's wife appeared in the window set into the main door, hand to her throat.

Cable was laid out on the sofa, a lace bedspread pulled up to his scrawny neck. The TV was off, the drapes drawn.

He grinned up weakly at Daryl, small head propped up on pillows. "Who would have thought?"

"Your wife said you had some information for me."

"Yeah." Cable waited until his wife left. "Remember that piece of paper that powder was wrapped in? First of all, it was cocaine."

Daryl stopped pacing across the worn carpet. "How'd you know that for sure?"

"Nancy had Getsi run some tests this morning."

Daryl felt a stab of jealousy. "Nancy didn't mention that to me."

"She knew you were busy. Anyway, the paper is a page from *Fresh Flesh*. It's a photography magazine. Most of the pictures are really young girls, like eleven or twelve. Nothing hardcore, just artsy-fartsy. It's a serious magazine. They talk about f-stops. I got a copy of the latest issue from Tucker's Tobacco Shop. The girls don't have any breasts yet. Their legs are kind of attractive. The copy's under this couch if you need it for research."

"No thanks. What's all this leading up to? Does Tucker know who bought it?"

"Tucker's dead. He died during World War Two. The guy who runs Tucker's now is Goldstein. He doesn't think the magazine was bought in his shop. I showed him her driver's license."

"It could have been bought by whoever killed her."

"No, I don't think so. I called up the publisher last night—he's out in North Hollywood, California—and described the picture to him and the name they gave for the model. They're all fictitious names. He told me that was from their December issue, which would have gone off the stands in November. Tucker's didn't even start to carry *Fresh Flesh* until February, when Goldstein switched distributors. Whoever bought the magazine probably got it up in Anchorage, because Goldstein's the only one in town who handles adult stuff."

Daryl sighed. "People buy more pornography in Alaska than any other state. How're you going to track down what shop in Anchorage sold the magazine?"

"Maybe I can't. I asked the publisher, but even he doesn't know what stores get his stuff. She probably didn't buy the magazine anyway. She just bought the page the coke was wrapped in."

"So it's a dead end."

"But it tells us something."

Daryl shrugged. "I give up."

"It tells us the magazine the coke was wrapped in is six months old. These guys don't wrap it until they're ready to sell it. Meaning she's been walking around with a gram of coke in her purse for nearly half a year."

"And who carries coke around for half a year without using it?" Daryl thought it through. "This probably isn't the first time she's snorted. She must have bought the coke a half year ago to party with, but then—"

"—Something more exciting came along."

"Or someone. The body's still at the hospital. I should check her nostrils more carefully to see if there was any recent coke use. As a matter of fact, I might just as well dissect her nose to see if there's any tissue damage from prior use." Daryl bit his lower lip. "I should have checked the nostrils when I saw the packet. I got caught up in the rest of the autopsy. Sorry."

"I called the Anchorage PD. Everything's cleared for you to go up to check out her apartment. The landlady's got a key."

"Okay. I'll drive up tomorrow. That's odd she didn't have any keys on her. Has anyone reported an abandoned car?"

"No. Maybe her boyfriend drove her down."

"Have you gotten any complaints the past couple of days about anything unusual? Like strange animals or anything?"

Cable's mouth turned down. "Like I said, rabies is up. Missing people, too."

"From here?"

"Anchorage and Fairbanks, mostly. One or two from Tok. Most of 'em were hitchhikers. What d'you mean, 'strange animals'?"

"I mean where maybe someone saw something and they weren't sure what it was. Or it didn't look like anything they'd seen before." He felt a tingle between his shoulder blades.

Cable shook his head. "How's that tie in?"

"I don't know."

\* \* \* \* \*

Daryl sat by himself in the hospital coffee shop, looking around with lonely eyes at the other tables, wondering at which one Sally sat today.

His right shoulder jerked forward under the propulsion of a punch from behind.

The stranger from yesterday morning sat down opposite him at the table.

The man's bony, smooth-skinned face broke into a grin. "What's up?" A dark, expensively oiled lock flipped down over his forehead.

Up this close, Daryl realized the face looked more European than it did American.

The stranger reached for Daryl's pepper, shaking it upside-down into the bowl of tomato soup he had brought with him.

"Bet I know what you're thinking about." The stranger kept his eyes down, concentrating on the growing disk of pebbled darkness floating on his orange-red soup. "That little dolly yesterday."

"I want to eat alone."

The stranger snickered. "Fuck you. This is a public place—I can eat anywhere I want. You don't own this table. Actually, I came over to apologize for my behavior yesterday. My name's Sam Rudolph, incidentally. I was sitting in my lawn chair last night, listening to the birds, looking across my swimming pool, and I realized that little dolly probably really likes you. It was wrong of me to say the things I did. I was thinking maybe you and I could get together some night, knock a few back, maybe get to be real pals."

"I don't want to be your friend."

Sam took two pepper packets out of his shirt pocket, splitting them open over his soup. "Come on, fella. I'll even teach you how to fuck that stuck-up little bitch of yours. Between the two of us, taking turns, we'll make her grunt like a pig. Date?"

Daryl stood up, trembling.

Sam beckoned with a long finger. "I want to show you something."

"Fuck you. Don't ever talk about her like that again."

"Sit back down just for a second." Sam reached with his wing-tipped shoe to the bottom legs of Daryl's chair, pushing the chair farther out. "Just a second."

Daryl flipped the pad of his thumb back and forth over the top edge of his lunch check. "What?"

"Sit down and I'll tell you. Just take a second. And I won't say anything else bad about your girlfriend."

Daryl sat back down, eyes fixed on Sam. "What?"

Sam brought his mischievous blue eyes closer across the table. "You are not so tough, sport."

"Tougher than you." Daryl shifted in his chair, glancing at Sam's shoulder width and hand size.

"Nah." Sam looked conspiratorially around, then lifted a pair of individually wrapped toothpicks out of their ceramic holder. He started elegantly peeling the paper down their sides.

"This is a waste."

"Wait a while." Sam bared both flat-sided toothpicks, clasping the wider tip of each between a thumb and forefinger. He held both out into the charged space between them.

"So?"

Sam stared coolly back. "So this." He brought both toothpicks up in an unhurried arc curving towards his face.

The wooden points touched both eyes at about the same time, flattening the convexity of the pupils before popping through.

Sam took his fingers away, grinning blindly, the two narrow lengths of wood sticking straight out of the center of his eyes. He glanced around the room, the long toothpicks switching left and right, making his eyes look feminine. They pointed at Daryl again.

"Want to try, tough guy?" The toothpicks twitched up and down with each vibration of his voice. "Maybe not, huh?"

Sam placed his index fingers on his black eyebrows, thumbs on his prominent cheekbones, and spread his eyelids as far apart, up and down, as they would stretch. The goggling eyes bulged in the diamond-shaped frame formed between each thumb and index finger. "Watch."

His eyeballs squeezed slightly out of their sockets, toothpicks wobbling.

The left toothpick fell out first, landing on his cheek, followed by the right. The tip of each looked gluey.

The blue eyes regarded Daryl again. Daryl could clearly see the small puncture through each pupil.

"Your turn, tough guy."

Daryl shook his head. He crumbled the lunch check up into his palm, stood, and backed away.

At the kiosks he looked back over his shoulder at the table where Sam had been sitting.

He was bent over his bowl, quietly lifting a spoon of tomato soup to his lips.

The Alaskan night was bright and clear.

Daryl stood in front of the house where he said good-bye to Sally the previous night, brushing the broad shoulders of his black leather jacket, the taste of half a bottle of mouthwash on his tongue and gums.

He crunched down the long gravel driveway, walking on the hump between the two ruts, the cement wall of the cellar rising higher and higher on his left.

Fifty feet behind the house the driveway widened into a large, pebbly square, a garage with two closed doors on the right.

To the right of the garage, a series of flat slate steps curved up a hillock towards the rear of the roof.

At the base of the steps, a piece of typing paper flapped against the slender trunk of a crab apple tree covered in white and pink blossoms. He walked over to the thumb-tacked fluttering, hoping it was a clue.

His first name. An arrow pointing up the hillock.

He ascended the slate steps, slant of the garage roof slowly curving closer and lower. On the top step he looked down at his belt buckle to check how the front of his shirt bloused out above his waistband.

To his right stretched a long, narrow lawn bordered by tall hedges full of bird chatter.

To his left, the slates led around in a storybook curl to the garage apartment's small rear door.

He rapped lightly with one bent knuckle on the upper right pane, holding his breath.

Sally swung the door inwards, the action making one shoulder lower than the other, smiling like Miss America.

They went through the age-old doorstep ritual, she stepping back, but not enough, he moving forward, but only a little. She let go of the door, walking backwards into her home, friendly and nervous; he stepped over the doorstep.

They looked everywhere but directly at each other. Even so, he could see she was taller and slimmer than yesterday, black hair pulled

up into a glossy swirl on top of her head, baring her ears and lengthening her throat. She took a pinky out from between her wide lips and stepped farther back, lowering her arms, holding them out away from her hips, inviting inspection.

Thin white sweater, tight black slacks. He brought his eyes back up to hers, which were down and rolling in their own inspection. "You look great." He held out the wrapped bottle. "I brought this for you. I thought we might have it with our meal."

She took it from him, holding it in both hands like a baby, then raised her eyebrows at him. "Gee, thanks."

At the kitchen counter she had enough trouble getting the bottle to stay upright while she unwrapped it that he realized how tense she was. He started relaxing.

"This is a really nice place." The interior was one long, sunny space with waist high wainscoting and a peaked, exposed ceiling, making it look like a clean, cozy attic. The kitchen was in front; beyond that a large living room with a bed; at the rear, a doorway leading into the bathroom.

"I fixed it up myself," she said happily. She looked around at her apartment, nodding. "I got a discount, for painting it myself." She took a breath. "Wanna hear some music?"

He sat at the kitchen table as she dragged two speakers the size of shoe boxes onto the kitchen floor. The opening bars of Marvin Gaye's "What's Goin' On?" loudened with the advance of the speakers.

From her bent-over position she shot him a shy over-the-shoulder look, then straightened up, back still to him, hands on hips, swiveling her head from speaker to speaker on the floor. "Whattaya think?" She rotated her upper body back towards him, hands still on hips, breasts in profile.

Daryl grinned. "Perfect."

They sat at the kitchen table like a couple of kids trying out adult furniture, picking up their conversation from yesterday. "I really like being here," he said at one point, looking around at the long, narrow stretch of her apartment, its soft shadows. "It's cozy and private, like Bugs Bunny's rabbit hole. Oh, I saw that asshole again today at the coffee shop."

"I ate there at eleven, like always. Thinking about you."

"He came over to my table. He did something really weird."

"That guy's a jerk. He's pretty old, you'd think he'd have better manners. You're having lobster newburg tonight, and I'm having

stuffed pasta shells.” Her eyebrows furrowed. “You like lobster more than Italian, right?”

“Well yeah, sure. That sounds like you went to an awful lot of trouble, though. Can I help with anything?”

“Just stay where you are, sir.” Sally got up sideways, opened the freezer door of her refrigerator, vapor curling free, and pulled out two colorful boxes. She studied the pictures on the boxes on her way to the stove, then flipped each box over to read the heating instructions. She said nonchalantly, “You can cook these shells in a microwave, but I like to do them in the oven to get a nice crust around the top. It makes a difference.”

“You have your own microwave?” I wonder if her TV is color.

“There’s a lot about me you don’t know.” She thumbed the perforated side of the Newburg box down, pulling out the frozen orange square, flat on one side, rippled on the other. “Oh. This has a boiler bag.” She looked up, beautiful and flustered. “I guess you’re supposed to boil it.”

After dinner, while Sally washed their dishes, Daryl excused himself to use the bathroom at the rear of the open space of her apartment.

It looked like a girl’s bathroom. Aquamarine walls, spotless fixtures, neatly hung towels.

Except that the shower curtain, big gold fish in profile, was off its rings, laying across the floor and toilet. The puckered holes at the tops of the curtain were intact. Everything else in here was so squared-off and tidy: why did she have the shower curtain on the floor?

The back of the curtain was still wet. In the far corner of the tub, a rose wash cloth lay squeezed into a nubby clump. Swallowing, he reached down, touching its damp texture, like touching between her legs.

I shouldn’t do this.

He stood in front of the toilet, holding his cock while he pee’d, looking out the wide, sunny window at the rising stand of lodgepoles beyond the main house. She must have been naked in here earlier tonight, getting ready for him, body reddened from the hot water of the shower, mirror filled with her beautiful eyes and bare breasts, beads of moisture on the cheeks of her ass.

The thumb and index finger of his right hand moved farther away from each other to accommodate the growing swell he held between them.

After the last pulse of pee he flushed, hanging around to make sure the toilet stopped after refilling, then lowered the seat and lid. He picked the shower curtain up, draping it again over the floor and toilet.

Sally was next to the stove, hands behind her back, hair unpinned, loose around her face. "I thought we could take a walk outside, if you like. It's nice this time of day."

Although nightfall was still a while away, the yard already had an aspect of darkness to it, like the backyards of childhood.

As they walked across the lawn, two dragonflies curved like graceful planes away from the back hedge of the yard, heading towards Daryl, their brilliant colors glittering side by side in parallel formation, wide, gasoline-on-water wings flapping. As they neared him, Daryl could make out the smooth heads jutting forward, stiff as swimmers, the ebony features looming larger, antennae slicked back over their carapaced napes—

He ducked, hearing the buzz of their wings as they glided above his hair.

Sally giggled. "Sometimes they dive bomb my sweater, then they get in a real panic, all their little elbows jerking around in the wool. They're harmless though."

They're harmless. There's no connection.

She walked over to a stone wall on one side of the yard, hopping up backwards onto it.

Daryl hoisted himself up alongside her. "This is like a fairyland."

She sighed in profile. "Yeah it is, isn't it?" She turned to him, smiling, pupils widening when she saw how close he sat. He could see the fine texture of her skin, each hair pulled back from her temples, the lengths of her lashes. She talked more softly since he was so near. "Course, no fairies allowed!" She leaned sideways towards him, sharing the joke by touching shoulders. They rolled their eyes sideways towards each other.

Daryl looked at the hedge at the opposite side of the yard. "Was it hard staying a virgin?"

"Huh? No. I had kind of a sheltered childhood, I guess. Sue says I'm very naive." Her eyes held steady in a thought. She ducked her head. "No, I don't—I shouldn't tell you."

Daryl leaned forward, smiling, so he could see past her profile to her full face. "Tell me what?"

She gave him an embarrassed glance, tops of her cheeks reddening. "I was thinking about something. You mentioned the

virgin thing, and it reminded me. If I start telling you and you don't want to hear it, tell me, okay?"

"Sure."

She looked down at her knees, feet starting to swing. "When I was like twelve or so, the room I slept in didn't have an air conditioner. My folks didn't have enough of 'em to go around. My dad drove a bus. So I'd sleep, like, without any pajamas on." She looked up shyly at him. "I still do, in the summer. I like the way the sheets feel. It's like doing something naughty but innocent."

Daryl shifted his ass on the stone wall, trying to give his crotch more room.

"Anyway, one morning I was waking up, I flipped the sheet off me, and there's all this red down there. And I get so scared, thinking, is that blood? My blood? It was just all over me, Daryl. Between my thighs, up on my stomach, even in my hair down there. I remember putting my finger down to touch it, to see if it was real, and holding my finger up real close to look at it, it made my fingerprints red, and I just burst into tears. I got out of bed real fast and sort of hobbled across the floor because every step I took more of the blood slid down the insides of my legs, plus there was all this tissue stuff mixed up in it. I'm sorry, I'm really grossing you out, right?"

"It takes a lot to gross out a medical examiner," Daryl said, shifting his ass again on the wall.

"I mean, you've probably seen girls without their clothes on when they're on their period, right?" She nodded to him, Daryl nodding back in the middle of her nods, her face changing through the nods from hopeful to unhappy. "Yeah, I figured. So anyway." She looked off. "So you know how much blood comes out. Anyway, my mom told me, good ol' naive Sally, to just stand in the shower and rinse it off." She stared off at the hedges, raised her eyebrows, thinking, then nodded to herself and bumped against his shoulder again. "Incidentally, I think that's good that a man has some experience." She shrugged down one corner of her mouth. "I mean, one of us has to, right? Otherwise we wouldn't ever know what to do."

Daryl smiled. "True."

"So okay, my mom told me to shower, and that then she'd show me how to use a Kotex. So I showered. I had to throw the sponge out afterwards, it got so bloody. Back then we all washed with sponges, they're kind of out of fashion now. I could get the blood off my thighs pretty easily with a little soap, but it was all clumped up in my hair so I

had to keep scrubbing across them and wound up pullin' out most of 'em, but they grew back." She lowered her shoulder nearest to him, sloppy grin on her face, looking up at him, sly and shy. "Okay, Daryl Putnam, now you have to tell me a 'private moment'."

"Me?"

Her broad face swiveled towards him, creating a new, intimate world in the space between their breaths, his vision filled with the sly jerk of her eyes to the left, the bold slide of her jaw to the right.

Daryl dangled his hands between his thighs, looked down at his shoe tops hanging above the lawn. Does she mow it? In shorts?

"I had a lemonade stand. It was just a folding card table with a white poster board thumbtacked in front with the word 'Lemonade' written in yellow Magic Marker. I was seven or eight. I haven't thought about this in a long time. Some memories you don't want to go back to alone." He smiled at her. "On the table was a wooden cigar box and a big, frosty pitcher with ice cubes floating.

"This one day a big, fancy car pulls up to the curb, windows all rolled up. Air conditioning, back then. The driver's door opens and a man gets out, standing up past the shiny roof of the car. He takes his time walking around the rear of his car to my stand.

"He stands in front of me. I have a clean glass in my hand, I remember that, and he doesn't talk, he reaches for his wallet. But here's the thing: he doesn't reach into his back pants pocket for his wallet like my dad would, he reaches into the inside of his suit jacket. His wallet is tall and flat, like a slim paperback. When he opens it up, I see the tops of credit cards—no one had credit cards back then, certainly not my dad—and on the left I see the green and grey borders of money sticking out of a leather sleeve. And the webs they engrave around the corner numerals? To make it difficult for counterfeiters? There were nine-legged spiders on them. Which is an impossibility. Spiders only have eight legs. Plus of course money doesn't have engraved spiders."

Daryl looked into Sally's face, troubled. "He did something, it's too vague. It crawls just below my memory. I remember up to him standing there, the wallet falling open in his right hand, the edges of the dollars.

"My mom came running out of the house, across the lawn. Calling my name."

"Was the guy still there?"

"I think he had left by then. I think there was nothing in front of my stand then but a cloud of exhaust."

"You can't remember what he did though?" Her voice was hushed.

He shook his head lamely. "It's like trying to remember a dream hours later, at lunch. My dad called the police. He was a little drunk."

Sally's eyes grew bigger behind her knuckles. "Did he maybe molest you or something?"

"I don't—I don't know." He arched his back to pass a shudder. "I only remember not knowing."

Darkness rose from the lawn, the sky still blue enough to make the high moon seem faint.

"I only had one real boyfriend."

"Back in high school?"

"Yeah." She alliterated disdainfully: "Jeff Jones." Her eyes settled in their sockets. "He was a real know-it-all. Captain of the debating team, captain of basketball. Every time I asked if we could go somewhere his buddies didn't hang out, he'd do this thing where he'd half turn away from me, staring back at me, then he'd reach over and flick his fingernail at the tip of my nose. Used to bug the hell out of me."

"Why'd you stay with him?"

She hung her head pensively, long black hair sliding forward. "I dunno. I met him in my sophomore year. By then, I was looking for someone new in the halls, the classrooms. He was a transfer from Florida. Florida was like, wow, exotic. Palm trees, beaches on the ocean. Miami. Even the shape of the state, that was something everybody knew. Nobody knew the shape of Arizona, except that it was some kind of big square. He was kinda cocky, always smiling sideways. I guess I liked that. He seemed so sure of himself. The other boys, the ones I grew up with, were always telling him jokes. He'd walk down the halls passing a basketball back and forth between his hands. I'd carry his books for him."

She looked at the darkening hedges across the lawn. "He broke up with me the night of the senior prom. We only stayed in the gym like half an hour, then he gets this idea in his head he has to drive. As we leave his buddies are giving him these really alert stares, rotating their fists in the air. We had been a couple for almost two and a half years by then."

"We drive and drive, with him just staring through the windshield, pushing in the cigarette lighter every once in a while. Real cold. I'm sittin' next to him, wonderin' what I did wrong. 'How come you're actin' so weird?' I ask. Nothing. So finally I just stare ahead too, feelin' unhappy because this is my senior prom night, thinkin' about drapes and my mom, and we drive and drive.

"Finally we get up to the Grand Canyon and now my heart's thumping, 'cause this is where he took me to ask me to go steady with him. I'm like this dope sitting next to him real meek now, still have my white gloves on, thinkin' maybe he's gonna ask me to marry him. Even now I can see that windshield in my mind, all that dust on it.

"He just wanted to break up with me. Yeah." She wagged her head side to side. "'You're not goin' to college and I am, maybe there's someone there I could relate to better'." She raised a wistful eyebrow.

"Did you ever see him again?"

"Spring break he came waltzing into the Taco Bell where I was Assistant Manager, with this stuck-up skinny girl on his arm. She waits until she sees me behind the counter lookin' at her, then she puts her eyebrows down really low like she can't believe a place like this exists. She looks around at everything. The tables, the napkin and condiments bar, the menu signs above the counter. All the time hangin' onto his arm, whispering all these little astonished jokes to him, callin' him Jeffery. Then she looks directly at me, and it's like she's got this string of pearls around her neck, I'm wearin' a Taco Bell uniform. I was hurtin' inside, but I'm not gonna let it show, so I tell 'em they can order anything they want, it's on me. And still hangin' on him she starts this really rude laugh, she's lookin' bug-eyed at me sayin' to him in this loud whisper, 'Do you believe this?' My face got really red. I was tryin' to be nice. Then she says, to me, 'I don't think we'll be having dinner here.' Her jaw really dropped then, like she's flabbergasted that I was offerin' them a free meal." Her jaw clenched, the first show of anger he had ever seen from her.

"They sound like real jerks."

"Yeah. He's a bank manager now, in Flagstaff. Know what he did, that night up at the Grand Canyon? He asked for his friendship ring back, the one he gave me when he asked me to go steady. It had a little diamond in it. I guess you'd call it a chip. He walked over to the rim of the Grand Canyon and threw it in. See, I still didn't know what was goin' on. I was saying things like maybe I could go to night

school. I think he threw my ring into the Grand Canyon to prove that it was over." Her lips were down. "I got it back though."

"He threw your ring into the Grand Canyon and you found it?"

"Yup. Next summer, my girlfriend and me camped up there. I knew where he stood when he threw my ring over. I tied a rope around my VW bug and I lowered myself down to this little ledge with a tree growing out of it. There it was."

"What did you do with it once you found it?"

"Once I got back up and got the rope off me I thought about grinding it up, but I kept it."

"Do you still have it?"

"No." Her lower lip trembled. "I was tidying up after work tonight, gettin' ready for your visit." She humped her shoulders up to her ears, looking across at him. "And I threw it out."

"Her name was Emily Barnes. She was the music appreciation teacher at my college in Vermont. She wrote poetry. Her poems would get published in those cardboard-cover magazines they sell at book shops. She was fifty-four. I was eighteen. She kept giving me D's and F's on her exams. Everyone else in class got A's and B's. I knew my answers were as good as most of the other students, but the exams were all essay questions, so it was hard to prove.

"One day she tells me to wait after class. She tells me that unless I get straight A's for the rest of the semester, she'll have to flunk me. It's my senior year. Her course is required. I can't get a degree and go on for my medical training unless I pass this stupid course.

"I knew she was failing me deliberately. But I didn't lose my temper. I asked her very politely, what do I have to do to pass this course? She says I better get a private tutor. I ask her can she recommend anyone. She says she'll do it.

"My last class each day was at two o'clock. By three I'd be at her place. She was a real pretentious type, hair all done up in a beauty parlor style, and she'd always talk with limp wrists, like everything bored her. That first day, playing these thick records for me in her parlor and asking me questions afterwards, she decided my problem was I didn't hear the individual notes in the music. So what she'd do is she'd stand in front of me, put her lips against my ear, and hum a note. I was supposed to figure out what note she was humming.

"Each time she leaned over to put her lips against my ear, the front of her body would press right up against me. I mean—" he looked at Sally, to see if he should go on. Eyebrows together, she nodded. "—her breasts would come right up against my chest, her stomach would touch my stomach.

"I backed up the first time. You know."

"Sure."

"But she tut-tutted me, said I was too self-conscious, this was the only way I was going to learn my scales. It sounds crazy now, but back then I was naive enough—"

Sally smiled.

"—that I believed her. I mean she is fifty-four. I thought maybe it's like when you go to the dentist and they lean all over you.

"Anyway this goes on for quite a while, her stepping back each time, not really even looking at me, then leaning up into me again, humming a note into my left ear, and I have to admit—I mean she's fifty-four, she's a lot older than me, but—I have to admit, it's sort of..."

Sally stopped chewing on her lower lip. "What'd she look like?"

He shrugged. "Tall. About my height then. Thin." He looked off. "Kind of ginger hair. Like I said, she always had it done up. She was attractive."

"Did she have a good figure?"

He shrugged again, looking at Sally, looking away. "Yeah, I'd say so. I had never really looked at her, because of her age, but she had a curvy figure. You could tell she exercised. When she went to press up against me that first time, I don't know, I guess I assumed her body was going to feel hard, because of her age, but it felt really soft. That surprised me, that it felt so soft."

Sally put her hands under her knees, swinging her calves back and forth. "Did you—did she make you excited, like, physically excited?"

"I—yeah."

"Could she feel it?"

"Yeah, I'm sure she could."

"Were you embarrassed?"

"Oh, yeah."

"Was she?"

"No. The thing was, I kept coming over after school each day and each day she'd do it again, like for an hour or so each time, and after awhile, I admit...I started to look forward to it." He gave Sally a sheepish glance. "I know it sounds weird, but the more she did it, the

more I got to like it. I think she knew I was put off by her age, so I think she kept just patiently pressing against me day after day, putting thoughts in my head, getting me used to the idea.

“By then it was spring, the days were getting warmer, so she moved the lessons outdoors. Her back yard was fenced-in, with flower beds against the fences. She started wearing these really short shorts. I mean really short, even shorter than girls my own age did. I couldn’t help it, I started looking at her legs. I knew she was fifty-four, but at the same time I kept thinking what a great pair of legs she has.” He was half talking to himself by now. Sally leaned back a little, eyes blinking.

“Plus what we’d do then after each lesson is relax in chaise lounges for a while, only she’d get up out of her lounge almost as soon as I lay down and just stand to the side of my lounge really close to my head, talking to me and flexing her legs and looking off at the tree tops so I had plenty of time to look at her legs, to see how smooth the skin was, and it got to the point where I couldn’t sleep at night, I wanted her so bad by then.” He laughed, catching his breath. “This is—I’m really being rude, I shouldn’t—”

“No, no.”

“You don’t want to hear about her, not in this kind of detail.”

Sally nodded, a flush across both cheekbones, black pupils tracking slowly to his eyes. “Tell me.”

He glanced down at her opened collar, where a humid scarlet had risen up into the flesh of her throat. “You sure?”

She brought her eyelashes together, talking in a little voice. “Yeah.”

“Can we be really honest?”

She nodded, waiting.

“By then I was—I’m embarrassed to say this—but I was masturbating six times a day thinking about her.”

“Wow.”

“I went over one day and she was in this tiny cherry red string bikini. I couldn’t get over how great her body looked. It was so hourglass. The only place her age showed at all was in her navel, where she had a slight crease on either side of her belly button, but that only made her body sexier, because it made you realize she was fifty-four years old.

“She got me to take my shirt off. I lay on my back on a blanket while she leaned over me to hum in my ear. She kept lingering her

body over me, bumping her breasts over my jaw, then slipping one of her legs between mine, and next thing I knew we were kissing, then we were out of our clothes, they were scattered on the lawn all around us, and she was sitting on top of me down at my hips, making love to me with one hand behind my neck.”

Sally let out a breath, wetting her lips. “Really? And she was fifty-four? What’d it feel like?”

“It was incredible. I felt like an amateur, the way her hips moved over me.

“I had a girlfriend my own age, but it was like nothing compared to Emily. She kept making love to me over and over again, and each time I thought I couldn’t do it any more, but then she’d start in on me again, touching me and rubbing her body over me, then we’d do it again.

“I started going over there all the time. I couldn’t stop myself. It was like my feet just carried me to her as soon as I got out of bed. I’d get there at dawn and she’d already be sitting on the blanket, legs spread, long arms behind her, waiting to climb on top of me again. My mother couldn’t understand why I was losing so much weight.”

Sally held a hand up to her heart. “So what happened? How’d it end? It did end, didn’t it?” She gave him a worried look.

“My girlfriend found out. I had stopped having sex with her, to save it for Emily. She followed me one day, and spied on Emily and me behind the fence. Then she came screaming into the yard, telling me to push Emily off me. Emily turned around, looking at Donna, but she kept making love to me, but even slower.” Daryl fidgeted. “Donna started crying. Emily lowered one of her—one of her breasts, still looking at Donna, and I took it in my mouth.

“Next thing, Donna’s telling all her girlfriends, some of them are telling their parents, and one of the parents told my mother. She raised hell with me, then called Emily and told her off over the phone.”

“And that ended it?”

“I stayed away from her place. One day I was home alone and the doorbell rang. It was her. She didn’t say anything, just looked at me with this little smile on her face. I told her it was over, she had ruined my life, she was an ugly old hag. We made love right there on the hallway floor, next to the family’s galoshes. As soon as I felt the floor against my back and her weight on me I knew she had me as long as she wanted me.

"After that, she'd come over every day while my mother was at work. I gave her a key. I'd wait naked in bed. She'd be naked by the time she walked through my bedroom door. We'd never talk. She'd get on me and it would start again. My mother came home sick one day. She walked in on us and went crazy, yanking Emily off, slapping her down the stairs, pushing her out the door naked. That's when it was decided I would take my internship in Maine."

Sally shook her head, wide-eyed. She took a deep breath, breasts swelling against her sweater. "Did you ever see her again?"

"No. My mother called me at the hospital in Maine one day to tell me she was dead. Somebody choked her in her bed."

Sally shivered. "Jesus. Your girlfriend?"

"No. Donna and Emily...from what my friends still in Vermont told me, Donna apparently started hanging around Emily. She apparently got into a lesbian relationship with Emily, eventually. They never figured out who killed Emily, but my mother said they knew it wasn't Donna, because she was in the town hospital at the time."

"For what?"

"Evidently whenever they went to bed together, Emily would spend the whole time playing with Donna's head. Apparently she got Donna to the point, eventually, where she enjoyed being beaten up by Emily, physically. It probably began just with face slaps, but I guess it kept getting rougher and rougher. That must have been Emily's revenge, for Donna telling."

"Wow." Sally absorbed the images behind the conversation, pupils far off, hand combing through her long black hair. When she came back, she threw an anchoring gaze at his eyes, then lowered her own. "Still think about her?"

"No," he lied. He shook his head, looked at the opposite hedges. He drew in half a normal breath. "I do still think about her."

"When you masturbate?"

Daryl ducked his head. "I have, until just recently."

"Just recently?"

He examined the backs of his hands, the right one seeming larger. "Well, since I met you..." He raised his eyes.

"Really? You think of me?" She grabbed his knee, grinning, cozily moving her hip against his. Her eyes went down, motionless. "Wow! So like what?"

Daryl gave a tense shrug, flexing his right hand. "I don't know. Your face. Body parts, kind of."

“What parts?”

“Your legs. Calves. What I’ve seen. So far.”

Sally looked down at her black pants. “My legs?”

“Yeah.”

“Gee. Where?”

“In my bed.”

“Are you nekkid?” She giggled wickedly.

“Yeah. On my back. Naked.”

“So.” She pushed her hair away from her forehead confidently, front of her throat bobbing over a swallow, head tilting towards him. “My legs?”

He exhaled nervously.

She rested her fingers on the front of his shirt, undoing a button while he watched, chin on chest.

He lifted his left arm awkwardly, like it had more than one elbow, maneuvering it around the back of her shoulders, their thinness evoking the soft fullness of the breasts below.

She turned her face towards his, blocking out the world, shadows sliding sideways away from her broad cheekbones, the cleft below her nostrils, lips lining up with his across the thin space between their breaths. “I haven’t been kissed in a coupla years.” The words rode on the spice of tomato sauce. Her large eyes went up to his, tarty, virginal, waiting.

He brought his right hand to the side of her neck, touching her flesh for the first time, feeling skin and pulse, slowly trailing four finger pads up over the bent bone of her mandible to her humid cheek.

His head tilted down. Hers tilted up. Lips docking against lips.

Hers wriggled apart against his, wet lively length of her tongue popping between the hardness of his teeth.

His right hand slipped under the neck of her sweater, sliding down the smooth, warm cleavage, fingers curling under the weight of her left swell, her hand around his wrist, pulling his palm out, planting it back on her hip.

He squeezed the inside of her polyester-covered thigh, crunching the tiny squares of the material, getting a hoist of lovely curve.

They broke for breath.

Faces both flushed, neither speaking.

They coupled again. He rubbed his chest left, right, over hers.

His right hand went up the underside of her right thigh, Sally lifting to let his hand go higher, both moaning, as he slid his palm under the soft resiliency of her right cheek.

They broke.

She lowered her forehead against his jaw, gasping. His breath ruffled the swirled crown of her head.

Her hand reached up, tenderly touching his cheek.

He put his left arm around her shoulders again, this time with a natural movement.

She snuggled the side of her face against his shirt, sweaty bangs and swollen lips.

He inclined his head in her direction.

They sat side by side on top of the stone wall, arms around each other.

The air darkened. The sun was down, the moon up. Beyond the splay of porch light they sat within, the hum of crickets oscillated.

"Look!" Her arm pointed upwards.

In the highness of the sapphire sky, a shooting star arced whitely before narrowing to nothingness.

She leaned back, looking up. Her chin shifted to the left like a kid, big black pupils rolling towards his. "Ever try to pick out the constellations?"

He leaned back beside her, elbows straight, looking at her profile, then up. "I used to look up at the night for hours when I was a boy."

"Me too. When I was a girl. I'd go out in the desert behind my house. There was this big, flat rock I'd lay on."

"It occurred to me once the blue sky was a wall. It's only at night we see the sky for what it is. What's in it."

She rolled her head in his direction. He could see the phosphorescence of forehead, cheeks. "Do you believe in God, Daryl?"

Daryl shook his head. "I always figured if there were a God, his presence in the world would be painfully obvious, like the sun in the sky. Can I ask you a question?"

She adjusted her hands behind her on the wall top. "Please do."

"I noticed you've got your shower curtain off the rings and laid out over the toilet and floor."

"Oh, that. Yeah." She rolled her lips inwards. "When I moved up here, I got this weird feeling maybe there was a, you know, monster or something creeping up on me. At first I showered with the curtains

all the way open, I thought that'd be best, but then I figured, what the heck, and I just took them down altogether. I lay the curtain over everything so the tiles don't get wet."

Daryl stroked her hair, fingers passing through the black softness, tresses lifting in the moonlight, half her face, from this angle, forehead. "I have to go up to Anchorage tomorrow. To go through that dead woman's apartment. Want to come?"

"Could I?" Her eyebrows lifted. "We could go to McDonald's for lunch."

Daryl laughed. "My treat."

The hedge across from them crackled mightily, parting.

Two large shapes shambled out into the dimness of the yard.

Sally slapped a hand to her mouth. "Oh my God!"

The two moose trotted forward under the moonlight, raising their sloped heads, one antlered, one bare.

Sally clutched his forearm.

Daryl stared warily at the animals, intimidated by their tallness.

The two moose bobbed their massive heads sideways towards each other, lips sliding loosely around their teeth, then slowly moved off across the lawn towards the back hedge.

Sally grabbed her lower lip, delighted. "One with antlers, one without—that means a male and a female, right? Like us."

The antlered moose swung his long head around to regard Daryl and Sally for a dignified moment, then unhurriedly crashed through the back hedge, mate following with bowed head.

Sally stood up on the wall, rising on tip toe, trying to follow the progress of the humped shoulders on the hedge's other side.

Daryl, still sitting, felt his body shake from the adrenaline shot into his veins when the shapes first lumbered out of the hedge.

Harmless. No connection.

He looked up, between Sally's tight pants, at her clothed crotch.

Daryl shut the front door of his apartment, sliding the dead bolt.

He flipped on the living room lights.

The sofa and easy chairs stood where they always had.

Sally was coming with him tomorrow to Anchorage. For the first time in years, he had plans for a Saturday.

First his shirt came off. The perfume of her hair still lingered in it. He lowered his head, one lonely tear trickling.

I'd forgotten how much fun life can be.

Sitting on the edge of his bed, staring at the cracked TV set, he pulled his trousers off his feet.

When he stood again, all he had on was his white underpants, front pouch jutting out with his decision to masturbate while her feel and smell were still fresh on his body, her voice still clear in his ear.

Something living bumped into something solid in the back room.

He backed into the kitchen, face stricken. Not again.

Digging through a yanked-out drawer, he uncovered, pulled out, a carving knife.

Reached out of the kitchen area just far enough to flip up the switch for the hallway light.

The glass globe in the hallway ceiling popped on.

The white walls were empty.

But the sudden light increased the stumbling noises coming out of the back room.

He picked a pillow up on his way across the sleeping alcove, raising it in his left hand like a soft shield. His right hand held the knife tight.

Down the short hall, under the light, gaining a halo, past the light, halo sliding behind. At the doorway to the back room he stopped, listening.

Something large was bumping into the stacks of boxes stored there.

To turn on the light in the back room, he'd have to reach around the doorway into the darkness.

He quietly lay the pillow down by his bare feet. Left forearm sliding past the doorway's molding, his fingers crawled silently for the switch.

The fingerpads tapped over blank wall.

A box fell in the darkness.

He angled his arm farther around, like putting it deeper into a hole.

Where the fuck was the light switch? Up to his elbow, still no switch, another box falling, fingers groping with careful, multiple touches until one nail tapped in the darkness against the plastic plate.

All five fingers slid across the plastic, covering the square-nosed switch.

Sucking in breath, he flipped the switch up, fingers falling away.

The overhead light didn't come on.

He slapped his hand back on the plate, violently flipping the switch up and down.

No light. Nothing.

Whatever was inside the darkness of the back room, attracted by his noise, stopped.

Daryl, scared, backed away.

It padded heavily in a straight line across the carpet towards him.

He pedaled backwards, banging into the hallway's wall, bumping his shoulder blades along the wall until he fell backwards on the bed.

Gasping for breath on the mattress, he faced the empty cubical stage of the hallway, walls and ceiling dramatically lit, blue pillow laying just outside the back room's doorway.

The thumping across the back room carpet grew louder, drawing nearer. One high heeled foot squashed a puffed corner of the pillow, a pair of women's legs, nothing above them, stumbling out sideways into plain view, throwing onto the white wall of the hallway an enlarged, shapely shadow.

I am a doctor.

The legs were naked, bush between them.

They poised, fronts pointed towards him, a pair of red spiked heels on their feet. The general muscle tone, the way the skin passed tautly over the small kneecaps, suggested a woman in her teens. The bush was untrimmed.

Daryl stayed tense, but not as much as if they had been male legs, or insect legs.

Knock them over, get a hold of those high heels. Both as a reality check and clues that can be used to trace the legs' identity.

Above the hips the skin swelled up into two large breasts, wide nipples pointing straight up, softening the surreal effect of half a body.

Daryl talked out loud, as though he were in a morgue with the tape reels turning, to impose a professional distance on the proceedings. "Question: without a brain, how are the legs able to ambulate? Also, without a stomach or lungs, how are the legs able to stay alive?"

Hearing his voice, the legs blindly staggered forward, rolling their hips side to side with obvious purpose.

An idea came to him. He put his arms around the useless TV set, lifting it off its table, carrying it to the hallway. Bending his knees, he placed the set right in front of the legs' path.

He stood back by his bed, tense in the chest. "What a pretty pair of legs. Look at that muscle tone. Those sure are great legs."

The legs sashayed down the hallway towards his voice, red high heels feeling along the floor, hips teasing with lithe little swings.

“Beautiful legs. Thighs so full, calves nice and curvy. I’d sure love to have those soft legs wrapped around my face.”

The left high heel went down on the carpet on the side of the TV, following his voice, the right high heel rising up, stepping forward, pointed front of the shoe rising higher to get over the boxy obstruction, the spike snagging in the antenna. Both legs struggled for a moment to regain balance, elegantly flexing long muscles, then pitched forward over the TV.

The legs lay sprawled across the top of the TV, knees trying to get some jointy purchase against the cracked grey-green screen, breasts atop the hips nosing into the carpet.

Daryl looked down at the backs of the bare legs as they struggled. Two terrible words rose up in his mind.

Nice ass.

No.

He went warily around the rear of the TV where the feet swung back and forth. Holding his breath, closing his eyes, he pulled the warm shoes off.

Got them.

Not wanting to hold the shoes any longer than he had to, he hurried with them to the bathroom, holding them away from his chest, throwing them on the tiles.

He shut the bathroom door with a decisive click.

Evidence.

Back by the TV set, the legs had managed to flip over onto their backs. At the vibration of his approach the limbs swiveled in his direction.

The pretty bare feet felt forward across the carpet for him, then, realizing he was out of reach, drew back.

Raising its two perfect knees, toes leaving the carpet, the legs lifted straight up in the air. Feet pointing to the ceiling like a ballerina, the bare limbs spread slowly apart in the air.

The hips, slim as a teenager’s, angled back, showing the small asshole, the pink, thin line of moisture waiting between the soft thighs.

Daryl stood in his underpants above the leg spread, looking down at the invitation.

He still had the knife in his hand. He walked sideways to the half wall between kitchen and sleeping alcove, put the knife down on the counter.

He had an erection.

I am a doctor. I am awake. Get to the bottom of this.

He went down on his haunches by the ankles, leaning forward to study the legs up close. Although the pubis had a modest bush of black pubic hair, the legs themselves were hairless, no black dots along the shin or underside of the calf to suggest shaving. They must be young legs. Judging by their length and muscle tone they were probably early teenage, although the nethersides of the thighs were more fully developed than he would have expected in a fifteen or sixteen year old.

Where the abdomen should start above the hips, the flesh instead tapered up into two wide breasts, one above the top of each thigh. Whoever or whatever had created this thing had taken a woman, discarded the face, and then compressed all the primary and secondary sexual features. It had a cunt and an asshole, legs, breasts and nipples, and absolutely nothing else.

He put his hand on the side of one of the breasts, surprised at its human warmth, pushing its circular sway sideways to examine the skin where the breasts joined the top of the hip. "No surgical scars in evidence. The meeting of the breast to the leg appears seamless." He brought his eyes as close to the skin as he could and still retain focus, switching his look from the breasts to the hips to the breasts. "Pore characteristics show a consistent difference in flesh between the fields of the hips/legs and the breasts. The legs and hips appear to be from a woman in her early teenage years; the pore characteristics of the breasts suggest a woman in her early twenties, confirmed by the breasts' very slight loss of resiliency."

He moved his face over the tops of the breasts. "Areolae are half-dollar sized, deep maroon, color contrasting markedly in classification with the pinker vagina, again suggesting body parts from two different females somehow joined together. Nipples are unaroused."

He reached his index finger down, upper pad touching the right nipple, feeling, at his touch, the hardening under his fingerprint.

"Nipple responds to manual stimulation."

The bare legs lowered to the carpet, spreading apart in a comfortable position. He took a breath, pinched the nipple, feeling it grow tall and fat between his fingers. The beautiful young legs shifted sideways with pleasure, long muscles in the thighs flexing.

“Even though at least two women’s body parts are in evidence, stimulus to one body part apparently also arouses the second woman’s parts. This could be verified by manually monitoring vaginal lubrications while the nipples are increasingly stimulated, but I will not conduct that experiment.” He swallowed.

On a sudden hunch, he examined the entire length of each leg: foot, ankle, calf, knee, thigh, cunt, hips, ass.

When he finished, he sat back on his haunches, rubbing his palm over the front of his nose. “The parts—it appears upon closer examination that the legs are not from one woman. It appears as though the legs have been constructed from various women, each contribution made bilaterally—i.e. the two feet are from one woman, the two ankles from another, the calves from another, etc. The parts have apparently been chosen for their comeliness. A number of women appear to be in this assembly, the woman with the sexiest calves having had that part utilized and the rest of her discarded, etc., to create the perfect woman out of parts.”

He sat down by the legs’ feet, leaning forward over the bare limbs to pull on the nipple again, like masturbating a dog, watching each component in the legs writhe in perfect harmony.

“What I’m seeing is very amazing.”

Something brushed against the inside of his knee. Looking down past the muscular length of his stomach, he watched as one of the naked feet moved up the inside of his bare thigh, massaging its insole against his low-slung crotch.

He let go of the nipple. The small foot kept rubbing determinedly away, the plump toes poking under his waistband, pushing his underpants down, reaching under his bare balls, twisting upside down to stroke up knowingly with their rounded undersides along his scrotum.

He grabbed the underside of the calf, feeling in its fullness how perfect it was, feeling the muscles moving, and yanked his balls away from the toes’ caresses.

He staggered back on his knees, lifted to his feet, cock rock-hard. The daintily raised foot twirled blindly in the air.

With a renewed sense of confidence, the legs drew their knees back, breast-topped hips jerking forward, flipping the legs back up to a standing position.

Daryl stepped backwards into the living room, trying to ignore how good the fat toes felt under his balls.

The gorgeous legs stalked, slow and sure now.

His shoulder blades backed into the living room wall, to the right of his draped picture window.

He tried going sideways away from the window, but the legs anticipated, thumping agilely across the floor the same way, blocking with a shapely stance.

He stood against the wall, wishing his cock would go down.

It didn't.

The legs advanced cozily, hips rolling, feet spread to prevent an escape.

He went to move away from the wall. The hips butted him back to the flatness with an exciting strength.

The left foot rose athletically up, snagging its big toe in the waistband of his underpants, yanking them down with such abrupt force the back of his cock slapped loudly against his lower stomach.

Between the legs, behind the cunt, a woman's tongue slowly unfurled, long and pink, flicking up to lick the backs of his balls, distracting him while the hips bumped up his stomach high enough to hook the cunt over the top of his cock.

The cunt slid down snugly over his cock.

Only it wasn't a woman's cunt. Inside was black bristle.

The first time, the creature had been woman from the waist up, thing below. He had rejected it. This time it was all woman on the outside, all thing inside. He had been tricked.

The hips bumped against his hips, coarse bristles inside sliding up and down around his cock.

He felt repelled. Even as the thousand fibers teasing his cock with an insect's coarseness made him harder.

He stood naked with his back against the wall, mouth open, eyes squeezing, big hands twitching in the air above the hips, fighting the urge to reach out and grab onto that soft muscularity.

He looked down, watching the backs of the full calves flex rhythmically as the legs fucked him with the best parts from nine different females.

His hands went down to the tops of the straight-up breasts, sliding down their backs, feeling the unique new outward curve of woman between the bottoms of the breasts and the swells of the ass.

The bristly cunt squeezed tighter, jerking up and down his cock. Daryl's breaths turned to groans.

The early thirties calves climbed up the backs of his calves, hoisting up the teenage thighs so they could open wider, the mid-twenties ass bobbing as it pumped cunt up and down over Daryl's swelling cock.

He put his hands on the backs of the thighs, helping to hold them up, his own knees bending.

His mouth shook open. He shut his eyes. The skin on the backs of the long thighs was as poreless as a baby's.

As he ran his hands up and down the beautiful thighs, it changed from the legs fucking him to he and the legs fucking each other. The legs climbed higher, finally getting the response they wanted, prepubescent knees knocking against his jaw, backs of the smooth thighs wonderfully weighty on his chest, knees pulling away, feet swinging forward, both big toes poking into the sides of his mouth.

He sucked on the toes, licking their wide undersides.

He came.

Within the sweet, knee-bending ache of his orgasm, he felt the bristles inside clump with his sperm.

He hung his head, chest wet, trying to get his breath.

The big toes pulled slowly out of his mouth, rubbing over his lips. The legs dropped to the carpet, unhooking themselves from his cock, stepping away.

I shouldn't have.

He held his lowering cock in his hand, stretching its skin with thumb and forefinger. The bristles hadn't scratched it.

I feel dirty.

The legs stood still, feet spread on the carpet. A glob of his sperm slowly trickled down the inner curve of a perfect teenage thigh.

In the morning, the legs were gone.

Like in a fairy tale, the red high heels were still on the bathroom floor where he had thrown them.

He put them in a kitchen cabinet on top of his coffee cups.

By one o'clock that afternoon he and Sally were in her station wagon, bouncing over the rutted surface of the one dirt road leading out of town, to Seward Highway.

Daryl drove. Sally sat low in her seat, laughing, sneakers propped against the dash to control the jiggling as the wagon rode the ruts.

It was a warm enough day to have all the windows down. The wagon traveled ahead of the twin brown plumes of dust it raised.

"This is my first trip out of town since I arrived." He talked a little loud to be heard over the tires.

"Mine too," she called. "An adventure!"

As the town disappeared behind a bend, they passed a tree-draped pond where a doe had its narrow head dipped down, modest rings expanding away from its lapping tongue. Head jerking up, it curved around and trotted slowly off, vertical backside hopping.

Daryl and Sally looked at each other, grinning. Sally raised her eyebrows. "Nature!"

An hour later, as Lodgepole Road neared the highway, they began spotting the occasional driveway hacked into the pines. Each yard was a mess, truck frames rusting, each small house's porch pillars and window frames covered with bald dolls nailed upside down. Daryl lowered his voice, even though they hadn't seen any people down the driveways. "Welcome to Alaska."

Sally grimaced. "Yeah."

Ten minutes later they emerged from the pine forest onto the intersection with Seward Highway, dragging clouds of tan dust around their wagon. Drivers passing on the highway seemed surprised to see a car emerge from the unmarked hole in the woods.

Daryl waited with the left directional signal on for a break in the sparse traffic, then gunned the wagon up onto the pavement with a screech and a scattering of pebbles.

As the wagon chugged up to fifty-five Sally took her sneakers off the dash, putting her hands under her blue-jeaned legs. "I can taste that Big Mac already."

Daryl grinned, both hands on the wheel, staring ahead at the black-topped road, at the red leather interiors with the tall pearl-grey letters bent into the instep's curve: Alfonso's. And the slightly off-center pearl-grey number 6.

As they drove north the land to the right rose in increasingly steep slopes, treetops sticking like bushes out of the smooth sheen of snow.

Around a curve a massive hill of snow lay heavily across the highway, high white corridors cut cleanly through it, following the turns of the blacktop.

Daryl looked up at the flat tops of the snow corridors as he steered through them. "They get a lot of avalanches up here," he said quietly.

They stopped to stretch their legs at Turnagain Arm, a wide, glittering stretch of calm water following to the left of the highway, black, snow-collared glaciers on its far shore, one or two of the flatter-topped glaciers crowned with a pure, icy blue.

A crowd had gathered along the cement wall on the Arm side of the highway.

Daryl and Sally glanced at each other. He shrugged. "Want to check it out?"

Traffic was light enough to let them walk across the highway to the Arm side.

Out in the Arm three large, tapering shapes were swimming darkly side by side just below the surface, taking turns raising their black and white fronts up out of the gentle waves long enough to spit their spouts straight up. The noise the spouts made sounded loud all the way over to the cement wall.

Cameras were clicking; a few men stood on the dusty hoods of their cars, panning their camcorders left to right, steadying the long lenses with a curled left hand as they zoomed in.

I wonder where they're headed, Daryl thought, picturing the frontispieces of his grammar school geography books.

One of the whales bobbed up again, shaking its rounded head back and forth vigorously, its long underside landing with a flat smack that splashed rainbows around. The twin triangles of its tail lifted with a spill of water before it slid gracefully under.

Daryl and Sally stood with their shoulders touching. As the third and smallest tail curled up before sinking Sally waved back, Daryl too.

He touched her chin. "Nature."

People stepped down off the cement wall, looking around, smiling shyly at each other. Logo'd caps went back on lenses; children were lowered to the pavement. Someone down the line moving away from the wall made a joke, not a very funny one, but most of the crowd chuckled, pausing for a moment, heads down, looking back at the wall, then continuing to their cars, faces changing.

As they neared Anchorage Sally followed her index finger over the map spread across her knees, her unpainted nail their station wagon. Past her opened window, thin waterfalls of melted snow splashed down the rock slopes.

In Anchorage, Daryl had trouble getting used to so much traffic on the road with him. A tall truck passed on the driver's side, loose chain hanging from its top banging noisily over its side panel.

Sally poked his arm. "We need to find East 5th Avenue. Wait a second." She peered out her side window, then pointed triumphantly at a yellow double-humped letter on top of a pole in the middle distance. "Over there, Daryl. Get in this lane next to us, then make a right!"

Daryl nodded, head swinging around as cars whizzed past.

They brought their McDonald's bags outside, choosing to eat at one of the isolated benches.

Sally gulped greedily into her Big Mac, both elbows on the table, deftly rotating the circular sandwich for another full-sized chomp.

Daryl took a polite bite out of his fish fillet, tasting for the first time in two years the tartness of the sauce, the crispness of the batter. He stared off while he ate at the black and white, tiger-striped slopes of the Chugach mountain range forming the rear horizon of Anchorage.

"Do you have to see the police here before we go to that strangled woman's apartment?"

"I hope not. Supposedly, all I have to do is get the keys from the landlady. Sheriff Cable said he'd arrange everything."

"Are you nervous?"

He swallowed down the last of his sandwich. "Not with you here." While they had waited in line, he noticed a lot of the men looking over at her, trying to catch her eye, ignoring the fact she was obviously with him. He didn't think she had even been aware of it at first, and when he saw out of the corner of his eye that she did notice, she stood closer to him, ignoring the others.

They got on East Fifth Avenue, driving south past the one- and two-storied blocks into the city, Daryl keeping his speed at an obedient 40 miles per hour, staying in the right lane.

Both gawked at the stores they passed.

Up ahead on the left, held up on poles, white letters on a black background spelled out HOTEL. By now it was around five in the evening. They hadn't discussed staying over.

Sally pointed a lit cigarette out her window. "Look, they even have topless joints here. Guess this is the big city." She laughed nervously, upper front teeth coming to a rest on her lower lip. "Hey! We can listen to the radio up here!" She studied the knobs, trying to remember which was which. "That's somethin' I missed, living in Lodgepole, being able to hear music while I drove." After a twirl of the knob an oldies station came on. "Hmm!" She twirled some more, getting songs from thirty years ago on each station. She settled on one playing 'Build Me Up, Buttercup'. "Pretty neat, huh?"

Up ahead, near the center of the city, a glass-encased walkway across the now one-way avenue joined the second stories of two stores. Some of the buildings in this section were ten stories or so, but most were still just one or two floors high. For a city which held more than half the state's population, Anchorage wasn't very big.

As they came out of the south side of the business district the road narrowed and sloped down, turning two-way again. At the bottom of the hill, beyond a trail of railroad tracks, they could see the flat, drab waters of Knik Arm.

Sally shook her head. "When I first came up here, I thought it would look a lot prettier. I took this same road through town down to where we are now. I couldn't believe how Anchorage just dribbled down to nothing. I was expecting this really exciting, brand new city built over an icy bay with glaciers and eagles everywhere."

Daryl turned the car around a curve, parking by the curb about halfway down the block.

He shut off the engine and handed Sally her keys back. "This is where she lived."

They crossed the narrow street to the two story building halfway up the slope on the other side. Daryl put his sports jacket on.

Somewhere beyond the neighborhood a chain saw started up, biting into a tree. Dogs began barking in backyards.

A wide, rickety porch stretched across the front of the building. At its nearest corner an enclosed wooden staircase led upstairs.

At the bottom of the stairway was apartment 1.

Daryl squared his shoulders, then knocked gingerly on the frosted glass pane set in the door.

A light came on from behind, throwing the border tulip etchings into relief.

The woman answering the door went, "Oh!", disappointed at who it wasn't.

She stood as tall as Daryl, with dark pigtails, horn-rimmed glasses, and a man's lumberjack shirt over a pair of walking shorts.

She kept one hand on the doorjamb, one on the door, blocking entry.

"Mrs. Kesedan?"

She blinked behind her glasses.

"My name is Daryl Putnam, this is Sally Dolumbo, I believe you've received a call from the Anchorage Police Department authorizing us to search Sylvia Gold's apartment."

“You the police?”

“I’m the coroner for the town of Lodgepole. Sheriff Robert Cable has deputized me to conduct this investigation.”

She looked over her plaid shoulder into the interior of the apartment. In a hallway at the rear of the apartment a short, dark barrel of a man, completely naked, stood under a light, clenching his fists, messy hair crimped with dozens of different colored ribbons. “Don’t want none!” he shouted angrily.

“It’s about the woman upstairs,” she called back. “The one the cops called us about.”

“Don’t want none!”

Mrs. Kesedan reached into the front pocket of her shorts, pulling out a single brass key. “This is a bad time. Leave the key in my mailbox. When you’re through.”

Sylvia Gold’s apartment was at the end of the hall. All the doors they passed had lines of light underneath, TV’s going.

As he fit the key into the lock, Daryl could no longer suppress the surge of excitement he felt. He and Sally were going to be able to legally snoop into someone else’s life, going over her belongings like he had gone over her corpse.

The air inside smelled of cigarettes, the nicotine as sharp and identifiable as lemon.

All the lights were off.

Sally found the switch behind the drapes. Two matching table lamps went on, on either side of the sofa. “Or should I not touch anything?”

“No, it’s fine.” He went through the apartment turning on lights, getting the layout.

The front door opened right into the living room. Behind it was the kitchen. A wide archway with a sliding room divider on the left of the living room opened into the bedroom. Down its short hallway, lined with sliding closets on either side, was the bathroom.

There were only two windows in the apartment, both sliding, both on the side of the apartment they had entered through: a large one in the living room, and a smaller, shoulder high one in the bedroom set over the headboard. Evidently the back of the apartment abutted the back of another apartment on the other side.

All the rooms were small, with cheap pine paneling sheets over the walls, giving the place a dark, depressing look. None of the walls held pictures, decorations or knick-knacks.

The long coffee table meant for the sofa had been moved under the living room picture window, a large TV on it.

The furniture looked like it came with the apartment.

Daryl turned the TV on. It was color. There was a box on top of the set with cables running out of it. He slid the selector handle left and right across the numbers, amazed at the number of channels clicking on the tube.

He smirked at Sally. "Want to leave it on?"

She rolled her eyes, delighted as he was. "I'll try to get MTV. They'd probably have that, right?"

He snorted. "Looks like they have everything." Towering piles of magazines and newspapers rose on either side of the TV, some of the inner stacks spilled against the sides of the set. "When you get a chance, could you go through these, please? Just give me some idea of what's there."

He lifted the cushions off the sofa. A few pennies and a long white scroll. He turned the scroll over: a cashier receipt from Safeway dated two weeks ago.

The kitchen had all the appliances against the right wall, with a table and four chairs crowded into the center of the floor.

A wicker basket sat on top of the refrigerator. He brought it down, setting it on the table.

Laying within were about 40 heads of garlic, a dozen small, cellophane boxes of shallots and a couple of pounds of stoutly-limbed ginger root.

He opened the freezer door at the top of the refrigerator. The cubical interior was crammed with smoking bags of ice. He took them all out, two at a time, filling the aluminum sink.

Behind the ice were three sandwich bags, each stuffed to the point of roundness with a green-brown filling. He undid the twist tie at the top of one, carefully pulling the plastic away from the frozen bulk inside. Buds, stems and seeds.

He opened the refrigerator door.

The top shelf was packed with beer. None of it American. The shelf underneath, and the side door, held a hundred or so jars of spices, herbs and sauces, many of the labels in a foreign language.

The bottom shelf was stuffed wall to wall with one-pound boxes of butter.

He had to yank on the vegetable bin to get it open. Inside were rubber-banded, white tipped bunches of scallions. He took them out, counting 63 sheaves.

The cabinet over the refrigerator was empty.

The cabinet over the sink was packed with booze, mostly bourbon and scotch, probably fifty bottles altogether, some of them crammed in sideways. Up front stood a cluster of absinthe, illegal in the United States because of the brain damage it can cause, but legal in Canada.

The cabinets over the stove held stacks of chocolate bars piled right up to the top. All the American brands, plus a wide variety of foreign ones. He pressed his thumb and forefinger into the tight stack, working a package of chocolate free.

The box was about the size of a hardcover book, but not as thick. Two kittens were painted on the cover, the word *Katzenzungen* above their pointed ears. He opened the lid, looking at the thin bars laid neatly inside, each one shaped like a rounded, slim-sided bow tie.

He picked one out, broke it in half and smelled it, then took a bite. It was chocolate.

Under the sink were institutional size jars and cans of jumbo green olives, Greek olives, jalapeno peppers, garlic pickles, cornichions, gherkins, cucumber pickles, mayonnaise, ketchup and ballpark and dijon mustard. The spaces between the large jars' necks were filled in with bottles of Tabasco and Lea & Perrins Worcestershire sauce.

Against the back wall of the kitchen was a floor model freezer with four boxes stacked on its lid. All four contained mushrooms, two of them the common supermarket mushroom, the other two a variety of fresh and dried mushrooms: shittaki, oyster, enoki, straw, tree ear and a large group that looked like it had been picked in the wild.

The freezer's setting was on high, about refrigerator coolness. Inside it was packed, left to right, with bell peppers, celery, onion, parsley, cilantro, heavy cream in milk-size cartons, and several dozen different types of chilies.

On top of the stove was one dutch oven and one skillet, both cast iron, both clean.

No other pots and pans, no utensils, no towels or wash cloths, no dish soap, no trash can, no meat.

He went back out into the living room.

Sally was sitting cross-legged on the sofa, magazine stacks of different heights around her. She looked up from what she was reading. "This is really strange."

"What do you mean?"

She looked uncomfortable. "Well, to start with, these are in all different languages. Like maybe twenty different languages. Some of 'em are just daily newspapers from all around the world, but mixed in with 'em are a whole bunch of different types of magazines. I separated 'em into different piles for you." She leaned forward, long black hair sliding around her face. "There's cooking, movies, books, muscle building, records and tapes, politics and current events, and what I guess you'd call pornography." She indicated with a disdainful point of her sneaker the largest pile.

Daryl went down on his haunches, picking up one magazine after the other from that pile, glancing at their covers.

"I made a list while I was waiting for you."

He stole a look into her lap to see what she was reading. Bon Appetit.

"There's 72 bondage magazines, 36 girly magazines, but the girls look really young, 54 orgy magazines, 63 cruel-type magazines, nine pregnant lady magazines, and 297 homosexual magazines."

Daryl looked up from his cover-flipping, embarrassed.

"All of them are really hard-core, Daryl. Really gross. Whoever this woman was, she musta been really sick."

"Or else whoever was with her was really sick." He came across some issues of *Fresh Flesh*, but didn't bother opening them. He looked through something called *Inside World* instead. In the center was a pinup of two teenage boys, both naked, one sitting on the edge of a bed, the other boy sitting in the first boy's lap, facing him, legs wrapped around his ribs. Their lips were open against each other in a passionate tongue kiss, the upper boy's arms around the other's broad shoulders, the boy underneath pressing his left hand against the small of the other's back, drawing him even closer, his right hand pulling lightly on the other's cock. His own cock was buried up the other boy's asshole.

Daryl stared at the picture a moment longer, first out of shock, then out of curiosity to see what it looked like when two males made love: the one set of muscular legs atop the other, the bare arms around each other, the taste of the closed-eyed kiss.

Even with the lights on the bedroom was dismal and shadowy.

A small metal trash can stood by the side of the bed. He pulled out wads of crumpled facial tissue. An empty jar of Tabasco rolled around the bottom.

The bed was made.

He and Sally pulled the cover down, then the top sheet, like the Bobbsey Twins getting ready for bed. The bottom sheet was thickly crusted with semen. When he tried lifting the sheet off the mattress, a long lightening bolt broke across the glazed surface with an audible pop.

Sally's cheeks turned red. "Guess she never did any laundry."

He moved to the short hallway leading to the bathroom, sliding the closet doors on the left open.

Inside were the first items he had found in the apartment, aside from the copies of *Fresh Flesh*, which he associated with Sylvia Gold: a crammed array of mini-skirts, shorts, tube tops, leg warmers, tee shirts, nightgowns and, on the top shelf, a silky, colorful pile of bikini underwear, all of them crotchless. Next to them, looped around nails in the wall, were several dozen thin-skinned bras, all with quarter-sized holes where the nipples would fit.

Sally sniffed. "How old did you say this woman was?"

"Fifty-four." On the closet floor, ninety or so high heeled shoes faced him.

On a hunch he picked one up, then several others. The ninth one he examined, made entirely out of a mirrored material, came from Alfonso's. Size 6. He felt a chill, remembering last night, the way his lips had held the two big toes, tongue switching from one lively underside to the other, feeling the toes bend back with pleasure.

Of course, that may be a popular brand. He looked up at Sally. "Have you ever heard of Alfonso's?"

"What is it?"

"A shoe manufacturer." He held up one of the mirrored shoes.

"No." She turned her wide face back towards the bedroom, the unmade bed. "I don't think it's my style, Daryl."

The other sliding wall closet had a bureau on one side, filled with more nighties and underwear, and a rod across the other loaded with furs. On the floor under the furs were two sets of dumbbells, each with 6 pound weights, and one barbell with 30 pounds of weight.

Sally followed Daryl into the bathroom.

The mirrored cabinet held diuretics and purges, and three boxed enemas. Daryl turned to Sally. "I'm looking forward to when this part

of our trip is through, and we can just have fun. Like we did seeing the whales.”

“And the doe.” Her face got less tight. She looked around the claustrophobic bathroom walls. “I want just a normal relationship. I mean I like the idea of wearing sexy clothes, I’d really like to do that, you know, show off for, you know, in the bedroom and everything, but none of these magazines or chemicals or stuff. That’s not love.”

Daryl lowered his head. “I know.” He felt a sickening surge of guilt about last night, made worse because it still excited him. “There’s so many weird things people do. Because they’re unhappy. Or lonely. Or think they deserve to be treated that way. Things people let other people do to them because they hope after it’s over they’ll get love. Or at least someone who’ll stay. There’s a lot of stupid, embarrassing things men do because of sex.”

Sally looked up at him. “You look like there’s something else you want to say.”

He shook his head. “I’ve just—I’ve been really lonely, you know? Like for years. It felt like my life was over. Like I’d never meet my person. My partner. And you get really interior after awhile. I don’t know. I’ve felt for a long time that something’s prevented me from living up to my potential. Drained my ambition every time I tried, like lips fastened on my life. Like working as a lab technician instead of as a doctor.” He looked uneasy at talking about himself without being asked to. “This is my first date in years. Or I could be wrong. Is this—maybe I’m presuming, I don’t mean like we’re boyfriend and girlfriend, you might see us as just—”

Sally smiled warmly, touching his cheek. “It’s a date. Far as I’m concerned.” She looked down, shrugging her shoulders nervously. “Far as boyfriend and girlfriend, far as I’m concerned—” she shrugged again. “If you wanted me, I’d be real proud to be your girlfriend.” She looked up at him, smiling shyly. “Yeah. You’re kind, and gentle, and very good-looking. And smart. And you make me laugh.” She shrugged again, looking vulnerable.

Daryl touched her shoulder. “That’s what I’d like. Boyfriend and girlfriend. I was scared to say it. To ask it. I don’t just want you as a friend.”

“Me neither.” She nodded to herself.

Daryl looked at the cabinet doors under the vanity. “Let’s get this over with.”

Behind the cabinet doors was a rattan basket filled with cotton strips, each about three inches wide and two feet long. Behind the basket, coiled like a nest of snakes, was an interlaced pile of men's belts. Daryl pulled several out, measuring them against each other on the bathroom floor. They were all the same length, meaning they could all have conceivably belonged to the same man.

Daryl drew the shower curtain and staggered back, stepping on Sally's foot.

She hopped over to the wall, wincing with pain. "What?"

A small dog lay on its side in the bathtub, head near the drain hole.

From behind, Sally tensed her hand on Daryl's shoulder. "It doesn't look right."

He nodded his head, looking down into the bathtub at the small corpse, trying to figure out what was wrong about it.

Sally stood closer behind him, fronts of her thighs against the backs of his. "It's too flat. Look at the head, Daryl. The head's normal, but the body's all flattened out."

He put the tip of a pencil under it all the way up to the eraser, flipping it over.

It went over too easily, like a hand puppet.

He put one foot up on the side of the tub, leaning over for a closer look.

"Careful."

He was convinced it had been a real dog. He reached down, gathering its middle up between his fingers, lifting it up off the porcelain, away from the grey jerky line of pencil leading up to it.

The head flopped straight down, hanging off the side of his palm while the long, plumed tail hung off the other side.

It didn't feel like a normal puppy. Too light, too dry, too flat.

He brought it over to the vanity, its weight only a little more than a glove.

The dog's pink lips were frozen so far back from its fangs the opened mouth took up three-quarters of its triangular face, eyes squeezed into tight, furred slits from the gargantuan effort of its last scream.

Sally, rummaging on her knees under the claw-footed bottom of the bathtub, said, "Oh my God."

Daryl rubbed the two soft-furred sides of the dog's abdomen between his fingers, feeling through the fur a crinkly interior. It felt like a glove with aluminum foil inside.

Sally handed him what she had found under the bathtub. A funnel.

He held it in his hand like a robot's breast, looking at her quizzically.

"Smell it."

The sloped inside walls still held the sharp scent of gasoline.

He angled the dead dog's head until the light from the ceiling shone into its mouth.

The fangs were blackened. Not in front. Their incurved backs.

Looking past the fangs, he saw at the end of the charred cavern of its mouth the burnt stump of tongue.

Sally bit her knuckles, looking from the blackened mouth to the funnel. "Did someone force gasoline down his throat?"

Daryl was studying the burn patterns inside the mouth. "The tissue is burnt in the wrong direction for that. The flames didn't go into the throat." He looked at her. "They came out of the throat."

"What?"

He turned the dog around, feeling the ashes shift inside it, and lifted the furry tail.

The anus was dilated, heat-discolored. He held the bottom of the funnel's hard metal tube against the anus' dilation.

Perfect fit.

Daryl and Sally sat in her parked station wagon by the curb, him behind the wheel, looking at the house halfway up the slope.

It was seven.

The key was in the ignition but not yet turned.

Daryl broke the silence. "Well...."

Sally stubbed out her cigarette in the wagon's ashtray, then put her hands in her lap and addressed the windshield in front of her. "I've got sixty-three dollars with me." She looked across at Daryl.

Daryl felt the triple thump of crotch, heart and mind. Talking about money late in the day in a distant town meant one thing. He casually touched the side of his jacket. "I have ninety bucks." Sally didn't say anything. He cleared his throat. "It is kind of late."

"Long drive."

“Long drive like we should get started?”

“I meant long drive like it’d be a lot to do tonight.”

“Get a fresh start in the morning?”

“And stay up here?”

“We could go to a phone booth and check the yellow pages for a nice motel. Rent two rooms.”

“We could rent just one. We could sleep in the same bed.” The corner of her mouth shrugged down. “Just, you know, I don’t want to go all the way. Tonight.”

“If we rented only one room, we could go out somewhere nice for dinner.”

“Or go to Kentucky Fried Chicken and get in bed and watch TV. We don’t get to see real TV in Lodgepole. Plus chicken’d be cheaper.”

“Do you drink?”

“I have. Yeah.”

The corridor inside the Super-8 motel was empty, carpeted and long.

They made hushed small talk as they traveled deeper into the corridor, counting down the numbers on the doors, clasping their supplies to their chests.

At the correct door Daryl handed Sally the key.

Their key.

Flat, brass, shiny, little sharp-edged ripples on one side like a mountain range, coastal inlets, stalagmites in a quiet cavern.

She put the red and white striped chicken boxes down. Standing arm’s length from the lock, bending her blue-jeaned knees, she fit the key in. She swung her long black hair away from her face, raising her eyebrows to him. “Ready?”

Daryl grinned, holding the bag of vodka and orange juice. “Yeah.”

She pushed the door inwards with Daryl’s over-her-head help—it was one of those self-closing doors—and their room for the night widened into view between door and jamb, its air conditioned privacy drifting out, offering the same cool retreat as a grotto swum up into.

Sally stepped over the transom, back of her head looking left and right.

The bathroom was in front, on the left; past it a large space with two queen-sized beds.

She twirled around happily from the far drapes. “TV works. Did you look at the bathroom?”

He put the bags on the bed farther from the TV. "Not yet."

She whistled past him, fingers snapping at her hips.

She popped back out in a flash. "It's really clean. I figured out how the shower works. They gave us three bars of soap. Mini-bars."

Daryl walked over to the bright doorway feeling big and slow, poking his head in long enough to admire the porcelain, pipes and gleaming tiles.

She brought her palms up on either side of his face, cradling it gratefully, going up on tiptoe with girlish grace to kiss him between his eyebrows, giggling at his befuddlement. "There's some vending machines outside the lobby," she instructed him. "We'll have to buy a paper to see what's on. We can use this bucket to get some ice from the machine. We can load that paper bag up with ice too, and pour it in the sink."

Daryl laughed. "You sound like you go to motels a lot."

"Only with my folks, when I was a lot younger." Her forearms went twistingly around the back of his thick neck, pulling him down for a kiss, pressing breasts and thighs against his body.

She landed back on her heels with a heavy-lidded look, puckishly curling up the corners of her wide smile.

They lay on top of the covers, dressed, watching HBO. A knife stabbed through a window. She jerked her shoulders onto his chest, letting out a gasp, crown of her head by his lips. He put his hand around her throat, holding her. He talked into her swirl of hair. "I hate it when they just throw something at the camera and bang on a piano."

"Yeah." She snuggled her shoulders against his chest, cheek of one ass touching his hip. Her eyes kept watching the movie.

A teenage girl in a long bathrobe twisted on the tap in a bathtub. Shower head shot from below, water spraying out in a hundred-jetted circle. Dark window, open, next to the shower.

Daryl's hand moved casually off her throat, fingers tracing the delicate ridges of her collar bones.

She let her head fall back, crown under his jaw. Her eyes stayed pointed at the screen.

His hand moved down the front of her blouse from the v-shaped bareness to the soft left swell of cotton.

Her eyes drifted to the side. Upside down in her pupils, a robe rose to the tiles.

He curled his four fingers under her left breast, thumb straight up in the clothed cleavage, measuring the heft, then brought thumb and middle finger to where the nipple would be under cotton and bra.

He gave it a little pinch.

She said nothing, pupils reflecting blood pouring up. Her lids pressed together, her jeans drifted apart.

He was rock hard.

His hand moved to her right breast. Her right hand came up, fingers curling around the back of his neck, lifting the breast closer, letting him caress her.

Yes.

His hand moved down the buttons of her blouse, feeling her abdomen underneath.

“Don’t.”

His hand slid between her legs, cupping her blue-jeaned crotch.

The back of her body arched against his chest and thighs. She let out a gasp. Her sneakers twisted on the bed covers.

Her wide lips exuded the smallest “no” in the world.

He undid the brass button at the top of her fly, pulling left on it, making her jeans magically unzip.

His hand went into her jeans before she could stop him.

His fingers slid over the frilly elastic, over the rise of nylon down to where it was moist and warm. He could feel the soft furrow of her cunt under the nylon. He rubbed the upper joint of his middle finger against the thin nylon, underneath which her clitoris swelled.

She rolled over onto him with a small musical moan, the motion pulling his hand out of her pants. She kissed him hot and sloppily on the mouth, unzipped jeans rocking over the ridge of his cock.

When he reached between her legs again she slapped his hand away. “Wait.” She sat up on him, ass resting its shapely weight on the fronts of his thighs, catching her breath.

Her cheeks were reddened, her black hair spilled around her face.

Glancing down, she saw the thick ridge in his pants. She stared at it, open-eyed.

Daryl put his hands palms-down on the bed. “There it is.”

Sally, sitting on him, jerked her face to one side, eyes never leaving the ridge, laughing embarrassedly. “There it is, all right.” Her black pupils reflected the upside-down bulge in his jeans.

He flexed his cock, so that the zipper rose suddenly.

She blushed.

She sat up on him, sighed, pulled her hair back, away from her wide face. She lowered her face again, long black hair spilling once more forward. She looked at it, not him. "Can I touch it?"

"Let me think. Yeah."

She gave a polite laugh, distracted. Her face bent lower, closer.

She reached an index finger out, nailed tip gently poking the ridge in the middle of its length. She giggled breathlessly. "It's hard."

"Um, yeah."

She poked it again. "Very."

"Touch it?"

She dipped her head, knowing this was coming, shy and inexperienced. "How?"

"Rub it?"

Looking down at his bulge again, she took a breath and put both her hands on either side of it, one black eyebrow rising as she touched it.

Daryl bucked his hips up.

Sally let out a snort, riding on the hips, hair falling over her shoulders. She looked into his eyes again, hers teasing and scared. "Like this?"

"Yeah."

She started rubbing the heels of her hands over his blue-jeaned cock, first side by side, then one heel under his balls and the other along the shaft. "Like this?"

"Yeah."

"Could you? If I kept doin' this?" She looked up from the backs of her hands, wetting her lips, eyebrows giving him a questioning look.

Daryl's lips fluttered away from his teeth. "I believe so."

She rubbed a little harder, leaning her shoulders forward. "Feel good?"

"Yeah! Take your—lower your jeans? Please?"

She kept rubbing, lips pushed out, considering. She looked back down at his desperate face.

His eyes shut as he started getting closer. "Please."

"Promise you'll keep your hands on the bed?"

"Promise."

She kept rubbing with the heel of one hand while she jerked her jeans down to two thick circles of denim above her knees.

Bare thighs.

The shock of actually seeing them. Fuller than he expected. Almost plump. Then suddenly perfect. Flesh shaking slightly as she rubbed him with one hand, the tall, soft, private lines of the inner curves bracketing the most sensual space within the world, promising the most wonderful embrace.

He kept his head curled up, eyes popping, vision field collapsing, until the whole wide world was bounded by her beautiful bare thighs, nether muscle tone sloping inwards halfway down.

“The biggest hurdle. Is coming. In front of someone. New.” He tore his stare away from the sloping flesh to look up into her eyes, to let her see his surrender, and the look staring back down at him was curious, frightened, triumphant.

“So how’d you come to be a coroner?”

Midnight had come and gone. HBO was still on but they were laying in bed facing each other, ignoring the TV, smoking and drinking, both still fully dressed.

The question surprised him. They had been talking about drapes. “I decided when my father died.”

Her face softened. “How come?”

“I was fourteen. When he died. We were in my parents’ room, which I didn’t get to go into too often. Usually I just waited at the doorway. My dad and me were in the closet. My dad was rummaging around on the top shelf, looking for a shoe box of photographs. We had the closet light on, just a bulb hanging. I could smell their hung clothes: my mother’s dresses, my father’s shirts. I had to be careful I didn’t step on her high heels.

“It was hot. Summer. He had been drinking. He was getting testy. Pushing boxes back and forth on the shelves. Suddenly just stopped. I was nervous, standing behind him. He didn’t say anything for a while. So I said maybe the shoe box of pictures was somewhere else. He didn’t say anything. Just stood there with his head pointing at the shelves. I thought maybe he didn’t hear me. From the back, he looked like he was pursuing a thought. I repeated myself, timidly.

“He didn’t answer me the second time either. What thought was he pursuing? I thought maybe he was remembering where the photographs actually were. I just stood there awkwardly, waiting for things to continue. He looked down his left arm, flexing the hand at the end of it.

“He fell back against the door, shutting it with his weight. I looked at his face slanted against the door, trying to read on it what was

happening. ‘Dad?’ He slid down the closed door, arms flapping, until he was sitting on the floor, back twisted against the door. His face had absolutely no expression on it.

“I reached out, giving his shoulder a little shake. I rarely touched my dad. He never touched me. The muscles in his neck must have given out then. They went slack, the weight of skull and brain lolling his head sideways.

“‘Dad?’ I touched his cheek. The skin was still warm but the eyes were funny. Motionless, but not staring. The pupils looked lighter.

“It took a long time for it to dawn on me he was dead. I mean there he was just a second ago slamming boxes around, getting into another of his angry moods, and now here he was sitting slumped against the closed closet door, eyes not seeing anything, mouth hanging open.

“He wasn’t fat, but he was big enough that I couldn’t pull him away from the door to open it. I was trapped in my parents’ closet with my dad’s body. At least the light was on. I looked up at the underside of the bulb, at the black circle with a 60 inside it, a 120v curved up below the 60, barely able to see the numbers because of the bright light above them, inside the bulb.

“It wasn’t creepy. I don’t even know if I was sad. Finally, once I realized I couldn’t get out, I just sat on the floor of the closet by the high heels, facing my dad’s lolled face, knowing he was helpless.

“Like I said, his mouth was open. I knew he had some false teeth. He’d chew on a piece of steak until it was all dry and grey, then push the mangled piece under the rim of his dinner plate. After supper my mother would clear the table, and when she lifted his plate there’d be this ring of chewed steak pieces underneath.

“I looked into his mouth now and I could see a bridge in front, whiter than his real teeth, which were yellowed.

“I pulled the bridge out. I had to work it sideways. The row of false teeth felt warm from his saliva and his breath. I looked at my dad’s face again, now with this wide gap in his upper mouth.

“I started really looking at his face. The hump of his nose was maroon. The tops of his cheeks had burst veins. Wrinkles ringed his eyes. Jowls swelled under his jaw.

“I had always thought of him as this powerful man with a squared-off stance, but now, up close and able to actually study him, I

saw how narrow his shoulders were, how the muscle in his chest and upper arms had softened to flab, how his abdomen had thickened.

"The state of his body told me more about him than fourteen years of living under his rule had. I realized then that if you wanted to know about someone, you looked at their body. The outside revealed the inside. Your true personality presses out into your flesh.

"Near the end I did a weird thing. His legs were splayed out in front of him across the closet floor. In the baggy pants he always wore. His crotch was filled with creases. I poked the middle creases with a finger, feeling the thick softness.

"I left it alone for a while, looking up his nostrils, in his ears, unbuttoning the front of his shirt to see what the skin of his chest looked like, knowing I would come back.

"I cupped his crotch in my hand, cupping my own in my other. Trying to see how son measured up against father. And maybe in part because it was the ultimate bad thing to do. But when you're fourteen, that's just about all you think about, sex and all the bad things you could do. And wanting to do them just to see what happens.

"Finally I undid his belt, the one he used to whip me with, and pulled down his pants. Then his boxer shorts. His thighs were sexless and pale, like they were never exposed to the air anymore. His genitals looked slacker and weaker than mine. Just a deflated bag with two balls slung inside, a cock too thin for its sheath of flesh. I touched his shrunken cock, thinking this is where I came from only fourteen years ago, talk about miracles, swimming out of this discolored slit at the top into my mother. When I put my thumbs on the head of his cock and pulled the slit open, the sheen inside looked unhealthy.

"Afterwards I thought of becoming a regular doctor, but you have to keep a conversation going during the examination, and you can't take your time. I wanted something where I could look at people's bodies as long as I wanted to, even cutting into them to see the state of what was inside. That's the only way to really find out about a person's life. At the end of it."

Sally nodded, thinking about what he had said. "Have—"

"No, I've never told anyone else this before."

She nodded again. "I'm flattered." She put her cigarette out in the ashtray between them. "When I was a little kid my parents let me stay in the bathroom with them while they showered or sat on the toilet and stuff and one time my father stepped out of the shower and I kissed

him between his legs. He got really upset, my mother too. They didn't let me come in the bathroom anymore."

"Why'd you do it?"

"I don't know."

"Sometimes that's a sign of having been sexually abused. Did your father ever—"

"No."

Monday morning Daryl was back at his desk at work, reading a lab report remembering Sally's palms pushing against his crotch, when the phone rang.

It was her. She sounded dispirited.

"Mr. Bayer wants Sue and me to do inventory tonight. We're probably not gonna get out until ten."

"Oh."

"Sorry."

"No, I understand." He looked around his desk, his day deflating.

Around ten the phone rang again. He picked it up on the first ring, heart pounding, it suddenly occurring to him that while he had been moping the past hour over blood counts she may have been arguing with Bayer that she couldn't stay after work tonight.

"Hello?"

"Is this Daryl Putnam?"

It was a man's voice. Disappointed, Daryl answered, "Yes."

"Are you the gentleman who sometimes eats in the hospital coffee shop?"

"Yes. Who is this?"

"This is Sam Rudolph, Daryl." The voice sounded businesslike. "We ran into each other a couple of times during lunch. Do you remember?"

I remember what an asshole you were, Daryl thought. "Yeah."

"The reason for my call is that I was wondering if perhaps I could take you out to dinner tonight. Are you free?"

Daryl pulled the receiver away from his ear, scowling at it.

"Are you there?"

"Yes, I'm here. Why would you want to take me out to dinner?"

The voice went on in reasonable, well-modulated tones. "The truth is, Lodgepole is a small town and I don't know very many people here. I'm living by myself and—" there was a deep chuckle—"I guess

I'm getting tired of eating in silence each evening. I know we got off on the wrong foot, you and I, for which I blame myself. I was hoping we could get together and put all that to rest. I've heard Pete's serves the best seafood in town. Have you eaten there?"

"No." What should he do? Go home to his gloomy apartment and watch the one channel on TV? Or go out with an asshole?

"Daryl, I know we've had a couple of run-ins with each other. I guess I rub people the wrong way sometimes. But if you'd be willing to have dinner with me tonight, I promise you I'll stay on my best behavior. I'm a little older than you are, and as you get older you get more lonely. It bothers me to just sit in my home each night after dinner, trying to think of what to do next, feeling cut-off from all the people outside having a good time together. Will you do this for me?"

Daryl sat back in his swivel chair, phone still to his ear. Of course, even an asshole's company. He raised his eyebrows to himself. "Okay. Fine."

"You'll do it?"

"Sure."

"I'll swing round your place at seven, and by seven-thirty we'll have a feast spread in front of us. See you then."

Daryl said goodbye, as it turned out, to the ether, the other phone having already hung up.

On the fourth of seven tolls reverberating through town a big, black Cadillac pulled up to Daryl's apartment building, its horn honking.

Three stories up Daryl let the drapes fall back in place, double-locking his door on the way out.

The horn was still sounding as he walked across the lawn to the Cadillac.

He passed the front of the car on the way to the passenger door. The big chrome grill was thickly encrusted with blood, feathers and fur.

Inside, Sam leaned across the seat Daryl would be occupying, touching the side control to slide the dark-tinted window halfway down.

Sam's jutting face stared up at Daryl from within the front seat. "Do you want to get in my car?"

Daryl lifted up on the latch. Locked. "Yes."

"You're getting in of your own free will?"

"Right. You asked me out to dinner. I accepted."

Sam nodded, sat back behind the wheel, touched another control on the arm of his door.

There was a deep click inside the passenger door. Daryl tried the latch again. This time it lifted up, the door swinging out effortlessly.

Daryl folded himself into the Cadillac, pulling the door shut but leaving it unlocked. A sharp scent of cologne hung over the leather smell of the Cadillac's interior.

His side window went up, the tint making the day outside seem like night. The sense of separation from the outside world made it feel like he was sitting in a richly-padded submarine.

Sam peeled the Cadillac around, churning up dust, and headed down Mountainview to Alaska Street.

He kept his cigarette clenched between his lips while he spoke. "Glad you could make it."

Daryl adjusted himself in his molded leather seat, pulling the back of his suede jacket out from under his buttocks. "To tell you the truth, I never thought I'd be having dinner with you."

Sam grunted, eyes on the road. He was dressed in three shades of grey, jacket, turtleneck, slacks, which brought out the grey in his black, combed-back hair. Daryl felt unsophisticated sitting next to him in his brown clothes. The visor over his side of the front window was down: its inset mirror reflected his nose and eyes. He glanced at Sam's profile. Sam looked handsomer, even with his age and bony face.

As they reached the bottom of Mountainview the sun fell on the windshield, illuminating hundreds of flattened insects matted across the curved glass, so many that Daryl had trouble seeing past them to the road.

Sam chuckled at Daryl's surprise, ash falling on his sweater. "They're always bouncing off my windshield, all the little bitty bugs with the great big insides."

"Don't you have any wiper fluid?"

"Nah. I think it's beautiful. Look at all the bright colors their little bodies were carrying inside."

Daryl looked away from the curved glass, throat closing. Sam swung the car left onto Alaska Street, tires riding smoothly now, on pavement. A few hundred feet down he pulled into Pete's parking lot, rumbling over the dirt and gravel to the back of the building, its rear extended over the lake.

He parked by the weathered grey pilings.

Both men got out of the car, Daryl standing by his closed door, readjusting how his shirt went into his waistband.

Sam gestured at the big, sleek lines of the Cadillac. "Like it?"

"Yeah, it's nice." He ran his hands through his hair, pushing it back.

Sam lead him around to the rear. "Let me show you something." He opened the trunk, standing back so Daryl could see the wide, carpeted interior. "Pretty big, huh? If I tuck in the knees and elbows, it seats four."

Daryl made a small smile.

A portico at the front of the restaurant led to two tall, carved doors. Each man opened one, passing side by side from the bright daylight into the dimly lit lobby. As Daryl's eyes adjusted to the cool darkness, to the red and blue neon beer lights, he made out a cash register area to the left with a young blonde with straight hair posed behind it in a sleeveless dress, rest rooms to the right, people standing around the middle of the lobby in private conversations, and in front, beyond a high, wide archway strung with nautical artifacts, a large, sunken floor area which stretched out of sight on either side, from which different voices and aromas rose, hanging in the air above bobbing heads.

He felt instantly uncomfortable.

Sam touched his upper arm to Daryl's chest. Out of the corner of his mouth he confided, "I picked Monday because you usually get a good crowd. Half business, half college."

The young blonde stepped out from behind the cash register. Holding a clipboard she headed across the lobby towards them, long skirt straining against the strides of her concealed legs. She stopped under the ceiling light where Daryl and Sam stood, top of her head haloed, flashing a perfect smile. Daryl looked shyly at her, seeing lots of eye makeup and rouge, as though this restaurant were in a large city instead of a small town. Half-lowering her lids for a moment under Daryl's inspection, cozy smile on her lips, she turned her face towards Sam, cocking her head. "How many in your party, sir?"

Sam held the back of his fist up towards her, lifting two fingers.

"We have a few people ahead of you tonight. If you like, you can wait in the bar until your name is called. Would you like to do that?" She gracefully brought the clipboard up in one arm, holding it out

sideways at a slant as though it were a lyre, pen poised politely, waiting for their response.

"Put it under Putnam," Sam told her. As she nodded and wrote 'Putnam' down at the end of two and a half columns of names still not scratched out, Daryl glanced at Sam's face. The older man's eyes were darting up and down the girl's soft bare arms.

As she finished writing she looked back up at Sam again, smiling. "There." She brought one hand up to touch the back of her neck, overhead light shining down on her crooked arm, displaying its slim roundness. "You shouldn't have to wait longer than half an hour, sir. The bar's over there, if you're interested. Are you interested?"

The bar was even darker and more crowded than the lobby. Girls with circular trays squeezed between chairs, rumps rubbing over seated shoulders, joking with customers five tables away.

I feel completely out-of-place. He thought back to the Open 'Til Eight Pizza Shoppe, Sally sitting across from him, both of them square and nervous, her beautiful, dark-haired, girl-next-door face. I didn't want that blonde to flirt with me, but I certainly didn't want her to choose Sam to flirt with instead of me, either.

Sam scanned the hazy room, bottom row of teeth pushed out aggressively, then idly slapped Daryl's rib cage. "Follow me."

They made their way through the noisy crowd, only half of whom were sitting, towards the windows at the rear which looked out over Little Muncho Lake's intense greenness.

Daryl followed in Sam's wake, excusing himself as he squeezed sideways past people, but he couldn't see any vacant tables up ahead.

Sam stopped with a one-two stomp of his shoes at a table already occupied by a young man and woman. Both were sitting on one side of the table, arguing quietly over their umbrella'd drinks.

Sam pulled out a chair and sat down heavily.

The couple looked across the circular tabletop, first surprised, then annoyed.

The young man narrowed his eyes. "Excuse me, but this table's taken." He gestured sideways at himself and his girlfriend, indicating the obvious.

Sam pushed a fresh cigarette between his wide lips, coldly regarding the pair. "Sit down, Daryl."

The girl went 'hey!' in a surprised voice, turning to her boyfriend to see how he was going to handle it.

Daryl backed away a little from the chair Sam had casually kicked out.

The boyfriend raised his head. "I said. The table's taken."

Sam sat back, stroking his jaw, grinning aggressively. He shook his head side to side so slowly it couldn't be taken as anything but a challenge. "That side of the table's taken. A table's got four chairs, son. You and your sweetie get two, me and him get the other two. You don't like it, grope her in your car."

The boyfriend raised himself half out of his captain's chair, leaning across the table top, a blond lock flopping onto his forehead. "Mister, the table's taken." When Sam didn't respond, the boyfriend twisted his lips back into a tough look, eyes blinking as the adrenaline started pumping. He stayed hunched awkwardly over the table. "Listen. You get up, you go somewhere else. Now." He jabbed his right forefinger forward, punctuating the command.

Sam ignored the threat, turning to the indignant girlfriend, blue eyes roaming over the bare flesh of her shoulders and breast tops. "This little boy you brought here can't protect you. Tell him to take a hike and you, me and my friend'll get chummy over a coupla drinks, then the three of us'll head back to my place, and between me and him we'll fuck every hole you got in your body." Sam lowered his head, giving her a dark look. "Then we'll take a knife and make some new holes and fuck them."

The boyfriend snapped his elbow back, knuckles whitening into a fist he hovered but didn't throw.

Sam raised his jaw up to the cocked fist, swinging it left and right. "Come on, junior," he goaded. "First shot is yours. But then there's gonna be chairs flying everywhere, and in the confusion you'll be down on the floor with me on top of you. I'll pull your intestines out your asshole while you scream at shoes."

The girlfriend tugged at her date's plaid shirt until she had his attention. "Let's go, Mike. I don't want a fight."

Mike turned towards her, still angry but visibly relieved. "He insulted you."

"Sticks and stones." She put her cigarettes back in her purse. "Let's wait by the bar. He's not worth it."

Mike wavered, then pulled his body back until he was standing in front of his vacated chair. He ground his fist into his palm, trying to catch his breath. "Somebody oughta teach you a lesson."

Sam exhaled lengthily, the stream of smoke rushing up towards Mike's face. "Won't be you, sonny. Not with your hairless baby balls."

The girl stood up also, smoothing her vinyl skirt over her hips. She pulled on her boyfriend's tensed upper arm. "Let's go, Mike. It's not worth it."

The two of them filed around the table, squeezing past the backs of occupied chairs, the male glaring, the female following, putting her purse strap back up on her shoulder.

As the boyfriend passed Sam he sneered down at him. "Asshole." He waited for a response. When he didn't get one he sniffed, moving off towards the bar with a swagger.

As the girlfriend passed by, Sam reached a hand up, cupping the back of her shiny skirt, giving the cheek of her ass a strong enough squeeze to make her jump in her high heels.

Daryl, still standing, expected her to haul off and slap Sam, but instead she lowered her head, breasts swelling against her blouse, and raised her rump so Sam's hand could slip between her legs from behind.

Her lips jerked apart again and again as Sam kneaded his big hand between her thighs, her dark, made-up eyes following her boyfriend's back. Just as Mike started turning around she dismounted her legs from Sam's hand, long-nailed hand trailing a caress across his chest, and hurried forward through the crowd.

Mike had turned completely around, puzzled, by the time she caught up to him. Touching his shoulder she pointed him forward again.

She flipped her head back, brown hair swinging, to see if Sam were still watching her.

Seated on a stool beside her boyfriend, his reddened face ducking down as he fed oyster crackers into his mouth, she swiveled around, spine erect, tossing her hair, letting a high-heeled foot drop so her skirt split open, showing her leg all the way up to her hip.

Her boyfriend said something to her from his hunched-over position. She tossed him a distracted answer.

Sam gestured at the chair he had kicked out earlier. Daryl sat down. "He just asked her what the fuck she was doing, and she said, looking at the lake." He lay his long hand on Daryl's suede forearm. "What she was really doing was counting how many holes she had in her body, and deciding where she'd like the new ones. Girls love

getting fucked. If you treat them like dirt before you fuck them, chances are they'll come."

A college-aged girl in a Pete's t-shirt and red micro-skirt sauntered over, smoky eyes switching from one seated man to the other. "Whaddaya want tonight, gents?"

Sam sat sprawled back, puffing on his cigarette, right hand rubbing the inside of his thigh, openly admiring her black-stockinged legs. "Bring me six White Label Dewars on the rocks, all of them doubles. Daryl?"

Daryl looked down at his hands, not wanting to be here. "I'll have a glass of the house white, please."

Sam grabbed the high red hem of the waitress's skirt as she turned to go. "Bring him a bottle of Moet instead. And listen, my friend here wanted to know if the reason why you're wearing black stockings is because you've got hickies up the insides of those shapely thighs."

She glanced at Daryl but addressed Sam. "Wouldn't you like to know."

Sam held onto her hem, crinkling his bony nose at her. He slid a folded fifty across the wet-ringed table. "That's just for telling us what the insides of your thighs do look like. Any discolorations?"

She glanced around at the crowd partying in the darkness of the bar, then slipped the green and grey bill up under her order pad. She leaned over, lower lip hanging out with sultry cooperativeness. "I got a bruise way up my left thigh."

"How'd you get it?"

"Walked into a doorknob."

"Were you drunk or were you high?"

"Both. Turn you on?"

Sam brought his gleeful face closer to hers, hand curled over his left ear to drown out the background noise. "Yeah. Ever look at it and wish a guy gave it to you? Or maybe a girl?"

Her brown eyes faltered, then her throaty voice spun it out with a honeyed casualness. "Yeah, sure. Maybe a girl, huh? Kneeling between my legs, putting my feet up on her shoulders, pinching my 'shapely thighs'? Is that your turn on?" She glanced pointedly at the side pocket of Sam's grey jacket, out of which Sam had pulled the first fifty.

Sam caressed the inside of her black stockinged knee, sliding closer still in his chair. "Right now, you got any pimples on your body?"

“Pimples?” She hesitated, pencilled eyebrows steady. “Yeah”, she confided. “I got a pimple on my ass. Had it ‘bout a week now.”

Sam moved his hand up the inside of her thigh. When he reached the hem of her red micro-skirt she placed both long-nailed hands down on the table top, one with the order pad still in it, going “Oof!” as Sam’s hand disappeared above the hem, forearm twisting left and right. “How big is it?”

She hung her head, riding his hand. “It’s a real fucker,” she murmured. She raised her face to look around again in the darkness at the oblivious crowd, quickly bowing her head once more as Sam’s elbow pumped rapidly up and down, his lips curling back in disdain.

“Have a head on it?”

She nodded her long-haired head, panting, straddling her legs to better accommodate his hand, flirt’s eyes hardening into whore’s eyes.

“Big white head. I was gonna try to pop it tonight after work.”

“Hurt when you shit?”

“God, yeah. I know what you want now, right? I took a shit between the lunch and dinner crowd, right over there in the rest rooms, and the fuckin’ thing brushed over the toilet seat. Really fuckin’ hurt.”

Sam cackled quietly, hand still vibrating under her micro-skirt. “Did it hurt when you squeezed out your turd?”

She nodded, sucking air in through her nostrils. “Sure did. Had to lift my left cheek. Get the turd out. Put pressure on my right cheek. Right where the pimple was. Stupid me, huh? Hurt like a bitch.” She looked up hopefully at him, little beads of sweat forming between her eyebrows.

His hand yanked under her skirt, pulling down her panties, tops of her hose. “Where is it?”

His wrist switched around under her hem, then stopped. A wide grin broke across his face. “This is it, isn’t it. What a smooth ass you have. But this is the pimple between my thumb and forefinger, right?”

She sucked in breath. “Yeah. Careful.”

“I don’t want to pop it. I just want to squeeze the red bottom of it. The part that really hurts.”

She shook her bowed head. “This is—”

With his free hand he slapped two more fifties down. “Just until you cry. Just until then.”

She shot him a dark up-from-under look. “Wanna masturbate me instead?”

“No. I don’t want to do that. I want to squeeze this big pimple on your beautiful, smooth ass until you start crying. Just until the tears come. All right?”

“Yeah, but—” Her eyes clamped shut as he started.

He watched her face start to shake as he pinched, watched the suffering open her mouth, a thread of saliva looping from upper to lower teeth. “Hang on. Just until the tears start.”

She braced her smooth young hands on the table top, nodding.

“You’re a real sport.” He pinched harder, making her shoulders jump. “Real good girl. Maybe later—” he tilted his head towards Daryl, who was staring open-mouthed at the both of them—“maybe later my friend and I can go over your place, sit on the floor in front of your toilet and watch you shit. Maybe my friend here will even lift your warm cheek for you, watch you push out your turd.”

Her face reddened, crumpled; she started crying.

Sam pulled his hand out. With his left he tossed the two fifties closer to her. “What color’s your toilet paper at home?”

She put the fifties away, touching her fingers to her eyes. “White.”

“Maybe my friend will want to wipe your ass for you afterwards. Maybe he’ll want to be the one to tuck the white toilet squares up your soft, sweaty crack and swab your hole clean. Interested, Daryl?”

Daryl closed his eyes. “Fuck you.”

Sam smiled.

Daryl stared out gloomily over the lake. From their table in the main dining room he could see the leafing white birches bordering the eastern shore of Little Muncho, beyond which Sally lived.

Sam held his smoking cigarette away from his lips, looking more foreign than ever in the dim light reflected off the lake. “That turned you on, didn’t it?”

Daryl let the last drops of his drink roll down the inner curve of the glass into his mouth. “Hardly.”

Sam snickered. “Daryl, I know you got a hard-on watching me feel her up.”

Daryl turned back towards the lake. “How would you know that?”

“The smell, you dope. An erect cock smells different from a relaxed one. It smells...” Sam reflected for a moment. “Cleaner.” He gave a disinterested shrug. “But what’s important is learning why it did arouse you.”

Daryl accepted another of Sam's doubles. "It certainly didn't arouse me hearing all that talk about her bowel movements."

"Didn't it? A little? All those intimate little details lovers never ask about? Which cheek she raises?"

"Come on, we're going to eat soon."

"Didn't it?"

Daryl looked down at his hands holding his drink. "Maybe lifting her cheek did, a little. Because it made me picture her ass."

"And it aroused you to watch me masturbate her."

Daryl said nothing.

"Of course it would. Any two people fondling each other, that's very arousing." Sam leaned forward. "When I first put my hand up her skirt, when she could have slapped me or moved her legs away but she didn't, that turned you on, didn't it? That made you think, he's got her now. She's going to stand there as long as he wants her to now. You watched her face. I saw you. You watched the pleasure start to build up in her face, saw her move her legs even farther apart, even though I hadn't asked her to." Sam sniffed the air again, then broke into a smug smile. "Real clean, Daryl."

Daryl looked away guiltily. "You make women act like whores."

Sam shrugged. "Life is pornography. When we can't sustain that level we sink into the mud of symphonies, gardens and love." He made a point of ignoring Daryl, looking around the room.

A young couple sat on one side of them, talking quietly. The boy was in an over-sized blue blazer, the girl in a flowery country dress with too many ruffles and flounces, like something sewn in a farmhouse from a catalog pattern.

On the other side, a long table held ten well-dressed black men and women celebrating something.

Sam turned his chair away from the table, trying to catch the farm girl's eye. Both her and her date's cheeks reddened and their voices became more self-conscious.

"Look, why not be nice for a change and leave everyone else alone?"

Sam spread his hands apart. "What would I do all day then?"

The waitress went up to the young couple's table. Both declined dessert. The boy flipped his blazer back, revealing suspenders, and reached into his hip pocket for his wallet. After he paid, the girl patted the top of his hand. They pushed their chairs back, the boy hurrying

around to help the girl out of hers. They walked past Sam with their eyes down, cheeks still red.

Sam leaned farther back. "Pretty dress. What are your panties made out of? Kitchen curtains?"

The couple ignored him, walking hand in hand to the front.

Sam made an angry face to himself.

A redheaded waitress stepped over to their table.

Sam threw an arm sloppily over the back of his captain's chair. He gave her a bored once over. "We'll eat here, in the bar. I'll order first, because he hasn't even glanced at the menu yet. This is a hundred dollar bill. It's yours. Take it. Do everything exactly as I want you to, and you get two more. Fuck up once and I'm going to stand on top of this table and scream at you in front of all these people until I've reduced you to a blubbering mass of twitches and spasms. Are you willing to do it my way, or should I ask for another waitress?"

The redhead looked at the hundred in her hand, one eyebrow up in shock, then nodded timidly.

"Good. This applies only to my meal, incidentally, not to my guest's. If you have to screw his up to get mine out in time, so be it." He turned with old world politeness towards Daryl. "Or would you like to give her a three hundred dollar tip out of your own pocket, to make things even?"

"I'll take my chances," Daryl answered testily.

"Fine." Sam drew in his breath. "I want you to bring me three dozen oysters on the half shell. I want them freshly shucked, and I want them served on the smaller shell half, so I'll know they've been opened just for me. If there is a speck of grit in them they're going back. I don't want anything served with them. No cute little lemon wedges, no cocktail sauce, no artfully arranged parsley sprigs. Just oysters and ice.

"When I am down to the last half dozen I want you to bring three bowls. In the first I want one pound of melted butter, and it better not be clarified. In the second bowl I want not less than fifty and not more than seventy steamed clams. Any sand in them, back they go, and I'll squeeze your wrists until you give me my hundred back. Serve the broth in the third bowl, and I want it to be pure broth, not watered down with wine or cognac, or dirtied up with seasonings. When I pick up the bowl of butter to drink what's left of it, that's your next cue.

"At that point I want two pounds of chilled jumbo shrimp. Make sure the sand and blood veins are immaculate, and don't overcook

them. With this course you can serve me lemon wedges. Don't let me get through my last shrimp without seeing you carrying over my next course.

"For my first entree I want beer-battered halibut, give me a couple dozen thick strips, with at least eight different dipping sauces, big bowls of them, and more lemons.

"Five minutes after you bring that I want a good-sized sevice of scallops and a broiled, whole rock fish, but not halibut. Snapper would be nice. Then I'll have some coffee, a generous slab of cheesecake, and after that a hot fudge sundae with vanilla ice cream and banana slices and brownies pushed down the sides, but skip the nuts. They get between my teeth. Instead, layer some marshmallow sauce between the ice cream scoops, and top it with whipped cream and a dozen maraschino cherries.

"Along with this, and start your service with this, I want a fifth of Dewar's and a fifth of Jim Beam bourbon, a low, wide, heavy glass, and two ice buckets crammed with cubes. Make sure one bucket is piled high with cubes at all times.

"And whatever you do, don't hover. It irritates me."

The waitress flipped to the fifth page of her pad, completing his order. She went back over the previous pages, counting with her fingertips. "You get eight salad orders with your dinner, sir. What dressings would you like with them?"

Sam shook his head. "Salads are for sissies."

The waitress turned to Daryl. "Sir?"

Daryl cleared his throat. "I'll have the flounder dinner, please, with blue cheese dressing on my salad."

She nodded, hurrying off.

Sam wiped the butter from his lips, ignoring the waitress' hands as full plates were substituted for dirty ones. "Trouble with you is, you're too hung up on girls."

Daryl lifted one of the four pepper mills on their table, studying it again, still waiting for his salad. "What does that mean?"

"It means girls do windows but they don't do cocks."

"Bullshit."

"You get a guy and girl together and right away there's trouble. Girls want to waste time on romance instead of moving the skin around your cock up and down a few thousand times. Because romance means

attention, and attention means they're still Daddy's little girl, under his protective armpit. Sex doesn't interest them. They learn how to suck cock for the same reason they learn baseball or football terminology, because they know it's something guys like. But they don't really enjoy sucking cock, not like a queer does. Have you ever heard a girl referred to as a cocksucker? Of course not. Every time a woman sucks your cock, it's as a favor. It's never because she truly, really, hungrily wants to slide her wet lips up and down your long, strong, beautiful cock all night long."

Daryl snorted.

"I'll let you in on a little secret, Daryl. I've sucked cocks and I've sucked breasts, and cocks beat breasts. Why? It's the perfect shape to slip into your mouth. Look at a cock, look at a mouth. They're made for each other. A breast, it's wide, it's fat, you can't breath around it. A cock, you only have to open your mouth a couple of inches to let it in, to feel that round length of it, that sexy heaviness."

Sam pointed a shrimp at him. "Guys are dumb. Know why? Because sex is so important to them, but most men are too afraid to try the most pleasurable sex a man can experience." He leaned forward. "Getting fucked up the ass. Look as skeptical as you want, you haven't experienced it so you don't know what I'm talking about. The girls don't want the guys to know how good it feels to get fucked. That's where the true sex organ in men is. The prostate. Think of it as a man's cunt.

"I'll prove what I'm saying to you, and you don't even have to pull your pants down.

"Every time you take a shit, there's that moment when the turd expands your sphincter to just the right width, and it feels great, it feels incredibly pleasurable. Am I right?"

Daryl, who was putting off eating his salad until this subject was over, shrugged.

Sam laughed. "It's all right to admit it feels physically good, Daryl. Anyway, a man's cock is just exactly the right thickness to keep that sphincter open to that crucial width. And not just for a fleeting moment, but for hours. And the longer your lover keeps your sphincter open with his cock, the more intense the pleasure becomes. Especially when he teases you, sliding his cock back and forth very slowly, rubbing inside that ring of muscle, narrowing the sphincter to where the pleasure almost goes away, then widening the round muscle again. You let a boy fuck you real slow like that for twenty minutes and he

owns your asshole. You'll be flat on your back, resting your legs against his chest like a woman does, giving him soft little girl-kisses under his jaw, feeling his biceps.

"And that's just your sphincter. Good as it feels to have your cock touched, it feels even better having the backs of your balls touched, right? Know why? Your balls are closer to your prostate.

"Now suppose you had a way of caressing your prostate directly. Can you imagine how intense that pleasure would be? Well, this thick cock inside you, the width of which has your sphincter in seventh heaven, also has a head to it, right? And a cock is just the right length that the boy on top of you fucking your ass can push that head all the way up inside your anus until the big head of his cock rubs repeatedly around your prostate. The organ of urination, bumping around inside against the organ of defecation. It doesn't get dirtier than that. And believe me, as far as sex goes? Dirty equals better." Sam sat back, holding up both his palms. "Ooh, la-la, la-la."

The waitress slid Sam's halibut chunks in front of him, removing the empty plate that held the shrimp.

Daryl moved the cartoonish-looking lemon wedges off his flounder, deciding to walk home.

Over at the other table, the blacks broke out in a round of subdued applause, one of the black women thanking everyone with raised glass.

Sam tucked the rest of a halibut chunk into his wide mouth, watching. When he swallowed he called out cheerfully, "What's the occasion?"

The group glanced over, one or two smiling and looking away, then they fell into a quieter conversation among themselves.

Sam picked up his glass, turning in his chair to face the long table. "I hope you don't mind me being nosy," he apologized, "but I was curious what you good folks were celebrating."

The seated group glanced around among themselves for a spokesperson. Finally the one being feted spoke up. "My husband and our friends are celebrating my promotion." She tilted her goblet towards the spectacled man sitting next to her. In a slightly lower voice she added, "I just made office manager."

The husband kept a smile on his face, looking at Daryl.

"Office manager!" Sam raised his glass in salute, beckoning for the waitress. "What are you folks drinking?"

The husband looked around the group. "You don't have to. We're having our own little party."

"What are they drinking?" Sam asked the waitress.

"They're drinking wine, sir. Blue Nun."

"Well, I think we can do a little bit better than that! I want you to go back there and get the best, the most expensive champagne you have, and I want you to deliver two bottles of it to that table." Sam lifted his glass of bourbon-flavored ice again. "My best to you, your husband, and your friends." He turned back to his fish.

Daryl poured some cream into his coffee, blowing on the slightly oily surface to blend the two colors.

Sam finished his sundae. "So what do you want to do now?"

Daryl tasted a hot sip. "This is a work night. I should get home."

"You're too young to worry about boss' breath on the back of your shoulders." Sam stirred his coffee with a spoon. "I've got an idea," he said casually. "Why don't we go back to my place, it's very secluded, we can share a couple of joints and go swimming in my pool."

And fuck me up my ass, Daryl thought. "Thanks, but it's too late. Besides, I want to call my girlfriend before she goes to bed."

"Make sure she's alone? You can't really tell over the phone, though. She could still have a guy in bed with her, rubbing his cock against her ass while she's talking to you."

"Fuck you."

"Best way to find out is let her hang up first. If she hangs the phone straight down, she probably is alone. But if it takes her a couple of times to get the phone back on the hook, that cock's up inside her again. Worse still, that cock could feel so good back up inside her she only thinks she hung up. Then you get to hear how the new boy breaks a bitch." Sam turned around to the blacks again. "How was that champagne?"

The husband answered. "Very good. Thank you again." All eight members of the party kept their eyes down.

"Have you ordered dessert yet?"

"I don't think we'll have any. Thank you again for the champagne."

Sam sat up in his chair, speaking loud enough for everyone at the nearby tables to hear. "Waitress? These good folks have finished their meal. I want you to bring them dessert."

"We don't want any."

"Nonsense." Sam looked up at the waitress. "Put their entire bill on my tab. Now, I'd like you to go back there and I'd like you to bring

out the biggest, ripest watermelon you have, and I'd like you to give a thick red slab of it to each of them." He swiveled back to the partygoers. "Am I psychic, or what? Myself, I prefer cheesecake, but I figure there's nothing like a big ol' watermelon to keep a bunch of niggers happy."

One of the black men tilted his long head at an angle. "Maybe you've had too much to drink. The lady's had something good happen to her. You understand that?"

Sam spread his hands out, laughing. "I'm happy for her."

The husband glanced at his wife, looked at the friend who had spoken. "We'll pay our own tab."

"No need to do that. You people don't make white wages. Tell you what, if it makes you feel any better," he said, spreading his shoes apart on the floor, "your wife can shuffle over here on her knees and suck my cock for me. You wouldn't mind that, would you, darlin'? To be made office manager, you must have had a lot of big white cock between those fat nigger lips of yours already anyway. Anything's better than your husband's shriveled-up dick, right?"

The husband stood up, but the man who had spoken first was faster, stalking over, jabbing his finger forward. "I asked you if you understood this was a special night for the lady, fool!"

Sam merrily glanced over at Daryl, who was sinking in his chair. Sam wrinkled his nose at the angry man in front of him. "How come you came over first? You're the one who defended her first, too." He glanced at the husband, the wife, the man in front of him. "She sucking your cock too?" The black woman bowed her head, starting to weep.

The man in front of Sam clenched his fists.

Sam, still seated, looked him up and down. "What's the matter, boy? Feets fail once you get this close to a white man?"

The black blinked himself back to dignity, still leaning forward. He took a deep breath, turning his head sideways to let it out. "I'm not going to spoil this lady's night with a fight. You get your head on straight. You should show more respect for other people."

"I show plenty of respect for other people. I just don't show respect for farm animals."

Daryl stood. He turned to the black man, who had braced himself when Daryl rose. He gestured at Sam. "I'm sorry. I didn't know he was going to do this." He looked at the black man, whose eyes stayed hurt and angry.

Sam, still seated, said, "You knew I was going to do it, Daryl. You saw it coming."

Daryl looked at the black again. "I'm sorry." He turned and walked past the people watching at the other tables, through the lobby, into the men's room.

He banged the stall door shut behind him, not bothering to lock it, fell on his knees in front of the toilet, opened his mouth and felt his jaws lock as the contents of his stomach came spewing up.

Once it was over he got to his feet again and washed his mouth in one of the sinks.

Sam wasn't in the dim lobby.

Daryl went through the tall double doors, out into the sunlight.

Squinting, he made his way around to the rear of the restaurant, knowing it was a stupid thing to do, but planning to let the air out of all four tires of Sam's car.

Sam was perched on his hands and knees on the hood of the black Cadillac like a mountain cat, tongue lapping wetly along the bug-encrusted windshield.

He turned his head sideways to Daryl, spitting little wings and legs out of the corners of his satisfied smile. "No matter how much I eat, I'm always hungry for more."

Daryl stumbled back the way he had come.

Daryl met Sally the next afternoon for lunch at the hospital coffee shop.

She was sitting by herself, legs crossed, the prettiest girl there, reading the Lodgepole Weekly like she had been the first time he saw her, the headline folded in half so all he could see was, "No New Clues Yet".

Sensing his approach she looked up, grinned, raising herself up for a quick, shy public kiss.

She unfolded the paper to get to something inside. Daryl, settling beside her, read the right half of the headline, "In Strangulation Case".

"I already ordered for us. Look at this!" She held the interior page up to him. All three living dead movies and the first one's remake were starting this Friday at the Starlight Drive-In. "Wanna go?"

He looked at the four black and white rectangles full of reaching hands. "Sure."

Sally bumped her upper arm against his, lashes lowering. "They end really late—you could spend the night at my place afterwards."

Daryl shot a glance at her to see what she meant, but her big dark eyes were down.

The Starlight Drive-In was located at the end of Alaska Street, two blocks past Sacred Heart Hospital.

Built after World War Two, the drive-in, open each year from April Fool's Day to Labor Day, was Lodgepole's sole source for movies.

Daryl walked down the long gravel driveway past the main house to the parking area below Sally's garage apartment.

Her station wagon was pulled out, Sally on its far side, hood hiding her from the waist down, leaning across to wipe the windshield.

She put the soapy rag down on the hood, disappeared below the line of the wagon, then rose back up with a plain-ended hose, flowing the water down the windshield. She gave him a flirtatious look as he crunched nearer over the gravel. "Wanted to make sure you could see everything." She brought the hose down, laying it on the hood, letting the water spill across the metal.

She walked around the front of the car.

He had seen her in nine different outfits so far. Part of the excitement when they met each time was what she wore, what new clues the clothes gave him about her body. As she rounded the front of the car, he realized she wasn't, tonight, wearing a bra. He could see, even from the other side of the wagon, the two loose sways under the white ribbing.

She rounded the front of the station wagon, stepping out from behind it, the lower part of her body no longer hidden.

Daryl's heart thumped.

Faded white sneakers. Red and white striped short-shorts.

Bare legs.

She had a secret smile. Turning her face away, she pretended to look at the plantings along the foundation of the main house, breeze blowing her dark hair back, ears sticking out, making her look even thinner and younger.

A woman's legs show you her soul.

Sally had great legs.

Full at the top, tapering with a sleek roundness down her thighs to thin knees, swelling out slightly again over her shapely calves.

She swung her large, dark eyes back to him, lashes going down, smug smile on her face. "Since we're going to the drive-in, I thought I'd dress." She gave a little lift to her shoulders. "Casual."

The drive-in lot was half full.

Sally drove the station wagon over the lot's ripples, like a boat battling waves, avoiding the speaker-topped posts, coming to a rest in the front row, headlights hanging in mid-air.

She twisted around in her seat to get the speaker hooked on their lowered window, then reached farther outside the window, down the speaker's post, to where the heavy heater hung, the back of her body and its candy-striped ass in a pose he hadn't yet imagined while masturbating.

She plopped back down in her driver's seat, putting her hands on the bottom curve of the steering wheel. "The heater's not working. They musta turned them off for the season." Her black eyebrows lifted nonchalantly. "Wanna get some snacks?"

The tarred walk leading to the snack bar was lit every ten feet by caged bulbs higher than their heads.

Inside the fluorescence of the snack bar, couples moved slowly along the cafeteria line, arms around each others' waists.

Some of the long-haired girls in line noticed Daryl.

All of the men noticed Sally. She pretended to be unaware, giggling as she pushed their logo'd wax cup against the flat metal slat which sent Coke sputtering down in twin sprays of clear and black. As the cup filled, her flirtatious, upward glances at him said, see, men want me, but only you can have me.

He paid the girl cashier, Sally having paid for the admission. While he waited for a palmful of silver and copper change, he noticed a boy of about eighteen standing with his date under one of the loudspeakers by the exit. The boy's eyes ran up and down Sally's bare legs, bulge in his denims. The girl was trying to get him in conversation, realizing Sally had his attention. He's fucking her, Daryl realized. In the silence of the boy's mind, impervious to the tugs at his shoulder, Sally's legs are spread across his rear seat.

How many times have we been fucked in fantasies without feeling it, by neighbors, co-workers, strangers on the street?

Daryl led Sally out through the same exit, arm around her waist, the boy turning around as they went past to check out her ass, Daryl's hand lowering around one shapely, moving cheek, giving it a light squeeze, getting a giggle from Sally.

Eat your heart out.

Back in their station wagon they ate their lukewarm popcorn, listening to crickets and frogs in the deep, marshy woods surrounding the lot, waiting for the big screen in front of them to light up.

A car pulled up alongside Daryl's window. The male driver left the engine chugging while he reached out to twirl up the volume on the speaker. Once he realized he had the black knob turned clockwise all the way and there were still no snack bar commercials blaring out, he threw the speaker on the ground, peeling away in his car.

Sally stopped her popcorn-topped pyramid of fingers just below her lips. "Good. We won't have anybody on one side."

Another car came to a rest on Sally's side. Daryl glanced over at its paint-prepped bulk just as the pale-haired girl in the passenger seat glanced over at him, their eyes locking for a moment in that meaningless communication which occurs by accident in crowds. He shortened his gaze to Sally's munching profile.

'Classical Gas' cut off abruptly on the speaker, an off-key fan fare starting up as the big screen illuminated. A black and white scroll started, explaining that the management of this outdoor theater realized movie-goers sometimes drove off forgetting to place the speakers back on their posts. If a driver did this, the speaker should be turned in at the snack bar.

The next word, HOWEVER, filled the entire screen. The scroll continued, explaining that anyone deliberately trying to steal a speaker would be criminally prosecuted.

Daryl turned to Sally. "Who in their right mind would steal one of these speakers? The sound you get is like listening to a radio over the telephone."

When the black and white clock on the screen pointed to five minutes, square-topped french fries marching merrily across a cartoon curve of the globe, Sally turned her wide face to Daryl, looking embarrassed. "That soda gave me a lot of gas." She dipped a lovely shoulder. "Plus I guess I'm nervous. I must be taking air in differently. That can cause it too, I read."

"Huh? Oh, yeah, I know. I mean I have gas too."

She wet her lips. "Would you...I mean would you mind if I..."

"If you... Oh. You mean, is it okay if you...got rid of some of it?"

"Yeah."

"Sure. Go ahead." He looked around. No car on his side; the passenger window on Sally's side up and steamy.

She kept her eyes down. "I feel funny. Doing it."

"No, that's fine. Really."

"You said you had some gas too?"

"Yeah."

"Would you want to go first?"

He burst into a nervous laugh, blushing. "I...there's this whole taboo against...farting in front of someone."

"We'd feel a lot more relaxed. It's an intimacy."

"Yeah."

She snuggled her warmth up against him. "Know what? If you go first, I'll give you a kiss."

He drew in a breath, brought his eyebrows together, face still. Somewhere inside his rectum, muscles pushed down.

He farted, louder and longer than he expected.

"All right!" Sally squeezed his upper arm, then swung her face in front of his, eyes lidded, lips settling on his.

As they kissed her hands played lightly across his chest. His right hand moved slowly up and down the insides of her beautiful bare thighs.

Sally lifted her lips off his, sitting back dreamily. "My turn?"

"Go ahead."

She lifted a bare leg, turning her shorts at an angle.

Her fart was quieter. She smiled embarrassedly at him. "Real feminine, huh?"

"Actually, this is kind of weird, but it sort of turned me on."

She punched his arm.

"Seriously."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. Because it's something people don't usually do with each other, I guess. And it has to do with your body. Your beautiful body."

Sally snickered. "Want me to turn you on some more?"

"Yeah."

She lifted her ass off the car seat, front teeth biting her lower lip, and let out another fart, louder this time. She shut her eyes, pushed down. A smaller fart followed.

He farted back.

The interior of the car held a fecal fragrance.

Sally lounged lazily against the inside of the driver's door, lifting her bare right leg onto her seat, exposing her striped crotch.

Daryl looked down between her full thighs at the thin red and white lines rippling over her crotch.

He stared into her eyes.

She lifted her right leg farther, off the seat, raising it along the back of the seat until her sneaker was resting on top of the back seat.

“Wanna kiss some?”

He slid across the seat into the embrace of her legs, hands on her shoulders as her sneakered feet closed around him.

His palms moved down over the front of her pullover, making two circles.

Her pullover rode up with his caresses, exposing her stomach, the graceful incurve of her bare waist, the pale, oriental eye of her belly button. He laid his hands on her baby smooth stomach, baring more of her abdomen, white-ribbed hem of her top sliding across the backs of his forearms as his hands, rising underneath, encircled both heavy breasts, coming forward to palm.

In the next car the pale-haired girl's naked back pressed against the steamy side window, petite knobs of her spine flattening rhythmically against the fogged glass as she got fucked.

Daryl pulled the white-ribbed top over Sally's head, off her arms, dropping it by the brake and clutch pedals, her forearms crossing her breasts in a moment of startled modesty, deepening her cleavage.

He had never seen her breasts before. Surprised, as every man is, at how much larger a woman's breasts look bared. The wideness. The softness.

Her small hands grasped the crown of his head, pulling his face down, rolling his cheeks across them, nose in her cleavage, her eyes closing, mouth all lips and happiness.

His lips stilled the sway of her left breast, tongue tip touching the goose bumped aureole, tasting salt and soap. He sucked her tall nipple into his mouth, her fingers clasping his nape.

Sally's forehead slid down the side window's warm glass, eyes seeing into the next car where the girl's ass was flattening with a rapid rhythm against the window, the black shadow between her cheeks pulsing wide and narrow.

Daryl slid Sally's red and white striped shorts off her hips, her legs twisting sideways with a woman's grace to let them get pulled down her curves, off her feet.

He reached up between her bare legs, no small hand stopping him this time, cupping against the soft, damp hairs. Her eyes closed at his hold, mouth opening, moan rolling out.

He slipped a finger inside.

Slickness.

Buried muscles responded, gripping fatly around his knuckled length.

Holding onto the steering wheel, she hoisted herself up, dismounting from his finger.

“Wait.”

He waited.

“Let’s...” She put her hands out in front of her, palms facing him.

Daryl waited while she caught her breath.

“Let’s go back to my place.” She gave him the most mature look he had ever seen from her, eyebrows wet.

“Okay. Let’s.”

She fished her top from the pedals, wriggled back into its arm holes, breasts wobbling.

Started the car. Distractedly pushing out the squawking speaker, she drove bare-assed across the front of the screen towards the exit.

Daryl sat with his damp back against the passenger side door, elbowy window handle pressed into his lower spine, holding her nylon shorts up to his perspiring face, breathing into them as though they were an oxygen mask.

By now it was nearly midnight. Nothing moved on the lamplit streets of Lodgepole but swirling fireflies and the limbs of oaks.

Sally decided to take the long way home, on Lakeview Road around Little Muncho, because it was more romantic.

The yellow moon floated in slices on the dark emerald waters.

Her elbows stuck out sideways as she gripped the steering wheel, palms and armpits wet.

The big station wagon pushed faster around the curves, throwing stands of birch trees into zebra illumination.

Daryl, body jostling in the shadows beside her, touched her bare shoulder. “I want you to know.” His forehead cracked back away from the windshield.

Sally screamed, tires screeching, the rear of the station wagon banging back down on the pavement, popping off the left rear hub cap.

For nine seconds its wobbly roll across the road was the only sound.

Daryl blinked back to consciousness.

Sally was hugging the steering wheel, face screwed up, bawling.

He felt dazedly along his forehead, fingers getting wet and sticky.

“Did we hit a tree? What happened?”

Both headlights were still on, pointing with double shafts into the line of the woods.

The station wagon had been spun sideways across the road.

Sally wiped both sides of her face with her palms. “It came out into the road so fast I didn’t see it until I hit it.”

Daryl rummaged through the glove department beyond his knees, looking for something they could use as a weapon. “Hit what? Sally, this is important. Did it look like it belonged in this world?” He pulled out another flat handful of paper, gave up.

She went into a crying jag, lips stretching her syllables too wide for them to form words.

All the windows of the wagon surrounding them were black. He pushed her button down. Swung open his door.

Because the wagon had spun around, it was lying right outside his door. He almost stepped on it.

Glancing up and down the moonlit road, crouched in his side’s doorway like a parachutist, he leaped over the immense brown bulk on the pavement. The soles of his shoes skidded over the tar on landing.

Knees trembling, he walked back to the huge body.

It was lying on its side. Its powerful hind legs were limp, but the front pair jerked weakly in the air, curling farther inwards towards the furred body with each new spasm. One of its giant antlers had broken off at the skull. He could see the raw, snapped-off stub embedded in the brown fur, blood oozing out of the bone’s porousness.

Lying on its side, only one giant eye of the moose was visible, brown and black, welled with suffering, staring straight up at the stars. As Daryl crouched over the eye it dilated further to where he could see in its brown and black pool his bleeding, wide-angled face.

A shudder passed down the moose’s matted length, rattling its legs and lifting its tail. With a last snort out of the tensed nostrils the body unclenched, flattening against the cold tar. After a moment in which it seemed that nothing more would happen the thick neck muscles slackened, the lifeless profile readjusting itself on the hard pavement.

A car door slammed behind him.

Sally walked over, shorts on again, hugging herself.

When she saw the gargantuan corpse she turned away, mewling.

Daryl walked over to her, pulled her shaking body against him. "It was an accident. But we have to get it off the road."

Putting one shoe against its broken spine, he pushed at its substantial bulk.

It didn't budge.

Sally's thin voice came from behind him. "Could we do it with the station wagon?"

The body lay mounded high enough that the mangled fender probably would fit against it.

Sally got behind the wheel. With Daryl's directions she managed to maneuver the front of the wagon against the stretched-out moose, nudging up the two halves of its broken spine.

Far above the moonlit road, an owl on a bare branch exhaled a diminishing series of hoots.

"Go slow," Daryl instructed.

She put it in first, wiping her eyes with the heels of her hands, thin fingers stretched out, letting the clutch up only halfway. The wagon slid forward, rumpling the moose's humped back. Just as Daryl decided it wasn't going to work, the body stickily shuffled forward on its side, legs wobbling. The one intact antler scraped noisily over the pavement with a high-pitched screech felt in the spine.

"You're getting it! Keep it slow."

He followed along as the body wobbled under the white headlights, aswirl with moths, towards the road's edge.

Since there was no rail and the shoulder of the road dropped off abruptly into a steep slope towards the lake, the station wagon should have been able to push the animal far enough to have it tumble off the edge.

But by the time the dead moose had been pushed to the edge, its broken limbs had gotten tangled underneath it.

The large head drooped off the pavement onto the grassy crest of the slope, but Daryl didn't dare wave Sally on in the wagon any closer to the slope, for fear the wagon itself would tilt over.

"Pull back."

The wagon rolled back, the moose relaxing off the fender onto the pavement. Headlights still on, the driver's side door of the station wagon swung out and Sally joined him by the long body.

He handed her a big stick.

“Work the tip under the body like I’m doing. Maybe together we can leverage it over.”

She nodded, no longer crying, sneakers bracing against the road surface as they both leaned forward under their sticks against the weight.

The bean-bag body lifted slightly. Daryl spoke from the bottom of his throat. “Keep trying!”

Soon they were pressing their hands into the moose’s broken back, like pushing against a soaked carpet, then their shoulders, then their backs.

With a final, closed-eye effort they rolled it over. The moose tumbled zig-zaggedly down the bushy slope, jagged legs whipping around and around until it crashed into a stand of birches at the bottom of the slope, disappearing in a swallow.

Almost immediately the shore came alive with the sound of little animals dashing through the trees, not away from, but towards, the crash.

Sally rubbed the sides of her nose. Her black eyes pleaded with him. “You don’t.” The weight of it bowed her. She started again. “You don’t think that was our moose, do you?”

He had no idea. He shook his head.

Down below, the birches thrashed violently back and forth, thin trunks buffeted by the frenzied convergence where the moose had disappeared.

He shook his head.

The intensity of the activity reminded him of insects.

He looked at her stark face, features phosphorescent in the moonlight.

“Let’s go back to the car.”

When they passed through the whiteness of the headlights he realized those weren’t shadows all over her body.

He held his own forearms up into the cylindrical flour of the beams, then looked down at his wrinkled pants.

Both he and Sally were drenched in dark blood.

He drove them back to her place, Sally sitting beside him stiff as a marionette, nostrils curling at the gore smell.

The main house in front of her garage apartment was unlit.

He drove the station wagon down the long gravel driveway with the lights out.

They hurried up the curling stone steps to her apartment, clothes stiffening.

In her kitchen they pulled down the shades, leaving dark red fingerprints on the cloth.

They stripped in front of each other, for the first time.

Once they were both naked they couldn't help it—they glanced shyly at each other.

Her body looked as bizarre and frightening as any woman's body does when first seen naked—the different configurations, the way parts are slung. Then suddenly proportion took over and it made sense.

The blood made it seem like she had a terrible sunburn on her arms and legs. In contrast to her crimson limbs, her abdomen looked big and pale and incredibly soft.

Daryl, more fully dressed at the time of the accident, had gotten away with red hands, a red and white ying-yang face and strawberry hair. His naked body was chalk and coal.

Facing her, he held his hands out away from his slim hips. "This is what I look like." In the surreality of the moment he felt carefree enough to wag his limp cock, smaller than the black hair above it. "Usually I'm a little more impressive."

Sally giggled, happily scandalized. Her hands lifted her hair, its length shortened by blood clots. Cocking her hips left, right she shyly sang, "Made of pen and ink, I can win you in a wink...ain't I cute?"

Halfway through their shower together the blood washed off, flesh coming back. Sally stood under the spray with her long back to him, profile lined up with her shoulder while he soaped his way down her spine to her glossy ass.

After a couple of swipes he let the wash cloth drop to the pink water fanning around their feet, using his hands instead.

They dried off by the toilet without looking at each other, silently lifting knees and elbows.

She hung both white towels, now tie-dyed red, over the shower rod.

She stood naked with her back to him, profile more prominent because of her wet black hair. "Wanna lay down?"

"Yeah."

They walked side by side to her bed, neither talking.

He put himself in front of her. She bowed her head, dark eyes filled with secret thoughts.

He expanded his chest and put his hands on her waist. They pressed their nude bodies together, lips past the other's ears, each reveling in the feel of their fronts against each other. Staying in his arms, Sally pulled back just enough to look down at the club resting against her stomach. Her left eyebrow raised.

They kissed.

Her nailed fingers moved dreamily over his broad back, his big biceps, his thin waist. She bit him under his jaw, nuzzling her teeth up towards the strong hinge.

They knelt facing each other on the white sheet. She caressed her breasts in front of him, fingers circling, showing him without words how she played with her nipples while she masturbated.

He took one of her hands off her breasts, molding the warm fingers around his stiff cock.

"Pull on it."

She did, alertly watching his face as his head hung down, breath hissing out of his nostrils.

His head hung lower, shoulders shuddering. "You got my cock in your hands."

"Yeah," she drawled. She pulled on it some more, long black hair drying, surprised at its strength, studying his handsome face to see which speed felt best.

His head hung further until she was taller than him. He wet his lips. "With your other hand could you caress the backs of my balls, please?"

She snickered. "Such a humble way to ask, Daryl dearest." She curled her nails up under the weight of his hanging balls, lightly scratching their hairy backs, other hand feeling his cock jerk up gratefully. She smiled to herself. "I'm learning a lot."

His breath got shorter. "Have you ever done this before?"

"No."

"Honest?"

"Uh-huh. Not actually, you know, touching it. Directly."

"What did you do before? Tell me."

She kept her caresses up, watching his cock get bigger as his body got smaller. "With my old boyfriend I used to rub him through his pants. Like I did for you in Anchorage."

"But never this."

"No. This is new." She picked up the pace.

He dropped a trembling hand on her blue-veined wrist, pushing it away. "I'm getting too close."

He stayed leaning forward on his knees, catching his breath.

Sally sat back on her haunches, head held high, hands at her sides. She felt confident now about them making love. She could see how easy it was to make him weak. She pursed her lips, feeling her new power in their relationship. Her tone was ironic. "What would master like next?" She tilted her head to one side, dropping her innocent eyes to his powerful cock.

He snorted. "Lay on your back."

She gave a saucy little shrug, shoulders so much smaller than her breasts, then stretched out on her long back across the sheets.

He walked on his knees over to her delicate feet, lifting one up to gently bite the insole, getting a surprised moan from her. His lips moved slowly up the inner swell of her calf, tasting the slightly vinegary tang of her skin, eyes shut in adoration.

When he reached the hollow behind her knee he put her foot back down, then unhurriedly spread her legs apart, opening up the slim pink line beneath her coal black pubic hair.

Sally shut her eyes.

Prostrating himself between her calves, hands on the outsides of her bare thighs, feeling the muscles under the smooth skin, he crawled on his chest up between her legs until both his cheeks were wedged into the soft inner curves at the tops of her thighs. He looked up dreamily at her. "I'm indulging myself."

Beyond the underside swells of her breasts, each spilled slightly sideways, looking flatter and fatter at this angle, beyond the bony outline of her upraised jaw, he saw her lips curl upwards.

He kissed the lightly furred outside of her cunt.

The undersides of her calves settled plumply across the backs of his ribs, holding him in place.

His tongue curled out to the bottom of the pink moist line in front of his face, lifting up through the line, tasting the cumin smell of her cunt.

Sally moaned.

Her hands settled silently on the crown of his head, keeping it between her thighs.

He started at the bottom again, this time lazily switching his tongue tip left and right as it flexed up the line.

Her nails touched down on his scalp.

Grasping her soft hips more firmly, he poked his tongue into her moist hole, twisting the tip around the wet circumference.

Sally grunted, hips starting a slow gyration, mouth open so she could breathe more easily.

Lips pressed against her soft black hair, he searched with his tongue for the embedded pearl of her clitoris.

When he found it her hips jumped, her feet rising up onto his shoulders, splaying her thighs farther apart. Her grunts deepened until they sounded like a boy's moans.

When her legs started to tremble, when the air between her thighs grew humid, she pulled his head out.

"Put it in me?"

He moved up her body rapidly, laying his hard cock across her stomach, kissing her with the taste of her own cunt.

While he kissed her he slipped his hand between the baby fat of her thighs again, palm against her pubic hair, easily sliding his middle finger up inside her cunt.

She went "Ooh," eyes shutting, mouth staying open, hips fucking his knuckles.

After a minute he pulled his finger out, pushing it between her lips. She sucked nervously on it, breathing through her nose, lips bumping over the knuckles, then let it go and started kissing his collarbones.

Her kisses lowered to his chest, went sideways to his nipples, then to the muscular, vertical indentation running down the center of his stomach.

She placed her hands on the hot insides of his bare thighs, feeling the soft hairs against her palms, the long, powerful muscles tensing.

She lowered her face between his legs.

His strong cock curved up above her nose. Viewing it from below she could see the wide sac drawn upwards towards the cock's base.

She reached two fingers out and tentatively felt along the sac for his balls, finding them under the thickened skin. Eyes hooded, she stroked them both, feeling them shift slowly under her nails, eliciting new sighs from him.

She raised up on an elbow, looking down at the thick cock, surprised at its size. Would it fit inside her?

Her eyes studied its length carefully. With a delicate fingertip she traced the scalloped edge of its head, marveling at how fat and elegant

it was. She dipped down gracefully, kissing the head at its little greedy mouth. A single pearl drop extruded.

"Put it in your mouth?"

"Yeah."

She dipped her head down, shutting her eyes. The cylindrical warmth of it pushed past her lips. She took as much of it in as she could, about two-thirds of its length.

His palms landed on her crown, holding her head down.

The smoothness of the cock's texture surprised her. It had to be the thinnest skin on his body. Keeping her mouth around it, she lolled her tongue around its roundness, tasting apple, Daryl's hips lifting gratefully.

She let her lips rise slowly off it, proud at how it twitched for her hot mouth once it was wetly exposed. She didn't look up from his cock. "Like that?"

"Yeah." He gulped. "Do it again?"

"Sure, no problem." She summoned up the courage to use sex talk. "I love sucking your cock."

After riding her wide mouth up and down the length of his cock a few dozen times, she wondered if it would increase his pleasure if she also stroked his balls at the same time. Her hand curled behind his cock.

He grunted gratefully, lean hips squirming against her sheets. This is how it feels to control someone bigger than you, she thought.

After less than a minute she slid her parted lips off him.

His right hand absently stroked her shoulder. "You picked that up fast." His chest was rising and falling rapidly.

She stayed between his long legs, liking it there, kissing the muscular insides of his thighs, looking at his tall cock, sliding her hands under him, cupping both his shapely cheeks. "Now what?" His buttocks were smaller than she had imagined, each cheek tight.

He hoisted her up by her sweaty armpits, laying her on her back beside him.

She spread her legs apart, glancing sideways at him, putting her hands on the pillow behind her, tall nipples lifting.

He climbed on top of her sideways, settling between her thighs. With his right thumb he pushed down on the hard cartilage at the back of his cock until the blunt head was nestled against her small hole.

“Don’t be cautious,” she told him. She shrugged down a side of her mouth. “If it hurts, it hurts. But I want to go to sleep tonight knowing what it feels like to have you inside me.”

He held her head by the temples, raising his muscular ass up until his cock was at just the right angle. “Ready?”

She nodded solemnly.

He lowered his hips slowly, her fingers gripping his ass like a safety bar, hard thighs descending between soft thighs, broad head of his cock sinking its roundness into her tiny red hole, cunt widening to accommodate, head getting swallowed up moistly by the grip until the underside rim disappeared inside, her hole contracting, settling around the head of his veined cock, expanding and settling around each round inch of his cock as it slid past her grip into her cunt.

## PART TWO: SEX

Sally spread her legs farther apart, widening her cunt, allowing each round inch of cock to slide forward past the anterior ring of glossy muscle, each round inch parting deeper her softness until the head bumped, then bent upwards against, her cervix.

Her cunt contracted around the thickness of him, gripping the heaviness in place instinctively.

She rolled her head back on the pillow to see his face above the strong underside of his jaw. He was that much taller than her, even in bed.

Daryl grinned athletically down at her, shoulders so high his collarbones formed a V around his head.

He could fuck women who wear glasses. College graduates. But instead he wants to lay down between my high school legs.

She looked at his naked body propped above her, down to where only the bottom, widest inch of his cock stood out of her. As she watched, he slowly withdrew his hard cock halfway out of her, the back of her cunt narrowing to emptiness.

As his cock pulled halfway out, its flat-backed rigidity slick with the saliva of her cunt, her ass, which suddenly felt plumper, lifted off the sheet to coax his cock back in her again, to refill the emptiness she never knew she had inside.

“Like it?”

The timbre of his voice was confident. Giving her body to him was doing that. She wanted him even stronger. She stroked his neck, chest, biceps, pinched his nipples, blew kisses up at his much larger body.

His cock withdrew even farther, taking its wideness away, until inside her only the baldness of his head stayed tucked.

Hard as he was, the texture of the head was silkily smooth. Using muscles she had just discovered, her cunt hung onto the head, keeping it wetly submerged.

Her heart beat faster. The muscled insides of her thighs went slick with sweat. She brought the delicate soles of her feet up off the mattress, landing them on the sides of his face, toe pads curling above his cheekbones, knees sticking straight out in frank invitation.

He sunk himself into her again.

Her ass arched up, plump and greedy.

Now his pumps developed an unhurried rhythm, each emptiness as he pulled back filled less painfully the next thrust.

Eyes shut into two black-lashed lines, she reached her bare arms up around him, pulling his profile down between her warm breasts, holding his face in her cleavage by the muscular back of his neck.

He's making me bigger inside, she thought gratefully. He's stretching my cunt to fit all the inches inside.

Soon she was enlarged to where each pump brought no pain, only the pleasure of his cock rushing slickly up into her grip.

The calves that had first attracted him, now naked, folded over the small of his back in a tight hug.

Shapely criss-cross. Shin bones and roundness.

Each big shove of his cock into her small cunt dropped her consciousness farther down her spine, towards her cunt, until he owned her from the waist below.

Her breasts rose and fell under his pinches to her nipples.

Her face stretched away from her shoulders, throat elongating, small underside of her chin clenching.

Their bodies grew glossy, the smell of fresh mown grass between them.

Ankles dropping off his back, lips twisting away from her teeth, she braced her legs far apart on the bed, cunt wide open, letting him pump in as deep as he could, until every nerve ending in her body was wetly wrapped around his sliding cock.

His hand moved down her sweating stomach, over the sparse tangle of her pubis, down to the wetness, middle finger slipping into the top of her slit.

She breathed furiously through her nostrils as he gently rubbed his fingerprint up and down over the broad lump of her clitoris.

Chin pushed up at the shadowed ceiling, she jerked her cunt up faster and faster onto his cock, taking him in deeper and deeper, until a surrender started up, an unstoppable eruption, a cry past lips, and Daryl's head curled back on his spine, eyes squeezed shut, teeth bared, as he squirted himself empty inside her.

Sally fell back on the mattress, eyes blinking at the suddenness of his orgasm, legs jumping.

Daryl bent his head, sweat rolling off his eyebrows onto her forehead. "I'm sorry." He hung over her, ribbed sides flexing, trying to catch his breath. "I tried to hold on until you came."

His cock started to soften slightly inside her.

An orange glow rose up the sides of the small green haystack. Holding his breath, Daryl passed the miniature pipe to Sally.

Both of them lay side by side in her bed. Daryl had the sheet down by his waist. Sally had it pulled up to her chin.

"I'm really sorry," he ventured in a strangled voice, holding the marijuana smoke inside his lungs. "About coming."

Sally nodded rapidly, pressing her lips together to keep her own breath of smoke inside. She dipped a flaming match down into the bowl of tiny green leaves, turning them orange again. She sucked the small haystack down to black ashes without offering him another hit. Smoking had been her idea.

She leaned over her side of the bed to put the pipe down, then rolled over in bed to face him, sheet falling off her breasts. "I don't want you to feel bad you had an orgasm and I didn't." Her black eyes looked down at his bare chest. "I got really close, but. Things in my mind kept messing me up."

Daryl stroked her long hair, still feeling guilty he had come and she hadn't. "Things like what?"

She shrugged, shoulders pulled in. "Things. I guess I need a little more practice."

He put a hand on her white shoulder. "A lot of women don't come the first time." She said nothing. "I don't know if I should have said that. Is that consoling, or crass?"

Her dilating pupils tracked up to the ceiling, the criss-crossed attic beams. "That older lady you went to bed with in Vermont had a orgasm the first time."

Using "a" instead of "an" charmed him even in his depression, as if she weren't used to pronouncing the noun.

She shifted onto her narrow back, leaving the sheet around her belly button, looking up sideways at him with her lips scrunched. "You told me."

Daryl felt the pot start to hit him, shadowy recesses of the apartment moving further away, everything in the bell of light they lay in—sheet, pillows, bodies—rising up in detail. "She was different," he said slowly. "She was a lot more—older."

Her index finger circled the rim of her belly button, then pressed into it and started circling inside. Her expression didn't seem to know what her finger was doing.

"That lady had a lot of practice by the time you knew her. Don't forget, I'm a virgin. Was."

He slipped his hand under the white sheet onto the inside of her thigh, resting it near the top. "Outside of not coming, did you enjoy it?"

She grinned, glassy-eyed from the pot, moving closer. "Yeah." She punched his shoulder. "You're huge! I didn't think I could get myself all the way around you at first."

"Maybe we should try again."

Her lids dropped, dark eyes flicking side to side beneath the long, upturned lashes. "Where's your hand going?"

"Let me just touch you here a little, while we talk." He wet his lips, the taste of the pot strong and acrid on his tongue. "Spread your legs apart more."

The sheet rose halfway between her waist and feet in double bumps, the round-headed ghosts of her knees sliding apart. "How's this?"

Under the white tent hiding her body from the waist down, his longest finger slid over her pubis, down to the hole below the boniness, poking between the slippery lips of her cunt.

Her face went still, one black eyebrow lifting. Her voice was so quiet it barely got past her lips. "When you touched me before with your middle finger I was thinking you're this really tough hoodlum, giving my, you know, pussy, the finger." She sighed, ghosts going almost horizontal. In a lower voice she added, "Really turned me on."

He lightly stroked the upper pad of his finger just above her hole, holding his hand up so the sheet fell enough away that she could see, in the pool of light, that it was his middle finger stretched down to her cunt like lightening to earth, other fingers curled into a loose fist above her black-haired bush. "Up yours."

She exhaled, settling into a more comfortable position on her back, closing her eyes. Again, a black eyebrow raised. She casually cleared her throat. "So anyway how many times did you and she make love?"

Daryl looked down his muscular arm to where his hand lay between her legs, the top joint of his middle finger flexing over her clitoris. "I don't know. All summer." He looked quizzically at her closed-eyed face.

She cleared her throat again. "She musta been pretty good, huh?" She arched an eyebrow above her closed eye.

"She was okay."

"Did she have a better body than mine?" She spread her legs a little farther apart, hands laying curled alongside her poised hips.

Daryl looked down at her. A flush had crept into her cheeks and across her collarbones. "No," he said.

Eyes still shut, she raised her chin, putting her hands behind her head, elbows sticking out, displaying her breasts to him. Shrugging one side of her mouth down nonchalantly she asked, "Were her breasts bigger than mine?"

He poked the top of his finger inside her, feeling the wet contraction around the joint. Looking down at Sally's breasts he superimposed the older woman's over them, seeing them as he had that first time, slung in a cherry red bikini top, remembering the deep, curved cleavage. He felt his cock slowly roll away from his thigh and lengthen.

"You're both about the same size. More or less."

"She looked really sexy in that picture you showed me of her on that beach blanket. I hope my body looks that good when I'm her age."

Daryl's finger faltered for a second, then started rubbing again. "I didn't show you any pictures of Emily."

"Sure did."

He laughed nervously, looking around the shadowy room. "Sally, I didn't. What was she wearing?"

She sighed, hands lifting away from behind her head, going to her breasts, fingers playing with her wide, dark nipples. She shrugged, still closed-eyed. "String bikini."

He kept masturbating her, but now he looked puzzled. "I don't have any pictures of Emily." He looked down at her face. "Why are you asking me so many questions about her?"

"I had a dream. About you and her. I meant to tell you. You and her were in my bed. Our bed. But she was turning it into your and her's bed. I started thinking about it while we were making love."

Daryl looked down, watching his hand as it moved slowly between her thighs. "I'm sorry. It put you out of the mood?"

She showed surprise with her eyebrows. "No. But I didn't want to be thinking of you and her while we made love."

"Of course not."

Her breasts started rising and falling more heavily. "Want me to tell you the dream?"

"Now? Do you want me to stop masturbating you?"

"No." Eyes still closed, she wet her lips. "You were on your back. She was sitting on top of you. At your hips. She had you inside her. She was doing it to you. I was on the other side of the bed. Watching. I was scared. She was doing it to you to take you away from me. Showing you how much more exciting it was to do it with her. I kept watching without trying to stop her. Watching how she moved on top of you, real slow and sure of herself. You were underneath her. You were really turned on.

"While she was doing it to you she kept looking over at me. I didn't have any clothes on myself. Every time she'd raise her hips up, getting ready to push down on you again, she'd pause. Give me this smug little smile. Real sly. Like, watch how much he likes this one. Then she'd pump down and you'd arch your back up, moaning real loud." Sally breathed through her nose, eyes still shut, then lifted her feet to kick the sheet off her bare legs.

Daryl looked down at his finger rubbing between her thighs.

He didn't say anything for a moment. Then he breathed in through his nostrils himself. "And so what happened?"

Sally smiled, closed-eyed. "She kept doing it to you. You got really, really close. She raised her hips. Just held them there. You were all sweaty, waiting for her to push down over you again. I looked over at her profile. I was trying to figure why she stopped with you bein' so close." Sally let out a troubled sigh. "She looked over her shoulder at her rear end. Then she looked at me." Sally pressed her lips together, eyeballs switching under their lids, seeing the dream again. "I knew. What she wanted. I got behind the two of you. I reached down. Lifted your hands off her rear end. Sat back on my ankles, looking down at her rear. Thinking how small it was. Your red hand prints were on both her cheeks. I leaned forward on my knees. I put my hands on her hips. They were so incredibly soft. Then I put my hands over your red hand prints. On her ass. And I was tryin' to decide if I really want to do this or not. And she—Emily—looks over her shoulder at me. And she starts flexing her cheeks real slow in my palms. I can feel the muscles in her ass flexing against my palms. I want to lift my hands off her ass. But, I don't." Sally took in a deep breath, wetting her lips again, tongue sliding from corner to corner. Both lips pressed together again, then parted. "Do you want me to stop?"

Daryl looked down at his right hand between her spread thighs, her closed-eyed face. Closing his own eyes, he let his left hand find its

way down his stomach onto his rock-hard cock. Air went out of him like a soul. "No."

Her lips broke into another smile, eyes still closed. Her legs spread even farther apart. "I push down on her rear end like she wants me to. This makes her slide down over you again. You moan really loud."

Daryl's hands worked independently, masturbating them both.

"I keep doing what she wants me to, pushing down on her ass so her pussy slides down over your cock. She's making me fuck you with her. Then that's not enough. She reaches back to where I'm kneeling. Puts her hand behind my head. Her grip feels really strong, Daryl. She pulls me down so she has my breasts against the cheeks of her ass. I don't try to stop her."

Daryl's two hands picked up speed between both their legs.

"She's got me really bent forward, my breasts rubbing against her ass. The awful, awful thing is it feels really, really good. I feel how soft her cheeks are against my nipples. Then instead of sitting on you she lays on top of you. You're still inside her. I'm laying on the backs of her thighs. I can feel their muscles moving against my stomach while I pump her down on you." Sally's hips began to rise off the bed. "She puts her hands on top of my head. I'm kissing her spine. She pushes my head down." Her hips started swaying left and right, face flushed with a horrible pleasure. "Pushes my head down, pressing my face into her rear end. My hands aren't enough. Now I have to push her down on you with my face. I can smell her pussy. Hear the big wet sound it makes when my face pushes it down around your cock each time.

"She keeps my face pressed into her ass with one hand. Then I feel her other hand on the back of my left thigh. Up near the top. Curling there, just the touch of it, ticklish. Her hand moves up onto my rear end. Just one cheek. Squeezes it. It feels good. Then her hand moves between my cheeks. I can feel her fingers on the little hairs between my asshole and my pussy and it paralyses me. Her head twists around on the nape of her neck, looking down at me from the opposite end of her spine, and she's giving me this look like, Daryl doesn't know what you and I are doing. He's concentrating on getting fucked by me. But you and I are gonna do this other thing while I fuck him.

"I'm thinking, I'm young, she's old, I'm supposed to have the upper hand. But it isn't working out that way. She starts doing what you're doing to me now. Touching me between my legs. Only from

behind. Right on the wettest spot. I can't help it. It's really gross. But. I spread the cheeks of her ass apart. I see her little asshole—" Sally rose off the bed, propped up only by shoulder blades and soles of her feet, the orgasm shuddering down her legs, wriggling her toes. She kept her eyes shut, chin tucked into her throat as one cry after another came out of her, compressing her face, each cry more feminine than the last.

She dropped back on the bed, legs twisting with relief.

Daryl kept rubbing his hand between her thighs, wondering if she'd say it felt too sensitive, stop.

She lay silent for a moment, legs open while he kept rubbing, upper body breathing rapidly. When she did speak again her voice was huskier, softened by the dying twangs of orgasm along the insides of her thighs. "I saw her little asshole. I had my lips over it. I started kissing her asshole. The asshole itself. Every pucker. It was such a dirty thrill. My rival's asshole, pink and small, my tongue licking it. I was liking it. Talking love talk to it. I keep pushing my face harder and harder between her cheeks. Trying to wiggle my tongue really deep up between her cheeks to please her. My face is actually starting to go up inside her. But by then it's like quicksand. I can't pull my face free. My hands are caressing the smooth backs of her beautiful fifty-four year old thighs, feeling their softness, their muscular shapeliness, so much sexier than my own, trying to keep the rest of my head from getting swallowed up by her asshole. And there's like this horrible moment where I realize that I could pull my head out if I really, really want to." Sally grunted to herself. "But I don't. Really, really want to. I feel my ears go up, shutting off the ear canal or whatever, and my head descends into this muffled world. The rim of her asshole closes around my neck. She starts squeezing my throat with her asshole just tight and long enough to let me know she could strangle me if she wants to. She has control of my life now. Control of my body. I feel terror. And incredibly turned on.

"Inside her ass it's pitch dark. But spotlessly clean. I can't see. Her warm, soft flesh molds around my face. Outside, I feel her head move between my legs. Her lips kissing my shaky knees. Her tongue moving up the insides of my thighs. I'm so proud she finds me attractive. I keep moving my legs into different poses. Trying to get her to admire them. I want so much to please her.

"Then I hear her say to you, real muffled, like putting a hand over a telephone mouthpiece, 'Want to watch your old girlfriend fuck your new girlfriend?'"

"She starts in on my pussy. Real quick licks, like zorro slashes. I slide my hands off her ass, down her spine to her breasts. Start stroking them to let her know how grateful I am she's fucking me with her tongue. Her hands go behind my knees. She lifts my legs until the fronts of my thighs are balanced on my breasts. She's got her tongue, God, in my asshole. She spreads my cheeks apart with her thumbs, Daryl. Puts her tongue deeper and deeper inside. I try to bring my legs down, but." Sally snorts. "She's much stronger than me." Sally broke into a smile, eyes still closed. "After awhile she's got the front of her face inside me. My asshole is gripping her forehead. It doesn't hurt at all. Fact is, it feels better the wider she spreads my hole apart."

"Once her head is all the way up inside my ass I squeeze her neck a little with the rim of my asshole. Just to be a little malicious, like she was when my head went up."

"She starts licking me from the inside. She's licking the back of my pussy from inside. It feels like nothing I've ever felt before. I had no idea! I grope in the dark with my tongue for the back of her pussy. We lay there a long time doing that. Two women's bodies facing each other, heads up each other's asshole, licking each other from the inside."

"While we lick each other we start feeling each other's legs and breasts. I realize I can not only feel her legs through my caresses, but I could also feel my caresses through her legs. Like we share both sets of hands, both sets of legs. Like touching yourself, but with someone else's hands."

Sally's mouth froze in a glamour girl's smile. Behind the parted lips, the upper row of glossy teeth hung motionless over the lower row. Eyes whipping behind their lids. Hips jerking up joyously. Whole body jerking up, inner thigh muscles flexing up, straining to raise the weight of the orgasm. Hips jerking up again, to the browns of the shadowy rafters criss-crossing above. Down again, ass rubbing across the sheet, putting out the burn of the orgasm. Smoldering it in sheets.

When she finally opened her eyes her pupils were completely dilated. Blackness with white squares floating across. Fluttering eyelashes.

Daryl lay next to her, cock still in hand, big-balled and thin-necked, wide, cold pool of sperm pearled on the sheet between them. "I never heard you...talk like that before."

Sally's dark eyebrows knit together . "Really? I was sayin' those words in my head out loud?"

Up from the sun's immense orange rotation a solar flare rose, tip snapping off into a spark a thousand miles tall.

Light from the spark flashed up, away from the falling orangeness; flashed out into cold, black and white space.

Flashed across ninety-three million miles of darkness, shearing the top of a blue and white globe.

One ray of the light streamed over the ridge of the Eyebrow Mountain Range, splitting apart, slanting into the valley of lodgepoles below, suffusing the pines with green phosphorescence.

A needled limb lifted, basking in the sudden warmth, a beam of the light streaming underneath.

The beam shot across Little Muncho Lake, hitting the birches on the far side, most of its width stopped in the depth of the woods by zebra-striped branches.

One fragment of the beam, coin-sized, flashed out of the birches, speeding through early morning air over dark lawns, passing through cool window glass, settling convexly on a closed eyelid.

Daryl frowned in his sleep, lips bending down on either side until his eyes popped open.

He immediately jerked his head sideways, blinking at the blindness, the ray dropping from his eye to form a circular patch on his pillow.

Sally lay sleeping on her back near the edge of the bed, one limp hand passed out at her cunt.

Daryl leaned across the mattress, creaking it quietly, tilting his head to look up between her thighs.

The top joint of her middle finger was tucked up inside. The two lower joints looked glossy.

Was she touching herself? In her sleep? He remembered last night. Dreaming about him? Or Emily?

Her digital alarm clock read 5:13. He got off the bed without waking her, not an easy thing to do. This would be the time to go to the bathroom, he thought, padding towards the rear of her apartment, when she wouldn't be able to hear it. I wouldn't mind peeing in front of her, but I'd still be too self-conscious to sit on the toilet and shit with her in the bathroom.

At the bathroom door he turned around to look back at her distant, sleeping body. I have a girlfriend.

His naked body looked tall and muscular in her bathroom mirror, cock pointing straight up. She said last night he was huge. He turned sideways, looking at his erection in profile.

He planted himself down on the horse shoe toilet seat.

Let out a small fart, looking into the shiny brass knob of the ajar bathroom door, like looking into a fisheye lens. He could see all of his sitting body, though it was distorted, limbs longer and skinner, and all four walls, ceiling and linoleum floor of the bathroom, plus some of the area outside the room, which wasn't otherwise visible.

Nothing followed the fart. His cock was still straight up in his lap. I don't have to go, he realized. I have to come.

This time though he'd make sure Sally came during intercourse. He still felt bad about that. He had gotten too excited, too close, too soon.

Afterwards, of course...maybe they shouldn't have done it like that. Him masturbating her while she talked about having sex with Emily. That was pretty wild. The way she described it. The amount of detail. But we were high.

I love her, he thought, sitting alone in her bathroom, very early in the morning, before bird song. Her cheerfulness, her goodness, her unpretentious way of talking. Her body, her breasts, her legs, her cunt. Her face on top. He nodded to himself. I don't want to wake her with a hard-on, he realized. I want to wake her with a kiss.

He stood up off the toilet, not planning to flush since he had done nothing, and nearly lost his balance, falling backwards against the upraised lid.

Why is my ass so heavy?

He reached behind him. Something cold and long flexed against the inside of his thigh.

He sucked in air.

I don't want to look down. I don't want to see it. But something cold and long has reached up out of the toilet and fastened itself to my rectum.

He stood frozen, afraid to breathe.

It must have numbed him down there long enough to get a good grip.

Maybe it doesn't know what it's hooked onto. Maybe it doesn't know about the opening. Maybe it'll drop off.

His legs began trembling. He kept his eyes riveted to the ceiling. Right back in the nightmares again.

He shut his eyes, praying to God.

Light little taps touched around the inner curves of his buttocks, in an unsymmetrical way.

His cheeks were pushed away from his anus, exposing and lifting the hole.

Something with low intelligence coldly squeezed up into his bowels.

He forced himself forward, leg muscles knotting with the weight he carried behind him.

Out the bathroom door, into the open area of the apartment. Sally sleeping in their distant bed under a spiraled sheet.

One foot tugging forward, then the other, the weight behind still increasing, legs tiring.

Don't look down. Down look over your shoulder.

Halfway across the apartment he opened his mouth to call to Sally.

Only a rasp came out.

Again he stretched his quivering lips apart, feeling them jump on his teeth, straining his throat to get a sound out, crying with frustration at the narrow whispers that squeaked out.

Because he had stopped, the thing attached to his asshole had time to coil its body farther forward. Something rough and bumpy brushed against the inside of his thigh.

He couldn't help it.

He looked over his shoulder.

The thick length hung between his cheeks, head buried up, length trailing sinuously forty feet back across the rear of the apartment into the bathroom. As he looked straight down his spine, another dark band undulated up into him.

A splash sounded in the bathroom. The back end of the thing flopped over the toilet seat, slithering into the open area of the apartment, curling up eight feet in the air over itself.

Long, skinny legs popped out on both sides all along its length. He could feel them inside him now, like gas with toes, tickling as the length spiraled up backwards through his intestines.

He staggered to the bed, falling on his knees on the mattress.

Mistake. Got to get it away from Sally.

He pushed against the bed, trying to rise. Halfway down the thing's length it humped up, pushing forward with enough weight to slam Daryl's face into his pillow.

He lay face down as hundreds of pounds of added weight coiled roundly on his back.

His bare legs twitched as more length flexed up through his asshole.

It effortlessly flipped him over onto his back. Too terrified to touch it, he watched helplessly as it slid still more of itself up into him.

His cock shot up, balls ballooning out. Tiny white dots spotted his genitals. The dots raised out of his skin, waving back and forth, eyelessly searching for a new patch of organ to loop back into. By now there were at least fifty of them, passing in and out of his cock and balls like sewing threads until they formed an oversized, finely woven white mass between his legs.

He opened his mouth in another attempt at a scream, the back end of the thing lifting mightily in the air, brushing under the rafters in the ceiling as it lowered towards his hoarse scream.

His mouth locked open.

As the back end of the thing descended towards him, he saw that its length was covered with breasts, each breast a small female face, a nipple growing out of the side of each ordinary nose.

The back end aimed down at his open mouth. Nubbled with hundreds of small black spheres rolling like eyes. Wrong. Eggs, he realized. The festooned back end plunged into his mouth, down his throat.

His chest jerked up.

The long, segmented legs pushed against the backs of his teeth, forcing coil after coil of breast faces down his throat, hundreds of whispering mouths, bent-back ears.

It took horrible time.

After a half hour both ends were fully inside him, except for a taut, glistening length across his abdomen from mouth to anus.

He breathed around its cold circumference, sweat rolling off his body.

The exposed length on his abdomen rose, flexing its bands. Daryl was flipped violently onto his side, facing Sally.

He whimpered around the coils holding his jaws apart, trying to warn her.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then one by one, in the early morning light, still eighteen minutes before the alarm would sound, her black pubic hairs lifted, swaying.

They rose higher still, until each was a yard long.

They tilted forward, lowering between her thighs, tips resting below her knees. One by one, they detached from her pubis, snaking down her calves and off the bed.

Her pubis was bald.

The flesh on Sally's right shoulder fell like snow. When the flesh landed on the sheet it unspooled into long, flat worms.

The flesh fell from her hip, her jaw, her thighs. One by one her breasts slid sideways off her chest, plopping on her elbows, uncoiling.

All her flesh fell off, exposing her skeleton.

With a pang of sorrow he recognized, from the way she thrust her chin up, the small, white mandible.

In her rib cage, the purple and red organs fell, squirming apart, skinny, colorful worms slithering over her bones out her skeleton, off the edge of the bed.

Daryl cried, tears falling on the dark length holding his jaws apart. The one good thing in his life, and he hadn't been able to protect her.

A rib dropped onto her narrow spinal column, then another, then all of them, in a clanking rain. Each bone in her skeleton separated, falling, several hundred spindles rapidly unwinding into worms.

His own abdomen fell in, hitting his organs with a slosh. Both sides of his chest slid off. Beneath the rows of his ribs he could see the incredibly intricate pattern the thing inside him had coiled into to fit all its body inside, like an untieable knot.

Eyes fiery, he bit into the length between his teeth.

The coils inside him shifted angrily into an even more complex pattern.

Don't make it mad.

The white bundle between his legs swelled moistly, big sideways movement under its skin. With a loud pop the bundle split open like an egg, falling away from a spitting, mucous-covered ovoid Daryl recognized as his own face.

When the new head opened its eyes Daryl's consciousness switched over to it, looking up between his legs past his own pubic hair at his old head, which was now deflatedly lolling to the side. He felt his ear lobes rubbing against the insides of his thighs.

His old head shriveled. The eyes filmed over, bulging out of their sockets. His old nose lengthened, softened.

His old head shrank until all that was left were the eyes and nose. The eyes, flesh-covered and veiny, dropped into a sagging position behind his growing nose.

It occurred to him he was looking down at his genitals, and Sally was trying to wake him.

Daryl sat at Sally's kitchen table, staring down into his empty coffee cup. "It was a horrible dream."

Sally poured hot, black coffee into the cup, filling it. "It was a centipede?"

"No. Bigger. Much bigger."

She sat down next to him, frowning as she pulled the sugar bowl over. "It musta been pretty bad."

"It was a dream. Towards the end, I knew I was dreaming. And I definitely woke up. I was asleep, and then I woke up and realized it had just been a dream."

"Sure."

"But there have been other things that have happened. Lately. That weren't dreams." He looked at her.

She sipped her coffee, returning his look. She reached for her cigarettes, sensing he wanted to talk for awhile. "Other things like what?"

Daryl let out a shaky breath, trying to laugh at the end of it. "This is—." He shot her another look, scared.

She scooted her chair even closer, concerned, putting an arm around his shoulders. "What?"

He told her about the three women attached to the round body of a spider, then he told her about the walking legs. The hardest part was telling her about having sex with the legs. Her eyes got red. For a few sentences he was afraid she was going to turn away from him.

She didn't.

When he finished, she said nothing, looking down at her hands around her coffee cup, pupils switching left and right to themselves, absorbing, deciding.

When she still hadn't talked, he asked her if she believed him.

She sat back, looking over at him. Shrugged. "They couldn't have been dreams too? Maybe more vivid ones?"

He shook his head decisively. "Let me show you something."

They drove in her station wagon over to his place.

Daryl put the key in his apartment door, standing in front of Sally, turning the key to the left, hearing the bolt retract into the wooden frame.

The door opened four inches, stopping with a twang. Already having started forward, he bumped the tip of his nose against the door.

He pulled the key ring out of his pocket again. "I installed a chain lock on the door Saturday morning, before we went up to Anchorage. I forgot."

As the chain swung down he quickly poked his head in, checking the floors and walls.

Nothing crawling.

He stood to the side, letting her pass through.

She stopped in the center of the living room, shyly looking around at the plain furniture, the dusty picture window, the small, windowless kitchen. He stood by her side, reminded of his life without her, dismayed at how bare and gloomy it looked. It reminded him of Sylvia Gold's apartment.

"No pictures on the walls?"

"When I moved in two years ago, I saw this place as temporary."

Sally touched his arm. "Daryl, maybe I'm being forward, but...how would you like to move in with me? Get out of this place."

His head went back, surprised. "Really?" He broke into a grin, then remembered. "I want to. But let me show you what I brought you over here for." He led her into the kitchen, feeling nervous again. He gestured at the closed kitchen cabinet over the counter, walking away from it. "If after you open it you still want us to live together, I will. I want to."

She stepped in front of the cabinet, looking up at its closed rectangular door. Her hand reached out, fingers molding around the small white knob.

The square door was stuck. She had to yank on the knob to get it ajar. As she swung the door open she looked across the small kitchen at him, edge of the door swinging past her profile, then turned back and looked inside the shadows.

The red high heels were on their sides on top of the coffee cups.

She pulled them out, holding the left shoe by its spiked heel, turning the shoe's steep slope left and right, like looking into a rival's long-nosed face.

Daryl stood by her side. His voice was quiet. "That's what the legs wore."

She turned the shoe around, looking at the tall, thin heel. "Not really my style." Her large eyes rose to meet his.

"Do you believe me?"

She put the shoes down on the white counter, thinking.

Daryl didn't breathe. The next words out of her mouth could affect the rest of his life.

She bowed her long-haired head. Reached a hand out, rapped on the counter top, looking at the red high heels. "The shoes are here. You're here. I'm here." She exhaled. "I believe you. Who knows what goes on?"

"Thanks. I'm glad I told you. I wanted to, but..." He gestured at the shoes.

"Yeah." She looked at the shoes again. "Did you want to keep them?"

"No."

"I don't want them in our home. They make me jealous." She looked him up and down. "Why do you think this stuff happened to you?"

Daryl slumped against the counter. "That first creature was half woman, half insect. It was definitely trying to have sex with me. I wouldn't, so the next creature was almost all woman, with just a little bit of insect tucked up out of sight where I wouldn't see it, and wouldn't feel it until it was too late." He shuddered.

"And that time you did have sex with it." She looked away, facial planes hardening.

"Yeah, that time I did."

"And both of those things really happened."

"Right. But last night was just a dream. But it was still that weird woman/insect combination again, because of the breasts all along its sides."

"And the women's faces in the breasts."

"Right." He forced himself to think about it. "Near the end it put eggs down my throat."

"Gross."

"I wouldn't have sex with the first one. The second one I did have sex with. Let's say—this is bizarre, but let's say I impregnated the second one."

She looked silently at him.

"Then the third one, it put the impregnated eggs in me."

Sally looked at Daryl's stomach. She let out a puff of air through her nostrils. "Do you think you have eggs inside you?"

He tapped his fingertips over his abdomen. "No. The third one was just a dream."

She shifted her weight to her left hip. "Well, you probably dreamt the third monster because of what happened to you with the first two monsters. But it was just a dream." Her mouth turned down wryly. Her dark eyes flirted with him. "You're not pregnant, Daryl."

"I guess I saw it more as being symbolic. Like it took something of mine, mixed it with something of its, and then put it in me to grow. Like it had to mix it, to dilute its portion, so it would take in me." He shuddered again.

Sally picked the high heels up by their spikes, walked over to his trash can, and let go.

The heels clattered around the can's rim, then fell inside.

"Pack your bags, Daryl. You're moving."

Later that night, both of them drunk and high, his stuff stacked in cardboard boxes at the rear of her apartment, tape already lifting ghostily away from the top corrugated seams, she sashayed over in panties and a tee shirt to where he sat on the edge of the bed, head down, thinking, and held her hand out.

He reached up for it.

She tugged him to his feet. "Hold your hands up."

He obeyed. She kissed each palm. "Now do mine." She held her palms in front of his face.

He put a tender kiss in each.

"Now come with me over to the front door."

He followed behind her, staggering slightly, feet moving slower than his knees.

She stood back from where she stopped, jerking her head at the four-paned door, the darkness beyond putting four blurred images of him in the panes, each reflection a different size. "Put your palms on the door."

Daryl raised his hands, reaching his palms out until they touched against the cool, dark glass.

Sally came up next to him, placing her left palm between his, the other to the right of his, so all four hands, two big, two small, alternating, touched the door.

He turned his face to the right to look at her. "Now what?"

"Follow me." She started stepping sideways, keeping her palms on the door. When their four palms reached the left edge of the door, they slipped over the hinge onto the wall.

They shuffled sideways around the apartment wall to wall, trailing their interlaced palms over cabinets, walls, pictures. At each closet they'd rub their palms over the front of the door, then Sally would jerk her bare knee up to pop the doorknob open, and they'd travel their palms over the inside of the door, the interior of the closet, closing their eyes as hangers vibrated against their noses, then out the closet and on.

"Why are we doing this?" Daryl asked when they were halfway through the circuit of their home.

Sally looked down, determinedly stepping her bare feet around the less ornate back legs of a chair. "We're gonna cover the whole apartment with a line of our kisses and it's gonna be like the line in a pentagram in those horror movies, where nothing bad can get through it. And then you're never gonna have to worry again about monsters."

When they finished they sat side by side on the bed. He put his hand on the crown of her head, sliding his fingers through her long, black, glossy hair. "I had a theory the reason why the third monster could only come in a dream here was that it didn't have enough strength here, in our rabbit hole, to become flesh."

She arched under his caress, scalp rotating back under his hand until his fingers were caressing her forehead. Closed-eyed she asked, "Why?"

"Because it was here I realized I love you."

She opened her eyes. "Say it again?"

He took a deep breath. "I love you, Sally."

Her eyes went large, dark, moist. Her small hand reached up, touching his jaw. "I love you, Daryl." She blinked her eyes, lashes wet, one big tear sliding out, rolling down her cheekbone, past her nostril, down to her upturned lips.

"Daryl Putnam speaking."

He hoped his voice came out deep and sexy.

"I'm glad I caught you at work. Listen. Some campers found a human body about twenty miles north of here. Their girlfriends brought it to town in their RV this morning."

"Is this Sheriff Cable?"

"Yeah. I know, I sound awful. I got pains all over my chest, I'm shivering and there are pimples all the way up inside my asshole. I only hope I didn't infect my two little step-daughters. When can you get over here?"

Daryl slumped at his desk. "I've got plans."

"Can you get over here right after work? When do you get off? I'm at my house."

Nelson Nimmitz waddled up importantly, stopping his tall, wide bulk at Daryl's desk, nose wrinkling at the cigarette in Daryl's hand. "There's someone on my line for you."

Daryl cradled the receiver between shoulder and ear, nodding silently at Nelson, and mimed writing a message against his left palm. Nelson stood where he was, swaying slightly.

"Can't it wait until Tuesday morning?"

"I need this. I should be checking myself into the hospital, but I'm hanging around here to turn this body over to you and also to bring you up to date on a couple of things. Things I can't discuss over the telephone."

Nelson leaned forward. "You're tying up my line with your incoming call."

Cable's end of the conversation lapsed into an annoyed silence for a beat. "Look. I should be in the hospital. I'm sick."

"Okay, okay."

"You don't have a car, right?"

"I took my girlfriend's station wagon to work. I can use that."

Nelson lumbered around to the front of Daryl's desk, leaning forward. "You are tying up my line."

"I have to go. I'll be over a few minutes after five." He reached around Nelson's hanging tie to cradle the receiver.

"I need to have my line open at all times."

Daryl shoved his chair back and strode over to Nelson's desk, Nelson lumbering behind. "Sorry, Nelson. Very, very sorry I'm tying up your line." He picked the black receiver up from beside Nelson's half-eaten sandwich, and softened his tone. "Hello?"

"How's it goin'?"

"Who's this?"

"Sam Rudolph. Listen, I heard through the local grapevine you kids are living together. That's great. I'm glad I heard that."

"I'm really busy." He turned around, bumping into Nelson's soft chest.

"Sure you are. Listen, I'm throwing a party up at my place tonight. Swimming and steaks. I want both of you to come. Talk her into wearing a tiny black string bikini and I'll blow you the minute I'm able to get away from my hosting chores."

"We're busy."

Nelson turned to Getsi Gooner, who had stopped working to eavesdrop. "If I get an important call and my line's tied up like it is now, does it bounce to your phone, Gets?"

Getsi started brushing her dyed blonde hair, large breasts lifting in her sweater. "Always has. Just like that pizza order yesterday, Nels."

"I can't understand why the people working here can't take their own calls on their own line. I wonder if Nancy knows this is going on."

"Knows what?"

Daryl felt the nerve endings embedded in bone at the top of his spine retract.

"Nancy, I'm trying to get these important reports caught up, the ones you said I had to finish today, but Daryl's tying up my line."

"Daryl, listen. Tell that character to push his fat ass up at your crotch and you'll really tie up his line."

"I have to go."

Nancy Costello glared up at Daryl from his rib cage, all four feet ten inches of her disapproving. "You have a call on my phone."

"So what time should I expect the two of you?"

"We can't make it. Goodbye."

Nancy's wrinkled face compressed. "I want to speak to you the minute you're through on my phone. You're in trouble."

Daryl followed Nancy's diminutive wake into her cubicle.

Nelson huffed back to his desk, making sure his phone was hung up properly. "Your friend is very rude," he called out.

"He isn't my friend." Daryl rounded the corner into Nancy's private cubicle. She handed him her phone. "Make it brief. We have a lot to discuss." She stood tensely in front of him, crossing her tiny arms, watching with a scowl as he raised the receiver to his mouth.

"Sacred Heart of Jesus Hospital Pathology Department, Daryl Putnam speaking. How may I help you?"

"Hi!"

"Hi. Ahm, this is a bad time."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

He turned as far away from Nancy as he could. "No, it's okay." He could feel the stare on his spine. "I'm in the middle of a meeting."

"I tried to get you on the number you wrote down, but it was busy."

Nelson appeared in the cubicle's opening, bending over indignantly to whisper at Nancy.

"Can I call you back?"

"Okay, sure. I'm in the back of the flower shop, on the phone there. It's more private. While I was waitin' I started to think about you, the way you felt inside me, you know? I'm really wet between my legs."

"Sounds good. Let me call you back."

"While you were shaving this morning I was counting the wet spots on the bed where we made love. Looks like we're gonna have to do some laundry!"

"Uh-huh."

"We can use the Henderson's washer and dryer though. There's a door in back to their basement, so we won't have to meet them. I'd like to introduce you to them sometime though."

"I'd like to meet them. Listen, Sally, I really have to go. Can I call you right back?"

"I love you."

He glanced over his shoulder at Nancy, whose face was getting smaller and smaller. What the fuck. "I love you, too. I really do. I love you everywhere."

"Even in your boss' office, huh? I guess I was testing."

"Yeah."

"Say hi to the witch for me. See ya."

"See ya."

He waited to hear her phone hang up, then hung up Nancy's.

Nancy was seated in her chair, looking bitterly disappointed. "Before I start on what this meeting was meant to be about, I want to warn you that you have got to cut down on your personal calls. These lines are strictly for business."

Daryl sat down, nodded his head.

"And that's especially true when we're way behind on our lab tests, as we are now. We're getting double, triple the specimen samples we're used to these past few weeks. Jasper's furious at our turnaround."

"That first call was business, Nancy. Sheriff Cable."

"Was the call you took in my office business?"

"No, admittedly not—"

"Damn right it wasn't. What about the call that tied up Nelson's phone for so long?" Her face turned fussily prim. "Nelson said the man spoke with a very pronounced lisp, that he kept insisting in a very effeminate manner that he had to talk to 'Darry'." For once, she avoided Daryl's eyes.

"Nancy, I don't even know—"

"—Damn right it wasn't." She nodded sternly to herself, decision confirmed. "I don't want you receiving any more personal phone calls in this office. Period."

"What about Getsi getting all those calls from her janitor boy friend? Or Nelson ordering food all day long? They talk—"

"Period, Daryl. What did Bob Cable want?"

He sighed angrily. "They found another body."

Her eyes widened. She looked down, caught off guard for a moment, gnarled hands rising over the sides of her lap. When she raised her stare she was herself again. "'They' found? Who's 'they'?"

"Some campers. He wants me to look at it. Today."

She jutted her miniature jaw. "I don't know if I'm going to let you handle this one. I may turn it over to one of the doctors on staff." Her watery blue eyes stared into his. "They found a very serious error on the autopsy you performed on that woman. Very serious. Who gave you permission to perform that autopsy?"

He pushed against the back of his chair, defensive. "No one right there at the time, at two, three in the morning, but you signed off on it the next day."

She chuckled grimly. "Oh no, you don't. You performed that autopsy all on your own, without any authority. You should have waited until morning. What a real doctor would have done."

His face reddened. Inside he felt hurt, outside he gave her a resentful look. "I'm a licensed forensic pathologist. I'm the only licensed pathologist on the hospital staff. You know that."

"Not here you aren't. You were hired as a lab technician. That's your job description. I never should have approved your work on her." She shook her head bitterly.

Despite his anger, her opinion of him still mattered. He felt his eyes get hot and moist. He made an elaborate sweeping gesture with his right hand to hide his humiliation. "What was the mistake I made?"

"You said on your report her blood type was O."

"Right. I remember that."

She gathered up a folder of papers from her desk. "We've gotten all her medical records, from Anchorage and New Orleans." Her arthritic hands clutched the messy file, papers' corners sticking out of the stiff manila. "Every record shows her blood type as AB, Daryl. Not O."

He laughed, exasperated and relieved. "That body must have not been her, then. Don't you see? The body we found must belong to someone who stole Sylvia Gold's ID, and had it on her when she was murdered. Sylvia Gold may still be alive."

"Daryl, it was Sylvia Gold's body. We matched her with fingerprints and dental work. There's no doubt. You're the one who made the mistake. Something as simple to type as that, and you got it wrong. Jasper and I are very disappointed in you. You will not be handling this new autopsy. I intend to speak to Jasper to set up a meeting with the administrator, to see if we can't have one of the staff doctors handle this new autopsy. I told you at the time we couldn't afford any mistakes."

Daryl spread his hands. "So I'm out of the picture on this new body?"

"You can transport the body from Bob's garage to the hospital, since we don't have an ambulance. Other than that, I don't want you involved. You have a lot of lab reports to catch up on."

Daryl went back to his desk with his eyes squeezed into brutal black slits.

Getsi glanced over, smiling sympathetically.

He looked away, embarrassed.

Nelson trundled up to Daryl's desk. "Nancy said from now on if someone calls for you on my line I should just take a message and not hold the call for you. She also wants me to ask if the call is business or personal. She said you are not to accept any more personal calls." His bottom-heavy face smiled unpleasantly.

On his short drive in Sally's station wagon from the hospital to Cable's house Daryl spotted three dead skunks lying in the road, their ripe smell rising.

By the time he pushed the ivory doorbell at Cable's front door he was feeling queasy.

The two little girls answered the door, solemnly stepping back like suddenly-separated Siamese twins.

Sheriff Cable was laid out on his back on the sofa in the dark living room, both hands folded on his chest, holding the remote control.

He gave Daryl an invalid's smile from under the quilt, turning down I Married Joan. "Thanks for coming. I feel really sick."

Daryl held Cable's thin hot wrist by its pulse, glancing at the sweep hand on his wrist watch. With his right hand he felt around the glands under Cable's sweaty jawline. The sheriff slid his tongue out unasked. A greenish-black furrow ran down the middle. "I never had this before," he said in a meek voice.

"You should be in a hospital."

"Can't. More missing hitchhikers." He gave Daryl a self-pitying look. "I can't even help you move the corpse."

"I'll do it myself."

"It's out back, in the garage. My wife's been dumping ice on it all afternoon. Is that awful smell me?" He looked up fearfully.

"There's some dead skunks out on Main Street."

Cable shut his eyes, relieved.

"Nancy doesn't want me in charge of the autopsy."

"She called me a minute ago."

"There's a question if I got the blood type wrong. I know I didn't."

Cable ran his tongue over his lips. They looked like orange leather. "I didn't tell her everything over the phone." He gave Daryl a wink. "Our little secret."

"What's our little secret?"

"It's in the vet's freezer, that's where I decided to store it, so only he and I know. Sylvia Gold's body. Some of it's missing."

Daryl put a forefinger on Cable's left eyebrow, thumb on the soft skin at the top of his cheek, and stretched his lids apart vertically, watching the eye roll wetly in its socket, veins and gloss. He tried to keep the unease out of his voice. "A cataract's forming over your left iris. Did you have that before?"

Cable answered in a hushed tone. "No. Never."

"What do you mean part of her body's missing?" He prodded Cable's thin abdomen through the sheriff's plaid shirt, watching the man's pale face for any reaction. "Are you talking about the internal organs? I only kept cross-sections because that's all the hospital had space for in its storage unit."

"I'm not talking about her insides, Daryl." Cable looked miserable. "Doc Waterman called me a couple of nights ago. He was

gonna move her body 'cause he needed the space for all the rabid animals he's been getting lately. Her private organ is gone."

Daryl sank to his knees beside the sofa. He looked warily at Cable.

"Her vagina?"

"Yes!" Cable raised himself up feebly. "They took her breasts, too. Waterman slid her body out of the storage tray, and there was a square hole between her legs, and two big red holes in her chest."

Something bulky lay covered by a large black tarp over in a far corner of Cable's garage. A thin trail of ants busily disappeared under one of the shape's tented corners.

Some of the upper folds held a few ice cubes.

The cement floor around the tarp was wet and dark where the rest of the ice had tumbled off and melted.

Daryl stood in front of the tarped shape. It came up to his waist. Using thumb and forefinger, he grasped one of the black, dusty pleats. Through the greasy material he felt something hard and cylindrical.

He felt around it, rubbing the upper pad of his thumb up and down over it to gauge its shape.

A big toe.

Up by his waist.

He pinched the tarp at a slack section sloping away from where the big toe poked it up, then started pulling the shroud off what was underneath.

The tarp was heavier than he thought it would be—he wound up having to use both hands to get it moving off the body.

Once the wide back edge slid over the uppermost part of what was underneath, the tarp slid easily down the front and off.

A male Caucasian body rocked stiffly on its spine.

Its legs and arms were bent up into the air, frozen there in rictus like a huge, dead, blonde-haired bug.

Its jaw was dislocated, the mandible hanging off its hinges in the slack bag of flesh that used to form its face. Both rows of teeth were shattered.

From the unnatural width of its hips Daryl guessed the pelvic bones had also been forced out of their sockets.

He squatted down in front of it, the bluish-white feet hanging in mid-air over his head, to look between its legs.

The anus was ruptured, the big dark hole dilated to the circumference of a coffee cup.

All that was left in front between the legs was a bitten-off stump the color of cured meat.

Daryl shuffled over to the side of the garage, throwing up on a pyramid of old paint cans, making them rattle in the early evening silence.

When he had control of himself again he stared back at the distorted corpse in the corner, then turned around to look past the wide wooden square of the garage doorway at the sloping green lawns of the neighborhood, the brightly colored mailboxes, a distant cluster of bored kids poking a stick at one of the dead skunks.

What the fuck was going on?

Daryl put the square box from the Open Til Eight Pizza Parlour down on the stove's four cold, black-spiraled burners.

They undressed in the living room, at the foot of the bed. Daryl got his clothes off first, like he always finished eating first, watching as Sally peeled her panties off, their shiny thinness looking skimpy against the fullness of her legs.

She noticed him watching her strip, and patted her flat stomach. "Think I should lose weight?"

"Girls are crazy." They lay naked on the carpet, their love affair still young. Their hands reached out, caressing each other's waist, touching each other between the legs. So far, she had only come through masturbation.

"I had another dream last night about, you know, Emily," she told him carefully, archly pronouncing each syllable of the name. Her thighs spread farther apart, inner muscles flexing, letting his middle finger get all the way up. "Wanna hear it?"

Daryl settled the top joint of his thumb on her clitoris, rotating. What the fuck. "Tell me."

"In the dream she and I were alone in a room. There were flower vases on the window sills, full of lilies. It was supposed to be a meeting I had called with her. To fight over you.

"I was going to tell her to stay away from you. She and I were in this bed, both naked. We touched the fronts of our bodies together, first the breasts, then the crotches, my body in its twenties, hers in its fifties. I pinched her nipples really hard, slicking my middle finger over her pussy, thinking that would get her on her back, that was my plan, I had thought of it beforehand, but what she did was reach behind

me, squeezing my ass while I masturbated her. Like she knew if she did it long enough, that would get me to submit. I didn't know that until it was too late. She let me suck on her nipples and rub her pussy all I wanted to while she kept patiently squeezing my ass. After about five minutes of squeezing she got me on my back. Right then I knew I lost, feeling the mattress under my shoulders, watching as she swung her right knee over to the other side of my hips, settling her weight on top of me.

"She spread my legs apart. Her pussy was right over my pussy, so close above it I could feel her hairs touching mine." Sally started gyrating her hips. "I felt wide open to her. Every time I tried to bring my knees together, she'd put her hands on their insides, pushing down to keep my thighs open. She was really strong.

"Then she lowered her pussy right down on top of my pussy, shifting around on top of me until we had a really snug fit. I'm ashamed to say it, but every time she shifted on top of me, trying to get it perfect, pussy on top of pussy, it felt like a bolt of electricity passing from between her legs down to between mine.

"She rotated her pussy on top of my pussy until she got my lips down there apart, and her lips apart, so her clitoris was riding right on top of my clitoris." Sally closed her eyes, pumping her cunt up onto Daryl's long fingers. "I could feel the weight of her body between my legs, that soft, rotating weight.

"She started rolling her clitoris over mine. We were both moaning, holding onto each other's hips to keep ourselves locked on each other's wet genitals. She lifted her right leg, sliding it forward across my stomach, rubbing the back of her calf over my breasts. Rubbing it really hard over my nipples. At first it hurt, because she was doing it so rough, but then her doing it really rough like that started feeling really, really good. I felt like your old girlfriend who blew the whistle. And I understood how something like that could happen, getting to like the pain, getting to love the humiliation of giving in to her time after time, wanting her above me so much, her skillful hands on my body, getting me so aroused, her shapely fifty-four year old thighs spread in a ride between my thighs, the weight of her wet pussy sliding over mine.

"She looked down at me from her position above me, looked down really smug, knowing I was looking up at the undersides of her breasts and jaw, looked down like, I own you now."

Sally pushed her face to the side, profile against the carpet. She spoke to herself now, eyes shut, like she was reciting. "She started peeing into me. It tickled. In a way that was very pleasurable. She had her crotch clamped so tightly over mine none of the pee could escape, it just kept filling up my pussy, getting bigger and harder until I felt I couldn't hold anymore, it was so much bigger than a man's thing, but she kept herself clamped between my legs, peeing this hot strong stream into me. When I thought I couldn't take another drop she stopped. She looked down at me. She started doing it to me with her pee, like her pee was some huge, hot cock, only her pee was better than a cock, it filled every nook inside me, smoothing the insides. It felt so good I started to go crazy beneath her, tellin' her I loved her." She jerked her cunt up around his finger, black bush brushing his knuckles.

She let her head roll back. Her big dark eyes looked out across the carpet, the legs of furniture, the undersides of tables. She spread her thighs all the way apart, outsides of her knees touching down on the pile.

"I can't get that woman off my mind. At work, when I use the bathroom? I mean I have to, I can't go the whole day without peeing. I start wiping myself with a piece of toilet paper and she pops into my mind, doing all these nasty things to me, and it's like I go into a reverie sitting on the toilet, playing with myself with the toilet paper." She shot him a glance, cocking her hips to get his finger in better. "You don't think of her, do you? When you come?" She barked out a haunted laugh. "I don't know what answer I want to hear."

Daryl kept his eyes on his submerged finger. "Sometimes I do now. You and her together."

Her thighs rose, closing softly around the ridged sides of his hand, cunt closing wetly, warmly around the buried articulations of his finger. "I don't like that. I like it now, while you're touching me, you said that and I got this dirty little bolt of pleasure inside me, but I know I won't like it later. Tell me about me and another man. Let's forget her."

"What man?"

She rolled her head back considering. "Tell me about...Elvis Presley."

"Really?"

"I used to watch all his movies on TV. I always liked him. My mom wrote him a letter once. He sent her back an autographed photograph."

Daryl looked down at his hand between her legs. “Do you want me to make it when Elvis was first starting out, in his Elvis the Pelvis stage?”

“No, Daryl,” she said angrily, legs spread, “I want you to tell me about me and Elvis when he was really fat and gross and dying of a heart attack on the toilet. God.”

“Okay. Sorry. You’re...watching Elvis, and he’s swiveling his hips around, and sensuously stroking his guitar—”.

“—Not at a concert. Me and Elvis in bed together. Elvis making love to me like we keep doing it with Emily making love to me.”

“Fine. You and Elvis are in bed together, you’re both naked, and he’s got really long sideburns. You’re thinking to yourself, ‘I can’t believe I’m really in bed with Elvis Presley’, and—”.

“—have us do something!”

“Okay! He gets on top of you, and starts kissing you, and kissing your breasts, whispering in your ear that he’s going to make love to you.” Sally settled back on the carpet, closing her eyes. Daryl remembered to rub her slowly. “And then he puts his cock in you—”.

“—his big cock.”

“—his huge cock, and he starts moving it up and down inside you. You lift your legs up and wrap them around him—around Elvis—and look up at him, blowing kisses up at him while he pumps.” Daryl felt his own cock get even harder. “Each time he pumps down he pushes his big cock really deep inside you.” Sally smiled, eyes still shut. “He keeps doing that, and you’re really excited, you hold his shoulders, and he kisses your breasts while he’s making love to you. His cock gets bigger and bigger until it feels like it’s going to split you in two. Your legs are still wrapped around him, you’re kissing his chest, he’s kissing yours, you’re both really excited...”.

Sally squirmed, readjusting herself on the carpet. She started to say something, lips soft, but then didn’t.

“And you’re holding the sides of Elvis’ face while he makes love to you, and he starts kissing your breasts again.”

Sally arched one blind eyebrow above her closed eyes. Her lips turned soft again. “Have...have Emily come in.”

Daryl felt a cold chill down his spine. He looked at his finger moving between her legs, then up at her closed face. “What?”

“Have Emily come into the room,” she murmured. “Have her come in and Elvis wants her instead of me.”

Daryl lay down next to her, cock twitching, and put his lips up against her ear. He started widening the rub between her legs. "Sure?"

The undersides of her thighs trembled with the widening pleasure. Her answer came out as a little gasp. "Yeah."

He spoke into her ear. She tilted her head closer to his lips, to hear every whispered word.

"Emily comes in wearing a sleeveless sweater and a short skirt, no stockings. To look at her legs, you'd never know she was in her fifties. Elvis sees her and starts watching her undress, ignoring you even though his cock is still inside you.

"She takes off her skirt. Underneath she's wearing a tiny little string bikini, black. It's so scanty and tight you can see the outline of her pussy behind it."

"Yeah."

"Her legs are really long. Longer than yours. They taper up from the knees into these perfectly shaped thighs. You watch the muscles in her thighs flex softly as she walks over. When she gets close you can see how silky and smooth her skin is.

"She bends forward, tugging her sleeveless sweater up her spine and over the back of her head, straightening back up, pulling the sweater off her short blonde hair.

"She's naked underneath. Her breasts are large and heavy, with big, erect nipples."

"Her breasts are bigger than mine," Sally coached him.

Daryl didn't hesitate this time. "Bigger than yours, and shapelier, too."

Sally popped her eyes open, rolling them around. "God, it turned me on so much to hear you say that."

"She sashays over just in her black string panties, and stands behind you. Elvis is still fucking you but his eyes are riveted on Emily." He pronounced all three syllables. "She kneels on the bed above your head and lowers her sweet ass down on your face, moving her ass around to get comfortable on your face."

Sally jerked up, mouth opening, hips lifting, orgasm snaking down her legs. As she fell back a ghastly look crossed her face.

"She takes Elvis' hands off your breasts and puts them on her own much bigger, shapelier breasts."

Sally jerked her hips up again, shivering, gasping.

"Elvis gets off you. Emily rolls her panties off, settles her pussy down on top of yours." Daryl got an idea. He put his lined palm

between her legs, bending the middle finger inwards so the back of the knuckle rested right on top of her clitoris. He pressed down hard against her cunt, muscles in his right arm flexing.

A look of joy came over Sally's face. She started breathing so hard little sprays of spittle landed on her lower lip. "Emily starts rolling her clitoris over yours, over and over, her clitoris is larger than yours, it's bullying yours—"

Sally's body jerked up, her long black hair soaked, molded against her skull, face so flushed it looked enlarged. Her thighs stayed spread apart straight out from her hips, small feet twisting deliciously.

"—And her huge breasts wobble as she starts fucking your cunt with her cunt, and your legs start jumping, your head starts slapping side to side on the pillow, she locks her cunt right over yours and shoots this noisy stream of hot piss straight up inside you—".

Sally's hips started bucking every few seconds, mouth hanging open but no sound coming out, limbs flopping more and more weakly, like shock treatment where time adds damage. He climbed on top of her convulsions, lowering between her legs, pushing his cock up.

She held onto him, stomach undulating under his, eyes rolling, lips babbling until she hissed very clearly, "This is Emily's cunt," wrapped her slippery legs around his waist and said, "These are Emily's gorgeous legs, these are Emily's beautiful breasts she's rolling your face in, these are Emily's hands squeezing your ass, I'm Emily, you're fucking Emily," and his orgasm was so intense he blacked out on top of her.

Came to, still pumping angrily into her. As his pumps slowed, as the last long throbs of orgasm pulsed out of him, taking his breath away, their phone rang.

Daryl reached up shakily for it. It fell out of his sticky wet grasp, banging down by Sally's head with a mickey mouse hardness.

She gave a delayed reaction to the crash by her temple, then groggily picked up the receiver.

"Hello?" Her black hair was plastered to her face, bits of carpet lint stuck to her indrawn cheeks.

Daryl watched her face, the muscled coils of her cunt still hotly gripping his cock inside her, trying to figure out from her expression who was calling.

"Yeah?" The word came out slurred, her eyes half-lidded. She listened for a long time, smiling once.

I must be getting heavy on top of her, Daryl thought. He pulled out slowly, pleased at the way her eyelids fluttered. Rolling over onto his back on the carpet, he groped across the tufted paisley pattern for his cigarettes.

Sally rolled over onto her stomach, legs splayed, nude ass catching the light from the kitchen, Daryl realizing again just how beautiful a woman she was.

"Yeah?" She listened some more, nodding her head occasionally. "Maybe. Okay. 'Bye."

She put the receiver down on the carpet, not bothering to hang it up. Using the heels of her hands, she rubbed her eyes.

Daryl sat up on the carpet, crossing his hairy calves in front of him. "Who was that?"

She sat up herself, leaning her back against the skinny legs of the telephone table, thighs sprawled out in front of her. Her face looked blurred. "That was that guy we met in that coffee shop that time, that guy that was getting fresh with me."

Daryl halted his cigarette in mid-ascent. "Sam Rudolph? Why's Sam Rudolph calling here? How'd he get your number?"

"I don't know. I'm in the book. Anyway, he says he wants to invite you and me over to his place this Saturday for a party."

Daryl got to his knees, heart beating fast. He hung up the phone. "Sally, what's going on? Why didn't he ask to speak to me? I'm the one he knows."

She shook her head, still looking groggy. "I don't know, Daryl. He just said he wanted to invite both of us over to a party he's having this Saturday at his house. He said he's got a pool."

Daryl looked at how she sat against the telephone table, thighs wide open. That's how she sat while she talked to Sam, naked, body still hot from fucking, legs still spread apart, breasts flushed, mind still dreamy while she listened to Sam's words in her ear. He must have known while he was talking to her, by the softness of her voice, that she had just got fucked. Must have known she was naked at the other end of their private conversation. "Has he ever called you before?"

"What? No. I'm in the book, he musta looked me up. He said just bring a swim suit, we didn't have to bring wine or anything, he's got plenty."

"He said 'swim suit'? That's the word he used?"

"Huh? Oh. For the pool, Daryl. He's got a pool. So we could go swimming."

"But I mean when he told you what we should bring to wear, was the word for what he told you to wear, was the word he used 'swim suit'?"

She looked over at him. "What?"

"Never mind. What was he saying when you smiled?"

"When I smiled? Oh, he said we made a nice couple." She smiled again. "He sounded real different than I remembered. Very polite."

She got slowly to her feet, touching the top of his head as she stumbled past him, and flopped into bed.

By the time he finished his cigarette and joined her, she was snoring.

Daryl woke up first.

The telephone was still on the floor.

Sally stirred, reaching for her glass of water, forgetting she hadn't filled it the night before, waking up when she felt the lightness of the glass. She put the empty glass back down on her night table. "We never ate our pizza."

"I know." He sat up in bed, stretching.

She did her own yawning stretch, breasts rising. When her stretch was over she reached her hands up to her head, touching her hair to feel what shape it was in. "I must look awful. Guess what? I didn't have an Emily dream last night."

Daryl smiled around lighting his cigarette. "No?" He waved the match out. "Maybe that's for the best. You look great. I like your hair when it's natural like this."

"I got weird last night though, didn't I? I mean all that stuff I asked you to say about Emily. Didn't you think it was weird of me?"

Daryl puffed his cheeks out diplomatically. "It was...we got caught up in it, I think the perversity of it just started turning us on, and we kind of went with it. I didn't mean all those things I said though."

"What things?"

"Well...". He looked embarrassed. "Things like comparing your breasts to hers. You know, unfavorably. It was just that that was obviously what you wanted to hear."

She raised her black eyebrows. "Oh, it was." She gave him a sardonic smirk. "Then. But not now."

He put his arm around her, both of them sitting awkwardly on the bed with the pile of pillows behind them. "I wouldn't say it now, because it's not true."

Sally beeped the microwave control pad. The pizza lit up inside the oven, a hum starting.

They both had called in sick.

She sat back down at the kitchen table, breasts apparent beneath her tee shirt, and continued brushing out her long black hair.

Daryl looked across the table at her. "So what do you want to do about Sam's party?"

She gave him a blank look. "Oh. I don't know." She considered, shrugged. "He sounded nicer over the phone than he did that first day in the coffee shop. What do you want to do?"

"I don't trust him. Of course, at a party, we probably wouldn't have to see much of him. It might be fun, just to be out together as a couple."

"Yeah."

"But I'd rather we didn't go swimming. Or bring swim suits with us." He looked sheepishly at her.

"Oh, no. I wouldn't want to. I'm very modest about my body. Except around you, of course, and then I'm shameless." She brushed her hair in silence for a moment. "We could go. It might be fun. Maybe get there late, leave early."

"We could see what it's like, and if it's not a nice crowd, we could just leave right away."

"I could say I have a headache."

"We could tell him as soon as we get there that we have other plans, so we're just stopping by for a minute."

Sally's bare forearms lay folded one atop the other on her car window's sill, her chin resting on the top arm. Far across the lake she could see the wooden backs of the tiny stores and restaurants.

The smell came to her first. She stuck her head further over the sill, looking down at the rush of road as on it a blur of black and white raced away backwards.

"And another one! I've never seen so many dead skunks in my life!"

Daryl slowed down, the red speedometer needle falling left to 15, as he maneuvered around tree branches laying in the middle of the road

from last night's heavy winds. The tires crunched and crackled. "Something in the hills must be killing them."

Sally rolled her window up, waving her hand in front of her wrinkled nose. "Maybe people will buy more roses because of the smell. If business picks up at the shop, I could ask Mr. Bayer for a raise, and that'd be more money to put in our savings account for our marriage."

Yesterday, Friday, Daryl and Sally opened a joint savings account at the Lodgepole Savings and Loan. The first joint savings account either had had. The crisp new bankbook lay in Sally's lap, open to the single, blue-inked entry for twenty dollars.

Sally flipped meditatively through the remaining pages, stiff and wide as currency. "I wonder what figure will be here." She glanced over, shy but determined, at Daryl, pointing on the last page to line 52.

"A million dollars."

She lifted her chin. "Maybe. Who knows?" Patterns of sunlight and shadow slid over the wagon's hood, glittering the windshield wipers.

"They ought to put faces on both sides of dollar bills. On the front there'd be this happy clown in one of those white neck ruffs saying, 'Hi ya!', and on the back the same clown would be holding a corner of a handkerchief to his eye, sobbing, 'See ya!'"

"Let's not stay long, okay Daryl?" Her big eyes rolled childishly up to him.

"We don't have to go at all."

"No, he's your friend. Or whatever. He was nice to me on the phone. But. If he starts getting rude again to me, like he did that day in the coffee shop, maybe we could leave."

"Just let me know. Or I'll see it's going bad, and I'll suggest we leave. Either way." A few houses, porches empty, appeared among the slopes. "I'm glad we decided not to go swimming."

Sally gave a happy smile. "Yeah." She put their bank book back in her purse, leaving the hasp of her purse unclasped so she could reach in and touch the book whenever she wanted to. Looking down as the wagon jostled her, she could see the two shiny lines of staple in the spine sparkle. "We're on our way," she announced to herself.

They rode in silence for a while, then Daryl cleared his throat. "I think this might be the place."

Sally took her hand out of her purse. "Already?" She glanced past Daryl's unhappy profile as a broad, three-story white house slid to a halt in Daryl's side window.

Tall white columns stood across the front. All the dozens of windows were shut, their glass reflecting emerald squares of Little Muncho. The broad, sloping lawn was freshly mown and edged.

"Wow."

Daryl felt a twinge of jealousy. He kept the motor running, looking up uneasily at the huge house. "There's no number, of course."

Sally flipped down her sun visor, looking up at the small mirror clipped to its underside. The nicotined surface reflected long clean black hair, ruby lips, big, nervous eyes.

Daryl shifted from park to drive, easing the station wagon up onto the driveway until the wagon was alongside the fieldstone path leading from driveway to front door.

He stepped on the wide brake pedal, a slight squeal rising up in the still, warm air.

Ahead of them, through the windshield grime, the driveway stretched to a vanishing point between hedge rows.

Daryl pulled up the hand brake, its ascending clacks reminding him of more cheerful places where they had parked.

He swung his door out. The smell of lawn and flowers grew stronger. "Let me check."

Sally nodded obediently, hand in her purse.

Daryl headed slowly towards the front door, self-consciously swinging his jacketed arms, putting one foot in front of the other, clearing his throat.

Far below to his left, beyond the perilous slope of lodgepole pines, lay the distant expanse of Little Muncho Lake.

To his right, the immense white bulk of the mansion loomed above him.

The lines of lawn between the path's fieldstones were overgrown, little chlorophyll spiders wheeling over the slates' rough surface.

From the end of the stone walk it was a four step climb up to the front porch.

The front door was tall, wide, white. A long half moon window above it reflected the entire lake.

No name, no bell.

He'd never been to a house before without a bell.

He slid his fingers around the smooth-curved bottom of the brass knocker, lifting it, feeling its warmth and weight.

After his rapping died away, the neighborhood fell silent again.

While he waited he looked down at the lake, trying to spot their little garage apartment from way up here, wishing they were there now instead, making love and popcorn.

He glanced over his shoulder at the big white door, not wanting it to open.

He rapped again, louder, since the house was so large. He pictured the raps shrinking as they echoed up the flights of stairs towards bathrooms and maid's quarters.

Stepping back away from the door he checked the station wagon. Still there, blunt and dingy between beveled lawn edge and hedge, door swung up higher than the rest of the car, Sally inside touching her temples as she looked into her visor mirror.

He pressed his nose against one of the front door's glass side panels, cupping his hands above his eyebrows to peer into the interior.

Inside, an immense gallery. Far back at the rear, past a slant of sunlight angled hotly down across the gallery, a double set of oak stairways spread elegantly out and up towards the second and third floors.

Very little furniture, all shrouded, shrinking in size towards the staircases.

He strolled back towards the station wagon, leaning in the opened driver's door.

"There's sheets over the chairs and china hutches. Either this is the wrong house, or he left town."

Sally raised her eyebrows from the passenger's seat. "What do you want to do?"

Daryl looked down the long driveway narrowing to green. "Let's drive around back. If his car's not here, we'll leave."

Sally shrugged in her black party dress, stockings on her legs, eyes made up. "Okay."

They drove slowly down the side of the mansion, both sitting upright.

Birds rose out of the hedges on their right as their wagon passed, flapping over the hood.

Behind the sprawling house a side shoot of the driveway widened out into a large parking area, sunlight on the asphalt. A white garage with six shut bays lay below the tall, sheltering limbs of live oaks.

Sally got out of the wagon this time, standing beside her opened door in her high heels, long black hair tousling in the breeze behind the mansion. She scanned the wide back of the house, its back doors three steps up, the slanted, cement-sided double door leading to the cellar. Her nervous eyes returned to Daryl's. She smiled shyly. "What?"

Daryl looked down at the roof of their wagon, raising his eyes with a braver look. "I was admiring you." He shut his door, walking around the front of the wagon. "I usually just get to see you in jeans since we moved in together. I guess jeans are more practical. Easy to get out of." His eyes took her in, from her black stockings to her bare white arms to her ruby lips. It's amazing how good women can make themselves look. "You look pretty sophisticated."

She met him by the right front tire, lids lowered, eyes to the left, hips slowed down, pleased. Putting her hands on top of his straight shoulders she searched into his eyes, craning her head back with a woman's pleasure when his hands embraced the small of her back.

Four of the garages were shadowy and empty.

Two held Rolls Royces, both up on blocks.

Daryl squinted up at the back of the house, its smaller windows reflecting nothing.

Sally moved beside him, upper body balanced on her curved hips, holding her small silver purse in both hands in front of her black dress. "We still have that spaghetti sauce in the freezer." Her made-up eyes gave him a tentative look.

Daryl put his hands in the pockets of his grey suit. "You think he would have at least called to let us know he was leaving. At the drive-in they're showing European zombie pictures." He gave her the same tentative look.

Sam banged open the back door of the mansion, stomping down the wooden steps, looking angry.

Daryl and Sally sagged.

"Did you knock on the front door?" He strode across the asphalt, spitting the cigarette out of his mouth. He wore jeans and a short sleeved shirt depicting ferns. He was barefoot.

He gave Sally a cursory glance up and down as he joined them. "Nice dress." He turned his attention back to Daryl, putting his face six inches in front of his. "Did you knock on the front door?"

Daryl smelled tobacco, whiskey, garlic and cunt. "I did, but there was no answer."

Sam swung his hand to point behind the wide, white garage. "I'm way the hell back there, for Christ's sake." He gave them both a sour look. Wiping his lower lip with thumb and forefinger he said, "Follow me."

He led them out to the main driveway, turning them down the continuation past the garage. They quickened their step to keep abreast of him, Sally's high heels clicking rapidly over the asphalt.

Sam stepped between Daryl and Sally as they walked, separating them easily. He turned on her. "I told you on the phone I live at the rear of the property," he scolded. "Didn't you tell him that?"

Sally gestured awkwardly with her hands while she walked, silver purse sliding down her bare arm. "I didn't hear you say that," she said, flustered. "You said you lived in the big white house."

Sam raised his voice. "Behind the big white house. Can't you can't anything straight?"

Sally looked away, pulling the purse with her and Daryl's bankbook back up her arm, stammering an apology. Daryl hurried around Sam to her side, feeling a wrench at how easily Sam had gotten her on the defensive. "Leave her alone." He reached out for her hand. The fingers trembled in his. She gave him a grateful look, body still beautiful in its black dress, gorgeous face tense.

Sam spat at the side of the driveway, a long black lock falling over his forehead.

The three of them walked in silence side by side, following the asphalt road, getting farther and farther away, around the driveway's bend, from the station wagon.

On their left, large oleander bushes gave way to a rolling back lawn.

"Oh, look!"

Daryl turned to Sally, whose cheeks were flushed from their rapid pace, then to where she was pointing.

Beyond a row of rose bushes dividing the lawn lay a large in-ground pool, its cheerful rectangle reflecting the high sky.

Sam spoke across Daryl to Sally. "You brought your bikini?"

Daryl answered for her. "We decided not to."

"Suit yourself."

Behind the pool was a wide, one-story poolhouse.

"That's where I live."

They stopped on the pool's patio in front of three deck chairs arranged around a metal table.

Daryl looked at the three chairs, looked at Sam. "Where are the other guests?"

"There are no other guests. Who said there were other guests?" He gestured for them to sit.

Sally settled in her chair, long bare arms flexing as she pulled her black hem down. Little beads of perspiration stood out on her forehead. "Does anyone live in the big house?"

Sam sprawled in his chair the way he had that first day in the coffee shop, his long legs stuck out in front of him. He stared out at the cemented body of water. "Not right now. She's in Jerusalem. She's old."

Daryl reached out for Sally's hand across the white cast iron table. He looked at the smooth-sided hole in the center of the table where a beach umbrella would normally go, looked at her right armpit where a bead of sweat was rolling down her inner upper arm. She lifted her eyes to heaven. He raised his eyebrows, agreeing.

Sam poked Daryl hard in the ribs. "Go in through that double glass door, make a right. There's some beer in the refrigerator."

Sally pushed her chair back. "I'll get 'em." She rose self-consciously, putting a hand on the front of her dress below her crotch to keep it from billowing up in the breeze. A touch to Daryl's shoulder and she was tapping across the patio towards the sliding doors.

Daryl watched Sam watching Sally walk away.

Sam gave Daryl a wolfish grin. "She's a beautiful woman. There's just enough of the tomboy in her to make her alluring in that black dress."

The words struck Daryl as true, but he said nothing.

In a voice quieter than he normally used, Sam said, "Daryl, I'm not making a play for your girl." He showed a wistful smile. "It's flattering a young stud like you sees me as a sexual threat, but I assure you I'm not." He took to cleaning one thumbnail with the other. "I like you. You're different from the rest." Sam looked up at him from his nail cleaning. "Sensitive." He went back to his thumbnail cleaning. "I guess I come on a little strong sometimes, but it's all an act. Behind the bluster I'm just a regular guy who needs a friend. I think you appreciate that." Sam drew in a breath. "It means a lot to me that my friend has a girl like Sally. She's loyal. I respect that. You find a girl who's loyal and will put out once in a while and you're halfway to the stars."

Sally came back out of the sliding door's reflection, carrying three beers in each hand by their necks, bottle opener between her teeth.

Both men fell silent as she leaned over waitress-style at the rim of the table to set each handful down. The plain metal opener held a crescent of her lipstick.

She sat back down, scooting her chair closer to Daryl's.

Sam opened the bottles, letting the bent caps fall. He placed the opener back on the table, his thumb and forefinger smeared with Sally's lipstick. He raised a toast. "To the two of you." Taking a swig, he watched them over the elevated bottom of his bottle.

The cold beer gurgled down Daryl's throat dark, bitter and strong. As he lowered the bottle he looked at the label.

"That's Spaten Optimator, Daryl. Brewed in Munich since 1397. Best fucking beer in the world, and I've had 'em all."

Sally spilled some beer out of her mouth, laughing. She held a delicate pinky under her red lip, trying to lift back in the foam.

Sam creased his eye at Daryl. "Guess we shouldn't make Sally laugh with her mouth full."

Sally wiped her chin, licking her palm. "I'm such a slob." Sweat popped out on her flushed face. She moved her head side to side, letting her long black hair swing behind her, then took her hand off the dark bottle and put her fingers around her throat, sighing at the cool touch. She shot Daryl a reassuring look, then glanced shyly across the table at Sam.

He looked out over the green water of the swimming pool. "Want to see a trick?" His blue eyes checked first with Sally, then Daryl.

Sally nodded encouragingly. "Yeah!" Daryl shifted in his metal chair. "Okay."

Sam put his beer on the table. "Study an animal long enough, and you can control it." Slouching further in his chair, jutting his crotch up, he put his thumb between his wide lips, index finger alongside his nose, squeezing the right nostril half shut. He started blowing out of his mouth a high rasp, distinct as a foreign word.

Although the noise was barely audible, it was irritating. Sally and Daryl both lowered their eyebrows.

Sam kept blowing, looking across the pool at the stand of trees on the other side.

After five minutes, Daryl made a bored face to Sally. She looked across to make sure Sam was still staring off at the tree line, blowing, then quietly moved her chair away from the table, pointing it at Daryl.

She uncrossed her legs, lifting the hem of her skirt.

Hoarding her eyes, pushing her lips out, Sally watched silently as Daryl's eyes rose slowly up her black-stockinged calves. The reflections of her covered knees floated up into his pupils, her black-encased thighs spreading across the convexity of his eyes, the undersides of the thighs flat against her chair, their inner sides round.

Sam kept blowing, back to them.

Sally hooked one knee over the white metal arm of her chair. Her eyes were getting glassy from the beers. Daryl dropped his look back down under her skirt. Now he could see all the way up to the netting stretched a lighter shade of black across her cunt. What a warm embrace that would be, thighs around his ears, cunt in his face with its moistness behind the rough cross-hatchings, its wonderful cumin smell. Sally tilted her pretty head, fetching and whorish, limp-wristedly trailing her small white hand up the black inside swell of her thigh, curling her thin fingers towards the stretch of lighter netting at her crotch. She looked over at Sam again and her eyes widened.

Daryl snapped his head around.

Sam was still concentrating on the property on the other side of the swimming pool. But now something was being pulled through the rough grass in front of the woods, towards the pool. From where Daryl sat he could see the zig-zagged line in the lawn from where the struggling thing had been dragged out of the trees.

Sam continued blowing.

The thing was eventually pulled out of the lawn, tumbling onto the cement walk on the far side of the swimming pool.

It was a squirrel. As they watched, its body slid sideways across the walk.

The flat surface of the water magnified the scrapping of its claws across the cement as its feet tried to get a purchase, bushy tail flat down and twisted to one side.

The squirrel was forcibly flipped over onto its back, four short legs clutching at air in four different directions, tail whipping frantically.

It slid along the cement to the edge of the pool and off, landing with a blue-green splash. Its gray body twisted in a panic on the water, trailing a bubbly wake as it slid across the rippled surface towards the pool's near side.

Daryl and Sally stood up, exchanging stunned looks. Their eyes switched from the squirrel to Sam.

As the small animal was pulled closer to their side, it slid out of sight below the eclipsing edge of the pool.

After a moment the frantic clicking of its nails started up again. The squirrel emerged, drawn over the pool's edge onto the cement walk just beyond the patio where they sat, small mouth spitting pool water, short black lines of fur sticking up porcupine-style all over its body and tail.

It shook itself feebly, then suddenly lost balance as it was pulled through the shallow puddle made by its shake. As it was dragged onto the patio, Daryl could see the hopelessness in its widened eyes, the preparation for death.

Spine banging against Sam's outstretched foot, the squirrel was pulled on its back over his black shoe and up his calf, tiny black claws reaching behind its body to grasp at the stitched inseam of Sam's blue jeans, wet fur darkening the denim.

Sam crooned the twisting squirrel along his blue thigh, onto his lap. Terror in its eyes, it started hissing up at Sam's pleased smile.

The squirrel jerked button by button up his short-sleeved shirt.

When it was just below his chin, its legs skinny and stiffening, Sam looked across the white metal table at Sally.

Tears hung in her eyes; her knuckles were between her teeth.

Around the thumb in his mouth Sam asked her, "Let it go, or go on?"

"Let it go!"

Sam abruptly took his fingers away from his face.

The squirrel dropped onto his lap, writhing, then bounded off his swollen crotch, landing on the patio floor in an ungraceful spill. It scampered around the pool, all four feet off the ground, then broke across the lawn back to the woods, shaking its head.

Sam gave Daryl a sly look. "An acre of forest land like this holds about ten million spiders. All different breeds, all different sizes." He unhurriedly raised his middle finger up to his mouth, poking the top joint between his lips. Talking around his fingernail he asked, "Want me to call them out, Daryl?"

Daryl reached for his beer. The sunlight's flat curve had advanced across the tabletop while the squirrel was being pulled towards them, so that his bottle was now lukewarm. He shrugged, taking his hand off the bottle. "Go ahead."

Leaving his middle finger across his lip, Sam pushed the tip of his index finger deep into his cheek. His lips puffed out. The sound was too high-pitched to be heard by Daryl or Sally.

“Don’t!”

Sam kept blowing, gazing over at Sally. A breeze lifted his black and grey hair.

Sally looked distraught. She threw a frightened glance at the edge of the woods opposite the pool. A thin brown border outlined it now.

Sam raised his eyebrows, eyes holding Sally’s. He talked with his two fingers still in his mouth. “Please?”

Her head shifted to the right a fraction.

Daryl felt his stomach sink.

She lowered her eyes, then raised them up to Sam’s again. Her eyes were in a different cast, the pupils larger.

She opened her mouth. “Please.” Her head shifted again, just a fraction.

Sam slowly withdrew the fingers from his mouth, laying his hand palm up on the tabletop, the long fingers slightly curled upwards.

Sally looked down at his palm. Like Sam’s face, the hand was larger than it should be, wide and ridged. It looked strong. Sam curled the fingers in several times, as though caressing the sides of something that would fit perfectly into the palm.

Sally darted her eyes away, cheeks reddening. She sat in profile, pupils rolled up, shoulders pulled together.

Sam spoke to Daryl. “Let me show you where I’m living.” The blue eyes stared straight through the words.

“Okay.” Daryl didn’t say anything more. He was afraid the fear would show in his voice. Sam must have rehearsed the squirrel. Or it was hypnosis.

Inside the beach house the air was much cooler.

The interior was divided by half walls of gleaming wood, so that from any one place you could see into the different rooms, each crowded with paintings, statues, antiques, sculptures.

Sally was the first to speak. “It’s like a museum.”

Daryl walked over to a wide-screen television set against one wall, tall stacks of expensive-looking electronic equipment on either side. Some of the components had only two knobs on their black fronts. “Seems like a lot of money to spend to get one television station.”

Sam put his arm around a speaker as tall as himself, resting his head against its lacquered side. "Satellite." He gave Daryl an overly polite smile.

Daryl and Sally wandered around the rooms, following the paths that wound around the wealth of artwork.

In the wide hallway connecting the rooms at back, a foot high green statue of a laughing man stood on a pedestal.

"Pure jade."

Daryl leaned forward once he realized the intricacy of its detail.

Each strand of hair on the head was separately cut into the green stone, each tooth in the mouth individually carved and shaped. Even the small green lips had faint vertical lines in them.

The mouth was drawn open in an arrogant, soundless laugh.

Daryl forgot his resentment, amazed at the workmanship. Sally leaned in next to him, bare arm resting against his sleeve.

The statue was such an exact reproduction of a man's body its precision raised the body to the level of the ideal. Shoulders broad and supple, chest youthful, limbs long, shapely with muscle. The stomach, although appearing relaxed, was indrawn, the waist athletically slender, its narrowness an elegant frame for the height of the erect penis. The penis itself was larger than life, the only exaggeration, yet its formidable size fit the proportions of raised muscle and long bones better than a normal-sized penis would. Otherwise it too was faithfully reproduced, each coil of pubic hair separate from the others, an intricate webbing of wrinkles carved across the plump scrotum, the circumcised head topped with a wide slit.

Daryl straightened up. "Amazing." Sally said, "Yeah," in the same hushed voice. He studied the face again, so perfectly realized he could easily imagine how it would look with different expressions, and suddenly recognized the features. Daryl looked back at Sam, who was leaning against a pillar, smoking a cigarette. "It's you!"

Sally joined in. "That's what I was thinking!" She glanced at the arrogant, laughing face again.

Sam nodded.

Daryl looked from Sam back at the statue, at the huge erection, and turned the statue around on the pedestal. "The back's just as detailed." He looked it up and down quickly: the muscular undersides of the legs, the buttocks so small they seemed just two swells of muscle curving in towards themselves at the tops of the thighs, the prominent

shoulders flanking the long back. He left the statue facing away from him and Sally. "How much did it cost?"

Sam pushed off the pillar, striding over to stand eye to eye with Daryl. "It was a gift. Done by an admirer."

Daryl glanced at the breadth of Sam's shoulders in his short sleeve shirt. They seemed to match the statue's.

"What's this?"

Both men turned around.

Sally had her eyes an inch from the statue's back, her black pupils travelling up and down. "There's something—it looks like drawings or something—" She leaned in closer, left hand going out to hold the statue so she didn't tip it over.

Daryl bit his lip, watching to see where her hand landed.

Her thumb touched just below the left buttock.

Her four fingers curled around to the front of the statue, their top pads closing in towards the hard jade.

The index finger landed first, across the broad chest. The top pad of the finger shifted on the stone, the trace of its print rapidly evaporating off the green muscles whorl by whorl.

Sally's middle finger came to a rest across the head of the erect penis.

Daryl opened his mouth.

Her sideways face intently scrutinized the spine. She doesn't realize what she's touching. Say nothing.

Her ring finger laid down across the broad base of the penis. Her pinky slipped under the full scrotum, rubbing across it as the finger held onto the inside of the left thigh.

Daryl's head turned slowly towards Sam, the tightness in his chest spreading.

Sam's eyes were aimed at where Sally's small hand held onto the statue of him, red nails against the tall green of the cock.

Daryl felt pressure in his ears. He looked down at Sam's fly, feeling sick.

A long bulge creased straight up between Sam's legs, pushing the belt buckle out.

Sally hoisted the statue in her innocent grasp. "Heavy!" She tilted the spine up to Sam, putting her free hand around the statue's head to hold it up steadily. She arched an eyebrow at him. "What's written down the spine? It looks like little drawings." The undersides

of her fingers rubbed unknowingly across the large penis as she struggled to hold the statue up.

Daryl reached out and took the statue away from Sally, hands lowering with its unexpected weight. She blinked at his abruptness. He realized he had his own left hand wrapped across the penis, and quickly shifted his grasp so that he was holding the statue under both armpits. "Yeah, what's it mean?" He angrily studied the back, seeing for the first time the tiny, elegantly drawn characters etched down the knobs of the spine.

Sam addressed Sally. "Oh, it's nothing."

Sally stood in front of Sam, bare-armed in her black dress, looking up at him with an ingratiating smile. "C'mon, it has to mean something."

Sam leaned his face closer to hers. "I thought you were going to ask me if I had the same writing on my back."

Sally laughed, glancing at Daryl. "That didn't even occur to me." She challenged him. "Do you?"

Sam smirked, lazily pulling the front of his shirt tail out. He turned around so that his broad back and narrow hips were facing her. "Lift my shirt up and find out."

Daryl moved to step in, statue still in his hands, but Sally was already backing away, smile fading. "No thanks." She slid her hand around Daryl's bicep, looking again at the statue. From this distance she asked Sam again. "C'mon—what's it mean?"

Sam took the statue of himself from Daryl, effortlessly holding it out face down in one hand towards Sally, the outstretched green legs pointing towards her ears. With the index finger of his free hand he indicated different lengths of the drawings as he translated. "Not. As strong. As the strongest. Not. As weak. As the weakest."

Sally folded her arms, thinking about it. She tilted her head to one side, long black hair spilling off her shoulder. "Why'd your admirer write that?"

Sam put the statue back on the pedestal. He turned again to Sally, flicking his gaze down at her breasts before looking her in the eyes again. "He must have thought it was funny."

The kitchen was a mess.

A standard circular kitchen table was pushed up against the one wall without appliances, three chairs around it.

Stacked a yard high on top of the table were books, magazines, record albums, compact discs, DVD's, catalogs, rubber-banded newspapers and video tapes.

Shorter stacks stood at different heights across the unwashed floor.

Dirty dishes, pots, bowls and pans were piled everywhere: on the countertops, on top of the extra-wide refrigerator, on top of even more books and magazines spilled out of the opened pantry, across the one window's ledge, blocking the light.

Compared to the rest of the pool house, the kitchen looked like some kind of nest.

Sam turned on the tap at the sink, washing his hands without soap. "Sit down."

Daryl and Sally sat close to each other so they could see each other around the stacks on the tabletop, legs crossing the same way, watching Sam's elbows pump backwards as he washed dishes.

Sally's right hand rested on the table at its edge, fingertips curled in to avoid touching the stack of hardcovers directly in front of her. Daryl stroked her knuckles with his thumb. Bringing his thick lips against her ear he whispered, "I think we overdressed."

She rolled her eyes, answering at a normal volume. "I'll say."

Daryl looked at the book spines stacked in front of him, reading titles.

Sam's muscular forearm cut off Daryl's view as the older man lifted the first pipe off, carrying it over to an unoccupied burner.

After Sam had lifted away a few more stacks, balancing them against his chest as he walked around the small kitchen looking for someplace to put them down, a heavy crystal ashtray was revealed in the center of the table.

Sam returned, setting two potted plants down in front of Daryl's face, blocking access to his just lit cigarette resting in the ash tray.

Sam stood between the chairs, his leg too close to Sally's bare arm, looking at Daryl but addressing her. "Let's see how smart your boyfriend really is." He looked over his shoulder and down at her.

Sally drew her arm back, resting it on the top of the kitchen chair. "Daryl's very smart." Head lowered, she snaked her hand between the plants, retrieving her cigarette.

Sam shuffled his body more directly in front of her, blocking Daryl's view of her, his belt buckle on a level with her eyes. "So he's real smart, huh?"

Sally drew on her cigarette, arm on the top of the kitchen chair stretching farther back, away from Sam. "Back off."

Sam leaned forward. "So modest!"

From his seated position Daryl pushed Sam's hip, feeling muscle and bone. "You mind?"

Sam backed off, chuckling, raising his hands like a hold-up. His voice was hoarse from smoking. "Excuse me." He fanned a finger at the two plants. "C'mon, hot shot. Which is the better plant?"

Daryl looked at the two plants set in front of him.

Sally studied them herself, lowering her head to see through their pale green branches at face level.

Her black eyes met Daryl's through the foliage. "They're impatiens," she said.

"Let Daryl do the talking. You work in a flower shop."

Both plants were in heavy clay pots, their glossy dark green leaves splaying out high above the rim.

The taller, bushier impatiens had three delicate white flowers set among the ace-shaped leaves. Daryl brought his nostrils above one of the blooms, its small white spread lifting with his sniff. He looked down into the fine white petals, each slightly rippled around a small white bud at the center.

A two-inch shoot even paler than the branches stuck straight out from underneath each flower like a stickpin.

Although all three flowers were grouped on one side of the plant's head, Daryl could see that on the other side the leaf clusters were also belled in their centers with green buds. One had just opened its tip: Daryl looked down into the tiny pinwheeled hole formed where the tips of the bud no longer touched, seeing inside the folded criss-crossings of the still tightly compacted petals.

By comparison, the other plant looked stunted. Only one flower was open, violet, the color darker and drier than he imagined it should be, one of the petals missing. The leaves weren't as shiny. Some of them hung puckered, like dying hands. The few buds were shriveled.

Unlike the first plant, white, every shade of green, and nothing else, brown had crept into this smaller impatiens. Along the leaf edges, in the very centers of the buds.

He held a leaf between thumb and middle finger, sliding the leaf between the opposing ridges of his fingerprints, feeling the brittleness. "This one's blighted."

Sam leaned down alongside Daryl's face, putting a casual grip on his shoulder. "How?"

Daryl curled his hands over the clay rim of each pot, dipping his fingertips into the soil. Both granular touches were equally damp.

Sally lifted her black eyebrows to him. "Think of the plant like a person you're autopsying, Daryl." She goggled her eyes encouragingly, then sat back, checking with a grimace the slowness of the clock on the wall.

Of course she probably knows already what's wrong with the plant—she works with plants all day. They both know; I don't.

The violet *impatiens* drooped next to the white one. No nourishment. Presumably both were fed the same. The nourishment must be being taken from the violet one. No spots on the leaves indicative of disease.

He put his face partially into the plant, outer leaves sliding their undersides over his nose, to look at the interior of the *impatiens*.

Here at the heart the leaves weren't just deformed. They were partially eaten. He quickly pulled his face out.

"There's something feeding off the plant." He ran a hand over the front of his face, touching both temples. Nothing on him.

Sam's face stayed noncommittal.

Chair pushed back, elbows resting on his knees, Daryl pulled his head down to look under the plant.

A half dozen snaky trunks rose from the dirt in the pot at whatever angles they needed to balance the weight of the leaves they shouldered.

Daryl's earnest eyes rose through the tiers.

Up within the canopy of pale undersides, hanging stretched beneath a down-turned leaf, one long, black caterpillar rippled noiselessly along an opened spine.

As Daryl's pupils widened, the caterpillar settled firmly upside down along the leaf spine, shaggy claws clutching contentedly along the line, head gnawing into the fiber of the spine, the faint slurping sounds echoing off the undersides of the leaves, the hooped ridges along the caterpillar's length squeezing the sucked-up fluid backwards through its long body. Its headless end curled off the bottom of the leaf spine, blindly twisting left and right with the digestive effort.

"Jesus." Daryl shuddered.

Sally examined it matter-of-factly. "We get them once in a while in the shop, but not too often. Each plant we get shipped to us, we hold it upside down and spray the backs of the leaves to dislodge any eggs.

We have a controlled environment. You can pull it off with two toothpicks.”

She pushed the heavy crystal ashtray up against the bottom of the pot, turning the tip of her cigarette around the ash tray’s rim, dusting off the dead ash until the glowing tip was fully orange.

Sam parted the withered leaves, looking in at the caterpillar. “I put it in there.”

Sally blinked. “Why would you—”

Sam stood behind Daryl’s chair, reaching over the younger man’s shoulders to revolve both plants on the kitchen table. “So which one’s better, Daryl?”

Daryl leaned forward in a cramped position to avoid having Sam’s forearms on his shoulders. “The white one. Obviously.”

Sam put his hands on Daryl’s shoulders. Daryl turned around in his chair as if waiting for Sam’s answer, but actually to get Sam’s hands off him as unobtrusively as possible.

Sam’s hands left his shoulders, knuckles of his right hand rubbing for a moment against the nape of Daryl’s neck.

“Wrong.” Sam walked away, to the refrigerator, leaning against it, tilting it back slightly. “Use your eyes! Look at how dull that white one is! All the leaves the same boring size, the same boring health.” He pushed off, a book spilling from the refrigerator’s top.

Bending over at the waist, he put a finger forward to caress the violet impatiens. “But this one here—look how each leaf is different.” His nostrils flared. “Eaten in a different pattern.” He parenthesized the plant with his large hands. “Each leaf sags in its own way. Those leaves—” He pointed at the white impatiens. “Perfect as plastic. These leaves—” finger pointing down. “Individual as snowflakes.”

One of the leaves, still green, twitched.

By their fifth beer things had gotten better. The plants were back up on the window sill, Sally’s high heels were kicked off under the table, her stockinged toes curled against the front of Daryl’s shoes.

Sam stood at the stove nearest their table, head thrown back, oversized Adam’s apple bobbing as he gulped down his latest beer. He banged the empty bottle back down on the counter.

“Who’s hungry?” He wiped his mouth, looking from one to the other.

Daryl and Sally perked up in their chairs.

"I'm fixing you something special tonight. I hope you both appreciate it." Sam leaned back against the stove, letting out a belch while he looked around the small kitchen.

Sally hid a stifled yawn behind long, thin fingers. She glanced up at the clock. "Can I help with anything?"

Sam chuckled. "Yeah, why don't you, ah..." He winked at Daryl's sudden scowl. "Only joshin', folks." He sighed at their stony silence, pulling his shirt tails out of his jeans. Undoing each button, whistling to himself, he flapped both sides of the shirt up to fan his face, flashing a flat, muscular stomach. A wingspread of black and grey hair lightly covered his broad chest.

Daryl glanced at Sally. Her head was down, eyes looking up distrustingly at Sam.

Sam crossed the floor to the refrigerator, jerking the door open. A jar of horseradish popped out, landing on the floor with a smack.

He's getting drunk, Daryl thought, putting his beer bottle down on the ash tray.

Sam bent over into the refrigerator, right hand holding onto the thick door, left hand resting palm up on the base of his spine. He pulled two large shopping bags off the lit glass shelves, the bags' tops stapled shut. Carrying them over to the counter beside the stove, he beckoned to Sally and Daryl to join him.

Sam tipped both bulging bags over so they were laying on their wider sides. He pulled the stapled fronts open. Light from the overhead fixture elongated the unbent staples' shadows into the brown recesses of each bag.

"Want to put your hand in here, Daryl?" Sam widened the rectangular mouth of the left bag.

Daryl finished his beer, put the bottle down, pushed Sam back a step, and reached into the opening.

His eyes grew larger, jaw tightening. Looking at Sam, he grabbed inside at something and started hauling it out.

The bag moved forward with Daryl's pull. Sally held the back of the bag, feeling hard movement inside. Her eyes went to Sam, then to the front of the bag.

Daryl's forearm slid out of the bag, four long, blue-black antennae hitting around his wrist. He pulled harder, two live, upside-down lobsters spilling out, their armored tails snapping at the air. He reached back in the bag, jerked, reached in farther, and hauled a third one out by

its antennae. Grabbing the square back of the second bag he upended it, shaking out three more lobsters.

All six lay on their segmented backs on the counter, opening and closing the claws at the ends of their multiple side legs, trying to turn over.

Daryl calmly raised his eyebrows at Sam.

Sam was looking past Daryl, grinning, his hand on the left side of his bare chest, wide nail of his thumb flipping down, then up, across his nipple.

Daryl turned around to see where Sally was looking.

She lowered her head, picked up her beer. Finished it. Leaning into Daryl's back, feeling his bicep, she asked, "Can I have another one? Pretty please?"

Sam got a fresh one from the fridge. He put the top of it in his mouth, pulling his lips back so they could watch his white teeth pull the cap off.

Standing four feet in front of Sally, he held the bottle out at arm's length to her.

When her fingers were almost around its cold curve he brought the bottle back towards his chest, grinning.

Sally held onto Daryl, stretching her hand out again.

Sam extended his hand, holding the bottle by its base.

She put her hand around the neck, trying to tug it towards her.

Sam held onto the base of the bottle long enough to let her know she couldn't pull it out of his hand unless he let her, then let go.

Sally tore a paper towel off the holder over the sink, wiping the rim of the bottle clean. She took a long swallow, looking at Sam with dislike.

Sam slid open a drawer, lifting out an oblong sharpening stone and a cleaver.

Daryl looked past the potted impatiens on the window sill at the pool, the lawn beyond, the woods. The kitchen seemed to be getting smaller and smaller. Sally hung onto his bicep, taking another long pull on her beer. Her eyelids were hooding. The skin was stretched tight across her face. When her lips came together to swallow, some of the beer brimmed over, sliding down her chin.

Sam held the sharpening stone under the faucet until its gunmetal surface was darkly sparkling.

Placing the oblong stone on the counter, water seeping from underneath it, he started sliding the cleaver's big blade across its

wetness, first one side and then the other, making a high-pitched, grating sound. "Only way to get an animal tender is to frighten it. That pumps adrenaline into the flesh." He held the cleaver upright on its spine on the counter, putting his thumb on the higher end of the blade. He slid the pad of his thumb along the razor sharp line. Halfway across the length of the blade, blood trickled down the tall, reflective sides. By the time his thumb had reached the handle, the sheet of red blood on either side of the blade had reached the counter. He kissed the slit in his thumb. "Adrenaline tenderizes flesh."

Studying the six lobsters, their multiple legs kicking up to ward off an attack, Sam started loudly clanging the square side of the cleaver on the counter. "Well, well."

He chose the liveliest one, pulling it by the plated fan at the end of its tail closer to the edge of the counter, keeping it on its back. Scooping the other five around the one he had chosen, so that their waving sets of legs knocked against each other in panic, he positioned the blade of the cleaver across the chosen one's underside, where the tail joined the body.

The body legs tapped helplessly against both sides of the cleaver's tall blade, small claws listlessly opening and closing. The larger of the two front rubber-banded claws lifted off the counter, looking like Popeye's forearm.

Sam put the blade down. He grabbed at antennae, knotting the five other lobsters' antennae to the antennae of the lobster he had chosen. "I want all of them to experience what I do to this one."

He picked the cleaver up again, repositioning the blade across the segment where the underside of the tail joined the body.

He slid the heel of his hand along the back of the blade until it was centered over the tail.

He pushed down lightly, the blade crunching into the top cartilaged segment, the tail's fan slapping spasmodically against the tall side of the blade. Sam raised his eyebrows gleefully, a big, thick-lipped grin on his face, looking back and forth from the lobster's triangular face to the entering blade. He seemed to have completely forgotten about Daryl and Sally.

When the blade was halfway down through shell and flesh he stopped.

All eight side legs banged at the hard sides of the blade, each with its own strategy.

A green liquid squirted out of the intestinal vein at the fan end of the tail, landing in a line across the counter.

Sam drummed his fingers on the sides of the blade.

The head of the lobster reared up, eyes twisting on their stalks, knocking its front against Sam's knuckles.

The other five lobsters tied to the antennae of this one flopped around desperately, trying to tug free from the telepathic link.

Sam put a hand on either end of the cleaver's back, clucking his tongue at the thrashing animal. Tilting his head to one side, setting his lips, he see-sawed the blade down through the rest of the tail, crunching into the back of the shell.

The detached tail flipped around on the counter, flexing open and close.

The side legs on the severed top half of the body continued hitting inwards against the blade, maintaining defiance.

The other five lobsters banged around on the counter, some of their antennae finally wrenching free from the antennae of the one cut in half.

Sam chopped off both blue-black arms next. The arm with the larger claw humped around the crowded counter top, losing its rubber band. It bumped blindly into the rocking body it had once been attached to, biting it with enough fury to lift itself in the air, the side legs of the half body curling around the thorny joints of the arm, snapping at it with multiple pinchers.

Sam snorted, shaking his large head. "Stupid."

Where once there had been six whole lobsters, now twenty-four blue-black segments lay across the counter, each one still questing.

Sam swept the body parts to one side with a wet rattling sound, moistening a dish rag to wipe up all the green streaks.

The arms and tails he put in a big glass bowl, covering them with shaved ice. The glistening white surface of the ice sank and rose as the buried parts reacted to the cold.

Sam coarsely chopped up the six body husks.

Sally, watching from behind Daryl, kissed the back of his shirt. "Did you ever eat lobster in Vermont, honey?"

"Yeah." Side legs still attached to the chopped-up husks waved listlessly upwards. "We boiled them whole, though. We never did anything like this to them."

She went up on tiptoe behind him, sliding her chin onto the back of his shoulder, caressing the nape of his neck with her fingers. "Why are they still alive?"

Daryl's skin tingled under her fingers. He put his hand behind him, squeezing her hip through her black dress. "I don't think they're still alive. I think that's just a nerve reaction."

Sam lifted a wide iron skillet out from a bottom cabinet, clanging it down heavily on the range top's largest burner. "They're still alive." He looked calmly from Daryl to Sally, nodding his head. "You may want to think it's just a nerve reaction, but they are still alive." He dropped in a handful of butter, watching it travel sideways as it melted.

When only the soft tip of the handful was left, and the coat of butter across the bottom was starting to foam at the edges, he scooped up the chopped husks in his hands and dumped them in the skillet.

As the hiss of hot butter loudened, the long legs attached to each square-cut body part dipped down, touching the bubbling yellow, ratcheting back immediately at the pain.

Sam shook the high-sided skillet, tumbling the parts upside-down in the butter.

Thin, parallel side legs tapped against the dismemberments crowded closest, pinchers waving for a way out, opening and closing with greater difficulty.

The legs of the first segments dropped in straightened, stiffer and prettier than the ones still writhing. The blue-black beneath the rising steam gradually turned rose red. All activity within the skillet stilled.

Sam let out a small sigh. "Now they're dead. Now we can't play with them anymore."

He put a thumb over the mouth of a bottle of brandy, upending the bottle over the steaming lobster parts, letting the liquor dribble down, hissing as it splashed.

Sam switched off the stove's overhead light. "More romantic this way." He lit the vapors, a bloom of light blue flame popping above the pink shells.

A scratching started up outside the back door.

Sam chopped a carrot up in his palm, dropping the orange drums into the skillet. He added a quartered onion with the skin still on and four unwrapped garlic cloves.

The scratching against the door grew more insistent.

He poured in wine and water, turned the heat up.

Daryl and Sally sat back down at their table.

Sam walked over to the door, wiping his large hands on the sides of his shirt.

He twisted the knob, jerking the door open.

A full-grown German shepherd bounded into the kitchen, sniffing the floor by the stove, long tail wagging.

He clicked over the linoleum to Sally, thrusting his nose under her dress, long snout rippling her hem up her thighs.

Sally whooped, pushing against the dog's furred forehead to stop its black nostrils from sniffing all the way up between her legs.

Daryl grabbed the shepherd around its strong neck, feeling the stiff black and brown hairs against his palms, trying to pull its head out.

Sally's chair tipped backwards.

The coarse fur wriggled out of Daryl's hands.

"Here!" Sam's loud voice filled the kitchen.

The shepherd immediately unwrapped its front paws from around Sally's knees, dropping back onto the floor. It looked up at Sally, tongue out, panting, black lips curled up.

Twisting its body away from her, it trotted over to Sam's down-pointing finger, head bent obediently.

Sally waved a hand in front of her flushed face. Her black-stockinged legs were exposed all the way up to her panties. She noticed, panickingly flipping her skirt back down over her thighs.

The dog sat upright on the linoleum in front of Sam, face tilted up, breathing with its tongue spilled out.

Daryl reached over and pulled Sally's hem a little farther down. Sally stayed flustered, touching her elbows down on various spots on the kitchen table, trying to find a position in which she'd look relaxed.

Daryl realized he was gripping the edge of the table. He let go. "What's his name? I assume it's a he."

Sam shuffled closer to the dog, wiggling his hips, until the black snout was pointed straight up at his crotch. "Its name is 'Here'." He made to hit the dog. Here whimpered, but stayed at the spot Sam had called him to. His front paws clicked anxiously on the linoleum. "It belonged to the woman who rented this place to me." He made to hit the dog again, drawing in his breath savagely. Here shut his eyes submissively, rooted in front of Sam's legs, head trembling, waiting for the blow that never came. "But now it belongs to me." Sam snarled at the dog. "You stupid fucking piece of shit!" He slapped the dog across the snout, hard. Here whimpered, but lifted its head back up to the tilt

it had been slapped from. "When I first came here it was very independent. Did what it wanted." He raised his voice. "Hey!"

Sally's hand jumped on the table.

Sam glared down at the shepherd, holding its eyes. Here's obedient upward stare moistened over with fear. "It took me one long evening to break its spirit." He glanced around at the boxy kitchen appliances. "Beat it up and down across this floor, threw it sideways against the walls, the stoves, the refrigerator. Until it knew who its new master was." He struck the dog sideways back and forth across its upturned face, each blow making it cry, but Here never tried fighting back.

Sally banged her fist down on the table. "Don't hurt him like that!"

Sam grinned wickedly at her. "You don't get it. I didn't master him by beating him." He slapped the snout sideways again. It snapped back into its upwards tilt again immediately. "I mastered him by making him crave my beatings." He stepped on Here's left front paw, making the dog wilt towards the floor. "Watch. And learn."

Sam dug into his front pocket, bringing out a purple gum drop.

He mashed it down on the wide bridge of the dog's snout.

Here crossed his eyes, looking up at the gum drop.

Sam bellowed. "No!"

The dog stayed cross-eyed, tongue wiping across its teeth, body starting to tremble.

"No!"

The trembling grew to a shake.

"No!"

Here started whimpering, tongue sliding faster. He shook violently on all four legs beneath Sam's crotch.

Sam lazily raised his right hand. The eyes uncrossed long enough to plead dumbly with him.

Sam looked over at Sally, who was silently watching, hand clenching her knee. "Shepherds are one of the proudest of all the breeds. Independent." He raised his long eyebrows at her. "But not when I get through with them."

He snapped his fingers. In the small kitchen the snap sounded like a thunderclap.

The dog gratefully shuffled around so that its rear faced Sam. Here lowered his head to the linoleum, keeping his snout level with the floor so the squashed gum drop stayed balanced atop the ridge of his

nose. His face was so close to Daryl and Sally's feet they could see the white specks of sugar on the gum drop, the whorled indentation on top where Sam's thumb had pushed down.

Daryl looked over at Sally. She had a small knuckle in her mouth, eyes flicking up and down the bowed back of the dog, trying to figure out what was going to happen next.

Unlike its head, the jaw of which was touching the floor now, the rear end of the dog was as far off the floor as possible, pointed up at Sam. The hind legs stepped up onto the tips of their claws, trying to angle the rear straight up at Sam's crotch.

The long black and brown tail curled up into the air, imploringly.

No, Daryl thought. No fucking way.

Sally sat sprawled in her chair, two fingers in her mouth, watching bug-eyed.

Sam reached out, grasping the furred tip of the tail, his body tall and lean behind the dog, his fiftyish face strong and stern. Here's hind legs jerked spasmodically, trying to raise the rear even farther up.

Sam's thumb traveled leisurely up and down the underside length of the now fully plumed tail, eyes hooded.

Here ground his chin against the linoleum, furred eyelids squeezed shut in a swoon, purple gum drop still in place.

As Sam spoke he dug his fingers through the luxuriant underside length of the tail, giving long, caressing strokes up and down. "When you dominate them...you dominate them with pain...then with fear...then with humiliation...until something gives way...and then the greatest pleasure for them...in the world...is pain...fear...shame. Isn't that right, boy?"

The hind legs started hopping up from their nails, trying to reach the rear up to Sam's teasing fingers.

Sam watched the hops with a smile. Reaching out, he slapped the dog violently across its exposed anus.

The dog ground its chin sideways against the linoleum, an obscene look of pleasure on its long face.

Sam let go of the tail. It stayed up on its own. He slapped the small maroon anus again, this time with his left hand, then worked up into a rhythm, slapping violently left and right across the swelling, split mound.

The black nostrils blew in and out rapidly. The tufted fur between the shepherd's hind legs sprouted a red erection. What started as a back of the throat growl climbed to drawn-out yips.

Daryl crossed his legs and looked away, frightened because he had never heard a dog make a noise like that before. Slowly, he turned back.

No one said a word in the small kitchen while Sam slammed his fists repeatedly under the dog's upturned tail, while Sally and Daryl watched, while the stock pot's surface rose up with bubbles.

It was impossible to tell how close the dog was to coming. With its strained face, the desperately hopping hind legs, the fully erect redness, the dog seemed to hover on the verge of orgasm forever.

When all five of Sally's fingers were in her mouth the dog suddenly slammed its penis down on the floor, lifting it and wetly slapping it down again, over and over, until it lost the last of its strength, settling down with rubbery legs, laying on its cock.

Sally twisted her face away from the exhausted animal, pulling her hand out of her mouth. "Gross!"

Sam strolled around to the front of the shepherd, letting it catch its breath for a moment, then raised his hand and snapped his fingers a second time.

The dog opened its dazed eyes, jerked its snout up to send the gum drop into the air, and gobbled it on the descent. Here crawled on its wet stomach over to Sam, gratefully licking the fronts of his shoes, then slunk out the door it had entered through.

Gluey clumps of sperm lay smeared across the linoleum squares where the dog had collapsed in orgasm, fur patterns spread across the viscosity.

Sally jiggled a cigarette out of her pack, several others spilling out. She brought it up to her mouth. The filter poked into her lower lip. Her eyes blinked dumbly. Looking down her face, she directed her hand to put the cigarette in her mouth, lit her lighter, touched the flame to the cigarette's open end.

Sam stood in front of her, big hands on his narrow hips.

From where Daryl sat he could see both Sally's eyes and the front of Sam's pants.

A long, thick bulge crossed underneath the zipper of the older man's pants.

Under Sally's wide, black eyebrows, the feature that to Daryl transformed her face from pretty to beautiful, her dark eyes were indrawn, thinking thoughts.

Sam kept his crotch in front of her face.

Daryl worriedly watched Sally's eyes. The big black pupils were still indrawn. As he watched, their border grew more definite, convexity at the center swelling, and her gaze flicked out into the world again. From her pupil's angle he could tell that what she saw in front of her was Sam's belt buckle. Its brass hung like upside down tracery in her pupils' gleam. He felt his heart beat faster, his face heat up.

Recognizing the belt buckle for what it was, her black pupils hesitated, then drew into themselves again. Their gaze went out a second time. The pupils stayed still a moment, white parallelograms of light sliding over the black convexity, then with the slowest roll possible they shifted slightly down. They fled to the left, then immediately returned to exactly where they had been pointing.

Daryl felt his cock swell thickly down his leg.

The pupils flicked all the way down.

They looked to the left, then came back, this time lowering more slowly.

Daryl watched, heart beating rapidly, as the blackness of the pupils widened. The cast to the focus changed as the eyes went into their own thoughts again. Daryl remembered that first day in the coffee shop, the way one crossed leg lifted on the other while Sam flirted with her.

The pupils came out of their reverie, darting rapidly around the area of Sam's pants, her lips turning down with distrust and dislike, but her eyes dully settling on his crotch again, measuring the size again despite herself.

Daryl looked up at Sam. Up past the belt buckle, up past the opened shirt, up past the bony underside of the jaw. Sam gazed down into Daryl's eyes with the look of someone in the middle of a sex act.

Sam moved his body more directly in front of Sally's face, blocking out Daryl's view of her, so that all Daryl could see where Sally's face had been was Sam's tightly encased denim ass.

He heard Sam say, "You have an ash on your face," and saw Sam's left hand lower.

Daryl stood up.

Sam touched his fingertips to Sally's cheek, gently rubbing away the ash streak. She crossed her legs, looking up at him as though ready to flinch, her eyes blinking rapidly, mouth downturned.

Sam's fingers traveled behind her ear, along her hairline towards the nape of neck, fingertips stroking.

Sally moved back in her chair, using her elbow to push Sam's hand away. "Cut it out!" Her eyebrows drew together. Goosebumps stood out on her bare arms.

Sam smiled at Daryl, gaze slightly drunk. "Got a live one, Daryl."

He went back to the stove, stirring the stock. "Another beer?"

Daryl sat down again, feeling the evening was getting away from him.

Sally met his eyes, then looked away.

Sam called over his broad shoulder again. "You two love birds want another beer, or what?"

Sally shrugged unhappily. "Okay."

"Go fetch them while I do this."

Sally nodded obediently, getting up.

While she was bent forward into the brightness of the refrigerator, Daryl looked up and down the back of her, the long black hair, slim waist, the shapely, black-stockinged legs, appreciating her beauty as any man would, but beyond that appreciating her beauty as only the boyfriend of a girl appreciated by other men can.

Sally uncapped all three bottles at the sink, then shuffled in her stockinged feet over to where Sam stood at the stove, bracing herself.

Sam took the bottle from her. His voice was deep and soft. "Thanks, Sally."

She looked caught off guard. Turning around, confused, she brought the other two bottles over to the kitchen table, setting them down without looking at Daryl. Sitting, she started in on her new bottle right away.

When the stock was a rose red, Sam strained it through a sieved cone into a glass bowl, its sides immediately clouding, then spilled the liquid back into the skillet. He cranked the heat up, stirring with a wooden spoon until the stock was reduced to a syrup.

Sally got to her feet, knocking her empty beer bottle over. She giggled at Daryl, raising a vague hand. "I have really got to pee."

Sam stopped stirring long enough to turn around. "Know where it is?"

She stuck her chin out. "No."

Sam lifted the skillet, banging it down on a cold burner. "I'll show you."

Daryl got to his feet.

Sam looked amused. "What are you, her bodyguard?"

“Maybe.”

The three of them went through the pool house to a plain door at the other end. Sam opened it, reaching inside to flick on the light.

Brightness popped out from the shiny surfaces inside, sink, toilet, shower.

“Thanks.” Sally started forward, bumping her shoulder against the jamb. Daryl closed the door for her.

Sam leaned against the opposite hallway wall, looking large. “We might as well wait. Your girlfriend’s a little drunk.”

Daryl held Sam’s mocking gaze. “She’ll be okay.”

The muffled sound of urine falling into water started from behind the door.

Sam put his right hand between his legs, rubbing his cock through the pants material, sucking in breath, smiling. “Oh, to be toilet paper.”

Daryl lost his temper. “We won’t be staying for dinner. We’re leaving as soon as Sally opens the door.”

Sam leaned the backs of his wide shoulders against the bone white wall, moving his hand more slowly between his legs as the noise of Sally’s peeing continued. He wrinkled his nose. “You’re not leaving, Daryl. Just like you didn’t leave any other time we got together, just like you didn’t leave any earlier point this evening. It’s not your nature. You’ll sit through any abuse I put out, because this is different.” The older man’s eyes regarded him. “If you leave now, what would you two do? Go back to your little apartment and watch TV? There’s nothing new happening in your apartment, Daryl. Not now that you’ve fucked her. No danger, no excitement, no fear of the unknown.” Sam stopped massaging his cock. “You won’t leave yet. You want to find out where this is going first. Where she and I and you are going.”

Daryl didn’t like the sequence of the pronouns.

Sam pushed off the wall, turning his back to Daryl, heading down the hallway.

Daryl was left alone.

He looked at the bathroom door, looked down the now deserted hallway.

He headed back towards the kitchen, but only to finish the argument.

Sam was standing at the wiped kitchen counter by the stove, a dozen jars and bottles in front of him. Using a ringed set of metal measuring spoons he scooped different quantities from each container, dropping the spoonfuls into a white porcelain ramekin.

The different-sized, different-colored piles of spices and dried herbs lay over each other in the glossy white ramekin like a desert diorama.

Daryl poked him hard in the shoulder. "Leave her alone."

Sam turned around, swinging his face up against Daryl's so close Daryl could see the two funhouse mirror images of himself hanging upside down in Sam's big, black pupils.

Sam brought the middle finger of his right hand up to his mouth, knuckles grazing Daryl's jaw. The top of the finger was encrusted with the different-colored herbs and spices. He flexed his wide lips into a small, muscle-ridged circle, sliding the top joint of his finger into the hole.

From out of the rear darkness of Sam's mouth the pink tip of his tongue coiled up into view, sliding across the manicured nail.

The backs of his lips tingled with the complex taste. His tongue tip licked the taste farther back into his mouth, summoning up the memories of so, so many meals, tip curling as the taste seeped to the top of his throat. A swallow brought the taste down his esophagus, ground peppers in the swallow warming the back of his Adam's apple. The taste dripped off the bottom of his esophagus into the soft sac of his stomach, the spices contracting the violet-streaked crimson walls of his stomach enough to push a pellet of digested food into his opening duodenum. Enough spice was in that pellet that the duodenum, with a simple flex, slid it along into the more alkaline mix of the large intestine. From there it floated slowly through, into the ribbed coils of the small intestine, drifting and dissolving down the convolutions, shredding to one final ruby drop which silently fell out of the puckered flexure at the end of the small intestine, riding into the rectum. Just enough spice was left in that final drop to summon up, from where it landed, a small gas bubble, curved walls cupping oxygen exuded from blood, shivering within the red hush of body darkness. The back of the rectum contracted, bouncing the bubble towards the sphincter, shimmering, the sphincter flexing into a small, muscle-ridged hole propelling the bubble out against air, against the black silk underpants.

The thing beside him reared the top front of itself away. One more secret for us to share, this fart between us while the thing with the breasts pissed out of the hole between its legs elsewhere here.

Sally appeared in the doorway, looking glassy-eyed. "I'm kinda drunk."

Sam tapped his wooden spoon against the rim of the skillet, eyes flicking up and down her slouched body. "Let's go for a swim before dinner. It'll clear our heads."

She shuffled over to her chair, sitting down at what looked like an uncomfortable angle, black dress twisted around on her body.

Daryl watched as she impatiently hit the top of her pack of Salems against the table edge, crinkling one corner, trying to shake a cigarette loose. When one did slide partially out, her next slam snapped its filter off.

She pushed the pack across the stacks still on the table at Daryl as he sat down, the snapped filter wagging tobacco bits out onto the table's surface. "Stupid cigarettes."

Sam stood behind Daryl's chair, lightly massaging Daryl's shoulders. "A swim will clear our heads. The water's nice and cool."

Sally stared at the linoleum squares on the floor, the same shadows on her face she always got when she was in a bad mood. Her dress had ridden up under her legs when she sat down, rippling the front of her dress across her lap.

Daryl handed her a lit Salem. She started puffing continuously on it. "We didn't bring any swimsuits with us." She slid her baleful eyes towards Daryl.

Daryl said nothing, eyes down, it being crucial to him that she be the one to reject swimming.

Sam's hands held onto Daryl's shoulders. The tapered fronts of his eyebrows bulged forward as he grinned. "So modest! Who needs swimsuits? Haven't you ever skinny-dipped before?"

Daryl, seated, turned around in Sam's grasp. "We don't want to skinny dip."

Sam held onto Daryl's shoulders, leaning forward above his head, muscular tautness of his stomach resting against the crown of Daryl's head. "Sally? Whattaya say? Wanna skinny dip? Wanna be bad?"

Daryl held his breath, looking over at his fiancée.

She slumped back in her chair, rubbing her eyes, acting like she was up past her bedtime. "I wanna eat."

Sam looked offended. His voice was plaintive. "We can eat later. With towels around our shoulders."

She glared up at him, eyes bloodshot. "I wanna eat now."

"Daryl, you're really tense." Daryl felt Sam's thumbs dig into the thick vertical bands of muscle flanking his neck, making his forehead crawl. "Relax." Sam's middle fingers slid slowly back and forth

across Daryl's collar bones with light, soothing touches. Daryl pulled free from the caresses, feeling embarrassed. "Is that stuff ready yet?"

"By 'that stuff' I suppose you mean the gourmet meal I've been slaving over while you two got smashed." Sam rummaged under several counters, clanging their contents around, then brought out a huge, stainless steel electric pot. He set it down on the table between Daryl and Sally. Daryl had to sit more erect to see Sally over the shiny rim.

Sam's forearm brushed across Daryl's eyes as he pushed the large black plug into the wall socket, a stack of magazines the forearm banged against tilting right, glossy covers sliding off themselves to the floor.

Sally's eyebrows jumped at the slip-a-slap noise of the magazines falling.

"I'll pick them up later." Sam fiddled with the control knob on the pot, setting it to high. Daryl felt a warmth start to radiate towards him from the footed pot.

Both he and Sally sat with their hands in their laps while Sam placed bowls of ingredients around the tall, reflective sides of the pot.

Sally sat up straighter at the smell of heated metal, shooting Sam's back a dirty look as he bent into the refrigerator to retrieve the iced lobster pieces, then rolled her eyes at Daryl. Some of the color came back into her face.

Daryl grinned at her and winked, feeling relieved.

She winked back, eye closing with a deliberateness brought about by drink, each lateral wrinkle of the upper lid only gradually smoothing out as the line of long lashes lowered in slow motion, but that was okay, it made the wink all the more sincere, a slowed-down wink to be remembered forever.

She leaned forward over the tabletop alongside the heat of the pot as far as she could, creating with her enlarged face an intimacy, speaking in a conspiratorial, low voice. "I keep thinking about that pizza we've got in our freezer."

Our home, our kitchen, our freezer, our spaghetti sauce. The table was too cluttered for their hands to meet. Daryl pushed his feet forward until the fronts touched her stockinged toes.

Sam moseyed over with a small gilt-edged saucer stacked with square slabs of butter.

"Midnight snack," Daryl whispered back, pleased to see the confused look on Sam's face.

Sam dropped two cut-up sticks of butter into the pot. They slid sideways across the stainless steel surface, trailing yellow plumes. When each stick was half melted he picked the pot up by its black plastic side handles, swirling the pot, the chopped butter skidding across its own melted pool, leaving a golden trail already bubbling.

When the butter was almost completely liquid Sam picked up the porcelain ramekin.

All three watched the few soft yellow lines left above the bubbling melt.

Sally pointed at the one on the far left. "I betcha that one stays the longest."

Half its length had melted into the golden pool already. As they watched, its sharp-edged sides rounded, dissolving away. A different shade of yellow appeared in the middle of the short slant of butter left. A golden hole developed. Soon all that was left was a thin kidney shape. A yellow bubble popped out of it, and the dab slid apart into the hot golden pool.

All the other squares had already disappeared.

"I win!" She blew Daryl a kiss.

Sam held the ramekin of spices and herbs over the bubbling pot of butter, glancing from Sally to Daryl, trying to get their attention back on him. "Smell this," he bragged.

He turned the ramekin upside-down.

The green-grey herbs, which had been on top, fell out first, but then separate sheets of black, red and white peppers passed through the tiny leaves, ground grains trembling the leaves aside so the grains hung in their fall below the flat cloud of herbs. As the peppers' three colors splashed down into the butter, immediately staining it, a soft spearhead of salt pierced through the herbs, landing next with the leaves of oregano, thyme, basil swirling down on top of the white collapse into the golden bubbles.

The aroma from the instant transformation by heat of all the herbs and spices wafted up powerfully past the top of the pot. Each person's first inhalation pulled in a complex hot mingling in which the combined smell gradually receded through each ingredient's separate scent.

All three rolled their heads back on their necks.

"Ah!"

Sam worked fast, picking up handfuls of wild mushrooms, chopping his knife's blade down into each handful, relaxing his fingers after each chopping to let the thick, outlined caps fall into the pot.

Surface of the reddened butter afloat with cross-sectioned mushrooms, Sam tilted the bowl of lobster parts over the pot, raking them out.

Claws and tails rattled heavily into the brew, sea-dark emerald of their prickly shells brightening to a cheerful red.

Sally perked up, looking to see what was left in the bowls to add.

Sam lifted the pot and shook it, black cord slapping between two book piles like an angry tail. The herb and spice flavored butter sloshed over the shells' thorns, leaving an ebb of speckled gloss.

He dumped a ramekin half full of minced garlic into the mixture, sighing to himself as the moist pile, submerging into the sauce, released its aroma. "The world would be a dreary place without garlic, breasts and marijuana."

He tapped his elbow against Sally's shoulder, eyes on the lobster chunks as juice and butter started trickling out of their red and white meat. "Push all these books and disks off the table."

Sally gave him a startled look, then timidly pushed one book off the edge. It landed on its spine against the baseboard heater, fanning its pages in an exhibition of its contents.

Her eyes checked with Sam to make sure that was what he wanted. He bugged his eyes back at her, impatient.

She started at the top of a stack, pushing it off book by book. "Whee!" Halfway down, she pushed the rest of the stack off. Daryl slid his feet out of the way. She giggled.

Putting both palms forward, calculating how much strength she would need, she bulldozed into the different heights and widths, spilling the stacks off, knees banging the underside of the table.

The stacks landed, sliding apart, spilling across the linoleum to the stove.

Sally laughed, drumming her hands on the tabletop. She kicked her feet free from the rectangular debris covering them. Tilting her head shyly, she looked up at Sam. "That was fun."

Sam poured a rich, silky stream of stock into the hot mixture. "Destruction."

Sam and Daryl carried the round table out into the middle of the small kitchen, away from the spilled-over stacks of books, discs and magazines.

Sam sat for the first time at the table, at a point equidistant between Sally and Daryl. Daryl moved his chair around the table, closer to Sally.

Each had in front of them a wide, shallow green and white china bowl. The design in the bowl was of an elaborately drawn dragon, wings and claws continuing up over the broad rim, down the outside. Each bowl was two-thirds full, lobster chunks still in their thorny shells rising up out of the thick, rich sauce.

Sam tore a long loaf of French bread into thirds, passing the portions around. "Use your fingers with the lobster. Scoop up the sauce and mushrooms with the bread."

Daryl chose a lobster tail first. The butter sauce was hot around his fingertips as he pushed his thumbs down along the underside cartilage, splitting it open. Cooked the way it had been, the lobster chopped up while still alive, the meat, rather than sliding out, stuck to the interior configurations of the shell. He tore a large chunk of the red and white meat free, swirling it around in the sauce, which clacked the remaining pieces about, then brought the dripping chunk up to his mouth.

He bit down into the red-rimmed, pure white meat, hot butter and juice flowing over his teeth and tongue.

Sally grinned bright-eyed at Daryl, swirling her lipstick-stained hunk of bread around in the sauce.

When the wide, white plate at the center of the table was piled high with emptied lobster shells, and each bowl had been wiped clean, revealing again the green and white dragon, Sam asked Sally to clear the table. While she did, he brought out three wine glasses and a tall, dark bottle.

He poured them each a half-filled glass.

Daryl kept his lips closed against a buttery burp, then sniffed the wine. "What is it?"

"Madeira." Sam lit another cigarette.

Sally leaned her head forward over the tabletop, looking at Sam's wide, flat cigarette pack. "What have you been smoking?"

Sam pushed the pack over to her. She picked it up, surprised to see it was made of tin. She read the black writing. "Balkan Sabranis. These are probably the best cigarettes in the world too, right?"

Sam grunted, pleased. "I think so."

She opened the box on its back hinges. The cigarettes lay neatly on foil in a single layer. Unfiltered, with a more oval shape than American cigarettes. She looked up at Sam. "May I?"

"Of course."

Still leaning forward over the table she turned to Daryl, long black hair swinging. "Daryl, do you want one?"

Daryl shrugged.

Sally carefully picked a cigarette up out of the neat row, looking it over before putting one end in her mouth. Eyes to the left, she felt at the roundness of the cigarette with her lips. "They're firmer and harder than American cigarettes."

"They pack 'em in tight." Sam pulled out a gold lighter, flicking it, but Daryl got there first with a match.

Sally drew in her first taste. The lit end barely reddened. She offered it to Daryl, who shook his head. "It has a really strong tobacco taste." She held the cigarette sideways, looking at it. "How come it burns so slow?"

"They're not treated with the chemicals American cigarettes are. Keep the pack. I've got plenty."

She put them in her purse. Daryl picked up his Winston, knocking the asparagus tip of ash off against the side of the crystal ashtray. "Where are you from, anyway?"

"Here and there." Sam sat back in his chair.

Sally smiled mockingly at the older man. "Where's 'here and there'?"

"I've traveled a lot." He lowered his head, boyishly pushing his chair back on its two rear legs, rocking the chair back and forth. "Still do."

Sally lazily pushed her long black hair away from her face. Daryl watched her expression as she continued the conversation. "You're a hard man to figure out."

Daryl turned his head to see Sam's reaction.

Sam kept slowly rocking, looking at Sally.

Daryl turned back to Sally.

"In the hospital coffee shop that day you were really rude to me."

Daryl felt his skin goosebump, embarrassed at Sally's directness. He swiveled his head towards Sam.

"Rude how?"

"The questions you were asking me."

"I was curious about you."

Daryl joined the conversation. "Your comments were very rude."

Sam kept looking at Sally, kept rocking. "I was right though, wasn't I?"

Sally blushed. She reached out for her Madeira and drank the rest of it, eyes down. Finishing, she banged the glass down on the tabletop and faced sideways, at the wall. "That's none of your business."

Sam quietly poured more wine into her glass. "Fine." He turned towards Daryl, old-world features hiding whatever he was feeling. "Why don't you kids take a swim with me? You can leave your underwear on."

Daryl closed his face. "We should be going."

Sam creaked around in his tilted-back chair to look at the clock over the refrigerator. "It's only twelve-fifteen! It's hot here in the kitchen. Right out there is a cool, deep body of water. It'll sober you both up before you drive home."

Daryl looked at Sally. She shrugged, posing a question to him with her studiously blank expression. When Daryl said nothing she craned her head back, touching the front of her throat with her right hand. "It is hot in here."

Both men watched as she reached behind her head, lifting her hair away from the back of her neck, eyes shut.

"Leave your underwear on, and I'll even stay at the other end of the pool to give you two some privacy." Sam's long black eyebrows arched as his blue eyes looked from one guest to the other. "I'll even stay out of the pool altogether while you're both in it. C'mon—I'll bring the wine. We'll swim under the stars."

Daryl and Sally undressed in the bathroom.

Daryl stripped down to his underpants, flexing his arms in front of the medicine cabinet mirror while Sally bent forward at the waist away from him, pulling her unzipped black dress over her head.

Leaning his hip against the vanity, he looked at her bent-over stance, the black-haired crown an inch from the tiled floor, the shapely backs of her black-stockinged legs leading up to her high ass, also encased in black, the bare white of her back, ridged spine elongated under the flesh, split by the black back of her bra.

She straightened up, turned around, big eyes above alternating bands of beautiful bare body and black underthings.

She glanced in the medicine chest mirror, lips slack from drinking.

Daryl watched her reflection make different faces, most of them sullen. Finished, she swung her head towards him, touching her eyelashes together. "I haven't had a swim since Arizona."

Daryl put his arms around her bare waist, pulling her closer to him until he could feel fabric and flesh against his chest, fronts of his thighs. She braced her hands on his thick biceps, turning her head sideways, hooding her eyes, arching an eyebrow, opening her mouth as he dug his strong fingers into the small of her back. She snuggled her black and white curves into the front of his body, biting him under his jaw. "Let's leave after the swim, Daryl, all right? Remember our pizza?"

She held onto his rib cage as he kissed down on her lips, pushing his tongue in.

When the kiss was over she stepped back in her high heels, hooking her thumbs over the elastic waistband of her pantyhose.

"Are you taking them off too?"

Bent over with the black hose below her knees she looked up at him. "I planned on it." She stayed bent over, motionless. Bare white thighs. "Do you not want me to?"

He shrugged with his eyebrows and his mouth, studying the flowery wallpaper. "I suppose it'd be hard to swim with them still on."

"Well yeah, sorta." She stood up, calves bound together by the black netting. "Daryl, we don't have to do this."

"No, it's okay." He watched as she stepped her small feet off her high heels, then daintily pulled the black hose the rest of the way off her calves.

She faced him with a tentative smile on her face, hands held a little away from her hips.

The black bra's scalloped lace ended halfway up the tops of her breasts, showing the cleavage and giving an honest idea of the shape and size of her breasts. Her panties were brief, snug in front over the pudendum, leg holes in back showing the bottoms of her cheeks.

She struck a pose in front of him, forearms criss-crossed over her bra, palms on the opposite shoulders.

Young, black-haired, beautiful.

Sliding the stars reflected in the glass door to the right, Daryl and Sally stepped out in their underwear onto the patio where hours before they had their beers.

Visibility was reduced in the night air, although the sky was still not completely dark. Clouds high up in the center held the last glow of

sunlight, their dark raggedness making them look meaner than the cumulus they were at noon.

Daryl and Sally padded ghost-like across the still warm stones of the patio, past the table with its empty beer bottles, talking in hushes magnified by the night's stillness. A large cricket jumped off the edge of the patio at their approach, onto the lawn.

Sam was nowhere around.

They stood side by side at the patio's edge, looking in front of them at the deep, dark rectangle of water, the silent line of woods beyond. Sally gave Daryl a wistful glance, whispering, "While we were undressing in the bathroom, all the people went away, leaving the world to us."

They paused on the marble tiles bordering the pool, the evocative smell of chlorine and coolness rising up. The waters were a deeper blue now, swaying with bands of light reflected from the pool house's wide windows.

Sally touched his forearm, speaking in a lowered voice. "I've never seen you swim before."

He walked in his bare feet over to the nearest steel ladder leading down into the water. "I haven't swum since I was a teenager." He looked down into the deep blue sway at his bobbing shadow.

He clutched the curved tops of the ladder with a parachutist's face. His profile turned in three-quarters profile towards her.

Sally chuckled. "Watch." She raised herself up on her bare toes, kissed the side of his face, and jumped in feet first.

He leaned over the marble edge, watching as she descended in a standing position down into the depths of the water, long black hair rippling above her, cheeks puffed out. When he could barely see her, her legs scissored gracefully, arms blooming alongside her streaming hair, hands swinging down as she started rising.

Her head broke the surface into the circle of ripples caused by her jump, hair plastered behind her ears, making her face look even bigger. One black bra strap slipped off a glistening shoulder.

Smiling happily up at him, eyes squinting from the chlorine, she moved her long white arms in a slow fan across the surface of the water to stay afloat. The head bobbing on the surface of the water shouted up at him, "Come on in, Daryl! It feels great!"

Daryl nodded, took a deep breath, and before he could think about it, jumped off the tiles.

Pinching his nose closed with one hand, raising the other arm over his head, he felt the soles of his feet hit the surface of the water with a slight sting, the coldness of the pool rising up his body so rapidly it seemed he felt it around his waist and head at the same time.

Eyes shut, he felt himself descend into the depths, the boom of water pressure sounding in both ears.

In the darkness behind his eyelids he heard his throat click as he swallowed, felt against the increasing pressure around his chest the rapid beating of his heart.

His toes touched bottom. He had sunk much deeper than he intended. The supply of air he had gulped began to feel too big for his lungs.

His knees banged against the bottom.

Two fingers of chlorine, stinging as alcohol, pushed all the way up his nostrils.

He opened his eyes. The snaky reflections of light on the surface were repeated on the pool's bottom, swaying over the tiles. The four-sided world he was kneeling in was paler, bluer, emptier.

Far above him, Sally's shapely legs moved in an easy, disembodied pedal.

The surface near her turned suddenly white, the thunder of the impact crashing against his ears a moment later, the downward force of it pushing him off balance.

He saw a longer, leaner pair of legs emerge as the millions of tiny white bubbles vanished, the legs swinging muscularly around to face Sally's.

Daryl pushed off the floor of the pool, kicking, pulling the surface closer with his hands.

He popped up alongside Sally's head, awkwardly bumping into her.

Sam had swum Sally against the wall, paddling in place two feet in front of her, grinning wickedly, tanned, muscular arms reaching out to hold the wall on either side of where he had her.

Sally looked at Daryl with relief. Her forearms were crossed over her black bra.

Sam swam backwards a bit, plunging his face below the surface, thick cords flexing out on either side of his neck, then flung his face up out of the water, shaking the water off like a horse. He turned his body around in the water, swimming away.

Daryl put his forearm in the groove running underneath the rim of the pool, catching his breath. "What was he doing?"

Sally watched Sam's rippling back as he swam off. Her eyelashes looked darker, her face paler. "He really startled me, Daryl. He cannonballed right next to me, then started corralling me up against this wall. I was getting worried about you—you stayed down so long." She reached out to touch his skin.

Daryl blinked at the chlorine in his eyes. "I don't trust him." He put her strap back up on her shoulder. "Let's just swim the length of the pool once and go. We'll swim down to the shallow end, then up to the deep end, then back to the shallow end. Then we'll go. Okay?"

Sally looked around Daryl's shoulders to see where Sam had gone, her face all cheekbones and eyes. "Okay, but stick real close to me."

They pushed off the wall together, paddling to the center of the pool. At the center they exchanged a chlorine-flavored, bobbing kiss, then set off.

Sally was the better swimmer. Daryl suspected she was slowing herself down so he could keep up with her. While his head whipped clumsily side to side above the water, hers streamed sleekly just below the surface, face turning gracefully left and right out of the water to exhale or inhale air.

As they made their turn at the deep end, Sam appeared six feet below them, swimming on his back beneath Sally's wake, looking up at her body. He moved his legs when she did, his arms when her arms moved, his hips in rhythm with hers. She spotted him and swam over to the side to get his matching movements out from under her, but he followed easily, both of them leaving Daryl to splash alone in the middle of the pool.

Once Sally realized Sam was too strong a swimmer to shake from under her she headed straight towards the shallow end, arms whipping across the surface.

Standing up in mid-thigh depth, water streaming down the curves of her body, she twisted around to see where he was. With a yelp she jumped forward suddenly, slapping a hand over her rear end, jerking around, angry, Sam breaking the surface, staying crouched down in the water to mid-chest, long middle finger of his right hand still extended.

Daryl swam up beside them, putting his feet down to stand up. The back of Sally's panties had shrunk into her crack, exposing both plump cheeks.

Daryl put his arm around Sally, glancing at her pissed-off face.

Sam stood straight up out of the water. He wore a skimpy, fire engine red piece of nylon between his legs, the hammock at the center hanging down, the impossibly thick ridge underneath the nylon bulging in a straight slant to the hip.

He can't really be that big, Daryl thought, but the wet nylon clung so tightly he could see where it molded around the giant, circumcised head.

Sally looked to see where Daryl was looking, did a startled double take and looked away, embarrassed. "Daryl, let's go, please. I'm frightened."

Sam dipped the curled backs of his hands onto the pool surface, making ripples with his knuckles.

Overhead a faint electrical crackling started up in the sky. The Aurora Borealis twisted ghost-like far above the three people in the pool, its filmy strands of light rolling around upon itself under the stars.

Sam took a step closer to Sally. "You think I'm going to rape you?"

Daryl held more tightly onto Sally. "We're leaving."

The older man turned to Daryl, eyes narrowing. "Shut up." He stood directly in front of Sally. She shrank against Daryl.

Cupping a palmful of water, Sam raised his hand up, tilting it above his head so the water splashed down on his thick shoulder. Daryl looked at Sam's exposed armpit, the unusual wideness in the armpit formed by the underside of the bicep and thick side of the chest reminding him of the wide span of exposed flesh in the center of a woman's spread thighs.

"Rape is no fun," Sam told her.

Sam shot his arm out, grabbing Sally's left breast, squeezing it so hard, flattening it, that Sally fell over sideways.

Daryl struck his fist across Sam's grin, but Sam held onto the breast, cackling happily.

Sally was on her knees in the water, face screwed up, tears streaming down her face, trying to pull Sam's big hand off her, each "Ow!" louder and more desperate than the last.

Sam's hand slowly revolved clockwise, pulling the breast sideways underneath the palm.

Daryl hit Sam in the face again, then plowed straight into him.

Sam turned sideways in the water, pushing Daryl forward, spilling him below the surface.

Daryl's head rose out of the water, lips sputtering, as Sam swung a leg across his back, straddling him, and slid a muscular forearm across his Adam's apple.

Daryl tried to stand, knees scraping across the pool's bottom, but couldn't with Sam riding his back.

Sam lay his chest across Daryl's back, strong arms holding him in a full nelson, and forced Daryl's head to the water surface.

Daryl turned his face sideways, struggling helplessly in Sam's grasp, Sally weeping hysterically in front of them, her left breast already blackened. The long, thick ridge of Sam's cock rubbed slowly down Daryl's lower spine. Daryl struggled furiously, until he was exhausted.

"Let him up!"

Sam continued rubbing his crotch down Daryl's spine, lowering the rubs until he had the ridge of his cock moving between Daryl's cheeks. Daryl tightened his asshole, hitting weakly against Sam's rock-hard biceps.

"You want me to let him up? Take your bra off and bring your good breast over here." Sam snapped his mouth open and shut, rows of teeth banging loudly against each other.

"No! Let him up!" Sally skittishly splashed water up into Sam's face, then in a burst of anger punched his face sideways across the nose.

"Fuck!" The older man's eyes squeezed shut with pain, bead of blood pinballing out of his nostril into his mouth. Tightening his grip on Daryl, rubbing his cock more forcefully between his cheeks, he looked Sally's body up and down, winking at her. "Pull your wet, black panties off, Sally. Put your hand between your beautiful legs and masturbate while I fuck your boyfriend." He lifted his tongue out between his perfect teeth, licking the air as he forced Daryl over closer to where Sally stood, the tongue licking forward towards her crotch.

She struck him again across the face.

Then she realized he couldn't hold onto Daryl and defend himself at the same time.

She crouched forward in the water, wincing at the pain in her breast, and struck him repeatedly across the face, each blow harder than the last as her fury built up. Blood dribbled off Sam's face onto the blue surface, floating outwards in thread-like patterns.

He took hit after hit, never loosening his hold on Daryl.

Sally moved behind the men, snarling, lifting her right foot up out of the water, kicking out with all her might against the side of Sam's face.

His head snapped left.

She raised her foot a second time, crying desperately.

Sam let go of Daryl. He grabbed Sally's ankle, yanking her off her feet.

Daryl slid into the water, coughing and gasping.

Sally landed on her back with a splash.

She tried to get her feet under her.

Sam thumped her on the forehead, knocking her onto her back in the water again.

He plunged his right hand below the surface, pushing through the water, hand passing up between her knees.

Crying out, Sally frantically walked backwards on her palms, trying to outrace the fingers reaching for her crotch.

She pedaled backwards on her hands to the side of the pool, banging her head against the wall.

Her eyes flickered. She sank in the water to her chin.

Sam surged forward. His hand plunged under the water again, snaking between her legs towards her open crotch.

Daryl grabbed Sam's right shoulder in both hands, pulling the shoulder back before the hand could cup.

Sam turned in the water to face Daryl. Only one blue eye showed through the mask of blood.

Daryl slammed his fist into the right side of Sam's jaw. A loud, solid thump bounced around the flatness of the water.

The blue eye rolled up. Daryl followed up with a squared-off blow to the left temple. Sam's head snapped rubbery-necked on his shoulders.

He sagged in the water, mouth open.

Daryl reached under Sam's armpits. Arms straining, he pulled him up the tiled steps at the corner of the pool, Sam's long legs flapping bonelessly up the steps.

Daryl dragged him over to the lawn, dumping him on his back on the grass.

A cricket jumped up on Sam's chest.

Sally leaned over to make sure Sam was out, then burst into tears. Daryl held her in his arms, talking quietly to her and stroking her wet hair until the sobs had quieted to snuffles.

“Get our clothes from the bathroom.”

After she had disappeared through the sliding glass door, Daryl stalked back over to Sam’s body.

It was still in the position Daryl had dropped it in.

He sat on Sam’s stomach, straddling him. Tapped against the swollen face. The older man moaned, eyes flickering.

Sam reached up feebly, pinching Daryl’s left nipple.

Daryl got off him.

He walked over to Sam’s feet, kneeling.

Reaching out, he put a hand on the inside of each of Sam’s thighs, spreading his legs apart.

The bulge in Sam’s thong still looked big and heavy.

Daryl shuffled forward until he was between Sam’s knees.

He put his hands on Sam’s muscular thighs again, feeling the thin black hairs against his palms, and spread the legs as far apart as they would go.

“This is for what you did to Sally’s breast.”

He slammed his right fist into Sam’s crotch, then his left, back and forth, one shoulder dipping, then the other, each time feeling the touch of Sam’s cock and balls against the grill of his knuckles, tilting the big, soft bulge left, right, the force of his blows jerking the body forward on the grass so that he had to keep walking forward on his knees to keep in range, not stopping until his body was covered in a sharp, glossy sweat.

He stood up, chest heaving, looking down at the inert body on the lawn.

The glass door on the patio slid open.

Sally ran out, clutching their clothes.

Daryl and Sally stood in their bright kitchen, valanced window crowded with moon and stars, their best outfits balled-up on the kitchen table.

Sally walked forward watching the ceiling, moving under the florescence. Carefully, she slid the black bra straps off her shoulders.

Her face in profile, with its upturned upper lip and upper eyelashes, crinkled down. The one large eye Daryl could see grew moist.

“Let me help you.”

Daryl stepped in front of her, red eyes filled with concern. Holding his breath, using his fingertips, he lightly guided the unhinged cup off her left breast.

Four blackened patches merged into each other across the top of her breast. Underneath the swell, a fifth, wider swath went up to her nipple.

Her face squeezed tight over its bones, lower lip trembling. "He made me ugly!" Head at an uncomfortable angle, she started crying, arms awkwardly at her sides, nose running.

Daryl held his arms out. She hid in them, feeling heated and frail.

They stood in the middle of their kitchen hugging, bodies trembling. Hers with grief, his with fury.

Finally she pulled away, just long enough to get a tissue. Her blow was long and moist. Halfway through it she started crying again.

She gestured with both hands at the blackened lump. It took her two attempts to get the wet words out. "What happens when I have our babies? How'm I gonna nurse 'em?" Her pitiful eyes looked at Daryl.

"Let me look at it."

"Oh, yeah, you're a doctor." She sniffed, standing stiffly for examination.

He lowered his face to the breast, studying the texture of the flesh. Because of the extreme swelling, the pores stood out on the skin. He glanced at the youthful curves of the normal white one hanging beside it. What did this remind him of? "I'm going to touch it very gently."

"Okay." Her voice, high and scared, made the casualness of the word seem inappropriate. Her reddened eyes looked up at the ceiling, blinking rapidly.

Using the upper pads of his index and middle finger, he lightly tapped the swollen flesh. The density underneath felt uneven.

A trickle of sweat ran out of his hairline, down his wrinkled forehead. His voice was very quiet. "Can you feel that?"

"A little. It feels a long way off."

He gingerly moved the pad of his index finger over her nipple. On the third pass it poked out. "You felt that?"

"Yeah. Not at first."

He straightened up. "You'll be fine."

She sagged with relief, wiping the tears off her face sideways, each swipe bringing a bigger smile. "Really?" She held his eyes a moment longer, face still flushed but the skin thicker now, more normal looking, then glanced back down at her blackened breast. Her face

faltered a moment seeing it again, but then she summoned up something inside her and nodded. "You're the doctor, Daryl!"

Daryl used the backs of his knuckles to stroke away a few tears above her cheekbones. "It'll take some time. He...there's some damage under the surface. But I think it'll heal fine." He tweaked her nose. Still red-eyed, she grinned shyly up at him.

She looked down at her good breast. "This one's still fine, huh?" An up-from-under look.

Daryl hesitated, then reached out, stroking its round sides, grateful again for the disproportion between her narrow waist and wide breasts. His voice stayed quiet. "Feels fine to me."

"This other one will get better and be just like this one here again, right?"

"Right." He moved his middle finger up the nether, holding the tip of the finger under the nipple. His thumb trailed down the slope, settling on the nipple's upper side. "The smoothest skin I've ever felt in my life." He gently pinched the nipple, making her grunt. Her nipple and his cock started to grow. Unhurriedly, he began lightly rubbing the pad of his index finger sideways over the top of her nipple, holding its new height in place between thumb and middle finger.

Sally rested one delicate hand on his bare forearm, feeling the muscles move. "Feels good."

He brought two fingers together like legs around the nipple. She grunted again, one black eyebrow raising. Her lids closed trustingly.

Thank God she's all right. That bastard. His two fingers wrapped more tightly around her nipple. She gratefully stroked his forearm a little faster. He'd never let Sam near her again. Ever. The way he kept looking at her, flirting with her, trying to get her—his anger flashed through his forearm, fingers squeezing her snugly-held nipple more tightly. She let out a deep-throated moan, stroking the tips of her fingers over his big, tensed bicep—trying to pin her in the corner of the pool, put his hand up between her legs—

Sally grabbed his elbow, stopping him. She took some shaky breaths, looking up at him smoky-eyed, then snuggled her body into his, kissing him under the jaw, stroking his ears. Her hot, soft lips parted against his throat. "Put it in me?" She trailed one hand down his tall body, pursing her lips, stroking the front of his underwear where it bulged up and forward.

He put his hands on her shoulders, standing stock still, waiting through his big heartbeats for her to pull his underwear down.

He felt her thin fingers slip under the waistband on either side. The tips of her nails touching his bare hips.

She pulled the slung front of the underwear up and off his cock, stooping to drag the fabric down the hairs of his thighs to below his knees.

From her stooped-over position she looked up at him, eyes calm and confident.

Straightening up, she pressed against him once more, curled hands going forward at crotch level, lips parting.

The first touch of her fingers between his legs set off a delicious tingling that crawled on nerve endings up the undersides of his ass, down the insides of his thighs.

She stroked his bare cock slowly, big eyes watching with satisfaction at how it sapped strength from him. Flirting with her power she said, "I've got you wrapped right around my little finger, Daryl. Know which finger? This finger." She delicately caressed him behind the heavy weight of his balls, beyond the curls of dark brown hair, fingertip barely touching the bald patch hidden there.

He shuddered breath up his nose, out his mouth. He nodded gratefully, eyes squeezing shut.

Making a loose ring with thumb and forefinger, Sally leisurely traveled the ring up and down his tall cock, keeping the ring wide enough its jointed interior only teasingly brushed against the skin of his cock. Each time she reached the spongy head she'd give it a quick squeeze, making him gasp, each squeeze more painful, pleasurable.

Each stroke bent his knees a little further, until she was almost as tall as him. Each stroke made him weaker. Her stronger.

Whoever thought there was a pleasure this sweet? No other man will know. Ever. Daryl looked down his indrawn stomach, testing his certitude by letting himself for just the briefest moment imagine it was Sam's cock Sally's small hands were, Sam's big balls Sally's long fingers were, Sam's wide head Sally's red lips were about to.

The phone rang.

Daryl sucked in startled breath.

It rang again.

Daryl stared over her shoulder at the phone temporarily silent in its cycle. "It must be him."

They stood still, Daryl's hands on her shoulders, Sally's hands on his cock.

It rang again.

Worry crept into his eyes and forehead. "I beat him up pretty badly while you were getting our clothes."

"Maybe it's the police. Daryl, maybe he's dead."

It rang again.

Sally took her hands off his cock. "It could be my folks. There could be something wrong."

Daryl looked up at the clock. "It's 12:30 here. How many hours ahead are they in Arizona?"

Sally stepped back some more, Daryl's hands sliding off her bare shoulders. "I don't know. Three, I think. Or two or—"

It rang again. The ring rang around the room, around their heads.

"—four, I don't know."

"Let's get it." Daryl walked into the living room. In the time it took him to get to the phone the rhythm of the rings didn't repeat. He picked up the phone anyway. Both of them, an ear cupped to the black receiver, Sally with just panties on, Daryl with his underwear at mid-thigh, listened to the buzz of disconnection.

Sally pointed at the empty black cradle. "Hang it up and maybe they'll call again."

He did.

They both stared down at the phone.

It stayed silent.

He cleared his throat. "Of course, if we didn't answer the first time, why would they immediately call back?"

Sally sat down beside the phone, touching the receiver. She looked up askance at where he stood with his hard cock drooping forward. "Maybe I should call them."

"It may only be 4:30 there."

"Maybe not though. Or maybe it is 4:30 and one of my folks is hurt really bad. Bad things happen early in the morning sometimes."

Daryl sat down in the chair on the other side of the telephone, leaving his underwear at mid-thigh. His cock listed to the left. "If you would feel better, call them. You do the talking though."

Her Salems were still in the kitchen. She lit one of his Winstons. "Would you want to just say hi to them?"

"Not this time." He bobbed his head. "I feel a little nervous. Talking to them the first time. You know. Springing it on them that you have a boyfriend—a fiancée—and then the phone gets passed to me." He gestured with his Winston at his lap. "Sometime when we're dressed, and it isn't the middle of the night, and I haven't been drinking

for twelve hours, or just beaten a man so badly we think he may be dead.”

“Do you think I shouldn’t call?”

He looked at her earnest face, then put a kiss on his fingertips and rubbed it on her cheek. She gave a pleased, girl-next-door smile.

He picked up the phone and held it out to her, the steady electronic buzz coming out of the receiver. “Call.”

She took the heavy receiver from him, holding it in both hands against her breasts. “Should I?”

“Go ahead. This way you’ll know they’re all right.”

“I could tell them about us.”

“Yeah.” The buzz changed to a high-pitched whine.

She depressed the button long enough to start over, then dialed the number from memory. She looked nervous and happy. “I haven’t called them in about half a year.”

Holding the receiver in place alongside her head, right hand in the middle of the black barbell shape, left hand holding the spiraled cord, she stared down into the hundred holes of the mouthpiece, lids seeming almost closed. Her eyes fluttered up. “It’s ringing!” She cleared her throat, eyebrows together.

Her head bobbed down suddenly and she held more tightly onto the receiver. “Dad?” Her head tilted forward, a big shy grin showing. “It’s Sally. Right. How are you, Dad?” Her voice was loud and musical. She glanced over at Daryl, smiling with her eyes at him. Her face changed into an expression of not being able to hear too clearly.

“Are you okay, Dad?” She listened for a moment, then nodded. She mouthed, ‘Okay’ to Daryl. “Is Mom there? What time is it?...Oh...No, I’m fine, Dad...No, I just got a phone call and I thought—a phone call, and I thought it mighta been from you or Mom.” She grinned with a daughter’s self-deprecation. “I don’t get a lot of phone calls.” She nodded again, tongue between her teeth. “I’m fine, Dad...No, I sold it. I got a station wagon now.” She listened, nodding solemnly, looking at a crumpled pack of Winstons next to the phone. “Pretty good. I’d say about—” she looked questioningly at Daryl, who turned his hands palms up to indicate he had no idea what she was talking about. “—I’d say maybe...25 miles to the gallon. Huh? Highway. No, a Ford. Okay. Nice talking to you, Dad. You take care. I love you. ‘Bye.”

Her eyes went into themselves for a moment, then she became alert again. “Hi, Mom! No, I’m fine. I just—it’s...12:35...No, what

happened was...oh, I'm sorry. I thought he didn't work day shift anymore...No, what happened was I got a phone call just now, and when I picked it up there was no one there, so I thought...right, just now...that's my point—I thought maybe you or Dad were tryin' to get through...Well, I mean I thought maybe something bad had happened....Right. Uh-huh." She looked up at Daryl, mouthing 'Okay' again, giving him a bright, brittle smile. "So you're both okay?...Okay, okay; I just wanted to make sure...Oh, I know. I'm sorry. I didn't realize it was so late. Or early or whatever. Mom, while I have you on the phone—" Daryl tensed up—"I wanted to tell you and Dad that I met this guy." She glanced shyly at Daryl, cheeks reddening. "Yeah Mom, we met up here in Alaska. He's a...Daryl. Daryl Putnam. He's from Vermont."

Daryl warily lit a cigarette, ready to wave the phone away if it were held out, knowing gloomily that if it were he'd have to take it and talk.

"Yeah! He's a doctor, Mom!...Yeah!...Here in Lodgepole, at the hospital. No, he's a medical examiner." She strained to hear her mother. Daryl could pick up a faint rise and fall from the phone, but couldn't make out any words. He realized he didn't like the sound of her mother's voice. "No Mom, he's a doctor who examines dead people. You know...dead people. No, no. Dead. Right!...Well, yeah, they don't have that many dead people up here, but he also works in the laboratory at the hospital." Daryl felt embarrassed.

"Huh?" Sally gave a laugh, flustered. She shot Daryl an apologetic look. "No, Mom, he doesn't use any chemicals or anything. Wait a sec." She pulled the receiver away from her ear. She turned to Daryl, rolling her eyes. He felt a bolt of panic. She didn't cover the mouthpiece. Her big black eyes leveled at him with a look that said, I have to humor my Mom. "You don't use any chemicals on those people, right? To preserve them or anything?" Daryl heard a squawk come out of the phone from thousands of miles away. "That's a funeral director who uses those chemicals, right?"

Daryl's voice came out as a croak. "Right." He smoothed his palms over his hair.

Sally cupped a white hand over the black mouthpiece, leaning towards Daryl. She looked like someone trying to hide nervousness with amusement. "She wanted to know if you smelled like formaldehyde or anything." She blew him a scared kiss. "No, Mom, he doesn't use any chemicals. He smells just like a...schoolteacher."

She listened, then interrupted. "We're living together, Ma." She glanced at Daryl for strength. Her voice shrank. "Couple of weeks." She listened some more, then interrupted again. "I love him Ma!...Yeah!" She looked down bashfully at her panties. "Because I do know. Yes, I'm sure...Uh-huh." She swallowed, then took her left hand off the cord, fanning her fingers out to look at them. "No, not yet. We're saving up for one. Yeah, I said 'we'. Well, that's how it's done today. I'm a modern girl, Ma." She listened some more.

"Well, nobody starts off rich." She lowered her voice. "Ma...". She smiled apologetically at Daryl. "Of course he pays his way...That too...We—it all goes into one checking account...He does. About fifty dollars more. No, Ma, a week." She rolled her eyes at Daryl again. "Okay. Well, I thought you'd want to know. Yeah, well, even at four-thirty in the morning or whatever it is there. Okay. I will. Say goodbye—yeah. No. Okay. Say goodbye to Dad, and I'm sorry I called so late or early, tell him that. I will. Goodbye, Ma."

She hung up the phone. "That wasn't them that called."

Daryl felt the crumpled pack of Winstons to see if there might still be a cigarette inside. There wasn't. "Well, there goes my fantasy of the two of them showing off their future son-in-law to all their friends."

"She's just really concerned I'm taken care of, Daryl."

"I'll take care of you."

"I know."

"I'm sure she wouldn't mind if you were going out with Sam. He may be the biggest fucking asshole in the world, but at least he's loaded."

She unfolded her bare legs from under herself, drawing her knees up to her face in a sitting fetal position. "Don't even say that. Gross."

"I saw him goose you in the pool."

She looked across the telephone table at him, eyebrows down. "He didn't goose me."

"I saw him. When we were in the lower end of the pool. He swam up behind you and you jumped forward. The back of your panties were tucked up into your asshole." He angrily pushed around the junk on the table, looking for cigarettes. "He stuck his finger up your ass."

She slapped her hand down on the armrest. "He did not! Do you really think I would have stayed there if he had done anything like that? He sprang out of the water behind me and I jumped forward. It frightened me."

“He wants to fuck you.”

She gestured at her black and blue breast. “Yeah, right, Daryl.”

“Are you saying he didn’t goose you?”

“Right.”

He tried to think back. Sally’s face registering surprise, her body jumping forward, Sam rising out of the water grinning, holding his longest finger out, she turning around with the back of her panties pulled up, exposing her cheeks. Sally’s face registering surprise, her eyelids half drooping for a moment, legs moving forward as she turned around in the water, Sam rising, finger out, back of her black panties tucked into her hole. Sally’s face registering surprise, eyes fluttering shut, thick red lips opening in a shock of pleasure, teeth bared; lazily turning around to see Sam rise out of the water behind her shapely ass, his big left hand resting familiarly across her cheeks, fingers spreading the cheeks further apart, the long middle finger of his right hand sliding up inside her asshole again, joint by joint, her eyes closing with pleasure as she reluctantly pulls her shapely ass off his straight finger. As she reluctantly pulls her shapely ass off Sam’s long finger until she gets to the top joint and can’t bear to part with the penetration, languorously sliding her little asshole back down around his middle finger again, bending over in the water to have it go up even deeper this time, moaning from the back of her throat as behind her lids her eyes roll up with pure physical enjoyment.

He had trouble swallowing around his quickened heartbeats. His cock was standing straight up in his lap. He looked at its traitorous tallness. Sex is a maze, and he had just stepped off the grass. Sally hadn’t noticed his erection yet. She was staring straight ahead of her, probably going over her conversation with her mother.

Still sitting, he pulled his underwear back up to hide his hard-on.

Sally was silent for a minute, then reached over and gently touched his shoulder. “We should go to bed, Daryl—it’s been quite a night.”

He stood up, seeing her eyes glance down at his hard cock.

They walked without speaking over to their bed. Sally lay down on her back, hands behind her head, looking up at him. Once he recognized the look his cock got even harder.

She smirked at the rise in his underpants. “Wanna finish what we started, Daryl?”

He touched her knees, surprising her by rolling her over onto her stomach.

Unscrewing the jar of vaseline they had experimented with, masturbating each other, he rolled his middle finger around inside, feeling the thick grease encase it.

Sally lay with her face in profile on the pillow, eyes closed, eyebrows raised, waiting for him to touch her body.

He slid his left hand under her hips, pushing his palm under the furred bone of her pubis until his longest finger was able to reach her clitoris. The lips were slick already, moistening his finger's dry top joint. He started unhurriedly rubbing her.

She placed her hands palms down on the pillow on either side of her profile, laying passively while he masturbated her.

Daryl looked down at the long, full legs, the shapely ass. The skin of her ass was slightly paler than the rest of her body, probably from long-ago sunbathing. It looked so smooth he was sure that if he ran a thumb over it, it would squeak.

The cheeks were closer to each other at the top than they were at the bottom.

He held his vaselined finger above the cleavage of her cheeks, then lowered it. He poked just the top joint inside her asshole, watching her profile.

A jump of surprise crossed her face at the unexpected intimacy. Her voice was husky. "This is new." She spread her legs farther apart on the bed.

He moved the top joint of his finger slowly in and out of her asshole, feeling the smooth, soft sides of her hole embrace each entry, rise up with each leaving.

She moaned from the back of her throat. "Feels good."

He kept rubbing her clitoris underneath her body's weight, then put an extra inch of his finger up her asshole. She moaned gratefully, eyes fluttering open, thick pale lips pulling back in a shock of pleasure, teeth bared; lazily turning her head around to watch the long middle finger of his right hand slide up inside her asshole again, joint by joint, eyes closing with pleasure as she languorously pushed her hole up further on his finger, plumpness of her cheeks pressing against his knuckles, bending over in the bed to have it go up even deeper, moaning from the back of her throat as behind her lids her eyes rolled up in shivering orgasm, toes working furiously, small asshole clenching around his big finger in a grateful rhythm, the sweat of her body bringing back, for just the briefest moment, the whiff of chlorine.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Do you want mashed potatoes?”

Daryl slumped naked in his chair at the kitchen table, watching Sally’s back as she stirred at the stove. She was wearing a pair of his boxer shorts on her otherwise nude body. Her period.

“That’s fine with me.” Daryl glanced up at her naked back. A cautious look crossed his face. “Remember those dreams you used to have about me and Emily?”

“Sure.”

“Naturally, in real life, you never would have actually wanted to see us together like that, right?”

“Of course not.”

“But in your dreams you’d dream that sometimes, and even though you never wanted it to happen in real life, it still turned you on while you were dreaming about it, and maybe even afterwards, while you were awake, right?”

Sally glanced over her shoulder at him, quiet. She faced her pots and pans again. To herself she raised her eyebrows, pursing her lips together. “Did you have a dream about Emily?”

“Huh?” Daryl shifted in his chair, sitting up. “Oh no, no.” He laughed, looking around the kitchen.

“Because if you did, you could tell me.” She gestured with the wooden spoon, spilling gravy across the stovetop. “I mean, it’s just a dream, it’s not like you still want her, right?”

“Swear to God. I just—we were talking about how weird dreams are, how you can be dreaming about something you would never want to have happen in real life, but you still dream about it. But no, honest, she wasn’t in my dream at all. I never dream about her.”

“I only dream about you, now that I’ve stopped dreaming about her.”

Daryl looked at his boxer shorts on her. “It was fine with me when you did dream about her—I mean I always understood it was just a dream. And it did turn you on.” He snuck a look at the back of her head.

She stirred some more before finally answering. “Yeah, it did do that.”

“Do you ever—I mean, I’m just asking—but do you ever still think about her? And me? Together, sexually?”

The back of her shoulders shrugged at him. Any word could have come out of her mouth at this point. He waited. She cleared her throat. "Sometimes. Once you get an idea like that in your head...when it feels really good—sexually, like you said—you kinda automatically start thinkin' about it". She laid the wooden spoon across the rim of the orange skillet, then trudged over to him. "Like I didn't tell you this, but like the other night, the night the lights went out for awhile? And we got in bed and you started touching me? I guess I started thinkin' about her and me again, and her and you, 'cause I knew that would..." She blushed, raising her eyes to heaven, "...do it for me."

He took her gesturing hand. "That's OK. You know, whatever people think...Do you—do you just think about her and me, or is there anyone else you might, you know..."

"No. Just you. Sometimes her. This is a weird conversation, huh?"

"I guess." He bit his lip. "Out of curiosity, when you do think about me, while I'm masturbating you, what do you fantasize about me doing?"

She sat down in his lap, glancing over at the stove. She gave him a flirtatious look, pulling her long, black hair behind her shoulders, then arched an eyebrow at him. "Stuff".

"Like what?"

She exaggerated looking to the left, trying to recall. "Well, I used to think of us making love the regular way. You know, you inside me." She adjusted her cheeks on his hard-on. "But—I love having you inside me and all, but I've never had an orgasm that way, so mostly now I fantasize about you masturbating me."

"You fantasize about me masturbating you while I'm masturbating you?"

She got a little defensive. "Yeah." Sitting in his lap she was a little taller than him. She looked down into his face.

"Is it OK you've never come from intercourse with me inside you?"

"Oh, sure. I'd like to someday, but right now it's fine with me you masturbate me for my orgasm."

He started stroking the insides of her thighs, very lightly. "Do you miss the stories I used to tell you while I touched you?"

Sally rested her head back against his shoulder, looking over at the stove again.

Daryl moved his fingertips farther up her thighs. "Those stories about you and Emily? Me and Emily?"

She shifted a little more in his lap, one leg lolling off each of his. In a small voice she answered, "Sometimes." They both stayed silent for a moment, the only sound in the kitchen the bubbling water. Finally she twisted a trusting arm around the back of his head, sighing heavily. Her wide lips shrugged down. "They always turned me on."

With his middle finger he scratched the top edge of her pubic hair, then slowly pushed the finger down through the soft curls. "Always?"

She let out another deep sigh, shutting her eyes. "I wasn't going to do this anymore." She spread her legs a little farther apart on top of his legs.

Daryl kissed her cheekbone, then pulled his boxing shorts off her, so she was nude. "I guess it's OK whatever we think though, right? No matter how weird it is, as long as it excites us and doesn't harm anyone?"

She said nothing, pulling his head closer to hers, moving his mouth up against her ear.

He started moving his lips against her ear, whispering into it like he used to in the past, remembering again how much more exciting this was, fucking her mind, to fucking her body.

Her face gradually lost its reluctant look. One by one, the vertical lines between her eyebrows slowly went away. Her arm stayed around his neck, its hand caressing his ear. She gave a rueful smile. "God, I'm gettin' right back into this again."

"It's OK, then?"

Her mouth opened, her tongue licked lazily over her lips. "Yeah."

The following Saturday Daryl and Sally went back up to Anchorage, to interview people who knew Sylvia Gold.

The computer store where Sylvia Gold last worked was over on 12th Street. The block was nearly deserted. They were able to park right out front.

Inside, two men in suits sat at the same desk in the middle of the room. The heavier man was telling the other in a low voice how to handle customers.

Most of the walls had boxes stacked against them. A few computers were set up on stands in front of the boxes, the same image on all the screens.

There was a small counter with a cash register and a stool immediately inside the door, but the stool was empty.

Sally drifted off to one of the monitors. Daryl walked up to the desk, bringing out the letter Sheriff Cable had given him, identifying him as a temporary deputy for the town of Lodgepole.

The heavier man stopped the lesson. "Help you?" He glanced at Daryl's casual clothes, then checked to see where Sally was.

Daryl held the paper out.

The owner read it slowly, then looked like he was rereading it. After a long time he turned the paper over, to see if there was anything on the other side. "Do I keep this?"

"No, I need it back."

"She worked here." He sat back heavily, looking aggressive.

"Was she seeing anyone?"

"I guess that would be her personal business if she was. I'm not saying she was, I'm just saying it would be her personal business."

"Did the police tell you she's dead?"

He jerked his head up. "Holy fuck."

"I found her. She was strangled down in the town I come from. We don't know what she was doing there."

"What town?"

"Lodgepole. It's a couple of hours south of here on the Seward Highway, deep in the woods."

The man slowly shook his head. "Never heard of it. Strangled." He fell silent, eyes lost in thought.

"Was she seeing anyone?"

"She—the last couple of months she worked here—" he let out a loud fart, eyes blinking. "This is—" He looked over at the empty stool behind the cash register. His eyes were wet.

"I'm sorry."

He patted the pockets on his fat thighs, face crunching up. The trainee handed him a tissue.

Sally came over, standing beside Daryl. She looked down at the man sitting behind the desk, her own eyes reddening. Daryl glanced at the trainee. He was checking Sally out, but stopped once Daryl saw him. He went back to looking at his boss.

The heavy man blew his nose, then rewiped his eyes. "Fuck." He took a deep breath, holding it in for a moment. When he let it go, only a sigh came out.

"She was seeing this guy here in town. Younger guy. Younger than her, I mean. He seemed okay to me."

"Do you know his name?"

"Clark. Clark Release." He shook his head. "Jesus."

"Do you know anything about him?"

"He wasn't working. He lived right down the street. He was twenty-five maybe, tall, good build, blonde hair, good-looking guy. He seemed to really like her. She'd talk about him a lot. It hasn't been that busy here, we'd talk a lot, her and me."

"When'd you last see her?"

"March. She quit in January when she came into some money. An aunt died in New Orleans. That's where Sylvia's from, New Orleans. She looked really good, really ...vivacious."

"When you last saw her?"

"Yeah."

The afternoon air was still mild when they left the store, so Daryl and Sally decided to leave the station wagon where it was and walk to Clark Release's apartment.

The street door was set between a wholesale furrier's and a topless bar. A flight of stairs immediately inside led up to a long corridor of closed doors. At the end of the corridor another flight led down, light from below shining up against that end's ceiling.

Daryl pushed the buzzer on the door nearest them.

Sally leaned against the wall. "Do you think Clark Release killed her?"

"I don't know."

There was a rattle behind the door, then it opened.

The woman was about their age, a little taller than Sally, with longer hair and a plainer face. "Yeah?"

Daryl showed her Sheriff Cable's deputizing order. She read the first couple of lines and handed it back. "So?"

"Does Clark Release live here?"

"No."

"Did he?"

She looked both of them up and down, propping an elbow against the door jamb. Smiled thinly at Sally. "Like your shoes. Yeah, he lived here, but he stopped paying his rent, so I got the super to open up his apartment and take all his stuff out."

"You don't know where he is?"

"No, I don't know where he is. He owes me rent."

"Did you ever see him with a dark-haired woman about fifty-five years old?"

"Yeah, sure. Sylvia. She used to stay over his place."

"Did you ever hear them argue?"

"Sure."

"About what?"

She shrugged. "The usual. She'd accuse him of fuckin' somebody else, and sometimes he'd accuse her."

Sally frowned. "Were they?"

The woman snorted, giving Sally the once over. "Honey, how the hell would I know?"

"Can we see his belongings?"

She shook her head. "They're gone. Some of the stuff I sold to the pawnshop—stuff like his TV and stereo and some of his clothes, and the rest of it I threw out."

"Did he have a diary, or letters, or any personal papers?"

"I threw out everything I couldn't sell."

Daryl stood on the balcony of their hotel room. Fifteen stories below, a parking lot full of straight white lines and cars, the lines by the hotel's back entrance empty except for man-in-a-wheelchair symbols. Off in the distance, Anchorage Bay stretched pale and featureless in all directions to the inwardly-curving horizon. It was colder now. The white sky above looked like snow.

He let himself back in their room, sliding the door shut. He didn't bother locking it.

Sally was in the large bathroom, sitting on the toilet with her jeans down around her socks, her bare thighs looking slightly larger on the toilet seat. She had forgotten to bring an ashtray in, so there were trails of ash down the inside slope of the bathtub next to her. She gave him a wan smile. "Discouraged?"

Daryl nodded.

She pulled some toilet paper off the roll. "We learned she had a boyfriend though, and the boyfriend's name. That's something."

"Yeah, but where's the boyfriend?"

Still sitting, she spread her thighs apart, wiping the folded-over length of toilet paper up between her legs. "They had a fight, maybe

she caught him with that girl we talked to—no, probably not, she was too cool—but they had a fight over one of them stepping out on the other, and he strangled her. Then he panicked and fled the state.”

“What were they doing in Lodgepole though?”

“They were on vacation. He wasn’t working, and she had quit her job.” She sat up straight on the toilet. “Remember, she had just come into a lot of money. They both weren’t working, so they decided to travel.” She stood up, looked at the yellow water in the bowl, and flushed. “No?”

“They decided to travel to Lodgepole? For vacation?”

“Okay, he lured her down there once he found out she had all this money. It’s off-season, not a lot of people around, and he killed her. Maybe he had her withdraw a lot of money earlier that day.”

“Maybe.”

The snow started falling around nine. They went out on their balcony, standing near the sliding door as they watched the flakes float down all across the city. Behind the falling reflections in the glass, in the warmth of their empty room, the color TV showed a black man with a drape behind him reading the news.

Sally turned away from the silent city towards Daryl, bits of snow sticking to her long black hair. “You really surprised me, getting this room for us.”

“I had a little money in my own savings account.”

She kissed him. Laughed, pulling away from him, tugging her blouse back down. “Daryl...here in front of the whole city?”

He kissed her again, until her arms went up around his shoulders.

Around them, the white lights of the other buildings blinked in the snowfall, surrounding them as they kissed on the little balcony high over the city.

He rubbed his lips over hers, pulled her blouse up, pulled her bra up. A blue sheet of lightening lit up the sky behind them, coloring all the snowflakes in midfall for an instant, making her breasts easier to see: the round young swells, the rock-hard nipples, the small bumps raised around the aurora. He nibbled at them, pinched them, feeling her hands across the back of his head, her calf twist around his leg to rub its back against the back of his calf.

They got out of their clothes quickly, dropping them on the wet floor of the balcony, clasping their bodies together for warmth, her lips parting with an rising gasp as he slid up inside her.

“I’ll come later. With a story. You come now.”

He nodded, burying his face in the crook of her warm neck, feeling the cold snowflakes touch his bare back, watching her beautiful breasts, one white, one still darkly bruised, wobble against his pale chest as he fucked her out in the open, on top of the sleeping city, at the top of the world, in the middle of a snowstorm with flashes of blue lightening, and when he came his eyes squeezed shut, and all he could see in that sudden, self-imposed darkness within him was her gleeful look, her opened mouth, her shapely ass sliding greedily down, down, down.

It was after midnight in their hotel room. They were sitting in their pajamas, watching HBO. A wide variety of room service trays, empty now except for plates, rinds and napkins, were piled up by the door to the bathroom.

Daryl looked at the mouth of his beer bottle. "What do you think of Sam?"

"He's an asshole." She frowned at the front of her pajama top, where her breasts stood out.

"I know. But I mean what do you think of him? Do you think he's attractive?"

"I can't stand him. He's like one of those kids you grow up with who's always trying to get you to do things your parents don't want you to do, and always making jokes about poo-poo and stuff. Only he's an adult, and he's a lot more dangerous."

"Do you find him attractive, though?" He glanced at the television set. Long shot of an ambulance coming around a corner, red and blue lights flashing. Medium shot of people crouched around a body sprawled on its back in the middle of the road. One by one they all turn towards the camera. Blue and red lights flash across their faces. Medium shot of the driver of the ambulance getting out, another man running forward from the rear of the ambulance, both in white. Close-up on one of the men crouched near the body, his face looking up urgently, shouting something. Both paramedics stop in their tracks, looking sideways for the nearest cover. "Physically?"

She chewed on a finger, eyes slit at the television. "Physically? I dunno. How come?"

He squirmed in his easy chair, making a flustered wave of his hand. "I had this really weird dream. A wet dream."

She pulled a foot up onto the chair cushion. "Yeah?"

"He was in it. He was—it was a really weird dream, I don't want to go into the details, but at the end of it, it was you and him."

She stared blankly at him for a moment. “Me and...oh. Yech!” She shivered, pulling her other foot up.

Daryl turned back to the TV, feeling nervous. He cleared his throat. Ever since then the thought has crossed my mind...no. Ever since then I’ve sometimes thought about what it would be like, just as a fantasy....no. Remember when we talked about Emily, and you’d sometimes think of her and me together, and we decided that was all right? Well...no. I was just thinking, you know how I tell you about me and Emily while I masturbate you? I thought maybe, as a switch—. He cleared his throat again. “Want to order some more room service?”

The movie ended at two in the morning.

Daryl turned the TV off. The only light left in their hotel room came from the opened bathroom door.

Sally stretched in her chair, yawning. The afterglow of the television tube faded. “I’m glad we stayed up as late as we did, to enjoy your present—” she gestured at the large hotel room—“as long as we could.”

The peach drapes in front of the one window they had left partially open for air whipped sideways again, the bared black panes lighting up with a sudden blue flash. Everything revealed for a moment outside the fifteen story window was white.

Daryl pushed himself up, out of his chair. “It looks like it’s snowing more heavily. My father told me once that it snows more heavily while people sleep.”

In the bathroom, Daryl stood on one side of the doorway, where the toilet and shower were, watching Sally on the other side of the bathroom vigorously brush her teeth.

She paused with tooth brush in one hand, toothpaste tube in the other, and gave him a foamy grin. “What?”

“I was just imagining you as a little kid, brushing your teeth better than anyone else in your class, probably getting an award for it during parents’ week. Fuck!”

A bright blue lightening bolt slid sideways through the bathroom door at waist level, heading towards the wall.

Sally screamed, hands up by her ears, toothpaste falling out of her mouth.

Daryl backed into the shower curtain, almost falling over into the tub.

The bolt bent like a giraffe’s neck just before it hit the wall, veering towards the bathtub, Daryl on one side of it, Sally on the other.

The blue length of it sparked and crackled between them, insubstantial but deadly, its surface roiling with violet bursts.

The smell of licorice filled the air.

Daryl bit his hand to keep from moving, shooting a glance at Sally to make sure she was safe. A lightening bolt in our bathroom. To actually smell a lightening bolt this close.

He felt the hair on his arms and legs stand up. Across the rippling bolt from him, Sally's long black hair rose above her scalp supernaturally, until it was as upright as a kewpie doll's.

The bolt burnt a round hole through the shower curtain, coursing along the tiled walls of the shower stall. As it passed above the faucet handles, they drooped. A bar of soap splashed upwards like a green and white geyserette. What seemed at first to be its black, snaking shadow over the shower's walls turned out to be the path it was burning over the tiles.

Spiky discharges ran up to the ceiling and across the bottom of the tub, with a loudness that was deafening.

The bolt burnt through the side of the shower curtain nearest Daryl. The blunt blue front of it buzzed an inch in front of his shirt, then hung there, in mid-air. He looked straight down into it. Rolling in the bolt, two small birds writhed inches apart from each other, their wings blackened, their legs burnt off, their heads carbonized. The bolt must have snagged them as it streaked down out of the sky.

Poof.

The bolt was no longer there.

The two small black skeletons hung in front of Daryl's belt for a moment, then dropped to the bathroom floor.

Three seconds had passed from the time Daryl had sworn.

A wide black scar was burnt across the shower walls.

The towel rack was in flames.

Their hair was still standing on end.

Daryl looked across the doorway to Sally. Her teeth were chattering. The tube of toothpaste in her hand was squeezed tight: a soft line of paste led from the mouth of the tube to a spiraled pile on the floor.

The front of his shirt was hot and stiff. One white button had melted, leaving only a tiny nub of plastic still encasing the button's threads.

"Was that a—"

Daryl nodded and gulped. His legs shook with adrenaline. He peered around the doorway into their hotel room.

The peach drapes in front of the opened window were smoldering. A black line of burnt fiber marched across the carpet in a straight line from the window to the bathroom doorway.

"It must have—burst in through the opened window—headed here—all the metal in here—blew itself out once it grounded against all the metal." His teeth started chattering uncontrollably.

Sally held onto the sink. Her voice was far away. "I thought—I was so sure—it looked like it was headed straight towards you—" Her lips shook, but she was still too much in shock to cry.

Daryl looked down at the charred rib cages on the floor. "This really happened, right?"

"Yeah." She jerked her head at the empty tube of toothpaste she still clutched. She dropped the tube into the sink. "Boy."

Daryl rubbed his lips with the palm of his hand.

Sally let out a sob, banging her back into the wall, pointing down.

Daryl's face twisted up in anguish, his eyes blinking rapidly. "I—I assumed after all that—I assumed—" He brought his slippered heel down, covering his eyes, crushing the wings' twinned flutterings.

The night manager came to their door with two big men. After seeing Daryl and Sally's gray faces, and surveying the damage in the bathroom, he sent the two men away.

Daryl, Sally, the manager and an uncomfortable silence took the elevator down to the third floor. The whole ride down the manager stared straight ahead, stubbled cheeks sucked in. Daryl glanced at one of the elevator's upper corners. "Does your policy cover acts of God?"

It took the manager four floors to answer. "That was no act of God." He raised his small eyebrows to himself, still staring ahead.

He put them in one of the hotel's regular-sized rooms on the third floor. Their luggage was already there, just inside the door. After checking to make sure all the room's windows were locked, the manager told them their stay here would be free. He left them with a voucher and a cold smile.

Sally clicked off the light on her side of the bed and rolled back over to Daryl, giving him a kiss. He put his hand on her knee to find out if she wanted to make love, she put her hand on his hand to let him know she didn't, he put his hand on her hand to tell her it was all right, he understood.

"I'm really horny, but it's been too weird."

They lay on their backs in the darkness, both looking up at the ceiling, closer in this room than the room they started out in, both thinking about the lightening bolt.

Sally finally rolled over onto her side, away from him, putting one hand alongside her profile on the pillow, a position Daryl recognized after all these weeks as the position she settled into just before she fell asleep.

Daryl's own eyes shut. His face drifted to the left, his body following, until he, too, was laying on his side. His knees pulled up, his spine curled, his chin moved down towards his knees. Wonder if—the room service food—free also. As he did every time he fell asleep, although he never realized it, he slowly brought his right hand up off his knee, up towards his chest. The hand gradually twitched to a stop a few inches away from his sternum, fingers uncurling like a child's, sleep lowering on him.

As his feet touched down, his mind booted up.

I'm in a dream.

Figure out where I am. Figure out what type this dream is. Can I write? He chose a file at random. Porcupine, his little doggy dead twenty years now, came bounding across nothingness towards him, tail wagging, tongue swinging, disappearing in mid-leap. Poor, sweet porky.

So it's not a read-only dream, I can write in it too. Interesting. But there's a program in here already, I can sense it.

A low level of illumination typical to write dreams suffused the immediate area he was in.

I'm inside some kind of building. I have a sense it's set up to be early evening. After work hours? No—after school hours.

A narrow corridor flickered on directly in front of him, sides bordered by long, low benches parallel to the walls.

He was in a locker room.

He walked forward. The sensation of the cool cement floor touching the bare soles of his feet with each step was so realistic, he realized this must be a huge program, one of the largest he'd ever been in. His real self must be in the deepest sleep possible to allow this kind of memory size.

He looked over to his right. The resolution on the closed lockers was near perfect. He could not only see the horizontal vent lines near the top of each locker, he could read a line of graffiti written in red indelible pen by a padlock: "pizza-pizza!" Wasn't that a tagline to a

television commercial? Must be random junk the program pulled in as it set up.

He looked down. He had a towel wrapped around his waist. Again, the program was powerful enough that he instantly knew he was buck naked except for the towel.

Boys now stood by the benches, some horsing around, some drying their legs or their chests with their towels. They were buck naked underneath, too.

This was always the eeriest part, when people came into a dream. Scenery he could handle, but interacting with others was a little goosebumpy, since they were, after all, just phantoms.

Keep walking slowly, see what happens.

All the boys were high school age, around seventeen or eighteen. All shapes and sizes, mostly white. As he walked forward he could smell their freshly showered bodies.

Some of them turned towards him now, leaning their broad backs against the lockers, flirting with him by dropping their towels or peeling down their jock straps, big young cocks springing up. It always took his emotions a minute to adjust to the honesty of dreams, since, like most men, in real life he would never admit to himself he found boys sexually attractive. With the adjustment came the familiar wave of excitement, the surge of self, the jubilant knowledge he was free to think what he wanted now, free to do what he wanted now.

Most of the boys were fully naked now. He felt himself grow erect as he moved forward. He started looking boldly at their cocks, comparing them.

I never knew there was such a variety among cocks.

A few of the handsomer boys, after Daryl had seen their cocks, turned around to show him their rear ends. Each male ass was smaller and, because of its muscularity, more well-defined than any female ass.

A cluster of naked boys walked ahead of Daryl, escorting him, shapely cheeks flexing as they strolled through the locker room. Every so often one or another would look over their broad shoulder at him, muscles standing out in their slender back, smirking at how Daryl's eyes kept returning to their buttocks, both the boy and Daryl engaging in one of the purest forms of sex: one human offering their body for admiration, the other admiring.

Up ahead, a wide doorway drew nearer, bright, steamy light beyond it.

This is only a dream, so I'm safe.

A white boy of about eighteen, slightly shorter than Daryl, broke out of the side ranks and stood in front of him. His face was familiar. His sky blue eyes looked into Daryl's with a directness which was confident of Daryl's desire for him, then slowly traveled down Daryl's body. It was the boy in the gay porno magazine he found in Sylvia Gold's apartment, the one sitting in the easy chair with another naked boy sitting in his lap, facing him, the cock of this boy in front of Daryl pushed up between the other boy's slim cheeks. Daryl remembered again the look of rapture—the closed eyes, the parted lips—on the face of the boy being fucked.

The boy pursed his wide lips and tugged Daryl's towel away. Putting a strong hand on Daryl's shoulder, lightly stroking the collarbone, the boy looked down at Daryl's cock.

After a long while the sky blue eyes raised to Daryl's again. His voice was a murmur. "It's beautiful."

Daryl walked on, glancing from time to time over his shoulder at the pack of naked boys behind him, pleased at the way their eyes watched his ass move.

He passed under the wide doorway into a broad room wispy with bright steam. A large, rectangular overhead light, one of the four fluorescent tubes above the frosted panel flickering, shone down on a massage table. There was no other furniture in the room.

A white sheet covered the massage table. From its hilly contours it was obvious there was a body under the sheet.

Daryl stopped at the foot of the massage table.

Dozens of boys, all naked, filed around the perimeter of the room, until they were packed so tightly around the walls their hips and shoulders pressed against each other, no boy standing alone, all the boys' bodies touched on both sides by other boys' bodies, like a ring of connected boyhood. A pop-up panel appeared in front of Daryl, showing a set of hands tying lobsters' antennae together. The reds came out very clearly, without any visual distortion. The panel slid back down, into nothingness.

Daryl looked slowly around at all the lightly-haired legs, the youthful faces, the big erect cocks.

One boy stepped out from the wall, walking over in an unhurried stroll towards the opposite end of the massage table.

He smiled at Daryl.

It's only a dream.

Daryl smiled back.

The boy reached down, his cock at a stiff angle, and picked up his end of the sheet in both hands. He straightened back up, slowly pulling the sheet towards him, baring the brown leather of the massage table at Daryl's end.

Daryl watched the sheet's bottom edge start to rise up the first hill of the body beneath.

It slithered off a pair of feet, their toes wriggling at the ticklish touch.

The white sheet slid farther up, revealing the shins with the swell of their calves beneath them, the thin knees, the elegant lines of the thighs.

The boy pulled on the sheet until the woman's pubis was revealed, and then he stopped. The sheet still covered the rest of the body: only the bare, shapely legs and the tips of four fingers on either side of those legs were revealed.

The resolution used for the bare legs was the highest Daryl had ever seen in a dream.

The woman's pubic hair was jet black. Sally's under the sheet, Daryl realized.

A male stood alongside him. Daryl took his eyes off Sally's legs to see who it was. It was Sam.

Only a dream.

Sam stepped back, so Daryl could see his body.

Daryl hesitated, even in the dream, then looked up and down Sam's naked body. He was thin, especially around the waist and hips, but his cock was huge, both in thickness and length. His thighs were muscular enough to actually be, together, wider than his waist, without appearing over-developed. Broad shoulders, sharply defined chest. Long, corded arms.

From under the sheet Sally's voice asked, "Who's there?"

Sam brought an index finger up to his lips, turning around in a circle to shush all the boys. Daryl glanced down at Sam's bare ass as he revolved around: it was unusually small for such a well-developed body, each cheek delicately formed with an individual shapeliness, the skin as soft and smooth as a woman's breasts.

Sam turned back to Daryl, his fiftyish face grinning like a wolf's. Daryl couldn't help it. He felt himself succumbing to the sense of cock community in the room.

He looked around at the lean torsos, the sly faces. Each boy's smirk said the same thing to him. Let's fool the girl, show her how dumb girls are, compared to boys.

When the boys he looked at grinned at him, Daryl grinned back, despite himself.

We won't hurt her, but let's be naughty, like only boys can be.

"Who's there?"

Sam mouthed: "It's me."

"It's me."

"Daryl? Ah." The bare legs on the massage table spread open slightly.

Sam put his arm around Daryl's waist, using his free hand to take Daryl's right hand by the wrist. He brushed Daryl's fingers along the inside of Sally's left calf.

That leg turned sideways to rotate more of the calf around for easier access.

Sam whispered in Daryl's ear again, his breath warm and tactile, then moved Daryl's hand away from the calf.

Daryl swallowed, hearing his heart in his ears. "Want me to touch it again?"

"Mmmmm."

Daryl watched as Sam's fingers delicately stroked along the inner line of Sally's left calf. He remembered that first day in the Hospital coffee shop, the way Sam had openly admired her legs, rubbing his hand near the top of his pants.

Sally's legs opened more.

Sam looked at Daryl, his eyes beneath the black and gray brows gently mocking him with an older man's experience. See? See? the eyes said. He mouthed Daryl's next line.

"Does that feel good?"

"Mmmmm. Real good."

She hadn't said 'real good' with his hand, only Sam's.

Sam silently pointed a long index finger up at Sally's left knee.

Daryl opened his mouth. He felt his upper and lower lips touch against each other as the sentence came out. "Want me to touch your thigh?"

Sam lifted his hand off the calf, poising it over the lower end of Sally's left thigh, fingers an inch from the smooth, soft flesh.

The surface of the sheet over her mouth puffed up with her one word answer: "Please."

Sam laid his hand down on the inside of Sally's left thigh, long fingers gently stroking the flesh, sometimes all four fingers at once, sometimes one finger at a time.

Sally's left leg bent at the knee, drawing up, exposing her cunt more.

"Touch me up higher, Daryl."

Sam leaned forward over the lower end of the massage table, his hand drawing its caresses farther up the underside swell of her thigh, lengthening the caresses, interrupting them every few moments to lightly pinch the inside flesh of Sally's thigh, making her go "Ah!" each time. That night in Sam's pool, how she had fought to keep Sam from feeling her leg, and now here she was, wanting even more of it...

"How does that feel?"

"Mmmmm. Feels so good. Really like that, the pinches." He had never thought to pinch her thighs. He watched as Sam's two hands now moved freely up and down the inside lengths of both her bare thighs, thumbs and forefingers increasing the frequency of the teasing pinches, his large hands sometimes closing over her willing thighs in hand-sized pinches.

Once those hand-sized squeezes started, her legs spread all the way apart, fully exposing her cunt, fully ready to receive whatever the hands wanted to give her. Daryl pictured her face under the sheet, front teeth resting on her lower lip, eyes shut, their brows gradually lifting upwards to duplicate the rise of the hands. If only she knew whose hands she was opening up so widely for.

As Daryl watched, the fingers of Sam's right hand crawled off the top of her thigh, onto her pubis.

I could stop this, Daryl thought.

Sam's three middle fingers started rubbing her pubic hair.

But I have to see how far this could go if I didn't stop it.

Sally arched her cunt up, trying to get the massaging fingers down closer to it.

I have to find out.

Sam's long middle finger—

Or I'll never know.

—moved down into the top of her slit, the tip disappearing—

If I took the sheet off her now, when she was this aroused, and she looked down and realized it was Sam's hand, would she stop him at this point? Or let him finish?

—sliding down through the black hairs towards her hole, over her hole—

It's almost too late to stop it from happening.

—making a slow rotation around the inside rim of her hole—

And didn't part of him want this to happen, want Sam to show her she couldn't resist him?

—the top joint rubbing slowly up, up, up over her clitoris, making her legs tremble with pleasure and desire—

She never moaned so long and loud when he did it.

—as the boy at the head of table pulled on the sheet again, pulling it up over the indrawn stomach, the swollen breasts, whose nipples her own fingers pinched, the closed-eyed, rapturous face, until the sheet was pulled off onto the floor and there was Sally, her beautiful woman's body naked on the table, her gorgeous legs spread wide apart with a practicality that both sickened and aroused him, and there was Sam, also naked, standing over her, his hand cupping her snugly between her twitching legs, his long middle finger bent back to enter her—

If she opened her eyes now, and saw it was Sam masturbating her, Sam bringing her to the orgasm her legs were already bracing themselves to receive, could she stop him now, or would she finally have to give in to him, if only to make sure he finished her off? There had to be some point of no return, where you were so near to the opening crest of your orgasm that you no longer cared who gave it to you, as long as they gave it to you.

—and Sam mouthed more words for Daryl to say—

In another second it'll be too late.

—and mouthed them again—

“Do you—do you want me to put, put my finger up inside you?”

Sally's closed-eyed face broke out into a blind grin, breath snorting in and out of her nose, head nodding up and down eagerly—

Sam's long finger slid forward, sliding forward up into her, sliding forward up into her knuckle by knuckle, Sally's thighs closing rapturously around Sam's hand, lips pulling back in a loud, long—

He woke up.

His elbows banged against the mattress. He raised himself up, ribs swelling with each heavy breath, remembering where he was. His cock flexed on its own, hot and hard. Lubricant dripped from its slit onto his stomach.

Have to come. I don't care. Too exciting.

He propped himself up on one elbow, decision made. Brought his right hand over to his cock, fitting fingers around the heat.

Sally sat up in alarm as though she had been shaken awake, face behind her hair. “Whazzit?”

“I woke up. Had a dream.” His fingers twitched away from his cock.

“Dream?”

“I was...I had a dream.” He shuddered, looking over in the direction her voice was coming from in the near darkness.

She sleepily pushed her hair away from most of her face. “Scary dream?”

“No. Yeah. I dreamt—I saw you and Sam in a dream, and he was—fucking you, and you were—enjoying it.” His cock tingled at the memory and the telling. “Really enjoying it.”

She slid under the covers up against him, warm from sleep, soft and alive, the fronts of her thighs touching his, her hand on his shoulder. Her hips jerked in surprise. “You’re all hard!” She brushed an innocent hand down his body to his groin, his stomach muscles seizing up with desire. “Your stomach’s all wet and sticky. Did you come?”

“No,” he said hopefully. “Not yet.”

As his eyes began to adjust to the darkness, he could see her forehead, bridge of her nose, chin. He started petting her bare shoulders, long, thick hair.

“Me and Sam?”

“Yeah.”

“We were...he was doing it to me?”

Another thrill of pleasure ran up from his balls. “Yeah. He was...he was doing it to you.”

She lay her head against his chest. This close, he could see her knotted eyebrows, her pursed lips. “You got so hard because of that?”

“Yeah. I did.”

She rubbed the side of her face against his chest, one hand cupped over his nipple. In a small voice she asked, “And I was enjoying it?”

He hesitated. With his right hand he nuzzled her under her chin, stroking a straight finger up and down over her throat. “It was the way he was doing it to you...it was very sexy, and you were...letting him do it to you, and you were getting really excited.” His cock twitched in the thin air between their bodies.

She hadn't come yet tonight. From past experience he knew that when she woke up in the middle of the night like this, it was from a dream, and she would usually be horny. She was probably wet already.

She didn't say anything. He could feel her thinking beside him, weighing what he had told her. Probably wondering why the thought of her and Sam had excited him so, maybe wondering if it would excite her too, if she let herself think it. Or perhaps not, perhaps she thought about it only for a second, and then rejected it out of hand. Could she come thinking about Sam? Would he get a chance to find out? Her silence stretched longer, and he knew with absolute certainty the next thing she said would either give him an opening for the two of them to explore this new fantasy, or close it forever.

Finally, in a voice that was diffident, almost casual, she asked, "What was he—you know—doin' to me that I got so turned on?"

I could stop right now, he told himself.

He took a deep breath. He reached his hand out for her, his fingers grazing, as he wanted them to, against the inside of her left calf. He started talking very slowly, very softly. Each word he weighed carefully, choosing the one he hoped would arouse most. Tenderly he stroked her calf as he talked, gradually letting his fingers rise. Once, twice, three times she stopped him, shaking her head, it wouldn't work. Once, twice, three times he slowly started it up again, changing the words, refining the images. Steadily he whispered on, easing the intimacies into her ear, until after ten more minutes his hand had risen to the inside of her knee, her head straight back on her pillow, eyes shut, bangs motionless on her forehead, and he knew and she knew this time it was going to happen.

He took his time, both with his words and his hands. After twenty minutes his middle three fingers were rubbing her pubis, and she was breathing through her mouth.

After thirty minutes Sam's middle finger slipped up inside her, and she shook from her shoulders to her ankles.

But when he told her how her thighs had clasped Sam's hand, her own thighs stayed open. He went on with his story, slowing down the details, and then mentioned again how her thighs had clasped Sam's hand. Her own thighs remained open. Was it her way of holding something of herself back? Of protecting herself? Them? Another minute passed in their predawn hotel room, and he switched to the present tense. Sam's finger no longer was inside her, it is inside you, his thumb is casually rubbing your clitoris, his finger is lazily rotating

around inside you, like he wanted to do in the pool, like you're now letting him do, wanting him to do, getting so much sexual pleasure from him doing, and you want to hold his hand inside you forever, you're closing your thighs around his hand to hold him between your legs forever, and with Daryl looking on in a mixture of excitement and horror Sally's own thighs finally, inevitably closed around his hand, and clasped it the way he had described, passionately clasped it, and then even more passionately clasped it, and a moment later, one knee thrown over the other so that her thighs clasped the hand so tightly he could barely move it, she came, bucking up. And he didn't know what aspect of her cry of orgasm haunted him the most: the surprise, the protest, or the dirty, guilty pleasure.

They didn't talk about it when they woke up. They didn't talk about it while they ate breakfast at a local Denny's, and they didn't talk about it on the long drive back to Lodgepole.

The station wagon's tires, after an hour of jostling through the deep dirt ruts of Lodgepole Road, at last bumped up onto the pavement of Alaska Street.

Sally spoke for the first time in nearly an hour. "The town looks different."

Alaska Street was nearly deserted. The shops on either side were closed. Although it was a Sunday afternoon with mild Spring weather, few people were on the sidewalks.

A dead dalmatian lay half on, half off, a curb. Black, white, scarlet, purple.

The interior of their garage apartment was silent and sunshot.

Daryl put their shared suitcase down on the kitchen floor.

Sally turned around in the middle of the living room. The unmade bed behind her.

Her eyes shifted nervously. "Wanna fool around?"

She got out of her clothes first. The crotch of her panties was damp.

She waited naked in the bed while Daryl pee'd and undressed.

She put him on his back in bed. He lay still, arms at his sides. She gave him a quick kiss. Rested the back of her head on his shoulders. Angled her legs so his hand hung near her cunt.

From where he lay he could look down her body. Hair clean and perfumy, breasts, stomach, legs. The eyes in her upside-down face rose

back to look above and behind her at his eyes. Big black pupils motionless in their sockets, faint purple circles above the bottoms of her eyes. Her look was tentative, her voice slightly agitated. Her upside-down pupils shifted just before she spoke.

"That story you told me was sexy." Her pupils rolled away from his, going inwards, waiting.

"The one I told you in Anchorage."

Her voice was hushed and private. "Yeah." Her shoulders, right one across his chest, left one across a pillow, were tense.

"About you and Sam."

It drawled out of her lazily, at a higher pitch. "Yeah."

He stroked the top of the breast nearest him. Her upside-down eyes shifted right to watch his fingers as they moved over the swell. "I'm glad you liked it."

She brought her eyes forward again. Held them motionless. Waiting. One black eyebrow arched. Her pupils rolled up and back to look at him again. "Wanna tell it to me again?"

"Now?"

"Yeah."

His cock hardened, lifting off his stomach. "Okay."

She hesitated, then spread her thighs apart, cunt lifting.

He looked at his hand, then reached it over, onto her cunt.

Her cunt was wet, wet, wet.

Sex got better.

Before The Story, sex between them was a straight line, Daryl at one end, Sally at the other.

With The Story, sex became a triangle. What made The Story different from most triangles was that the third corner of the triangle, Sam, was never present during the sex. At least never present in the flesh, although his presence in The Story dominated and defined the triangle.

With The Story they both began affairs, both with the same man. As with any passionate affair, their lives slowly came to revolve around their secret lover. They'd think about him at work, talk about him on their way home, have hot, prolonged, toe-wriggling sex with him the moment they got through their door. The only difference was that the affairs took place not in a bed, but in their brains.

It was better sex. Thighs shook and jumped through longer orgasms; throats let out more painful cries. Both discovered that sex as a straight line, Daryl in Sally, lacked the excitement of the warm whisper of words into the triangular folds of her ear.

They made love four or five times a day now, more on the weekends. They made love at home, parked on a side street during lunch, in the bathroom of the laundromat, down by the shores of Little Muncho Lake. Making love was not only more exciting now, it was easier. Both could stay dressed. To make the connections necessary between their two bodies to have the third body appear, all they needed to do was have Sally pull her pants down to mid-thigh so he could slip his hand between her legs, and have her tilt her ear up to his mouth.

Connected.

They even made love in the supermarket once, Sally in a long coat, both of them bent over a bin of frozen birds.

They called their new, better sex The Story ("Tell me The Story?"), but actually it had developed over the dozens of tellings into several stories. Sam and Sally in the Pool. Sam and Sally in the Deserted Hospital Coffee Shop. Sam and Sally in Her Garage Apartment. Sam and Sally in the Back Room of the House of Red Roses. They varied The Story not because either one of them ever tired of it, but because they wanted to make sure that during the ritual of telling The Story they included every possible way that Sam could conquer Sally. The sequence in The Story never changed though: Sam tempted Sally, Sally resisted, Sam kept on tempting, Sally gave in. Sally always came during the last part, explosively, as Daryl described the crumbling of her last resistance to total sexual enslavement.

That was The Story, Daryl convincing Sally each time to overcome her strong hatred of the real Sam long enough to have a hip-lifting orgasm imagining herself being rapturously fucked by his Sam.

Over time they found ways to make the telling of The Story even more intense. Sally got that humid look in her eyes one day while they were in the town's only pharmacy. Daryl casually looked up and down the merchandise-crowded aisle to see if they were alone, feeling the familiar rise of his finger, the swelling of his lips, but that wasn't what she was asking for—not yet. She picked up a box of cheap men's cologne, *Slap*, from a pyramided stack, smelling a corner of the cardboard. Her eyes widened. "This is the stuff Sam uses!" Daryl took it from her. Sniffed the shiny black side of the box. It was. Their eyes shifted excitedly to each other there in the middle of the aisle, two

people with a secret. Daryl paid for it with the nervousness of buying rubbers. Sally stood beside him, hands holding her purse in front of her, blushing and giggling. That evening, at home, Daryl dipped his finger down into the bottle, swirling it around in the garish green cologne. The cheapness of the scent, uncapped, drew both their stomachs in with desire. He put his wet finger on Sally's already slippery clitoris. Her legs twitched.

"Stings." Gone were the girlish giggles in the pharmacy. Her voice was at a woman's lower pitch, serious and intent.

"Want me to stop?"

"God, no."

One Saturday night he got an idea. A half-hour into The Story he rolled her over onto her side, away from him, exposing her long bare back to him. He switched hands between her legs so that now his left hand masturbated her. "Pretend my body behind you is Sam's body." "Yeah!" He described Sam laying behind her in bed, Sam's left hand masturbating her, his right hand lifting up the top cheek of her ass. Sam putting the head of his cock over the entrance to her cunt. Sam feeling on the swollen head of his cock the little curly black hairs alongside her cunt. Sally feeling the heavy pressure of Sam's big, fat cockhead up against the rim of her cunt. He held the head of his own cock there, rubbing it over her cunt, describing how wide the head of Sam's cock was, how long, thick and hard the length of Sam's cock was. 'Long, thick, hard' were three words he ritualistically repeated dozens of times during each Story. "If you want Sam's long, thick, hard cock up inside you, you have to beg him for it." "Please, please." He dabbed some of the cologne around the head of his cock, and her legs started shifting excitedly on the bed. "He won't put his long, thick, hard cock up inside you—" "Please! Please!" "—until you say, 'I'm begging you, Sam, please put your long, thick, hard, gorgeous cock up inside me, Sam'." There was a moment's pause while she tried to contain her excitement long enough to speak, long enough to time the grinding rush of contractions inside her, and then, "Beggin' you, Sam—I'm beggin' you, Sam—please, please shove your long, thick, beautiful, hard, stiff, gorgeous cock up inside me. Sa—!"

With her shapely thighs spread wide apart, glossy rose of her cunt wetly exposed, his middle finger sliding into place, tongue tapping behind his teeth as he pushed his thickened voice all the way up into a nice, snug fit within the waiting configurations of her ear, both knew what they were doing was perverse. But it was too powerful for them

to stop. He rarely got jealous of The Story. It excited him too much for there to be room for jealousy. The only time he did feel a twinge was once when she told him that during a slow day at the House of Red Roses, Mr. Bayer out on delivery, Susan in back cutting stems, she locked herself in the bathroom and masturbated on her own thinking of Sam fucking her.

One night in bed after pizza and Cokes from the Open 'Til Eight pizza shop, Daryl stroked her shoulder. "I wonder sometimes what might have happened. You chose me at the coffee shop that day, but obviously—now—you could just as easily have chosen Sam. Maybe even more easily."

Sally lay next to him, walking the fingers of one hand over his nipple. "I liked you. You were sweet." She smiled softly. "Sweet and shy."

"But you've told me since that it did turn you on a little, Sam flirting with you. You did find him attractive."

"Well. We're talkin' about the real Sam now, right? Not our Sam."

"Yeah."

She watched her index poke at his nipple. "Sam—the real Sam—is mean and cruel. Guys like Sam appeal to the worse in a woman. But that's still appealing to them, I guess."

"You could have chosen either one of us. You were at a fork in the road, and you chose me."

"Yeah." Her brows knit briefly. "But it turned out it wasn't a fork after all, it was a spoon in the road." She glanced up and sideways at him. "Yeah. I mean, I chose the right side of the spoon, but the other side followed us on the left, and we all met together again at the top. Here."

She smiled up at him, and he smiled back.

The wind rattled the windows.

She spread her long thighs apart. He put his finger between them. She cocked her ear up. He lowered his mouth to its labyrinth of curved shadows.

Connected again.

For The Story.

The typed phrase, "rabies confirmed", lowered away from Daryl as he put the lab report back down on his desk.

Another one.

It was a Tuesday. Tuesdays were worst than Mondays. Mondays you expected to be bad. Tuesdays you expected to be better, but they never were.

They were having canned food for dinner tonight. Money was low. They had to withdraw another ten dollars from their savings.

Nelson's phone rang.

Daryl watched Nelson say hello. Saw his eyebrows slowly rise, then saw him look directly at Daryl.

Daryl ducked his head down, embarrassed at getting caught staring. He picked up the lab report in front of him. Rabies confirmed.

Nelson's voice called out. "Incoming for you on line three, Daryl."

Daryl picked up his phone. "Hello?" He glanced over at Nelson, who reluctantly turned half-away.

"Daryl?" It was Sam's voice. "Daryl? This is Sam Rudolph."

"Hi, Sam." He wet his lips.

"Haven't heard from you since the party."

Daryl couldn't think of what to say. Too many other thoughts were going through his head: Sam twisting Sally's breast, Daryl laying him out, punching him unconscious, The Story.

"Hello?"

"What are you—why are you calling?"

Sam's deep voice went on, oblivious to Daryl's discomfort. "I've got some free time today. Wanna have lunch?"

"Lunch?"

"Yeah."

"I don't—I was—I can't—"

Sam chuckled through the hyphens. "Come on! I'll take you to the Alaska Cafe. My treat." The Alaska Cafe was where all the town's businessmen ate their lunch. Daryl had never been inside it. Sally couldn't eat with him today because of the Mother's Day rush at the House of Red Roses.

He felt his face flex through different expressions as he gave his excuse, as though Sam could see him. "I was really planning on just eating downstairs today, in the Hospital coffee shop. I might not even go out at all, I might just have something sent up. We're really busy." He put his right palm flat down on his desk top.

"You don't want to eat that shit they serve there, Daryl. I'll pick you up. When do they let you eat?"

"I don't really think so."

"C'mon! Whaddaya, still upset 'cause we got into a tiff last time? Listen, Daryl, I feel awful about it." Sam's voice slowed down, lost most of its exuberance. "I woke up the next day, and I just felt awful about it. It was the booze that made me act that way. I'm really sorry. I was going to call you, to apologize, but I felt so ashamed I didn't even do that. I'm one of these people, like the Indians or the Japanese, who just plain can't hold their liquor. I know you don't want me to burden you with my troubles, but if it helps our friendship any, I never used to drink like I did during that period around the party. It was the loneliness, it was being a little too excited about you and your fiancée coming over—it just got out of hand. But that's no excuse, and I know it." His voice broke. "I've been sitting out here in my garden all morning drinking one cup of coffee after the other, trying to work up the courage to call."

Daryl leaned over the receiver, casting a glance at Nelson. "Whenever you call for me, do you act effeminate or something? I keep getting these weird looks from the co-worker who first answers your calls."

Sam's voice sounded as deeply masculine as ever. "Me? Effeminate? Well, I don't know." There was a pause on the line. "Do I sound effeminate to you?"

"Not now you don't, but I'm asking if you deliberately act effeminate when you ask one of my co-workers for me, like as a practical joke or something."

Sam laughed easily. "Why, did some guy there make a pass at you?"

"No, of course not, but—"

"Daryl, listen, have lunch with me, will you? Give me another chance. We've known each other for a while now, I consider us to be friends, and I could really use the company. And it's not just any company I could use, it's your company. We'll do it just like that time I took you out for that seafood dinner, just the two of us. If you like the place, you could take your fiancée there sometime. Is one o'clock too early?"

Daryl looked around at the walls, the reports on his desk. He let out a sigh. "No, one o'clock's fine."

The Alaska Cafe stood halfway down Alaska Street in the center of Lodgepole, across the street from the town's only bank. White butcher paper covered both its storefront windows from bottom to top.

Across the wide sheets of paper, done with blue and red felt pens, were psychedelic designs, menu suggestions, and tall paragraphs explaining the restaurant's philosophy, which was known as Rationalistic Perfectionism.

Daryl had read all the paragraphs when he first got to Lodgepole, stopping in front of the storefront during his wanderings around the small town after his interview with Nancy Costello. To kill time waiting for Sam, he started rereading one that was written above a blue drawing of a dungeness crab for the Tuesday all-you-can-eat special.

Halfway through it he heard an engine's downshift behind him, turning tensely just in time to watch a long, black Cadillac pull into the slot directly in front of the restaurant.

A moment after the motor cut off the driver's door swung out and Sam rose up out of the car, grinning. He was dressed in black suit pants, a white dress shirt, and sunglasses.

He looked taller and thinner than Daryl remembered.

Daryl found himself smiling back. He didn't know what Sam was to him—he knew he wasn't a friend—but outside of Sally, Sam was the only person Daryl could have a conversation with about something other than weather, work and television.

Daryl spoke first, trying to sound relaxed, invincible, sophisticated. "Still haven't cleaned your grille." He gestured at the thick crust of insects and small animals sprayed across the Cadillac's front.

Sam half-turned away from Daryl and the Cafe, studying his grille as though seeing it for the first time. Turning forward again he grinned at Daryl, one eye squinting in the brightness. "Nope, not yet."

Daryl grunted, smiling back.

The silence after a smile is allowed to last longer than most silences. Sam clapped his hand on Daryl's shoulder without saying anything more, offering the Cafe to him with his free hand.

The interior of the Alaska Cafe started three deep steps down, in a dimly-lit, noisy space. Along the walls were fishing nets, starfish, photographs of crab catches, and green-lit aquariums.

Just inside, across the door from the cash register, a slight, bearded guy wearing an aquamarine t-shirt looked up from eating his crab. His dark, French-Canadian eyes wandered from Sam to Daryl as he put a curled finger in his mouth, drawing it out slowly. "Just the two of you?"

Sam nodded.

The man pushed his chair back, brushing at his lap. He looked up again. "I'm the owner."

They followed his humped shoulders towards the rear, past a waitress stooping in the middle of the aisle to take pictures of a loud group sitting around one of the tables, each flash lighting up big teeth, waving beer bottles, a half-eaten birthday cake.

The owner seated them at a table along the back wall, near the kitchen.

Sam whipped his napkin out sideways at knee level, then draped it casually over his lap. "Not the best table." He smiled apologetically at Daryl.

"It'll do."

"That's what they say in Australia. Are you relaxed?"

Daryl listened to the bubblings from one of the aquariums for a moment. He shrugged. "When we eat out, it's usually at the Open 'Til Eight pizza shop."

"I haven't eaten there. Open 'Til Eight pizza shop." Sam politely mimed making a mental note. "I imagine the crowd's a little less pretentious." He cast some sharp glances around, scowling.

"Yeah."

A tall, blonde, big-boned waiter in an aquamarine t-shirt appeared at the front of their table. He put a fist down on Daryl's side of the table, one on Sam's, and leaned in so he could be heard. "My name's David. First time visit?"

Sam, mid-way through lighting a cigarette, pointed his cupped hands at Daryl.

David swayed his wide face closer to Daryl's side. "We operate according to the philosophy of Rationalistic Perfectionism, a philosophy invented by the Alaska Cafe's owner, Alain Sarr."

"Okay."

"In keeping with this philosophy we offer the finest seafood eating experience available in all of Alaska. Because quality levels of seafood vary from catch to catch, you as the customer must rationally understand that not every meal served here will necessarily be as perfected as every other. But, each meal will be as perfected as is possible with the select catch then available."

Daryl nodded judiciously, wishing Sally were here to hear this bullshit. "Sounds great."

David took off for a moment, then came back with a terra-cotta bowl of salsa, which he placed in the center of the table. Carefully,

with a dip to the side, he put a plate of cheese-covered tortilla chips in front of each of them. He took his order pad out from under his armpit.

Sam passed a secret wink to Daryl. He tilted his face up to David, his voice very mild. "What do you recommend for my friend and me, David?" He flicked a glance down the waiter's body just long enough to have it be noticed.

David put a hand on his hip, standing back slightly to look around. "Don't, do not, order the shrimp today. They have a new cook and he doesn't know how to clean shrimp. He pulls out the sand vein and never even touches the blood vein. If you're like me—" he waved a hand down his front—"you don't want any veins in the food you eat."

Sam chuckled deeply, his voice oozing out of him like a low-thrummed purr. "Well goodbye to shrimp, then." He looked David's body over again while the kids' aquariums bubbled in the background, putting his right palm against his left, all ten fingers straight up. "So what are you going to feed me, David?"

David cocked his hip, cheeks slightly reddened, looking around again. His voice was coy. "Well..."

He's just going along with Sam, Daryl decided. He's flirting with him because he thinks Sam's a rich, aging fag who might be flattered into leaving a big tip. In reality this waiter's probably got a girlfriend and a waterbed, and a couple of illegitimate kids down in the lower forty-eight.

Sam settled on crab. David turned to Daryl, his manner slightly cool. Doesn't want Sam to get jealous. "And you, sir? What will you have?"

"I'll have crab too."

After the waiter left with the menus Sam measured Daryl for a beat. He hid his question behind the lighting of a fresh cigarette. "Ever flirt with a man?"

"Me?"

"Yeah." He pitched the smoking match at an ashtray. Over-shrugged. "Ever do it?"

Daryl reached for a tortilla chip. Sam dipped one into the salsa the same time he did, their chip edges touching under the red. The salsa had been warmed up, which was a surprise to Daryl. "No. I never have." It occurred to him his head had tilted to one side as he had answered. He straightened it up so it sat squarely atop his shoulders. He looked around at the seated crowds, the ceiling fans,

knowing he would have to look back eventually. “You?” He cleared the frog out of his throat.

Sam pulled on his cigarette, blue eyes holding Daryl’s behind the ribbon of smoke. His voice remained casual. “Ever have a man flirt with you?”

Daryl shook his head, not in the negative but at the subject matter of their conversation. He crunched a tortilla chip into his mouth, one sharp shard of it cutting him behind his front teeth. He answered even more casually than Sam had asked. “In college, yeah. Once in a while.”

“Tell me about it.”

“There isn’t much to tell.” Daryl gestured with a dry chip. “One night when I was working late at the Hospital—Maine Medical Center, in Portland, Maine—and I was walking back to my apartment—” he started to see it in his mind—“it was late, after midnight, intern’s hours, and this guy crossed the street to my side, middle-aged guy, looked respectable, and he asked me for a, you know, light—” Sam smiled—“and then he looked around—the streets were deserted—and asked me if I wanted to earn some extra money. That’s how he put it, earn extra money.”

Sam showed his teeth.

Daryl squared his shoulders to himself within his jacket. “I’m sure this sounds quite naive now, but when he first said it to me I had no idea of what he really meant. My first reaction was, why would someone be offering me a job in the middle of the night?”

Sam barked out a surprised laugh, looking at Daryl with appreciation. In his mind Daryl quickly went over what he had just said, then realized the joke he had unconsciously made.

David came over with their onion soups. Sam sat back to make room, then put a hand on Daryl’s forearm. “David,” he confided, “my friend—” he pointed across the table to Daryl—“was admiring your build. He’s a weight-lifter too, but he says he can’t get his forearms to look like yours.”

David, who had leaned chummily over the table towards Sam at the sound of his name, cut a glance at Daryl. Daryl could imagine what was going through his mind: now I’m being asked to flirt with both of you. Okay.

David came over to Daryl’s side, rolling his shoulders to loosen up. He stood alongside Daryl’s chair, leaning his hip against Daryl’s shoulder.

Daryl shot a terrified glance at Sam, who was nonchalantly dipping his spoon into his onion soup.

David leaned further over, until his face was in front of Daryl's. His eyes inspected Daryl's face with the coolness of a big cat, lips pushing out slightly. "What do you press?" "Seventy-five." Daryl felt the need to explain. "I keep it low for cut." David's big face bobbed, the expression on his lips suggesting that was a decent weight to press for cut. He looked down at the bare forearm he was holding just under Daryl's jaw, to get Daryl to look at it. When Daryl did, David started turning the forearm left and right, both of them watching the powerful way the tendons stood up, the muscles ridged. Daryl felt the hip press with deliberate over-familiarity against his upper arm. "Be careful how you do your curls. Make sure you match the effort on each side, nice and slow and controlled like this, so the muscles build up even. Gradually increase to ninety." He flexed his forearm in front of Daryl's face a few more times, blonde eyebrows up and innocent, his bland face only partially concealing his contempt, like the way some people say 'Sir'.

"I'll try that."

The blonde broke into an athlete's grin, quick and easy, before withdrawing his forearm, eyes, mouth and hip. He touched Daryl's shoulder lightly, then glanced at Sam.

"Thank you, David."

David sauntered away down the aisle, turning once at the corner to glance back over an aquarium at Daryl, giving him a very serious look.

Sam cackled, wiping his fingertips with his napkin. He stopped when he saw the complicated look on Daryl's face. "It's only lunch, Daryl. We're only having fun."

When the crabs came both men had an excuse not to keep the conversation up for a while. Daryl grasped the crab's top shell in one hand, carefully placing his fingers around the thorns, and pried the bottom shell away. He was getting through lunch, and he was enjoying himself. A few times he had caught himself trying harder than he usually did—even with Sally—to say something clever. Sam was one of those people in life who you never know if you really like or not, even though you do know you like being with them.

Somehow it had gotten to be 1:45 before it usually did.

Of course, Nancy Costello was out sick, so it probably didn't matter too much if he was a little late getting back. Nelson Nimmitz still hadn't returned when he left.

He pretended to concentrate on liberating a particularly well-defended piece of crab meat, sneaking a glance under his eyebrows at Sam.

The older man was pulling apart a box of cartilage to get at the plump square of flesh it encased. For the first time since Sam had arrived, Daryl allowed into the front of his mind the realization that the man sitting across from him was the star of *The Story*. With his eyes he discreetly measured the width of the shoulders, the strength of the jaw, the elegance of the rib cage tapering inward below the table top. Sally and Daryl both came fantasizing about this man making love to her.

During the weeks of *The Story* Daryl had understood why Sally would come—she was thinking about an attractive, well-built man making love to her. But why did the same thought make Daryl come? During the ritual of telling *The Story*, Daryl played the roles of both himself and Sam. Without either of them realizing it, was Sally, besides playing the role of herself, also playing the role of Daryl? If Sally was using his cock as a substitute for Sam's, was Daryl using her body as a substitute for his own?

Sam looked up, lips glossy and eyes bright. "Good, huh?"

Daryl nodded with his head down, raising his eyebrows in agreement, teeth pulling a cord of white meat out of the body of the crab.

Sam put his napkin down over the rose and emerald remains of the crab. "So how's your fiancée doing?"

"Good. Great."

"You guys should come over my place some time. Watch my TV."

"We're really busy right now."

"Planning for the wedding?"

"Yeah." Daryl met Sam's relaxed eyes.

Sam picked up a book of Alaska Cafe matches. He flipped it open, pulled off a match at one end, and lit it. Lowering his hand, he moved the match's small, silky flame underneath a tube of flesh left exposed in the shell of a leg. He played the flame left and right under the tube, concentrating on the strings of meat as they curled and frayed

away from the fire. "Would it offend you if I asked what she was like in bed?"

Daryl felt a double thump: heart and hard-on. He studied the look of concentration on Sam's face as the tiny flame slowly ate up through the fat tube of flesh. This wasn't a dream, and this wasn't The Story. "Why do you ask?"

Sam kept watching the flame, forearms on the table. His wide shoulders shrugged in the white dress shirt. "Just asking."

Daryl started putting his emptied shell sections back on his plate. If he refused to answer, it would imply Sally wasn't that good in bed. "She's great." It felt good to say it.

Sam grinned. "She is, huh? I figured." He brought the match to his lips and blew it out, the last flicker illuminating the wide eyebrows, the prominent cheekbones. "Really passionate?"

"Yeah."

"I figured." He dropped what was left of the match onto his napkin. "Those quiet types..."

Daryl defended her. "She's not that quiet."

"When she comes?"

Daryl's face pulled back bashfully. "I meant in everyday life."

Sam sat back, big hands still on the table, as though they were too heavy to lift after his meal. "I meant during sex. Nothing wrong with bragging about her. You probably don't have many people you can brag to, even though you'd like to. She's not here, this is just between us."

"I know."

"Don't you want to tell someone what she's like in bed? Don't you want to shout it from the rooftops at times?"

"Sure. She's wonderful. Fantastic."

"Does she go, 'Ah!' or 'Ah, ah, ah!' or 'Ah! Ah! Ahhhh!'"

Daryl broke into a sloppy grin despite himself, at Sam's intentness. He rubbed his mouth. Blinked. "Probably the latter."

"Ah-hah." Sam dropped one large hand off the table, onto his lap. His bright blue eyes held Daryl's. "Tell me what she does when she comes. Tell me something only someone who's seen her come would know."

"I'm the only one who's ever seen her come. That's awfully intimate."

"Yeah, I know. You'd like to tell me though, wouldn't you? You'd like to share it. You'd like to brag about it to me."

"Maybe." He moved his arms around, trying to find a relaxed position for them, heart beating loudly. He tested how it felt to let Sam know. "She clasps my shoulder when she comes." Sam's eyes hooded, the pupils looking inward at the picture Daryl had given to them. The reaction reminded Daryl of the look he had seen on a dog's face once when he was a kid, a dog he had started masturbating, his hand not stopping once he had started only because of the novelty of seeing the progression of arousal in something other than himself. He cautiously took it a step further. "She rests her hand on my shoulder near the end, that's how I can tell it's getting close, then she clasps it when she comes."

"She likes shoulders."

Daryl remembered Sam's powerful shoulders from the pool. "Yeah. She likes shoulders."

Sam's knee brushed against the inside of Daryl's. Daryl opened his legs farther to move his knee away from the touch of Sam's, the cotton over his crotch stretching tighter.

Sam rested his right elbow upright on the table, letting its hand slowly drape down until it was perpendicular to the wrist, in the classic fag position. Daryl thought: that's why gays are so limp-wristed—it's to draw attention to their hands, to make you start thinking about those hands on your body.

Wrist still bent, Sam placed the tip of his middle finger on his lower lip, abstractly moving the tip back and forth over the lip's wideness. His voice was the quiet voice of someone going into reverie. "How's it feel for your cock? When you're inside her. Tight, loose, in-between?"

Daryl shifted his legs around under the table, feeling his ass move over the seat. I can fuck his mind if I want to. He's off-guard. His ear's right there, open and waiting. And I can fuck it. "Tight." Sam's drooped eyelids flickered. Want some more? "Very tight."

"She like it all the way in, part of the way..."

"All the way." He felt Sam's calf cross his. He let it stay there. Tonight he'd tell Sally how he fucked big bad Sam in a public place. "She likes to be teased with the length of it first."

"Just the head and an inch or so?"

Daryl slowly shook his head. "Just the head." He watched Sam's switching eyes.

Sam pursed his lips out, thinking about it. His voice was deferential. "I'd give her an inch or two below the head. Try it next

time. It'll make her cunt widen up deeper inside her, so she can feel the emptiness at the back. It'll make her want to get that emptiness filled up real bad, real fast."

Daryl frowned, at first because he was offended that Sam was trying to tell him what to do in bed with Sally, and then because it occurred to him that the tables had turned, and now Sam was fucking him back.

Sam filled the silence before Daryl could, drawling out each word so it went in Daryl's ear as separate thrusts. "Then while I was between her legs I'd flip one of my legs over hers, outside her legs, so my hip bones weren't stopped by the undersides of her thighs, and I'd pump down into her sideways. That's what I'd do when she asked me to go deeper."

Daryl's thoughts reeled, like protective hands trying to wave something back, but the pictures got through anyway: I'd flip one leg over hers...my hipbones, the undersides of her thighs...I'd pump down into her sideways...when she asked me to go deeper.

Daryl looked at Sam with surprise. He fucked me. He played passive until I was close enough, and then he rolled my mind over and he fucked me.

And I couldn't stop him. His voice was still inside my head, flipping one leg over Sally's, his hipbones, the undersides of Sally's thighs, and Daryl knew tonight at home it would be Sam's words coming out of Daryl's mouth that would fuck Sally, Sam's images, images Daryl had caught from Sam and couldn't keep from spreading to Sally like a psychic sexual disease.

Daryl slumped in his chair, fumbling across the shells and spills for a cigarette. He gave Sam a grudging look of admiration, and asked a question he usually only asked girls.

Sam smiled, still basking. "How old do I look?" He played with the matchbook, opening and shutting it.

"Forty-five?" Daryl said it to compliment: he figured Sam was really somewhere in his mid-fifties.

Sam's lips turned down. He shook his head. "I'm older than that, Daryl. I'm millions and millions of years old." He put the matches back down on the table.

Daryl grimaced. "I've felt that way sometimes, too."

David, the waiter, came over with their bill. He bent his left arm behind his back to bulge the bicep out, using his other hand to lay the bill gently down in front of Sam. With a sly sideways glance he

checked to see if Daryl was admiring the display of muscle. Daryl wasn't: his eyes were fixed on his older companion.

Out on the sidewalk, Daryl squinting in the brightness, Sam placed his hand on Daryl's shoulder. "Is your old place rented yet?"

Daryl let the hand stay there. "I doubt it. The building was only half-full anyway."

Sam's thumb drifted to Daryl's collarbone, sending goosebumps up his spine. "Still got a key?"

"Yeah. It's not mine now, though. I don't pay rent anymore. Why?"

"That's okay. Let's take a drive over, show it to me."

Daryl laughed tensely. "Show you my old apartment? Why would you want to see my old apartment?"

Sam cocked his head to one side, giving Daryl's shoulder a strong squeeze. "I don't know. How about it?"

"Why?"

Sam jerked his head around, imitating confusion. "Who knows? How about it?"

The interior stairs, familiar yet narrower-seeming, loomed up in front of him. Way up at the top, to the right, a bulb burned behind an old-fashioned white and rose globe.

He followed behind Sam, step by step.

He thought back to that night so many weeks ago: the dream about his teeth falling out, the discovery of Sylvia Gold's nude body.

Raising his head to see how much farther they had to climb, he got a close-up view, directly above him, of the small cheeks of Sam's ass moving beneath the black seat of his pants.

He watched a moment longer than he thought he would, then a moment longer than that, then one final moment, then he ducked his head back down, heart beating fast.

Sam stopped at the top of the landing, waiting for Daryl. The globe picked up the grey in his eyelashes and hair.

He ambled ahead of Daryl down the faded carpet, white sleeves rolled up past his elbows, head held erect.

He stopped outside Daryl's old door. Number 18.

Daryl pulled the ring of keys out of his pants pocket.

They jangled in the silence of the hallway as he flipped through them.

He pushed the key straight forward into the door. "How'd you know which apartment was mine?"

The key still fit. The door still creaked.

The pattern of sun shafts and shadows hadn't changed. The air smelled of aerosol sprays.

Daryl walked alone through the quiet of the rooms, feeling the claustrophobia of them again.

The hallway wall where that spider-thing with the three beseeching women growing out of its front had crawled sideways in retreat.

The front room where the walking women's legs had maneuvered their hole up, over, around and down his cock.

"A lot of strange things happened to me in this apartment." He turned around.

Sam stood by the foot of the bed, the striped mattress behind him. He was naked.

He stepped over his clothes on the floor, walking slowly towards Daryl.

"You must have known somewhere inside you that this is why I wanted to come here. To be alone with you. To let it happen."

Daryl stopped breathing. His mouth opened but nothing came out. He stared at Sam's body, all of Sam's body. Legs, cock, chest, shoulders.

His mouth was so dry his tongue stuck to the roof. He pulled it down.

Sam stopped directly in front of Daryl, a foot away.

Both men were the same height.

From the soles of Daryl's feet to the crown of his prickling scalp, Daryl's body asked Daryl's soul a single question: yes, or no?

Sam turned his body around in front of Daryl slowly, gracefully, showing his lean, muscular back; his small ass. He finished revolving with his heavy cock once more showing its erect underside to Daryl, the hips flanking it so narrow they were recessed in above the tops of his thighs.

Sam reached up and pulled the knot of Daryl's tie down until the wide and narrow ends lay side by side across his shirt front.

He undid Daryl's collar button.

He unbuttoned his shirt halfway down his chest.

The clear blue eyes looked knowingly into Daryl's. He put his strong hands around Daryl's neck, rubbing the soft, wide palms over the sides and back of his neck, making Daryl go up on tiptoe.

Daryl shut his eyes with a shiver as the hands slid under his shirt. He let out a girl's quiet moan as the fingers caressed his ribs, nipples, spine and stomach. When they slid up into his wet armpits he shivered again, feeling the tickling jolt of pleasure run down his arms.

He let Sam take his shirt off him.

He watched the muscles move in Sam's thick arms as Sam slid the end of Daryl's belt out of its buckle.

He was so conscious of his body by now, and of Sam's, that only a small mound of his mind hadn't yet submerged into his body.

He knew what happened when bodies took over.

Bodies have no conscience.

Daryl's stomach fluttered as the belt was drawn tighter for a moment to get the prong out of its punch hole, the rounded end of the prong moving slowly out of the hole, lingering for a second at its rim.

Sam hooked his thumbs under the elastic band of Daryl's underpants, pulling forward so the pants and underpants came down without snagging on Daryl's own erection.

Daryl took his own shoes and socks off.

Now Daryl was naked too.

Their bodies faced each other.

Sam lightly stroked the tops of his own thighs, elbows out, the four fanned fingers on each side framing his cock. "So."

Daryl was so empty he echoed. "So."

Sam took a step closer. Daryl could see the smooth texture of his skin. The few sun freckles across the tops of each shoulder made Sam look incredibly sexy.

Sam took another step closer.

From the side, their two thighs and asses formed a tall, lean, two-toned heart shape, the two stiff cocks at the center of the heart now only an inch apart.

Sam's right hand passed into the heart, palm resting flat against Daryl's warm stomach.

Daryl's legs went weak. His arms lifted slightly. His asshole went into an involuntary flex.

Sam's other palm touched down alongside his first.

Daryl stood rooted, hands lifting at his sides.

Sam looked into his eyes. Through the fish eye lens of extreme closeness Daryl saw Sam's nose as being more prominent, saw the blue eyes as bending slightly back towards the temples.

Beneath the black and grey eyebrows, within the long lashes, in the center of the glowing blue curve of each iris, the large, black pupils held his as Daryl felt Sam's hands close unhurriedly around his cock.

Daryl bent forward as though with the holding he had been pierced with the sweetest, lightest, deadliest blade, and now the heart their bodies formed had found its arrow.

His hands cupped around Sam's balls and cock as though cupping life itself. He mirrored pulling the cock like his was pulled, feeling between his palms its tall stiffness. As his body arched under the feel of Sam's hands on his cock, as his head rolled back under the delicious petting, a tear rolled out of the far corner of either eye, sliding down his cheekbones.

Daryl's knees were already bent when he felt Sam's hands leave his cock for his shoulders, gently pushing down.

It amazed Daryl how easy it was to drop to his knees in the classic position in front of another man.

Putting his hands on the front of Sam's thighs was easy too, because he knew how good that felt to a man to be touched there.

Sam's cock stood straight up in front of him, waiting. He looked up at it, its height, its thickness. This was not a dream. This was not The Story. This was real.

He leaned in, kissing Sam's left thigh, then his right. The kisses were tender. He rubbed his face against the muscles running up the thighs, speaking the first sentence of his new life. "You have beautiful legs."

He moved his hands around to the backs of Sam's thighs, stroking and holding. It suddenly occurred to him in his passion that he could now finally feel Sam's ass.

He crept his hands up the backs of the thighs, smiling to himself as he felt through Sam's legs the desire in Sam rise up with the caresses.

He paused when he got to the bottom of the swell, to tease them both. To cup a man's ass in this posture—there was only one other greater gesture of submission.

He raised his hands up, feeling for the first time the lean, lively band of muscle just beneath the soft skin of each cheek.

Once he had Sam's ass cupped in his hands, the rest was easy. Because once Sam allowed him to hold his ass, Daryl realized he was in love, realized this had been what he had wanted all along, that right from that first day when he saw Sam dominate the town, dominate the

coffee shop, dominate Sally, he had wanted Sam to dominate him, and so the act of raising his mouth up to just above the head of Sam's gorgeous cock, and parting his lips just wide enough so they'd both feel the hot, toothy passion of the long slide down—that turned out to be the easiest part of all.

Sally burst through the front door of their garage apartment, laughing and hip-wriggling, free hand waving in the air. "And so then Mr. Thomson steps out from behind where we put all the store's stuffed animals once Mrs. Thomson is gone, and he orders a dozen roses too, for her. Imagine having your wedding anniversary on Mother's Day. That's one of the busiest times in the flower industry to get a delivery."

She put her bag of groceries down on the kitchen table. Daryl, looking jittery, slipped his bags down beside hers.

Her round face remembered something while the smile was still on it, eyes blinking. The corners of her lips lost their curl. "It was nice to see an old couple that's loving, like us. This town. Lately everybody's so argumentative." Daryl's face loomed behind hers as her pupils rose into the one o'clock position. "Poor Mrs. Johansen came in. She still tries to smile all the time, but I found out her new dog died. I asked her how he was doing and she told me." The pupils dropped to five o'clock. "Rabies, just like the last one. She doesn't stay long anymore. Just long enough to order flowers for people." Six o'clock. "She's such a nice person—I can't understand why bad things keep happening to her lately."

She sighed.

Daryl sat down at the kitchen table, looking at the three bags of groceries now at his eye level, trying to think of something to say. Absolutely nothing came to his mind.

Sally reached into the brown grocery bag she had carried, pulling out a blue-wired bundle of celery. "And anyway so then, right in the middle of all this rush, and chaos, I remembered what we were talking about the other night, about how maybe when we died we'd not only see our own life flash in front of us, we'd see the other person's life flash too, because we love each other so much and we're so close to each other, and then it occurred to me that if that's true, then someday, as you were dying, you'd see this moment of me today being really busy in the flower shop. So I took a moment out of the rush to think to you, 'Hi, I love you!' so you'd hear that during your life flashing, so in

case maybe if you were a little uneasy about some of the things you saw when your life flashed, this little moment with me in it you saw might reassure you.” She grinned at him, happy at herself, at them. “So that was the Most Interesting Thing that happened to me today while we were apart,” she said, concluding her half of the game they played each evening on their way home. “What was the Most Interesting Thing that happened to you today?”

Daryl shrugged, looked blank, raised his eyebrows, scratched his temple, furrowed his brow, bit his lower lip, propped his jaw in the cradle between thumb and forefinger, focused on the salt and pepper shaker.

His face twisted. “Sam called me today.” He reached over and picked up the salt shaker in both hands, holding it at a tilt away from him, watching all the tiny white grains behind the octagonal glass slide backwards.

Sally, cradling long bags of vegetables, bent over inside the refrigerator. “He called you today? What’d he want?”

Daryl looked at their potholders, their flower pots, the newly painted window sill. If only they could die now, right now, before this conversation continued. “He asked me to have lunch with him.”

“He’s got a nerve.” She turned half a lettuce around in her hand, shaking her head, then pitched it backwards towards the sink. It landed on the floor instead, rolling in its cellophane bag until it rolled over onto its missing side.

Daryl’s face turned grey. “Yeah, well. He wanted me to go to lunch with him. I wound up going.”

“Huh? You had lunch with him?” She walked slowly over, vegetable bin left pulled out, until she was standing in the center of the kitchen floor. She cocked a hip, long hair hanging straight down over the side of her face. She left it there. She started to say something but then stopped, thinking about it some more. Her laugh, when it came, was the type of short laugh that isn’t a laugh at all. “I don’t know how I feel about that.” She looked at Daryl to pick up some clues. “I mean after all he’s done to us. To me, in particular.” She was a little angrier now than she had been when she gave the short laugh.

She said nothing further, standing silent in the middle of the kitchen, considering it to be his turn in the conversation now.

Each ‘I’ he pulled up out of his throat weighed a hundred pounds. “I—at the time I thought I’d just see him and that would be that. It was at the Alaska Cafe—”

"The Alaska Cafe, Daryl?"

"—he paid, and I thought I'd find out what it was like, if we wanted to go there—". He cut himself off, sickened. His hands curled on the table top, his face hung off his skull, exhausted. He wanted to cry. His eyes closed.

Sally sighed. He felt her hands on his shoulders, massaging her man. "It just upsets me that he thinks he can... 'have lunch' with you after all that's happened..." He heard her sigh again and knew she was looking down at the forward tilt of his head, his dead hands. Her fingers pushed slightly against the fronts of his shoulders, pushing her resentment away. With each conciliatory sentence Sally's face grew more peaceful; Daryl's, more troubled. "I don't want you to feel bad, Daryl. I guess we never really discussed what to do if he called again. And you meant well, trying to check out a new place for us. I'm not mad."

She plopped herself down in the chair next to his, the two chairs they sat in night after night to discuss their future together, nuptials, babies, picket fences, and put a live hand on his dead one. "You did the right thing. We can drop it. Want to help with dinner?"

The next words weighed almost as much as his heart. "There's more."

Her face went still for a heartbeat, like the only photograph left of someone you loved, who loved you back. Then her eyes shifted. "More?"

He looked into those big, black, forgiving eyes.

She reared up in alarm at the desolate look in his eyes. Her hand reached out for his shoulder. "Baby? Are you okay?" Her loving eyes grew wider; dread crept in. "Did he do something to you?"

Daryl died at her touch. "He did something to us." He burst into tears, a big, beaten man, holding his hands over his broken face in shame.

In his closed universe of red-centered darkness he heard her calling for him, calling for an explanation.

He cried through his words. "This is so awful. It's so fucking awful. I can't go back. I can't undo it. I can't—"

"Do what? Daryl! You're scarin' me! Do what?"

He raised his agonized face up out of his palms, snuffling and blinking. In his grief his face looked too small for his head. The words came out stickily. "You'll never forgive me. You'll never love me again. You'll never look at me the same. Way." He started on another

hopeless jag, the muscles over his jaw and cheekbones aching. "One good thing I ever had. You."

"Daryl! Tell me!" Sally started crying herself, frantic and tense. "What happened, Daryl?" She let out a fearful keen. "Did you kill him?"

"I—" He wiped at his eyes, his nose, the drool on his chin. "I want to tell you but I don't want to tell you, I want to not tell you for a moment longer, so you'll still love—me—a moment—longer—" He burst into tears again.

Sally's face was in his face now, her voice as furious as a mother's. "Tell me what he did to you, Daryl. What did he do to you?"

"I—we had—we had sex."

"Who had sex?"

"Sam and I. Had sex."

She drew back.

"I don't know what I was doing, I can't believe that it happened, I'll never do it again, I must have been out of my mind."

"You. Had sex. With Sam?"

"I don't know what I was doing."

She let out an even shorter laugh than before, a the-joke-is-on-me laugh. It was so short it was just a puff of air through her nostrils.

"I can't believe I did it. I can't believe I did it."

She blinked hard. Several times. Each blink brought the truth further into her. As each blink ended, her eyes stared out into the world with a different emotion. Shock. Disbelief. Horror. Grief. Resolution. Fury.

She jerked her chair back so quickly it toppled over, spilling her onto the floor. Daryl jumped up but she hissed at him, crying. She got up by herself, awkwardly, still crying, and plodded dead on her feet over to the sink.

She slammed the water on. Spat out an agitated torrent of words to herself he couldn't understand. Halfway through washing the first plate she hurled it sideways.

Bang! Against the potholder hook, breaking apart like pie sections.

She spun around. "You had sex with him! You had sex with the man who did this to me!" She clumsily ripped the front of her blouse down, a blouse she really liked, one of the few she had, tearing fabric and popping buttons.

The force of her effort knocked her backwards against the sink. She slid down crying to the floor.

She stayed down there, sneakers tucked in towards her crotch, dungareed knees sticking out, weeping. Now he could make out the words, even though she was still saying them only to herself. "Ruined! All ruined and we were gonna get married and have kids and be old together and it's all ruined, ruined, ruined!"

He went in a hunched-over position to her, sat on the floor beside her when she noticed him but didn't object.

"I'm sorry, Sally. I don't know what to do. I'm really sorry."

She raised her red face, staring up at the far away ceiling. Swollen eyes that kept crinkling as the next blade of pain went in.

Finally she shook her head to herself, still not speaking to him. She spotted something over near one of the cabinet bottoms.

The half-eaten head of lettuce, lying just outside its cellophane wrapping.

She made a miserable face. "I can't believe that lettuce went bad so fast." She laid a small fist against one of her temples to hide her face and sniffed.

Daryl's head lifted. He looked over at the lettuce, back at her, new tears in his eyes. "Yeah. Yeah, it sure did." He looked at it laying there again. The exposed center, which should have been a pale green, was yellowed and brown-tinged.

She drew her knees up to her unhappy face, reaching her arms around to hug her shins. "When'd we buy it? Wasn't it like just yesterday?"

"I think so." He thought about it. "Yeah, we bought it yesterday."

She raised her pupils straight up in their sockets, a sure sign she was going to cry again. "Daryl, how could you?" She shot him a glistening look, friend to friend, then broke down into tears again. "I mean, how could you?"

Daryl hung his head in shame, shivering. "I don't know, Sally. I went to my old apartment with him—"

"—you what?"

"He wanted to see where I used to live."

Her grief changed to puzzlement. "Why'd he want to see your old apartment?"

"Well—now I know to have sex with me. At the time..." Daryl thought back over the conversation on the sidewalk. "...I don't know.

He said he wanted to see the apartment, and I was asking him why myself, but he just kind of gave me nonsense answers.”

“He didn’t say he wanted to have sex with you?”

“When he asked to see the apartment? No.”

She looked from where they sat on the floor below the sink to across the kitchen, to the table top. “God, if I ever needed a cigarette...”

He jumped up, brought back cigarettes and matches.

Once he was sitting beside her again he extended a hand towards her knee, stopping short out of fear. His words came out drowned. “Life wouldn’t be worth living without you.”

Her eyes hooded with distaste. “Yeah. Well.” The black eyebrows stayed straight across. Her face prepared itself. “So. How’d it happen?”

Daryl opened his mouth, shut it, opened it again. “I was looking around the apartment and I turned around and he had taken all his clothes off. Behind my back, while I was looking around. I didn’t see him undress, or know he was undressing.”

She flicked some ashes on the floor, eyes narrowing. “So?”

“So he came over, and he started touching me—” she flipped her hair back, angry and jealous—“and then we had sex.”

“‘And then we had sex’.” Her face suddenly crunched into itself so violently he thought it would break a bone. She stared straight ahead. “You stupid, fuckin’, stupid asshole! ‘And then we had sex’.”

Tears rolled silently down Daryl’s grey cheeks.

“So? Then what?”

“Then we—well, we left.”

Her face twisted to one side, lips snarling, the quote coming out in a moronic sing-song. “‘Well, we left’. What type of sex? What type of sex did you have, Daryl? What type of sex did you two do together?”

“I sucked him.”

“You. Sucked him.”

His head, already down, nodded.

“Don’t ever try to kiss me again. That’s out.”

Drops pattered down on the linoleum in front of Daryl’s lowered head.

“So? And? Did he suck you?”

“No.”

Her jaw swiveled to one side. She started thinking. She put the cigarette to her lips like it was the first time she had ever held one. "So you didn't come then."

"No, I came while—" his face looked stricken—"I was sucking him."

"He was masturbating you?" By her expression it was obvious she was trying to picture in her mind how that could be done.

"I came on my own. My cock just came." He added meekly, as further explanation: "Nobody was touching it."

She hissed out something too angry for him to comprehend. She put her fists up on her forehead, banging them against the forehead a few times, ashes falling. "Felt that good, huh?"

"I don't know what to say."

She burst into bitter, black laughter. "What do you have to say? You already said it! You get a guy's cock in your mouth and boom! you shoot off. Are you gay? Is that it?"

"No, no—"

"—no? No?" She smashed her cigarette out on the floor. "You jerk me off makin' me think of Sam with his cock inside me, till it's at the point now that's all I think of when I think of sex, Daryl, Sam's—let's see—'big, long, thick, hard cock' up inside me, I think that's a direct quote from one of your little bedtime stories, and that's normal, right? That's heterosexual, right? Only I guess that wasn't good enough anymore, right? It wasn't the real thing, yet. So I'm at work runnin' my ass off for us, all happy for us that we're gonna be alone—Shut up!—tonight, and us—you know, having a really good time and stuff—" She forced the tears out of her voice—"and here's good ol' dependable Daryl down on his knees suckin' another man's cock. What were you doin' the exact moment I was waitin' on people and plannin' what we were gonna have for dinner, stroking his balls? Or maybe puttin' a finger up his ass? How'd it feel, Daryl? Huh? How'd it feel to have that 'long, thick, big cock' in your mouth? Want to put it up my rear end next time we—no, wait a minute, hold the horses, you probably want it up your rear end."

"Listen, I—"

"Oh, fuck you!" She tore her cigarette pack open, spilling them. "Fuck you."

Daryl held his hands out towards her, palms up, new tears on his lashes.

Sally snarled at him, picked a cigarette up off the floor. She used both hands to hold the match's flame under the tip. The cigarette's sides were splotchy with the tears on the floor it had rolled over. "Was this it all along? Just an excuse to talk about his cock, tellin' me The Story?"

"I don't know."

"I don't know'." Her voice got as cruelly goofy as she could in her fury. "I know I like to suck men's cocks, and talk to my girlfriend about men's cocks, but I don't know the answer to that particular question'." She went back to a normal, strained voice. "What other man—it—this is so ridiculous! What other man has sex with his girlfriend by telling her over and over again how good some other guy's cock would feel in her? Are you trying to get rid of me?"

"I love you! I love you."

"Why are you so weird? Huh? Answer me, Daryl, this isn't one of those rhetorical questions."

"I don't know." He looked over at her. She looked so much bigger than normal, sitting on the floor with her torn blouse and her wild look; he felt so much smaller sitting next to her fury. "I mean, I had some sex dreams, and we started, you know, doing it that way—"

"—You started. I didn't ask for The Story."

"Not the first time."

"No. Well. After awhile, you kept telling them to me, and masturbating me till I'd come—after a while, okay, The Story did start exciting me."

"Does it still?"

She snorted. "Not at this particular moment, Daryl." She looked at her torn blouse, held one ragged side of it in a hand, shook her head disgustedly. She felt his eyes on her. "Oh, what—you want to go in the other room now and tell me about your boyfriend's cock again?"

"He talked about you."

She did a double-take that brought her out of her anger for a moment. Looked at the refrigerator, looked at Daryl, looked at her cigarette. "What?" A twitch started in her upper left eyelid.

"In the restaurant. He told me how he would make love to you. What position he would choose while he was making love to you."

She huffed out air several times. "You—what is this? Love? Does he really—" she screwed up her face—"turn you on that much you're just...obsessed with him now?" The refrigerator, the cigarette, Daryl. "He discussed with you how he would make love to me?"

Daryl nodded shamefully.

The refrigerator, Daryl. "And you just sat there with your thumb up your ass while he was describing how he'd make love to your girlfriend." She angrily pulled her thumb towards her torn blouse. "To me."

"We had talked about it so long between ourselves with The Story, I—admittedly, it did excite me to hear him say it. I'm being honest. I think hearing him say what he would do to you turned me on to where when he did take his clothes off and start touching me I...I couldn't resist." He shifted his legs, lust gloomily replacing fear and shame.

She heard him out. Let her legs push out in front of her; sighed. Tried to blink her anger away. The refrigerator. The cigarette. Put her hand on his shoulder, as a friend would. Silence in their kitchen. The two chairs turned away from the table, at this angle on the floor she could where the cushions were unevenly stapled underneath. After a bob of her head she looked over at him, her eyes at a higher level than his. He shrank his face away; stared at his shoelaces. The hand on his shoulder rubbed it. "He went into detail about how he'd make love to me?"

A wave of sexual hope so intense it was nauseous swept over him. Shyly, he told her, "He said he'd only put one leg between yours—one of his legs between your legs. The other leg he'd keep outside your legs."

She gave his shoulder another encouraging rub. She communicated with her eyebrows, rather than her eyes. "Really? Why?"

"So he could do it to you sideways." His face went into a haunted, high-cheekboned look. "He said he could get his cock into you deeper that way. He said he knew...you'd really want it deep."

"He said, he said."

"I can't lose you, Sally. I could tell you everything he said, everything that happened. I could incorporate it into The Story."

She looked sideways at him.

"It won't hurt anymore then. We'll use it to get even more excited." He watched her silence as long as he could. "Please, Sally. I've got to work through this. I don't want to lose you."

"That's what this is, trying to work through it?"

He nodded, eyes shutting. "I think so."

She mirrored his nod, hers lasting longer. "Okay, Daryl. Hey, you know. We're in this together. So." She swallowed, tossed her hair, stretched her arms and legs, put her hands in her lap, one curled atop the other, slid her eyes over to his. "Show me."

"Show you?"

"Now it's my turn at The Story. Take your clothes off."

"Now?"

"Yeah."

He stood up awkwardly and took his clothes off, pulling the sleeves down his arms, stepping out of his cuffs.

"Now get down on your knees."

He got down on his knees.

She jumped up, walked briskly over to the refrigerator, opened it, looking suddenly small against its white bulk, reached down, pulled out the vegetable bin, rummaged around, lifted out the cucumber they had bought.

She put it in the sink while she got out of her own clothes.

When she was nude she picked the cucumber back up in her hand, turned on the hot water tap, and thoroughly cleaned it.

She walked over with it in her hand to in front of where Daryl knelt. Slapped his hands away from her legs. He put them in his lap, in front of his hard-on.

She held the cucumber up in front of his upturned face, thin fingers around its base; held it upright and steady. His quiet eyes regarded it. "This is Sam's cock," she said cozily. "Do you want to see Sam's cock up inside me?"

His nod wobbled atop his shudder.

She looked down at his poor face. She thought of his smile, his shyness, his kindnesses.

If one of us hurts, we both hurt. If one of us gets hooked, we both get hooked.

Still standing in front of him, she spread her bare feet apart, so her cunt was accessible.

She tossed her hair back, bent forward at her knees, and carefully moved the rounded end of the cucumber up into her. In a squat, both hands holding the base, she grinned to herself, swung her long black hair out of the way, and started a steady pressure upwards, the dark green skin rising between her pale thighs, beyond the curly black hairs around her hole, until she had plunged it in as far as it could go. She sensed the walls of her cunt, unused to anything this large inside, try to

settle comfortably around the girth. What was inside her had felt cool at first, going up, but now her body warmth had risen its temperature to where it felt real.

She hung backwards slightly, eyes shut, sliding its width slowly back and forth within her.

“Do you want—”

“No words. Just watch. This time it’s just me and Sam. Like he had you.”

She made herself concentrate on the sensation of it sliding up beyond the juncture of her legs, made herself truly imagine it was Sam’s cock. Not the Sam of The Story—the Sam who really lived, who stared at her legs and kept letting his glance drop to her breasts, who tried to rape her in the pool, who had seduced her boyfriend so utterly he actually wanted her to do this now; the Sam who had his own real, live cock. She made herself want that real Sam, the cruel Sam, so badly that at the end, when the walls of her cunt clamped so tightly around what was in her, she for a moment, the most critical moment, honestly wished it was Sam’s cock. As she started coming she stopped breathing through her nose, her breath instead coming out of her twisted mouth in great wracks of agony. Her long black hair in a seaweed tangle, the muscles on the sides of her calves bulging out.

She pulled the cucumber out slowly, shutting her eyes at the pleasure of it. Now it’s in my veins too, like Daryl.

She took a big breath, chin down, eyes flickering. She grinned again, sloppy and distracted. “What a rush.” Again, she held the cucumber up in front of Daryl’s face. “This is Sam’s cock.” She gulped some air. “It just fucked me—your fiancée—until I came. It’s got my smell all around it.” She arched a lazy eyebrow. “Wanna suck it, Daryl? Is that what you want?”

She held it between her legs, in the upright position.

Daryl’s arms went like a swimmer’s around her, hands settling on her plumper ass.

Daryl mouth went down around it.

Sally lifted one hand off the base where she held it in place. She wanted to smash him in the face, but instead stroked the side of his full cheek.

A distressful thought occurred to her. “He doesn’t want you to move in with him, or anything like that, does he?”

Mouth still around the cucumber, Daryl shook his head. Then he pulled his lips off it, but only for a moment. His voice was breathless.

"I think he prefers it this way." He looked up at her. She looked down at him. He slid his mouth back down again over Sam's green cock.

Daryl stood up, putting his hands on the backs of his hips, twisting his shoulders back left and right to work out the stiffness in his spine.

Nelson Nimmitz pulled his eyes away from the top of his microscope, eyeing Daryl's limbering up.

"I'm going to the men's room, Nelson. I'll be back in a minute."

He walked down the wide, white corridor, passing other departments' cloth partition walls, behind one of which a phone was ringing on and on.

Halfway down the hall, at the photocopier, one of the nurses lowered her face down to her reflection in the control panel, fluffing the hair around her temples as the copier flashed on and off through its shuffle of multiple copies.

The hall ended at a closed door with an EXIT sign above it. He could take the metal stairs all the way down, flight after flight, out into the birds and trees and pale blue sky.

He turned left instead, bent over, and drank from the fountain.

The men's room was next to the water fountain. He put his palms on the door. His elbows shot behind his shoulders as the door banged. Hard. Into his nose.

He staggered sideways, one leg longer than the other, both hands holding the lower half of his face. Ammonia rose up into the bones beneath his eyes.

His hands left his face as fists. He jerked back three steps, eyes blinking.

The door swung open again, very slowly, very quietly.

The eyes, the crotch. Sam.

"What—"

Sam stayed in the men's room doorway. He beckoned with a long finger.

Daryl went.

The men's room was clean and bright and empty. Two sinks, two urinals, two stalls.

Sam sauntered over to the far stall, wider for the handicapped. His clothes were neatly pressed, his black hair carefully combed. "We could talk nonsense for half an hour first, but why? Want to come?"

Daryl didn't know if Sam meant "come" as in accompany, or have an orgasm. It didn't matter.

Daryl went.

Sam stood at the back of the stall, by the toilet. The seat was up. A shiny metal bar ran along each interior wall.

Daryl entered.

Underneath the smell of cleanser rose the scent of different men's urine.

Daryl wanted to have sex with Sam, Daryl didn't want to have sex with Sam, Daryl still felt a gut repulsion to the idea of having sex with Sam, Daryl felt more sexually excited than he ever had before in his life, Daryl was afraid of Sam touching him, of Daryl touching Sam, Daryl wished Sam was a girl, Daryl wished he were a girl, or they both were girls, anything other than two adult men touching and kissing and sucking and fucking each other in a stall, but no matter how confused he was about everything else, Daryl knew he wouldn't leave.

Sam reached behind Daryl, shutting and locking the door.

Daryl wet his lips. "Someone might come in."

Sam unbuttoned his shirt with both hands, like a spider washing its face. "We're in a stall."

"They'll see four feet."

"Only at first."

Daryl watched the long, muscular arms come out of the shirt sleeves. Wanting to be held by them made him feel, for a moment, sad. His voice was diffident, respectful. "Are you gay?"

Sam let out a genuine laugh, the masculine loudness of it frightening Daryl. What if someone were passing by in the hall? What if someone he knew burst in when they were only halfway through?

Sam casually undid his belt, pulled down his fly. His voice was quieter. "I'm not gay, Daryl. I'm not asking you to be either." Daryl listened as though he were being told instructions, raising his eyebrows and bobbing his head with relief at the second sentence. Sam pushed his tight pants down. "Cunt's something you always keep a hankering for, like steak or chocolate." He pulled off his underwear, straightening up. "But cunt ain't cock, Daryl. And today, I want cock."

The fingersnap was so sharp it echoed.

Daryl bashfully began undressing, aware of Sam's eyes on him. Bent over to pull a shoe off, he smiled at Sam for reassurance, but Sam gave no smile back.

When Daryl was down to his underpants, Sam stopped his hands. "Leave them on. For now."

"Oh. Okay, sure."

"Keep your arms at your sides."

Daryl did what he was told.

Sam looked Daryl's body up and down several times, thumb and index finger caressing his lower lip. Daryl stood still, feeling the sweat start under his armpits.

"You could be a little thinner."

Daryl's head jerked. His nervous smile was replaced with a brave one that tried to hide the hurt. "I only weigh 180. I'm six feet tall."

"Keep your arms at your sides. Your chest is nicely developed—"

"—thanks for that." A tear fell.

"—But you've neglected your legs." Sam squatted in front of Daryl, angry eyes looking up, down and sideways. "There isn't the same degree of muscle tone." His hand evaluated the inside of Daryl's left thigh, Daryl's fingers curling in jerks. "They're soft, Daryl. There's too much flesh. They don't suggest the bone beneath. Flesh shouldn't hide bone, it should accentuate it in a perfect balance."

"I—you caught me off guard—I could exercise more, or diet, if you think—"

Sam brought his older face close up against Daryl's, until the world was eclipsed. The blue eyes, wider set than Daryl's, pointed their pupils right into him. "All flesh is fruit. As the seed covers itself the skeleton covers itself, to continue."

Sam moved his big face back, until it was normal-sized again. His fingers reached out, low and unhurried, their tips lightly caressing the front of Daryl's still straining underpants. Daryl held his breath, bent his head and watched, like a girl watching her boyfriend put his hand on her bra for the first time.

"Do you like me, Daryl?"

"Yes. Do you like me?" Another tear rolled down.

"Do you want me, Daryl?"

"Yes."

"Bad?"

"Yes."

"Real bad?"

"Yes."

Sam looked up, kept stroking. "How bad?"

Daryl's miserable face screwed up. "What do you want me to say?"

"Do you want me bad enough?"

"I don't understand."

"You can put your hands on my chest during this."

Daryl's hands rose before him, fingers spread. They moved forward until they were on Sam's chest. The skin was soft, the muscles underneath hard.

"Are you willing to prove how bad you want me?"

"Yes."

"Don't lift your hands off until I tell you you can, then."

"I won't."

"Or else we won't make love."

"I won't lift them off."

Sam's hand closed around the hammock of Daryl's underpants, gripping his balls. The squeeze started out slowly, tightening until Daryl let out a cry.

"Keep your hands on my chest."

Daryl did.

The second squeeze began, shooting spikes of pain out to the anus and up into the stomach. Daryl's shoulders slumped forward but he kept his hands on Sam's chest. When the second squeeze finally ended he looked up into Sam's eyes from his withered posture, not pleading, just bracing.

Sam squeezed again, harder this time, lips peeling back away from his teeth, right eyebrow lifting in enjoyment.

Daryl whimpered under the pain, a bead of saliva trickling out of the corner of his mouth, but hung on.

By the time the third squeeze ended he was weak and nauseous.

Sam held tightly onto Daryl's balls but didn't squeeze again. With his fingertips Daryl felt the deepness of Sam's voice reverberate through the bones of his chest. "I'm not gay, Daryl."

Daryl rested his hot face against Sam's chest, feeling its smoothness, smelling skin and soap. "You want Sally."

His balls got another squeeze. Halfway through the squeeze a bolt of pleasure shot up through the pain. "Good boy."

"I wouldn't stop her. I won't stop her. If she wants to."

The next squeeze, longer and tighter, was intensely pleasurable. "I want a chance to fuck her."

"Okay. All right. A chance."

“When it’s just the four of us—you, me, her, a bed. We’ll let her decide.”

“Her decision.”

Sam let go of his balls.

Daryl fell back a step, looked at the still curled palm of Sam’s hand with longing.

Sam took Daryl’s underpants off. Using his thumb, he wiped the tears away from under Daryl’s eyes. “Now I’m going to show you a secret.”

“A secret?”

“A secret that’s inside you, that you never knew about.” Sam pointed down. “Bend over the toilet.”

Daryl stood naked in front of the toilet and bent over. Hands on either side of the rim of the bowl. His ass pointed up in the air, the cool circles from the overhead fan blowing down on the hole.

His ghost looked up out of the bowl water at him.

Face hung upside down between his knees, he saw Sam’s shins approach, until they were directly behind him. After a pause, the touch of thickened grease on his anus. Rubbed over the tender circle, then poked in. The heels of Daryl’s feet lifted off the tiles. The short hairs around his asshole rose as the skin goosebumped.

Something wide and blunt touched against the grease, smearing it across his asshole. Something that felt too big around to be able to enter.

Daryl bent over further.

Strong hands spread his cheeks apart. The bluntness pushed forward. A moment of slight pain, and then the head slid past the rim, where it held.

His asshole felt stretched but there was no sharp pain, only a bearable soreness. Daryl couldn’t decide if he liked the sensation or not.

The bluntness pushed farther in, more easily now, forcing accommodation each interior inch it entered into, like a bowel movement in reverse, until it pushed into a second sphincter-like vise, now dilated by the head of Sam’s cock halfway up his asshole.

“You feel that, Daryl?”

“God, yes.”

“Every time you take a shit, there’s that one moment of physical pleasure as it passes out, and that’s because the turd’s expanding this—”

“God!”

“—ring of muscle—”

“Jesus!”

—right here. Feels good, huh?”

Daryl had his elbows down on the rim of the toilet bowl, huffing with pleasure as Sam slid his cock back and forth halfway up his asshole, widening and contracting the grip.

“There’s only two things in the world that are just the right diameter to make you feel this way, Daryl—a turd and a cock. With a turd it only lasts for a second. With a cock you can have it last all night long. But there’s more.”

Sam’s cock pushed farther in, easily now, until its curly black pubic hairs tickled against the inside of Daryl’s cheeks. As the big head passed beyond the interior end of the anal passage, entering the rectum, Daryl lost track of it.

And then, gloriously, within his rectum, behind his genitalia, the big head grazed against an organ with the sweetest, most delicious jolt of pleasure he had ever felt.

His toes wriggled, his back rippled, his head hung down into the bowl in sheer appreciation at being touched there.

“That’s.”

“Sam....”

“The secret.”

Daryl lowered to his knees, Sam’s cock still inside him, lowered until his shins and face were on the men’s room floor, his ass sticking straight up. He spread his shins apart across the tiles to get Sam’s cock even deeper inside him.

In front of him rose the base of the toilet, urine stains around the bolts. He closed his eyes, his profile sliding back and forth on the tiles from the motion of Sam’s fucking, his mouth opening and twisting in expressions so intense no sound came out.

The orgasm, when it came, started inside his body, behind where it usually did. Because it had so much farther to travel it lasted much longer, so much longer that in its arch another one arose, an orgasm within an orgasm, heaven in heaven, the sky is red, the river’s on fire.

The interior of their garage apartment was dark and silent. Both lay on the bed, blankets kicked down to the bottom, Sally on her back, naked, Daryl propped up on one elbow at her side, naked, looking

down. Her quiet face. His cock was hard and hot. Her cunt was wet and swollen. Her wide-apart eyes stayed open, the pupils attentive with alarm. Between her legs her longest finger dipped down among the curly black hairs into her hole, slowly, intentionally. Her lips parted. Daryl held his breath. The only movement in their world was the rise and fall of her middle finger's knuckle.

"I don't know if I could."

"Could you?"

She twisted her face towards his, eyes large, cheeks thin. "I don't know. I'm scared."

"Of him?"

"Yeah."

Daryl stroked the outside of his own thigh, delaying putting his hand between her legs. "He wants you. He told me today, afterwards."

"Afterwards." Her free hand's fingers rested on his slanted chest. "Wasn't he afraid you'd punch him?" The knuckle bent further.

His hand slid around to the inside of his thigh. "Is this tonight's foreplay? Describing how I let him tell me to my face he wants to fuck you?"

She scooted a look up at him, answering shyly. "Yeah."

"He wasn't afraid I'd punch him."

She sighed, the knuckle dipping further. "What'd he say, Daryl?"

"You know, you asked me that just now, and I actually felt jealous. That you want to know, and you ask it so casually, so assured that I'm going to tell you. That I would want to tell you."

"But don't you? Isn't that why we're doing this? C'mon, Daryl, you're talking to me with vaseline still on your asshole. Do you want me to stop touching myself?"

"No. I know why I'm getting jealous. For the first time it might actually happen. You might actually go to bed with him." The engine of the world stopped. "Would you?"

She kept her face neutral. "You mean 'would I' like 'will I'?"

"Do you want to?"

"You mean really want to, not pretend want to?"

His smile sagged. "Yeah."

She spoke deliberately. "If you want me to, I will."

"You'll actually go to bed with him?"

"Yeah. If you want me to."

He felt a shot of horrifying pleasure, at her, at his reaction. "You will? You'll actually let him fuck you?"

"Yeah. Actually."

"Why?"

Her lips shrugged. "Because you want me to, and because, well, I've imagined it so often now, at your request, and he's gone to bed with you already - twice - so...why not?" She looked up now at him. The look of having walked one step farther out on the limb.

He felt excitement, embarrassment. "And I can watch?"

"Oh yeah, definitely." She regarded him in a way she never had before, as someone with the advantage. "It wouldn't be the same if you didn't watch, would it, baby?"

"Are you being sarcastic?"

She shook her head. "No. But I want you to watch it all. I want you to witness every second of him making love to your girlfriend, and I want you to watch when your girlfriend comes in his arms. Because I will come with him. I know that already. I've had plenty of practice with our stories. Even though I am absolutely terrified of him and absolutely cannot stand him, we both know I'm all primed to let him give me the biggest orgasm of my life."

"That's it."

"What's it?"

"The best part, the part you never know about, the part he shows you. Letting someone you hate so much move his hands all over your body, showing him where all your buttons are, letting him push them one by one, taking his time, while each of you gloat over what he's doing to you. Helping him to reprogram you while you lay there for him using all your will power to not stop him, to let him slowly take your will power away from you, both of you grinning, eagerly anticipating the point where it's irreversible, where he's finally got you for good. It's rape, it's the worst rape, because you're showing someone you hate how to make you love them. That's the rapture. Cooperating."

"He's got you."

"Yeah."

"You want him to have you."

"Yeah."

"You want him to have me, too."

"I want to watch him do it to you. I want to see the look of resentment on your face when your bodies touch. How stiffly you hold yourself while he starts moving his hands over you. I want to be there when he finds the chink, I want to watch it creep into your eyes. I want

to see the moment when you show him where he should touch and what he should say to make you fall in love with him. I want to hear the deep, gruff sigh come out of you when it's too late and he's finally got you, when your arms are around his neck and your legs are around his hips and you've completely forgotten about me."

Her tongue clicked in her mouth as she wet her lips. "Not here, not in Lodgepole."

"We'll go up to Anchorage. He'll meet us there. We can stay at the Alaska Towers again."

"No. That was our night. Let's go to a motel. Somewhere where no one knows us. Somewhere we never have to go back to again."

He was surprised. His face changed, back to the way it used to look long ago, before he was her lover but after he had become her friend. His voice was parenthetical. "Are you sure you want to do it? 'Somewhere we never have to go back to'."

"Yeah. I'm sure. The more I realize we're really going to do this, the more I want to rush to it, to have it begin, to be in the midst of it. But I want it to be isolated from the rest of my life. We can't do it here, because I wouldn't be able to let go enough to completely go along with what he's going to do to me. I want it to be somewhere where he can get his best shot. He's asked for it often enough, so I want to give him the most perfect opportunity there is to really fuck me over." She resumed masturbating, closing her eyes, letting her legs spread apart, indulging herself. "I want to know what you know."

Dear Mom: Things are going really well up here. There's no more snow now that it's June, and the birch trees around the lake I told you about are getting their buds back. My work has picked up a lot lately because of an increase in rabies in this area. I've more or less been heading the Hospital's efforts to test suspected animals, because of my background.

We had a murder here about a month ago, a middle-aged woman who apparently came down here from Anchorage. There's actually also been a second murder, a man who was found in the woods a few miles outside town. I'm helping the police with the first murder because of my forensic training. She was strangled.

I've met a girl up here who works right in town. Her name is Sally. We started dating early in the Spring, and have fallen in love with each other. We plan to marry. We've taken some pictures of each

other, and I'll send you copies once we get them developed. She's of Italian-Irish heritage. Right now we're saving up whatever money we can for our marriage and honeymoon. We figure we need about two thousand dollars, which is hard for us to save towards because of day to day expenses. But we'll manage. Someday we'll go down there to visit, or you can come up here, and the two of you will get a chance to meet. I really love her, Mom. I feel really happy.

Well. I'll go for now, but will write again soon. Thank you very much for the check you sent with your last letter—it went to good use. Sally says to say hi.

Daryl and Sally, baggage bumping, struggled side by side down the dimly lit motel corridor. The tiny light above the raised metal numbers 333 cast elongated circles in a shadowy fan down their door. As Daryl dipped his arm to slide their key into the lock, his suit bag, slung over a shoulder, slipped down the front of his sports jacket, limblessly landing on its back on the hallway carpet.

Daryl stooped over, grabbing his suit bag, feeling big and clumsy.

Staying hunchbacked, he dragged the bag well onto their room's carpet before turning around. Sally shut the door, but had trouble getting the security chain into its groove. "Or should I just leave it unchained? Since he should be here soon? What should I do, Daryl?"

"You can leave it unchained. He should be here soon." He extended his wrist past his cuff. "It's five o'clock. He should be here soon."

He slowly let go of their bags and straightened up. Looked around athletically. They were one level below the ground. The shallow windows at the top of the cement block wall showed mulch and hubcaps. Behind them, to the side, was the bathroom. Ahead were two king sized beds crisply made up, a TV facing the beds and, under the shallow windows, a circular table with two chairs.

Daryl watched as Sally kept turning around at the beds, the chairs, the TV, the beds, and realized he was doing the same thing. He stopped circling. "Let's have a drink. We can sit and relax a little before he gets here, have a drink or two just to stay calm."

Sally tried to pick their wrinkled grocery bag up off the carpet but it fell over, so she got down on her knees and tugged the bag away from its contents, spilling out a pencil, jug of vodka, TV Guide, six pack of canned orange juice, black lace nightie, Hershey's Kisses,

crossword magazines and polaroid camera. She looked up from the carpet at where Daryl had decided to sit for a moment on the edge of the nearest bed. "I was gonna smoke a little first too, before he got here. Should I—" She touched the shoulder of her plaid blouse, waved a palm at her jeans. "Should I change first, in case he's early?"

"Yeah. Probably. We need ice, I'll get some now, we passed a machine." He glanced around at the different flat surfaces in the room. "We have plenty of ashtrays."

He carried the small, white-plastic ice container down the hall and around a corner to where the ice machine stood like the front of an emerging tank. Stairs went up behind him.

The soft side of the container bent around the curved lever before the lever finally shuddered back and half-moon cubes started spitting down.

He couldn't see their door from here, couldn't hear anything except the download of ice and his heart. What if Sam got here early, and Sally, thinking it was Daryl, opened the door standing naked behind it, just the top joints of her fingers visible from the hall? Would they wait? Were they across the bed already? Did she really want to do this? Did he?

He cupped the container by its cold square bottom and carried it back, gloomily looking at the dark walls.

She didn't answer when he knocked, so he let himself in. Both beds were still made.

She was standing on one foot in the brightly lit bathroom, hurriedly pulling up her black lace panties. He saw a flash of the curly black hair between her legs as she straightened up, putting the other foot down, pulling in her stomach as she snugged the panties up against her pubis. Sloppy, nervous grin. "I thought it might be him." She reached behind her with a woman's grace, lifting the sheer black gown off the sink, holding each empty shoulder with a pinch. "Want to fix us a drink? I got the pot out." One bare arm slid into the gown's soft black tunnel of nylon, then the other on the left side. She pulled both sides of the front over her breasts, bending her head forward as she carefully looped the ties into little black bows. She looked up, wide-eyed, nervous, toes clenching on the tiles. "So whattaya think? You've never seen me in a nightgown before."

The gown ended at the top of her panties, making her legs longer, curvier, and more naked. Each sleeve ended with a triangular cuff of black lace across the back of the hand. The gown itself was sheer and

without decoration, so the body beneath was visible, as if in shadow. The top and inner swell of each breast was left exposed, looking incredibly alive and bare in contrast to the shrouded rest: the ghostly inward curves of waist, the darker rounds where the nipples touched.

"You look...grown-up, like a woman who wears bare-shouldered evening gowns." He raised a hand, awkwardly. "You look so great I'm starting to feel a little shy around you."

Her black eyebrows teepee'd above her nose. She put her arms around his neck, kissing him tenderly. "Oh, Daryl."

He moved his hands over her smaller body, flesh and nylon, holding her close.

She looked up into his eyes, upset. "You're still going to want me if I do this, right? You're not going to stop loving me, or leave me with Sam, are you?"

"No, of course not."

"I don't want this. I don't want..." Her voice trailed off, she hung her longhaired head.

He put a thumb under her chin, lifted her worried face up. "Don't want what?"

She moved in her gown and bare legs over to the ice bucket, started dropping cubes into their glasses. "I've really been thinking about this, you know? And I think it's good we're adventurous enough to do something as weird as what's going to happen, but I'd like for us to not always be doing this. I mean once we're married, we've sowed our wild oats then, and then we can settle down and have it just be the two of us. Maybe move away from here first, then settle down. We could go to Arizona if you want, or Vermont, it sounds really nice, I could meet your mother, or maybe somewhere new for both of us, like Texas or California, but wherever we do go, I wouldn't want us to be swapping wives or anything. Now's okay, we're both still young and we don't have any kids yet, but once we settle down, I'd like it to just be you and me." She looked over at him, hands out holding the two glasses full of ice, her nervousness contradicting her nightie.

She looked so beautiful, so young, so in love. "I don't want us to make love to anyone else either, after this."

She mixed two screwdrivers, dropping ice on the dresser. "How many times—I mean, after tonight—"

"We could just make it tonight."

"And then that's it? It's out of our systems?"

Daryl shrugged. "I don't know. We have to see how it goes. I guess that's up to you." He realized she was half listening for an early knock.

She looked away from him and talked fast. "One thing I wanted to say Daryl before he gets here is once we're doing it, naturally I—I'll probably be responding to him, I mean that's what we both agreed to, and I don't want you to hold that against me, or be questioning me about it later." She added her other hand to her glass, her eyelids fluttered, and he suddenly knew it was going to last longer than just tonight. "I mean he's going to be touching me and be inside me and from what you say he's really good, so I hope you don't expect me to just lay there."

Daryl had his first hard-on since he got out of bed this morning. "No, I don't expect you to just lay there." He got harder. "I know you're not going to be able to help yourself. Once he starts." He got harder. "I don't want you to hide how turned-on he's getting you, how much you're enjoying it." He got hardest.

Daryl and Sally sat at the table under the windows. More cars' tires showed outside now. Sally had her bare legs crossed, the top leg swinging. "What time is it now?"

"Five to six." On the tabletop were overflowing ashtrays, drink spills, black ashes, wet cigarettes, a toilet roll with a hole cut in the curved grey side, a concave piece of foil with pin holes rubber-banded over the hole, a crossword magazine and the TV Guide. Sally moved her fingertip through the ashes and spill, darkening her nail, making a slowly looping doodle. "Such clutter whatever we do."

Her eyes were done up. The thin lines of mascara made her look different. Made it easier for him to picture himself standing to one side and watching. Like it would be someone not quite Sally, but close enough, like Sally with mascara.

Their conversations at the table had been limited to talk about the time. He tried now to think of something else to say, but all he could come up with was, "Well, here we are."

She had her laced elbows on the table, hands joined, head down. "Yeah, here we are."

Knuckles rapped against their hallway door.

Daryl trotted over, turning round to blow a kiss back as Sally sat up straight, adjusted the lace over her shoulders, and rubbed her dirty nail on the side of her gown. Her face was so scared her eyes shone in the gloom.

Grabbing the doorknob made him realize how much he had been sweating. He brought a fist to his mouth, took a deep breath, and opened the door.

Sam strode into the room carrying a long, cylindrical camping bag over one shoulder. It sagged down to his belt on either side.

He looked straight into Daryl's eyes and Daryl knew without doubt for the first time that yes, he wanted this man standing in front of him to walk over to that girl still sitting at the table and bring her over to the bed and take her clothes off and fuck her while he watched.

Sam shrugged the camping bag off. It landed on the dresser, banging the ice container up into the air, spraying water. Sally jumped in her chair.

Sam continued ignoring her, unzipping the bag's side. He pulled out four big bags of ice, pushing them into Daryl's chest. "Put these in the sink."

Daryl avoided his own eyes in the bathroom mirror. He hurried back in time to watch Sam pull out a long, thick, white-wrapped package. Water dripped out of a bottom corner of the paper.

"What's this?" Daryl looked at Sally, who was still in the chair, sitting on her hands.

"Open it."

Daryl held the white package in his arms, feeling wet pricks against his forearms and biceps. He unwrapped the paper. Inside were two-dozen long, red, multi-jointed legs, their sides covered with thorns. He looked over at Sally, who was jiggling her legs. "Alaskan king crab legs."

"Oh." Sally tossed her hair, looking only at Sam. "Sounds like we're gonna have quite a feast."

Sam ignored her. "Put the legs on the ice."

When Daryl got back, Sam was walking over to Sally. She looked up, following him with her eyes. She had her arms crossed in front of her, but now she let her arms slide to her sides. Her eyes never left his. Her face was flushed. Daryl could hear her breathing. A scared smile twitched on her face.

Sam didn't look at her body, only at her face. He gestured at his white shirt, his black pants. "Recognize this?"

"No." She cleared her throat. "No."

"Daryl, go in that bag and pull out the white pillow case with the flowers on it."

Daryl walked back to the bag. The pillowcase was right behind the zipper. Its top was knotted. He could feel something soft inside. He got halfway to Sam when it dawned on him. "This is our pillow case."

Sam lit a fresh cigarette, tossing the match on the carpet. He reached out behind him. Daryl looked down at the large palm that had cupped his head, his balls and his ass and placed the pillowcase in it. Sam took a step forward and dropped the pillowcase on Sally's bare legs. "Open it."

Sally worked on the knot, laughing nervously. Putting an uneasy flirt into her voice, she asked: "Did you break into our house?"

"Yeah. This morning. After you left to come up here."

Sally laughed again, the skin on her face tight. "Why? Why'd you break into—?"

"Shut up."

Sally looked at Daryl. Daryl looked back, then away.

"I was just wondering, it's weird to think—"

"Shut. Up. Open the pillow case."

She got the knot undone, then gingerly widened the opening. As she looked inside her black eyebrows furrowed. She put a hand into the opening, moving the contents around. "I don't—can I talk now?"

Sam picked up the free chair and moved it about ten feet away, facing the table. He stayed standing. "Talk."

She pulled out some clothes. "I don't get what this is all about. This is a skirt of mine, a blouse, a—" she blushed—"a bra and panties, stockings..." She looked up at Sam.

"They're your clothes?"

Sally nodded. "Yeah."

"Do you remember when you wore them?"

"I... all the time. Every other week. Daryl? Baby? I don't know what's going on."

Daryl took a step forward. "I don't either." He looked at Sam. "Why did you steal our clothes?"

Sam snorted, looking Daryl up and down. "I didn't steal your clothes." He watched her turn over a skirt in her hands, deep in thought. "Only Sally's."

She looked up when he said her name. Tossed her hair. Smirked. "These are the clothes I wore that first day you saw me, at the coffee shop." She relaxed more with each moment. "When you flirted with me. Right?"

Sam stood over her, no longer rude. "Yes."

She flicked her eyes up and down his body. "And that's what you wore?"

"Yes."

She smiled her first real smile of the day, one filled with a dawning sense of power. "What d'you want me to do, Sam? Put 'em on?"

"Yes."

She stood up, gathering the clothes in her arms. As she passed him she looked up into his eyes. "I'll do it."

She walked slowly to the bathroom in her nightie, never looking back. Sam didn't watch her. He looked up at the cars' tires.

Daryl knocked a half dozen Winstons out of his pack, catching the last one. His throat was dry. "Since I was there that day too, wouldn't it make more sense if you brought the clothes I wore too? To completely recreate it?"

Sam snorted, not bothering to turn around. "Daryl, you are without doubt the dumbest, stupidest person I've ever come across. And that's saying a whole hell of a lot."

Daryl's face recoiled. "I—"

"What? Don't?"

"I—"

"Don't, Daryl? Is that what you want to say? I don't have your permission any longer?" Sam turned around, facing him. Daryl noticed with a sickening inward lurch from heart to crotch the tall bulge up the front of the black pants. "I'll tell you two things, Daryl." He glanced at the shut bathroom door. "Number one, I don't need your permission any more." The eyes glittered. "I've got her now." Daryl let out a roomful of air. "And number two..." he slowly moved his hand down towards the distended front of his pants, watching with a grin as Daryl's eyes hopelessly followed, "...number two, I've still got your permission anyway, Daryl, don't I?"

The bathroom door opened.

"Don't I, Daryl?"

Daryl wiped his face, lost his soul. "Yes. You do. You have my permission."

Sally walked out in the blue skirt and white blouse she wore that first day in the coffee shop.

Sam looked away. "I didn't see you until after you sat down."

She walked over to the motel table, smoothed her skirt behind her, and sat down.

Sam sat where he had moved the other chair. "I sat here. Same distance, same angle. The first thing I noticed about you were your legs."

Sally put one elbow on the table, lit a cigarette. She didn't look at Daryl. Her mascara was washed off. She looked alive, excited. In control.

"Did you know I was looking at them?"

She made him wait until she got her cigarette going. She glanced at Daryl, as if to say, I'm sorry. She let out a stream of smoke, knowing she was the center of attention of both men. "Yes. I knew you were looking at them."

Sam slouched back in his chair like he had that day. He rested his right hand on the inside of his thigh, just like he had then. Daryl saw the strong, naked-looking face, the arrogance in it, the fear it had inspired in him, and it was like being back at the beginning again.

Sam slowly moved his big hand over the inside of his thigh. "You crossed your legs."

Sally dipped her face forward, smiling to herself, pleased. She looked up sideways at him, tapping her cigarette. "You have a good memory, Sam." She leaned back slightly, then slowly brought her left knee up, the stockinged side of the calf rubbing against the other calf's stocking, the knee rising higher until the hollow behind it was held over the top of her right thigh. It was done naturally enough, but ever so immeasurably slowed down that just for the quickest, most fleeting of moments someone sitting in Sam's chair could catch, in the second's stretch of fabric from one stockinged thigh to the other, a partial glimpse of small, white panties.

Sally's left thigh settled on top of her right. Her left knee slid forward on the thigh until her upper calf rested against the lower knee, making the back of the calf bulge out slightly, just as Daryl remembered it.

Sam stroked his thigh. "When did you know I wanted to fuck you?"

She tossed her hair, smirking, then put her arm over the back of her chair, leaning against the chair's back, relaxed, swinging her crossed leg. "Right away. The looks you gave me."

"Did you know I had a hard-on?"

She watched herself stub out her cigarette. "I figured you did."

"The way I was sitting, the way I kept staring at your legs, the way I kept rubbing the inside of my thigh."

She looked him straight on across the ten feet, defiant. "Yeah."

"Did you look at it?"

"Your...? No." She shook her head.

Sam looked bemused. "Why not? You knew I was looking at you, you were doing what you could to make me keep looking at you, why not check me out?"

She moved the stubbed-out cigarette around in the ashtray, shrugging. "I just wasn't that way. You were looking at me, you looked at me first, and it was just something to do to make breakfast more interesting. To see how long I could keep your attention."

"Could you feel my eyes on you?"

She glanced at Daryl, who sat like stone and felt like stone. Her voice was smaller. "Yeah."

"You leaned back in your chair at one point and put your arms behind your head and left them there while you talked to me. Say why you did that."

She blushed, looked down at the table, looked around the cement block walls. Her voice was mildly reproachful, slightly panicky. "You know why I did that." Daryl's heart cramped. "I didn't think we were going to do this, analyze this."

Sam rubbed his hand between his legs. "Why'd you do it, Sally?"

"To get you to look at me." She glared at him.

"To get me to look at what, Sally?"

Sally glared at him again, tilting her face slightly sideways. "To get you to look at my breasts, okay?"

"You offered your breasts to me. To my eyes. How'd you feel when I looked? How'd you feel when you felt my eyes touching your breasts, touching how full they were, how young, how firm?"

She opened her mouth but didn't say anything, just held her hands out in front of her an inch above the table top, the tendons in the backs of her hands showing. She looked over at him resentfully, shaking her head. "I didn't expect it to be this way. I didn't know this was how you were going to do it."

"Sally, how'd it feel?"

"Good. It felt—it made me excited."

"Sexually excited?"

She nodded obediently. "Yeah. I got sexually aroused."

"There in the coffee shop."

"Yeah." She turned to Daryl. "Baby, that was a long time ago, I'm sorry."

Daryl moved his head, hearing creaks and pops inside. "It's okay."

"I didn't know he was going to do this."

"It's okay."

"Then you stood up. Stand up."

Sally stood up, moved away from the table. "I was about here."

Sam nodded. "And I told you I could smell your cunt."

She shut her eyes for a moment. "Yes."

"Was your cunt wet while you stood in front of me?"

"Yes."

"Say the whole thing."

"My cunt was wet when I stood in front of you."

"Why, Sally?"

"You made my cunt wet, Sam. You made my cunt wet by looking at me so long and so... detailed."

Sam looked for the first time at Daryl. "And when you stood in front of me, your cunt wet and your nipples hard, did you even for a moment look at my cock?"

She sagged, straightened herself up again. "Yes."

"More than once?"

"Yes."

"Did you imagine feeling my cock inside that wet cunt of yours?"

A tear rolled down her cheek. "Yes."

"Did you imagine me fucking you?"

"Yes."

"Did you masturbate that night?"

"Yes."

"Who of the two men you met that day, me or Daryl, did you imagine fucking you?"

"You are the worse bastard I have ever known in my life."

"Who, Sally?"

"I—I started thinking of you, Daryl, I really did. But...it kept turning into him. You had been really nice, and I really liked you, but...he had been so obvious about it, I just...it stayed with me." She sniffed, tears falling.

"What was the fantasy you had of Daryl while you masturbated?"

She found a Kleenex in the pocket of her skirt and blew her nose. She gestured with the tissue, her voice defensive. "I pictured us kissing, and petting, getting married."

"And what was the fantasy you had of me?"

She took a deep breath. Her voice was quiet. "I'm ashamed to say it—" she checked Daryl, who was sitting completely still—"but I pictured us in the coffee shop, and me standing in front of you, 'with my wet cunt', okay? and you took my stockings off, and my panties—" her voice got hushed—"and then you pulled your own pants off and asked me if I wanted to sit on your—" she looked ashamed—"cock, you wouldn't put it in, I'd just sit on it, and I did, I sat in your lap facing you, one leg on either side, and I could feel your cock rubbing against me as I sat on it, and then I asked you to put it in me and you did." She looked at him, no longer crying.

"And when you came that night while you were masturbating, when you had your orgasm, whose cock were you imagining was inside you? Daryl's, or mine?"

"Yours."

"Was it a good orgasm?"

"It was very powerful."

"If I had suddenly shown up while you were masturbating, would you have let me fuck you?"

"Yeah." She nodded her head.

"Even though you were a virgin at the time."

She nodded again. "Yeah. I would have." She suddenly burst into laughter. Shook her head in disbelief, switching her weight from one foot to the next. "I don't fucking believe we're doing this, but I'm glad it's all coming out." She swung around to Daryl, twirling a hand at him. "Do you want me to stop, Daryl? Do you not want to know all this?"

Daryl rolled his head around on his neck, then squeezed his eyes shut and opened them again. "No, I want to hear it. I was in shock at first—"

"—I'm sorry, baby."

"No, it's okay. It really is. We're being more honest than anyone's ever been. I stopped drinking half an hour ago and I feel incredibly high." He laughed to himself, thinking about it. "I always suspected it, I always thought he turned you on, even before we started talking about it between ourselves, and now I no longer ever have to

wonder about it. And knowing that it's true? It's not bad, it really isn't. I've had a hard-on for so long now it hurts."

Sally ran over and kissed him, then faced Sam again. "So now what?"

Sam pointed towards the front of the motel room. "Take out the next set of clothes."

Sally pulled them out, the high heels clattering onto the motel carpet. She shot Sam a knowing look. "The black dress I wore when we went to your house for dinner."

"And the black underwear you wore afterwards, in the pool. Put the dress on over the underwear."

Sally made a cro-magnon face. "Duh." She walked back to the bathroom with this new set of clothes, shutting the door behind her.

Sam motioned to Daryl. "Turn around."

Daryl did.

Sam talked to his back while he changed. "How do you feel?"

"Incredibly weird, incredibly alive, incredibly aroused."

Sam walked around to Daryl's front wearing the tight jeans and white shirt he had worn that night. Their faces were only inches apart. Daryl on impulse went to put his arm around Sam to kiss him, but Sam stepped back.

The bathroom door opened. Both men turned around.

Sally stepped out in the strapless black dress she wore that evening. Her long black hair was brushed and her eyes were no longer red. She had lipstick on. Both men automatically glanced down at the black-stockinged legs, the black high heels.

She walked slowly over, letting her hips move side to side, her eyes discretely down. When she got to Daryl she slipped her hand around his arm, resting it as she always did on his bicep. Holding onto Daryl, she looked at Sam. "I'm ready."

"You and Daryl sit at the table." Daryl brought the other chair over. He and Sally sat down.

"I was making dinner while you two sat."

Sally watched Sam's back while he pantomimed stirring pots. "Then you came over."

"And when I did, I stood right here."

Sally nodded. "Right in front of me."

"And I put my hands on my hips, and stood with my crotch pointed right at you, inches from your face."

"Yeah. You sure did."

"You knew I was erect."

"I was looking everywhere else, I didn't want to look at it."

"Why?"

"Because then I was in love with Daryl. I had gone to bed with him then, I'd given up my virginity to him."

"But I kept my cock right in front of you."

"Yeah. You wouldn't take it away."

"It was so close, if I had pulled it out you could have sucked it."

"Yeah."

"Would you have?"

"No."

"Did you look at it?"

"Only once, just for a second."

"Why?"

"You kept it in my face so long, I thought if I looked at it you'd move it away."

"Did I?"

"Only after you found out I wouldn't look at it again."

"What did you think when you looked at it?"

"I thought it looked really big, really hard."

"Did you picture it inside you?"

"No. I kept thinking of other things."

"Did you masturbate thinking of it when you got home?"

"No. I loved Daryl, and I hated you. You twisted my breast all up, and tried to rape me, and fought with Daryl."

"Look at it now."

Sally shifted in her chair, looking nervous. She reached out for Daryl's hand.

Sam took a step closer to Sally's face. "Do you want to look at it?"

She stared down at the table and nodded.

"Then look at it."

She kept looking down. "This is it, right? I mean this is the beginning of why we came here." She made a cramped gesture with her hands. "I'm scared. It's like I'm at the top of a mountain, and one more step and my skis are going to pull me down the slope and there's no way to stop then."

"Do you want me to leave? Do you want this to not happen?"

She let out an anguished sigh. "No. I don't want you to leave. I want it to happen."

She cut quick glances up at his crotch, looking nervous. But each glance lingered longer. Until finally. She no longer pulled her eyes away. Her eyes moved over it, her eyes stayed fastened on it.

“How’s it look?”

“Big. Hard.” She twirled a long strand of black hair in her finger while she continued slowly running her eyes over it. “Beautiful.”

“If I pulled my zipper down now and took it out—” Sally bit her thick lower lip, getting lipstick on her front teeth—“would you put it in your mouth and suck it?”

She answered quickly. “Yes.”

“If I told you I wanted to fuck you right now, put it in you—” her eyes drifted shut and her head swayed—“and fuck you to orgasm, would you let me?”

She drew in air like a flower’s fragrance. Her voice was a whisper. “Yes.” She shivered as she said it, and then looked up into his eyes with open sexual admiration. “Yes. That’s the one word I thought I’d never say to you, but you got me to say it and mean it. I’m yours. Yes.” She reached her hands out and around for his small ass, opened her mouth, tilted her face and without another moment’s hesitation moved her red lips up to his rigid crotch, but Sam stepped back before he was touched.

Her hands closed on nothing, her parted lips found nothing to rub against.

She blinked, befuddled, arms still out, mouth still open, looking and feeling foolish.

She sat back in her chair. Her hand went out for Daryl’s, her eyes shifted too quickly.

Sam watched her, his eyes glittering. He lit another cigarette, shooting the stream straight up. “Next, we went swimming.”

All paths from the back doors of the motel led through the blooms of azalea, rose and myrtle to the pool. Daryl, fully clothed, even to his black leather shoes, stood on the tiled edge of the pool and looked around, the aquamarine weight of water behind him. The winterberry bushes surrounding the pool area stood taller than him, frail black branches and bright red berries.

Nearly nine, in this lower light Sally was two colors only: the black of her hair, eyes and bikini, and the beige of her body. Shadows slid down the thin curve of her back as she walked away from him over to the pool. She stopped at the edge, looking out across the darkening sparkles like she was alone.

He walked over stiffly to join her, embrace her, but it was awkward, all elbows and jaws, her head down with a fixed smile on it, eyes half-closed, tilting up at the outsides, dark pupils slightly cross-eyed, protecting secrets. Still looking down and away she slid her bare arm around his shoulders, holding her to him, but when they kissed her lips were slack and the way she raised her right heel off the tile, exposing her narrow sole, was stylized.

She showed him her embarrassed smile but not her eyes, patting the top of his back while she turned her head away, profile young, shoulders womanly.

He let her slide out of his hands. She turned more of her back to him, watching the breaks in the winterberry bushes, the occasional dark bird. He looked at the thin black strap of bra across her back, imagining Sam's strong fingers undoing the little clasp, the black nylon popping apart, the weight of her breasts hanging naturally.

Sally sat down at the edge of the pool, swinging her calves into the water, turning them Technicolor. Planting her palms on the tile, she lifted her black-cupped bottom right to the edge, leaving her arms propped straight at her sides, her shoulders tilted higher at their ends than where they joined her neck.

Daryl stayed standing. He was outside now, just a witness to a woman waiting by water for a fuck.

She heard first. Her face turned towards the winterberries, tendons on either side of her throat slanting, eyes squinting slightly to see if any of the shadows behind the branches' criss-crosses moved. Her eyes were calm, her lips parted. After a moment she faced forward again, but sitting more erect now, cheekbones more prominent, glancing down at her swinging bare thighs, raising them up slightly so their backs didn't fatten out against the edge.

Down the path they had taken, a shadow man, coming closer, became solid.

Sam stepped off the grass path onto the tiles.

Sally turned her head around, not enough to see Sam, but enough to let him know she knew he was here.

As on that night, he wore a skimpy red bikini. It should have looked ridiculous on any man, especially one at least fifty, but it didn't. It was vulgar and sexy. The weight of the tall cock inside pulled the bottom upwards, fine black pubic hairs curling around the red seams.

Sam walked past Daryl, not greeting him. His eyes were on the woman sitting at the edge of the pool. As Sam passed, the red string between the shapely bare cheeks slanted with the movement of his hips.

Sam stopped beside where Sally sat.

She leaned back on her straight arms so she could look up at him. His face first and then his nyloned cock. Her lips shifted into something better than a smile. "Hi."

"Hi." Sam put his thumbs on his hips, fingertips flanking his cock, inviting her to keep looking at it.

She pulled her calves out of the water, rotating on her ass so she was facing him. She leaned back on her arms, legs lying bare and shapely in front of her. Watching his face, she drew one knee up and slightly away, so he could glimpse the black cloth between her thighs. He took the bait. His cock swelled behind the nylon. She lowered her eyes, and then raised them at a slant. "So." She rocked the raised knee side-to-side, watching the urgency come into his face.

Her confidence was back. Now it was her turn. She lay on her back, long black hair spilling on the tiles around her smug face. Still watching him, she drew both knees up until the heels of her feet were next to her ass. She gave him a sly glance through long lashes, then raised her right foot off the tile, lifting it in the air until it pointed straight up, like a ballerina's, at the darkening sky. Her voice was soft, teasing. "So. You like my legs, Sam?"

His lips pulled away from his teeth as he moved his eyes up the soft undercurve of her thigh, the elegantly narrow hollow behind her knee, the voluptuous swell of her calf as it tapered up to her Achilles tendon. His eyes shut, opened again. His voice was hoarse. "I love your legs."

"Here's another one, Sam." She lifted the other leg up, eyes steady as she took satisfaction in what it did to him. Her voice came out sly, enticing. "Like lookin' at 'em?"

"Yes."

She ran her hands slowly down their undersides, index fingers extended so they rode over the curves. "Wanna touch 'em, Sam?"

"Yeah."

"C'mere." She lowered one leg at the knee, beckoning with its foot as though her leg were a long, sexy finger. "C'mere, Sam."

He drew closer.

Sally pointed her foot at his crotch. Glanced up at him.

He looked down at her poised foot, then at her. "Not yet."

She let her foot drop to the tile. The other foot followed. She sat up, tossing her hair angrily. "So what happens now, then?"

"Stand up."

She stood, looking self-conscious again.

"We went for a swim."

She bobbed her head. "Okay. You want me to get in the pool?"

He nodded.

She walked gracefully around to the wide steps leading down. When she was thigh-high she leaned forward and splashed some water up onto her shoulders, then folded her arms across her breasts, looking up at where he still stood on the edge. "Are you coming in?"

The undersides of his toes slid under without a ripple.

Sally stood at the shallow end while Sam's body coursed underwater from deep end to shallow.

He popped up five feet in front of her, grinning. His black hair was plastered away from his face, making it look masculine almost to the point of ugliness.

He strode forward towards her. "Do you remember that night?"

Sally backed slowly up, head erect, eyes wide, trailing the backs of her hands on the surface, drawing him in. "Yeah. I was really surprised you wore such a skimpy suit. I saw you coming across the lawn."

Sam's crotch broke the surface, water pouring off it. "So what did you think, Sally? Did you think, once he gets closer, I'll sneak a peek at it? Just one?"

She dipped backwards into the shallow water, kicking her feet to propel her the short distance to the wall. At it she stayed facing Sam, sliding along until she was in waist deep water. Her eyes were bright. "I was in love with Daryl by then. I didn't want to look."

Sam changed direction to reach to where she had moved. He stopped directly in front of her, within reaching distance. "But did you?"

"Yeah."

"What did you think?"

She smiled, excited and anxious. "I wasn't going to, but you were looking away at one point, you were knee-deep, and I took a fast look. Your suit was so small and wet I could almost see through it to your...cock." The back of her throat emphasized the consonants. She left her mouth partly open, then dared to lift her bare arms up into the grooves under the edge, her breasts rising up and out in an offering. She

glanced down at their tops, then at his face. "I swam away, trying not to think, but I was conscious of my legs moving underwater, and for a second I thought of your cock inside me. Daryl and I only come by masturbating. I guess I wondered if your cock was in me, if that would make me come."

Sam looked at her long bare arms fitted into the grooves, at her breasts offered to him. "I tried to touch you between your legs that night, but you stopped me."

"Yeah."

"Would you now?"

"No."

"I put my hand on your breast."

She looked momentarily upset. "You squeezed it really hard. You really hurt me. I was black and blue for a month. I hated you for that."

"What if I said now I wouldn't make love to you unless you let me squeeze it even harder?" He raised his cupped hand up like an animal's mouth.

She looked left and right. A finely drawn eyebrow jerked, and her feet made an agitated little two-step on the pool's silent bottom. "It really hurt me. It scared me."

"What if I said I wouldn't put my cock in you otherwise?"

She swung her head left and right, trapped.

"Well?"

Sally let out such a big sigh there was little air left in her to speak with. "I'd let you."

Sam's eyes glittered. "Good." His curled hand moved closer. "Want me to stop?"

She hung her head in shame, mouth awry. "No."

"That's good. But right now, I don't want to hurt you." His hand moved forward until it was directly in front of the black nylon cupping her left breast. His large fingers closed over the roundness of it, the black nylon shifting on the wet breast. Her head lolled back, her eyes drooped closed, and with an abandon that made Daryl's stomach flip flop, she went up on tip toe and rolled her breast inside Sam's palm.

In slow motion, under the waving weight of the water, her feet slowly encircled Sam's body, the backs of her calves touching in a slow criss-cross around the small of Sam's back, the strength of her legs pulling Sam's body slowly between her thighs, Sam stepping back before their crotches could touch.

Sally's legs drifted down in disappointment. She hung onto the grooves, breathing heavily, grinning with disbelief. "You bastard. You're really gonna fuck me over, aren't you?"

Sam licked the palm that held her breast, looking calmly over his fingers at her. "By the time I'm through with you, you're going to be an emotional mess."

She raised her legs up through the water to him, spreading them so far apart her pubic hair showed around the nylon. "Do it."

Sam strode instead towards the steps. "We've reached tonight. Back to the motel."

Sally went into the room first, white motel towel draped over her shoulder. She reached both hands behind her head, squeezing down her tail of hair to get the pool water out.

Sam shut the door behind them, locking it.

Sally turned to face him. "Do you want me to change into my nightie, or—" her lips shrugged down, she raised a shoulder—"should I just stay in my underwear?"

"Put on the clothes you wore here."

"The clothes? I...they're not very...I only wore them to be comfortable, my sneakers are kinda ratty. There's a hole in my panties." Her bare feet fidgeted. "I thought, you know, maybe the nightie..."

"I don't want the nightie." Sally flinched. Sam flopped into one of the chairs, grabbed a pack of his cigarettes off the table. "I don't want to fuck you in a costume. I want to fuck you in your street clothes. I want to fuck you in the clothes you wear when you do laundry."

"Okay." She went over in her underwear to the bed with the suitcase, fished out her jeans, tee shirt, panties, socks and sneakers. "I didn't wear a bra in the car."

Sam spread his big hands out, palms up. He talked around his cigarette. "Then don't wear one now."

"Okay. Should I—do you want me to change in the bathroom again?"

"Yeah."

The bathroom door closed. Sam's red bikini sailed over Daryl's head, wetly hitting the wall.

Daryl looked at his hands gripping his knees, their veiny backs. His face and crotch were hot. The rest of him felt shivery.

"After tonight she's mine, Daryl. You'll still be boyfriend and girlfriend, or husband and wife, but you remember that old test about two people drowning, and you can only save—"

The bathroom door opened.

Sally came out shyly. She had her blue jeans on again, with the old white sneakers she wore to the drive-in that time when she and Daryl first made love. Her short-sleeved tee shirt was white, her breasts beneath warping the word "Arizona". Her hair was dry, brushed away from her lovely face. "Here I am."

Sam was back to his black trousers and white dress shirt. As Sally walked towards him, blushing, he reached behind him to the tabletop and turned on the radio. The pad of his thumb rolled the tuning dial clockwise and counterclockwise, sending out unintelligible bursts of music until it stopped on a station playing the old Chicago song, "Colors".

Sally stopped in front of him. Her head tilted up, black eyes looking into his. Her hands, very slowly, rose up around his neck. One hand stayed there, cupping the back of his neck, the other resting on his shoulder. Slowly, carefully, she brought the side of her face against his buttoned shirtfront.

She looked small in front of Sam, smaller than Daryl had realized.

Sam's arms went around her, crossing at the small of her narrow back. For the first time, Daryl realized the shirt had cuff links in it. They made him jealous. Signified how much better Sam was than him with his commanding presence, the fine black hairs across the backs of his beautiful hands, his over-sized cock and his ability to speak different languages. And here was Daryl, sitting on the edge of a bed in a motel at the top of the world, a big, dumb guy watching a well-dressed man take his girlfriend away.

Sally kept her profile against Sam's shirtfront, closed her eyes and sighed.

They started a slow dance together to the song, feet barely shuffling. Sally's arms settled more snugly around Sam's shoulders, the back of her tee shirt lifting off the waistband of her jeans, exposing an inch of skin. "Arizona" pressed against Sam's rib cage.

While they danced, her eyes gradually opened. The wide black pupils looked up, came level again in thought, looked up again. She squirmed the side of her face a little higher on the shirtfront.

Sam, whose jaw had been resting on the top of her head, opened his own eyes. Her tangled black hair rubbed against the underside of

his jaw as she tilted her profile back, bringing her face away from the shirt, tentatively, rotating her face so her lips were just below Sam's. She looked up into his eyes, only inches away now; hooded her eyes, looked up again into his eyes. Her right hand grasped his shoulder. Her left hand held his neck in place. She kissed him full on the mouth, moaning when her lips touched his, moaning deeper, louder as his lips kissed back.

Daryl stood up off the bed, heart pounding. As he watched, Sam's big hands reached down and around Sally's ass, cupping a cheek in each palm. The hands gave a hard, simultaneous squeeze, the tendons in the backs flexing.

Daryl looked up. Sally had her hands on either side of Sam's face, sipping at his lips, now opening her lips, her tongue appearing, her tongue going between Sam's parted lips into his mouth.

Daryl looked down. Sam's left hand hoisted the cheek it held, up and to one side, separating it from the other cheek. His right hand slid down between the separations, rubbing under the double-stitched seam between Sally's legs.

Sally's lips broke away from Sam's with a sob of pleasure. Staying in his arms, black eyebrows twisting, her mouth brought up one cry after another.

She walked her sneakers up onto Sam's shoes to raise her crotch to crucial height. Holding onto Sam's shoulders for balance, she brought her right knee up to his hip. Sam's hand slid more easily between the backs of her thighs, rubbing over her cunt.

Daryl looked down. Sally had her right hand between Sam's legs, massaging his cock through the material.

Daryl stepped to the side to see it better, careful to be quiet so he wouldn't disturb them. He watched her four fingers on one side; thumb on the other, measure over and over again the thickness, the height. What she had wanted all along, from that first day, in her hand, in her mouth, in her cunt.

Her face rested against Sam's chest, both of them luxuriating in the freedom of finally feeling each other between their legs after such a long wait.

While Daryl watched her closed eyelids, the light on them changing as the eyes beneath rolled, they suddenly opened, the dilated pupils shrinking to startlement as she realized Daryl was looking right at her.

A glimpse of the old Sally crossed her, only for a moment, buried beneath the delight she couldn't compose her face out of, and then, not knowing how to look at Daryl, or if to look at him, she turned her face away, swinging black hair replacing her happy black eyes.

But from the way the backs of her shoulders went still, the way her hips moved more slowly atop Sam's two hands, Daryl could tell she was thinking about their eyes meeting, thinking about what she was doing here, letting be done to her. Her head raised a fraction off Sam's chest.

Something popped. It was the brass button on the front of Sally's jeans. Sam's hand let go of the waistband he had yanked. Quickly, he pushed her jeans down off her hips. He pushed down the panties with a hole in the side. Her lovely, bare, woman's ass. Her black pubic hair. Sam's left middle finger drew out of his mouth, burrowed between her cheeks up into her asshole, knuckle by spit-wet knuckle; his right middle finger shot up her cunt.

The shock of such swift pleasure made her gasp. Her face fell back against Sam's chest. Her small hands curled closed at his shirt pockets.

Daryl realized Sam was looking not down at Sally, but across at him. He met his cold blue eyes. Holding Daryl's look, Sam gave both his flesh-filled hands a rapid jiggle. Sally let out a loud grunt, then, eyes closed, face still on Sam's chest, blindly pushed her jeans farther down, to mid-thigh. Sam gave a different jiggle and Sally gasped gratefully, rocking her hips on the twin pivots of Sam's stiff middle fingers.

Sam stretched his mouth into a circle mimicking Sally's and jiggled. Sally grunted lustily. He raised his eyebrows way, way up in imitation of Sally's and jiggled. Sally gasped.

He grinned silently at Daryl, inviting him to enjoy the joke. Stretched his mouth. Jiggled. Sally grunted. Stretched it again. Jiggled. Sally grunted. Raised his eyebrows way, way up. Jiggled. Sally gasped.

Daryl started making and unmaking fists.

Sam banged his jaw once, twice, three times on the top of Sally's head. She looked up dreamily, a sleepy smile on her face. She pushed her jeans farther down, to her knees. Her hands tenderly held the sides of Sam's jaw. She kissed him under his chin, nibbling over the shaven skin, pulling tiny, upside-down tents between her teeth.

Looking down into her dazzled eyes, he stretched his mouth into a circle. Jiggled the two fingers thrust deeply into her.

She grunted.

He raised his eyebrows. Jiggled. She gasped. Did it again. She gasped, ending it with a blink of confusion.

Eyebrows. Jiggle. Gasp. Jiggle. Grunt.

She tried to bring her legs together, but Sam's hands were too big between them. "Wait. Wait a—"

Jiggle. Grunt. Eyebrows. Jiggle. Gasp.

"You're humiliating—"

He jiggled her into a long series of gasps and grunts. She came out of it breasts heaving, eyes half-shut, moaning despite herself. "Stop. Making fun of me."

His hands lifted her into the air, sneakers leaving the carpet, the full weight of body supported only by Sam's two rigid middle fingers now, the full weight making her body slide farther down on them, pushing them deeper yet inside her. He stretched his mouth and raised his eyebrows and jiggled some more, mocking her. Whenever he let her rest for a moment her bare legs kicked listlessly, trying to get free, but the ankles were still joined by her dropped jeans, binding her thighs around Sam's hand.

She started crying in frustration. "Stop it. You're humiliating me!"

Daryl stepped up. He put a trembling hand on Sam's shoulder. "Put her down. Now."

Sam guffawed, eyes glittering at how Sally's face kept changing between anger and rapture. "Ask her, Daryl. Ask her if she really wants me to stop."

Daryl stared at Sam a moment, then looked up at Sally's face. "Do you want him to stop?"

Her legs struggled helplessly, the ankles yanking back and forth in the rolled-down jeans. "Yes!"

Daryl curled the four fingers of his right hand around the back of Sam's neck. His thick thumb pressed against Sam's Adam's apple. "Put her down. Now."

Sally weakly slapped Sam across the face.

"Now, Sam."

Sam looked at Daryl, looked at Sally, and looked at Daryl again. "Ask her one last time," he murmured.

“Put her down!” Daryl’s thumb pressed Sam’s Adam’s apple inward.

Sam’s voice came out distorted, but his eyes stayed calm. “One last time. Ask her.”

Daryl hesitated, and then looked up at Sally again. “You want to come down, right?”

Her face filled with exasperation. Teeth bared, she drew her lips sideways, about to shout her answer in Daryl’s face.

Sam jiggled her, hard.

Her head lolled back, bare legs twitching as she rode the pleasure. When it was over, it took her a moment to get her thoughts in order. She swung her head at Daryl. It wasn’t going to be a shout any longer, but it was still going to be the same answer.

Sam jiggled her again, harder.

Her knees rose as the long grunt came out of her. Her hands fumbled down to Sam’s wrists, one at her ass, and one at her cunt. She caressed them gratefully. Her head dropped forward, eyes shut, sneakers twisting slowly.

Daryl looked at Sam. “Is she coming each time?”

Sam shook his head, grinned, and jiggled her again. “She hasn’t come at all yet. This is just a jolt. Each jolt feels better than the last. I won’t let her come this way though. This is just to let her know I can get a reaction out of her body whenever I want, regardless of what she wants. Like tickling.”

Sally raised her head again. She blinked, confused. She looked around at the height she was at, and then looked down at the hands holding her. She tried to get a knee up on Sam’s forearm to climb off his hands, but she was too weak. Her face swung helplessly towards Daryl. Her eyes were unfocused, her voice resigned. “Daryl—”

Sam started jiggling her again, not stopping this time, going faster and faster and faster until her gasps and grunts all blurred into one continuous, unintelligible jibber and jabber; until her bare legs went rubbery, her head wobbled back, her arms jumped and jerked around her, and even then he kept it up, moving her body around in a circle with him in the center, the puppetmaster showing off his jiggling puppet, and at the height of it he called out to her as though she were in a storm, “Do you want me to stop? Do you want me to stop?” and she burst into tears and answered, “I don’t want you to stop! No, I don’t want you to stop!”

He banged her sneakers down on the floor, yanked both fingers out with audible pops.

She staggered backwards and fell over onto the carpet.

She looked up from the floor with the goofy grin of someone who's been spun too much. Her bare legs, still bound by her jeans at the ankles, spread open for him. "Now? Please?"

Sam shook his head. "First I want you to take off all your clothes." He smiled secretively at her, holding his left middle finger under his nose, sniffing the rich brown tip.

Sally looked up past her spread knees at Sam. She bent her arms at the elbows, laying her hands palms up by her ears. "You want me to strip on the floor, or..."

"No. Stand up and strip."

She put her palms around her knees and hauled herself childishly into a sitting position, then gamely rocked herself forward, bound feet struggling in the pulled-down denim to get flat on the floor.

She squatted on her bare haunches for a moment, fingertips on the carpet in front of her for balance, and then stood up, knees cracking.

Her legs, naked from crotch to ankles, looked bigger in their bareness.

Reaching down she lifted her right foot, nearly losing her balance in the awkward doubled-over position, long black tangle of hair falling over her eyes, right knee pushing under her chin, and worked the sneaker off without bothering to untie it. Tossed it a yard away on the carpet.

Pulled the right side of her jeans off her socked foot and stood, freed, breathing happily.

Her left sneaker was a lot easier. It landed a yard to the left.

Her jeans fell across the back of one of the chairs in an upside-down twist. After a last blue rustle, out of the empty waistband dropped the flimsy panties, pooling on the carpet, nylon and waist hole and leg holes.

Her short white socks had settled down by her ankles, the jointed shape of her toes visible through the threadbare cotton. Off they went, left, right.

Sally stood straight again. Only her Arizona tee shirt was left, its crew neck a touch of the tomboy above her body's curves.

Her right forearm crossed downwards over her belly.

Her left forearm crossed downwards over her right.

Under the soft hem of the shirt on either side slipped her upwardly curving fingers, nails tapping against the warmness of her slowly breathing sides. And up she raised the tee shirt, the slowest unveiling of rib cage and underswell; up she raised it with forearms still criss-crossed. Up in front of her face, her criss-crossed forearms, elbows almost rising, spreading to either side of her head, like horns.

Off it went, the tee shirt.

Now she was naked.

Tangled black hair fell over her thin shoulders. Shorter, almost pubic curls hung above her black, black waiting eyes.

Her breasts, naked, seemed too big for her thin shoulders. Her body, nude, seemed too big for the room.

Sam, still clothed, walked over in front of her.

She downcast her waiting eyes.

His shoe's leather soles crunched quietly as he circled behind her. Her waiting eyes floated to the sides of their sockets, watching him disappear behind.

"Your butt's too big. Your thighs are too, generally."

She gave an upset little laugh to herself, not being able to see him.

"I can't change that, tonight."

"It gives you a slightly bovine aspect."

She ducked her head. Her mouth opened vertically. "I don't know what that means."

Sam completed his circuit. His thumb and forefinger grabbed her chin, swiveled her blinking face up towards his direction. "It means cowlike."

He frowned at her stomach while what he had said sank in blink by blink.

"Cow...you think I'm—I took my clothes off for you and you think..."

"The best thing about you's your calves." It came out as a dismissal rather than a compliment. In Sally's stunned silence he thought back over what he had just said and snorted in surprise. "I just made a pun! What a world!"

"I don't—" she looked to Daryl for help. Her palms waved at her hips in constricted exasperation. "What are you saying?"

Sam stood heavily in front of her, chuckling at her, shaking his head. "You are so stupid. What were you before you came up here? An assistant manager at some fast food joint?"

"Yeah, well, so?"

“So I don’t think I want to fuck you. Frankly, you don’t turn me on as much with your clothes off. You’ve got great calves, but the rest of your body doesn’t live up to their promise.”

She let out an astonished laugh, starting to cry, losing the mangled smile on her lips. “What’s so bad about my body? Daryl likes it, don’t you?”

“Daryl doesn’t count. You don’t want to get fucked by Daryl. You want to get fucked by me.”

“I don’t see why—I don’t know why—”

“Right?”

She sagged in front of him, naked and blushing. “Right. Yeah. So how come...?”

“You’re fat!”

In a small voice she said, “I’m not that fat.”

“Look at your stomach.”

She looked at it, sniffing moistly. “Yeah. Well. It’s not, it’s not like it’s real fat, I mean I did put on a coupla pounds, but...”

“‘Coupla’.”

Her red-veined eyes looked up at him. “You’re makin’ fun of the way I talk now?”

“‘Makin’.”

“‘Making’. You’re ‘making’ fun of the way I talk?”

Sam put his big hand around her jaw again, tilting her lovely damp face left and right, sliding shadows over the sharp cheekbones. “If I make love to you, will you promise to go on a diet?”

She tried to pull her jaw out of his grip, couldn’t. “Yeah. Yes.”

“Then I’ll make love to you.”

“Really?” She watched, biting her lower lip, as he started undoing his shirt buttons.

“Really.”

She looked at her indrawn stomach again, sucked it in some. “I guess I am a little fat.”

Sam’s eyes glittered at her. “You’re a pig. You’re a fucking sow.”

Her lower lip dropped. With the lilt of a flirtation she said, “No I’m not.”

Sam answered quietly, pulling one shirtfront out, Sally’s eyes dropping from his face long enough to look over his emerging body. “You are. Look at how big your nipples are.” She did. “Pig size. I’ll

bet if I squeezed them now you'd grunt just like a pig, like some fat, stupid sow rolling on her back in mud, kicking her fat little legs out."

The smile stayed fixed on her face, lower lip still hung down, while his words went into her, and at first, looking at her rigid smile, Daryl thought that behind the smile she was braced to weather his humiliation, but then, looking at her eyes, he saw how each insulting word was received, saw how bright her eyes were, and a phrase floated into his thoughts.

"If I pinched those fat little nipples of yours I'll bet milk would squirt out. I'll bet you could fill a couple of pails."

Eating it up.

He had her.

Sally stood naked and silent, right elbow in her left palm, right index finger in her mouth, chewing meditatively while Sam took his clothes off.

When he was down to his jockey shorts, plain white, surprisingly, he smiled at her as he straightened up. "Want to see my cock?"

That got to her. She dropped her arms to her sides, unconsciously pushing her breasts forward, raising one foot up on its toes. "Yeah. Yes."

His large thumbs hooked under the elastic waistband. He bent forward, pulling down, the lowering angle of his body blocking her view.

When both holes in the underpants had slid down his strong calves and off his feet he turned around, tossing them behind him, straightening up with his back to her.

Sally's eyes darted down to his bare ass, the small, perfectly shaped cheeks.

He looked over his broad shoulder at her, longish black hair combed straight back, ice blue eyes, wide lips.

With a man's natural grace he turned around.

He stood naked in front of her, eyes quiet, palms spread.

Sally shook her long tangle of black hair away from her face, and stepped barefoot over to him.

When she was in front of him, she reached her arms up and put her hands on either side of his thick neck. His forearms slid around her waist, large hands taking possession of her soft, warm ass.

Neither spoke.

Her lips rose up. His head bent down. They kissed.

Between the cheeks of Sally's shapely ass, Sam's longest finger slid familiarly, gently rubbing her cunt from behind.

Her hand was on his bare leg, stroking the inside of his thigh with a woman's slow, fingery tease.

They kissed again.

Sam's hands came up around Sally's breasts, lifting and separating them. He pulled tenderly until her lashes met with each pull, until her feet went up on tippy-toe.

Sam's lips parted above the dark red of her left nipple. Out lolled his tongue tip, tapering as it stretched down, wetly touching the tall side of her nipple, rolling slowly around the nipple's base, flicking licks up the nipple's sides, encouraging its hard height. His mouth opened over the front of Sally's breast, lips fastening around its diameter, hiding it from Daryl.

Daryl watched Sally's head fall back, small hands holding Sam in place by his rounded biceps. By her expression Daryl could tell when Sam was sucking, and when he was tonguing. And by the movement of bones beneath the flesh of Sam's cheeks, mandible and maxilla, Daryl could tell when Sam brought both sets of teeth around Sally's nipple. And by the slight additional sideways movement, Daryl could tell when Sam was biting Sally's nipple.

He watched Sally's back arch so sharply the spine sank into its own shadow. He listened as in a voice almost as quiet as a thought she went, "Yeah."

It came out again, that "Yeah." It came out steadily now, deep, purring, and hungry.

Her right hand dropped down, fumbling to feel where on Sam's body it was, recognizing with a measuring flutter of fingers the narrow jut of the hipbone.

Sally wrapped her left forearm around the back of Sam's neck to keep his mouth on her breast, teeth around her nipple, putting her right hand between his legs, tenderly caressing the black hair covering his balls.

Sam's lips slipped off Sally's breast, its slope shiny with saliva. He snaked his hand up under the black tangle of hair to the nape of her neck, gazing down with triumph into the love in her eyes. His front teeth bit into his lower lip. "Finally."

"Finally," she echoed lovingly, and it was the most powerful word in the world just then, it was stronger, sexier, and more violent than "fuck".

Massaging one of Sam's balls in each hand, Sally pulled her breasts back away from his chest so she could look down between their rapidly breathing bodies and watch the rhythm of her wrists. The wide slit at the tapered crown of his cock looked back up at her, closer than she had expected.

She breathed through her mouth, head down.

Sam stiffened his back, nostrils, cock, as her fingers played around the heavy, hairy weights.

Whispering to herself in quick, incoherent breaths, she let go of his balls, put her hands on his hips, and, still standing, with a graceful swoop, black hair sliding, brought her mouth down sideways, like going for a drink at a water fountain, and put her mouth over the top of his cock. Immediately after her lips settled in a twist around it, she slid her opened mouth farther down, rounded bulge appearing in her cheek.

One of Sam's hands palmed the crown of her head, holding her bent over, the other coming up around her hanging hair, flipping it over so Daryl could see the fat lips riding up and down the top third.

Daryl stared at the black tangled hair, tangled even where it threaded at her temples, the shut, rolling eyelids, lashes twitching, the face itself, so formal and beautiful, swaying on its thick root of cock, knowing he would never see her face again, the delicate elegance of its beauty, without remembering its ride up and down Sam's cock.

Sally's long fingers bent back on Sam's hips, thumbs and pinkies wiggling.

Her lips, red and wet, pulled more strongly on Sam's upper cock, riding rapturously, whorishly up and down over her own saliva.

She came up for air. Sam let go of her head. She slid her knees to the floor, pressing her breasts against the fronts of his thighs, arching back, bare ass on her heels, looking up prettily at him.

Trying to catch her breath to talk, she gave an out of breath laugh. "Fuck me?"

"Yeah." Sam held her elbow, hoisted her up. She followed him to the bed.

"Pull the covers down."

"Sure." She yanked them down off the bed.

One pillow plopped off, settling on the carpet.

Sally put one knee up onto the mattress, then the other, kneeling on the bottom sheet's edge with her back to Sam. She checked back over her shoulder at Sam's eyes with a look Daryl recognized, pupils in their corners, front teeth on her lower lip, then bent forward and

lowered her stomach at a slant across the sheet, displaying the soft lines of her ass, the undersides of her thighs.

One foot lifted flirtatiously, tucking down in the hollow behind her other leg's knee. She raised her black eyebrows. "My calves, huh?"

Sam put both knees on the bed facing her back, hair in place, cock up. Sally rolled over onto her back and scooted her spine up the sheet with a push of her long legs, towards the lone pillow.

Sam walked on his knees to the side of Sally's ankles. He spoke in a solemn voice. "You can take your clothes off if you want to, Daryl. You can look, but you can't touch or talk." His head swiveled further on its neck until the two men's eyes met, the cold blueness, the touch of grey in the eyebrows.

Sam lay down sideways facing Sally, left forearm on the pillow, right hand on his own hip. She turned sideways too, facing him, putting both hands behind her head, so her slightly rightwards-sloping breasts were between them.

Sam put his hand on Sally's hip.

Daryl took his clothes off on the long walk to the foot of the bed, lightheaded with the lust and dread of watching how another man made love.

Sally's hands went around Sam's back, Sam's hand moved over the curves of her side up into her armpit. Sally rolled over onto her back, bringing Sam with her, the weight of his chest widening her breasts. They kissed as legs went between legs, Sally fully on her back now, both of Sam's legs between Sally's.

She drew her soles up the sheet, knees rising on either side of Sam's hips, face blushing furiously at the rub of Sam's cock against the furred outside of her pubic bone.

Sam kissed along the underside of her jaw so passionately the busses jostled her head around on the pillow, out of all these profiles, like a drowning, her eyes suddenly opening with shyness and doubt, looking for Daryl, Daryl at the foot of the bed watching Sam clasp Sally's left thigh underneath and lift it up and out, watching the front of Sam's right thigh push Sally's other leg open, watching as Sam raised and then lowered himself into place, watching as the muscles in Sam's lean ass bunched tight, lowered, bunched tight, lowered, one of Sally's hands on Sam's shoulder now, the other over her eyes, bunched tight, lowered.

Daryl walked around the side of the bed.

Sam had the long head of his cock in Sally's cunt, making it appear and disappear among her curly black pubic hairs.

Sally put her profile on the pillow, looking mortified. "I can't do this. I'm sorry, I can't go through with this."

Appear and disappear.

"Why not? What's wrong?"

"It's just hitting me." She was too shy to look up into Sam's eyes. His face hung over hers, listening while he made the long head of his cock appear and disappear among her curly black pubic hairs. "I'm not like this. I don't even know if I even like you. I don't like you. I—this was a fantasy, it was just between Daryl and me, but now you're actually—I'm actually about to let you—"

Sam's long head started pumping an inch deeper inside her, then another inch deeper, nice and slow and sliding. Now it never fully emerged from her cunt after each pump: the head itself stayed inside.

Sam's wolfish grin spread above her face, teeth and tease. His eyes watched hers avoid his. "It's true you don't like me, Sally. As a matter of fact, you probably hate me. But here you are in bed with me."

Her face was still flushed, but her voice softer. She gave a quick, embarrassed glance down at where their bodies were partially joined. She rolled her eyes, blinking them. "I was doing this for Daryl." She braved a glance up at Sam.

"Pretty soon though you're going to be doing it for you." The weight of Sam's cock slid another inch deeper into her. The vertical lips of her cunt experimented closing around the cock's slow but steady rise and fall. The lips flexed back away again, but then with a betraying reflex settled around the movement.

Sam hooded his eyes, lowered his mouth.

Sally's face flattened back. Sam stopped. Stopped his descending kiss, stopped his pumping.

Sally's black eyes looked straight up at him. "I hate you."

The two stared at each other, Sam's hands on her shoulders, Sally's hands on his biceps, Sam's cock four inches inside her cunt.

"Say it again."

"I'm not going to say it just because you want me to."

Sam arched an eyebrow. "Remember after my pool party? What I did to your poor breast?" They both looked at it, Sam with full lips, Sally with a sickled mouth. "Remember how you cried?"

Her eyes flared, her hands let go of his biceps. "I hate you!"

Sam shoved his cock all the way up inside her.

She let out a gasp. Her legs jumped. The short muscles in Sam's cheeks flexed powerfully left and right as he rotated the length of his cock around and around inside her.

He pulled it back up to four inches' depth.

Teeth, tease. "Say it again, Sally."

She looked up into his face for a long, long time. The swell and fall of her breasts gradually slowed. Her hair against the pillow, she finally again looked down the sky and earth of their bodies at their shared horizon. She saw Sam's lean stomach sheltering her softer belly, the top fronts of his hard thighs pressed against the insides of her own, preventing them from closing. And in the sideways diamond of facing groins there it was: the mean connection between heaven and earth.

Sally put her palms back on Sam's biceps. "I thought maybe if I let you fuck me it would get it out of Daryl's system and my system and maybe even your system." She raised her legs and crossed her calves over the small of Sam's back, and raised her arms and crossed her forearms over the nape of Sam's neck.

Sam started fucking Sally very slowly, very gently, very deeply.

Gradually the moans came out, her face appeared out from under his shoulder, chin hooked into his collarbone. Her eyes shut, mouth open, tongue pushing over her lips, rewetting them. Every few pumps the muscles in Sam's ass would bunch even more tightly, Sally's calves would scrabble more urgently across his back, and her parted lips would twitch into a grin.

Daryl knelt at the side of the bed, adjusting his ass on the backs of his ankles until his eyes were at a level with the sheet. His left forefinger ran back and forth under his balls, his right hand formed a cylinder of fingers around his cock.

Sally dropped her calves off Sam. She spread her legs wide open, knees drawn up, and hands on her knees pulling them up even higher. Her face was off the pillow on the sheet, turned towards Sam but with eyes closed, her beautiful, girl-next-door face tensing and slacking.

Sam had his upper torso curved above her body like a ship's prow, arms propped on either side of her waist, bony face pointed down. Each time he treated her to a few pumps of an especially deep fuck, to where that chilling grin would spring onto her lips, he'd grin too, all cheekbones and teeth and glittering eyes.

Watching her get fucked so well, Sally looked different to Daryl, wobblier breasts, hairier cunt, lovelier arms.

Daryl came, wetting the underside of his chin.

He stood up, knees cracking, and went into the bathroom to pee.

The aquamarine shower curtain was swished to one side, the bathtub filled with ice bags and Alaskan king crab legs. One of the long, multi-jointed legs shifted as the ice in the bags continued melting.

Daryl stood in front of the toilet, propping his left hand against the goldfish and sea grass wallpaper.

When he finished, he turned on the tap and washed his hands, avoiding the mirror, and with a sudden lurch threw up into the sink.

Bent over, he fumbled his hands forward, feeling for the tap. He threw up again, a light brown gush splashed on the backs of his hands.

He hung his face over the sink, panting, eyes tearing, willing himself not to get sick again.

Through it all he could hear Sally's groans of pleasure. His worse fears come true. There really was a way to make love that other men knew, but he didn't.

Daryl walked back into the bedroom. Sally was standing at the foot of the bed, facing it, bent over at the waist, forearms and face on the mattress, ass up in the air, Sam giving her a slow, steady fuck up the cunt from behind, each thrust creating rude-sounding expulsions of air. Sally's feet were up on grateful tiptoe, delicate and feminine. Sam's big hands roamed freely around her bare legs, just like he said they would so long ago, squeezing and stroking, cracking loud slaps across her ass.

Behind the black tangle of hair on the bed, one joyful eye rolled and bulged with the thrusts and punishment.

After a minute more, Sam stopped. Hips arching back, he slowly withdrew his cock, Sally rubbing her palms in circles on the mattress.

The mass of black hair on the mattress showed the tip of her nose, her open, pushed-out lips.

Sam went over to the table, tall hard-on wobbling. He jiggled up a cigarette, stuck it in his mouth, lit it.

Sally rolled lazily onto her back, hair still across her face. The cigarette pack landed on her stomach. "Break?"

"Yeah." Sam stretched his arms up, torso rippling. "People fuck too fast. Fucking should take hours."

Sally sloppily propped herself up on one elbow on the bed, legs still open, unlit cigarette in her mouth. In a voice with only the

slightest trace of shyness left in it, and only the faintest self-consciousness about Daryl being in the room, she said, "You sure know how to fuck." She lit her cigarette.

Daryl felt jealous at the admiration in her voice.

Sam strode over, jaw out, sticking a hand in his armpit, flapping the bicep, making farting noises. Sally giggled, pulling her legs closer to her.

Sam stopped directly in front of Daryl. "What's the matter?"

Daryl stepped back, embarrassed. "Nothing."

Sam stepped closer, giving Daryl a light shove in his chest. "What's the matter?"

Sally sat up on the bed, watching.

Daryl backed up again. He put shaky annoyance in his voice. "I already told you. Nothing."

Sam pushed him again, harder.

Again.

Daryl lunged for Sam, grabbing the back of his head and kneeling him in the thigh. He pulled his fist back, felt himself going down, Sam's cock sliding across his spine. He landed on his knees and hands, Sam's hard forearm across his throat. From behind and above him, Sam said, "Give up?"

Daryl struggled on his hands and knees, got slammed stomach down onto the carpet. The forearm pressed his Adam's apple into his throat.

"Give up, Daryl?"

Daryl looked around from where he was pressed face down on the carpet. He saw Sam's strong calves on either side of his head, and way up, at an angle, Sally kneeling on the foot of the mattress, quietly watching.

"Give up?"

"No." Daryl tried to get at least one hand flat down on the carpet.

Sam's forearm pressed more tightly across his Adam's apple. Daryl couldn't breathe. His nostrils flexed for air, picking up the damp smell of Sally's cunt on Sam's cock.

"I give up."

"What?"

"I give up."

"Say please."

From where Daryl's face was pressed into the carpet, he could see straight down into the multitude of loops that made up the weave. Not

every loop was exactly the same hue, nor were all of them exactly the same height. Way down at the bottom, tiny black specks of mica were ensnared in the loops' twirled sides. "'Please'."

Sam let go.

Daryl stayed face down on the carpet, drawing his legs in. Watching from under his eyebrows he saw Sam walk over to Sally, grab her hair at the back of her head and pull her up. She glanced down at Daryl, hesitated, and then went into Sam's arms. In the mid-air between their faces, their tongues licked, like cats.

This time when they fucked she held his head, covering it with kisses, then rolled his face lovingly, teasingly over her breasts, laughing when a nipple went up his nose, going solemn when he started nibbling.

After a while they slowed it down, very slow, very gentle, very good, and her hands drifted down dreamily to his ass, cupping one cheek in each palm. Her head lolled straight back, raising her throat in a hump.

Her black eyebrows started moving.

First it was just a flex. Then both brows twisted, sending small wrinkles up her forehead. Her eyes closed, lids bigger than normal, like they were listening.

Sam's hips started moving ever so slightly faster between Sally's thighs. Her fingers stroked his ass, encouraging him.

A little faster.

Her mouth opened, lips rubbery, sliding over her teeth, twitching to form not a word but a sound, a sound older than words.

A sound bigger than words.

Over her gums her lips slid back, twitching for the shape they needed to form for the big sound inside her.

A little faster.

Sally put her hands under her thighs, pulled her legs up, and out.

Her cunt was now the highest point on her body.

Sam, propped above, went straight down into it, hips slapping against her ass.

Sally's teeth drew apart, spittle on the upper incisors. The hump in her throat swelled. The muscles along the backs of her legs stiffened. Her nostrils shuddered. Her lips stopped. Down in her diaphragm a small sound started, rising, growing, nearing, getting closer, getting higher, louder, bigger, welling up between her paralyzed lips like the perfect note, like the name of God.

Her body bucked.  
Her body twisted violently under Sam's.  
Shoulders, legs.  
She came back, mouth wrenched wide open.  
Her body bucked again.

Her lower back slammed back down on the mattress, spine snaking.

Deep, angry thrusts.  
Bucked, fell back.  
Again, fell back.

She was babbling gibberish, blinded by her hair, a terrible, growing pain between her legs, a pain too large, growing too fast, a suffering spreading out down her legs, up her waist, gripping her, grinding her, and she shrieked each time it doubled, she screamed each time it deepened, until it was too huge to stay inside her, too enormous to hold onto, and with terrifying swiftness the pain took over her, became her, became more than her so she was floating inside the pain, an insignificant speck in the pain, and it was the purest pleasure, it was the sweetest joy, the most blissful ride, and when her body stopped bucking this time she became aware Sam was coming inside her, she could feel the hot pulses of sperm, the squish of his cock's head against the sperm filling her cunt, and she held onto his ass, feeling it twitch with pleasure, stroked the backs of his thighs, caressed his balls, ignoring the loud knocking on their room's door, smiling and sighing to herself and rubbing the side of her face against his chest like lifting it up into clover, not at all worried about the knocking because Sam was here, and Sam could do anything.

After resting in each other's arms, Sam raised his head, looking down into Sally's eyes. She put her arms around him, tears of happiness sliding out of the sides of her eyes, down her cheeks, and smiled trustfully up at him. Her voice was hoarse from her screams. "I love you." She tilted her head sideways.

His eyes narrowed, his smile widened, he sipped another tender kiss from her willing lips.

The knocking got louder.

Daryl, naked and half-hard, looked for the eighth time from the door to the two of them in bed.

Sally smoothed a neatly trimmed strand of black hair back behind Sam's ear. Her eyes were bright. "Should we see who it is, baby?"

Sam kissed her forehead. Palms flat on the mattress by her hips, he slowly withdrew his cock, still hard, until only the very top of the head was still buried in her, connected by a thread of sperm. He slid the fat top up between her cunt's lips, gliding it smoothly over the swelling of her clitoris. Sally's legs shivered, her eyes fluttering shut.

The wide, rosy head lifted away from the pink clitoris, the thread of sperm stretching, thinning, finally snapping.

## PART THREE: DEATH

Sam strode naked across the room, lean and wide-shouldered, fat head of his cock banging up against his stomach.

He wrenched the door open.

The hotel clerk's three middle knuckles stopped in mid-air.

The top of the clerk's shirt pocket drooped forward from the weight of the hard plastic name bar pinned to it. Behind his glasses his eyes dropped and widened at Sam's nakedness, then swung up to see into the room. The naked man standing midway between the TV set and the bed, the nude girl sitting off the bottom of the bed, blowing smoke.

"So?"

The kid kept his face down, talking to Sam's cock. His shoulders rose. "Someone complained."

"Not her. You have any complaints, Sally?"

"Certainly not."

"It was a guest in one of the other rooms. They heard screams. I didn't take the call."

Sam leaned his elbows against the insides of the doorframe, making his waist even narrower. "I was fucking her."

"Yeah, I figured."

"So now you know no one was being murdered."

"Yeah." Face still down, the clerk made an uncomprehending grin to himself, thoughts visible in his changing facial expressions.

"Any other questions?"

"Can I ask who he is?"

"Her boyfriend. 'Scuse me, fiancée."

The clerk pulled his eyes up from Sam's cock long enough to take in the self-consciousness of Daryl's look back.

"You'll have to excuse us now, we're kinda busy." Sam's hand reached behind him, came back with the door, swinging it forward until it filled the talking space and clicked shut.

Sam took a couple of steps back into the room, glanced at Daryl and pointed at the carpet. "Kneel."

Daryl slowly got down on his knees, looking up at Sam.

"We didn't forget you, Daryl." Sam knelt behind him, calves flanking Daryl's. His big knuckles rode up Daryl's bowed spine to the

top, where he quickly grabbed the back of the neck like catching a fish in water, forcing Daryl's head down, down, down until the forehead touched the carpet. Sam looked up, mouth open. Sally stood. "Come here." He returned his gaze to Daryl's down-sloping back, slanting his head left and right to look around his grip at both sides of Daryl's tense face.

Sally strolled over obediently, smirking, hands dangling by her hips.

"Straddle the back of his neck, facing the same direction as him. You ride his neck while I ride his ass."

She walked to the front of Daryl's bent over body, lifting one foot and putting it on the other side of his head. With a silence as big as a stare she settled her cunt onto Daryl's nape, undersides of her bare legs plumping atop the back of each shoulder.

Sally tightened her grip on Daryl's forehead. Her lashes lowered, black eyes switching back and forth, waiting.

Sam's voice throbbed behind the couple. "Your thighs are getting soft, Daryl. Like a woman's. Softer each time I fuck you. Your asshole's turning into the sweetest little cunt, slick and tight and oh so ladylike."

Daryl's head rose back on its neck, delicate hairs on the nape pressing against Sally's pubic hair, eyes fluttering, and then staring wide, lips pulling away.

Sally watched carefully as Daryl's upside-down face twitched, keeping him hog-tied with her legs, feeling through his bony body Sam's forward thrusts, Daryl's head rolling all the way back, crown against her stomach, his sounds like giving birth, upside-down eyes meeting hers for the first time in hours, face exploding.

All three of them sat in the bathroom, Sally and Sam on the rim of the bathtub, Daryl on the sink basin, eating Alaskan king crab legs.

Daryl's thumbs peeled back the pre-slit shell from the red and white flesh it cylindered, careful to grasp the carapace away from its thorns, like eating the moist insides of thick rose bush canes.

Sally's hand was resting casually on Sam's bare thigh. Sam had a knack, naturally, for pushing the whole red roll of meat out of one chopped-off end of the leg, even past the joints. He'd give every other long, dangling link of flesh to Sally, who gobbled it up weenie style in one hand so she could keep her other hand on Sam's leg. Every once in

a while her hand moved briefly over his thigh, palm and fingers feeling the hard muscle under the skin.

She had some red and white crab confetti on the tops of her breasts. Occasionally Sam would lean into her, licking it off. Each time she giggled, but Daryl could tell she was hoping each time the licking would lead to Sam fucking her again.

Sam's cock lay long and limp across the top of the thigh Sally kept her hand on.

Daryl's lips closed around the latest red and white log of crab meat he had pulled out, wishing as he had with all the others that it was that cock laying across the thigh.

Sam's blue eyes met Daryl's with a neutral look while his jaw moved up and down.

He knows. He's laughing at our jokes and contributing to our small talk, but he knows we're both just waiting for him to fuck us again.

"You're getting dressed?" Before Sam could answer her question, Sally shot Daryl an alarmed look.

Sam glanced up from where he was about to step into his trousers. "Yeah."

"Daryl?! Sam, it's only after midnight, I mean we still have until checkout, I was kinda hoping..." her index finger meekly pointed from Sam's chest to her breasts. "I mean I enjoyed it so much..." Sam quietly hooked the top of his trousers shut. Humiliated, her face went slack. "I know I probably wasn't very good, but I can learn if you'll just show me what to do."

Sam, dressed, walked over to Sally, naked. He laid his hands on the wings of her shoulders. Her face turned attractive again, her tears stopped. "I don't want you more sophisticated. I want you innocent and naive, as you are. Both are. That's why I chose you."

Daryl, also still naked, cleared his throat nervously. "You mean 'chose you' singular, or 'chose you' plural?"

Sam regarded Daryl for a moment. Sally's eyes never left Sam's face. Sam grinned. "I meant plural."

Daryl relaxed, wiped his eye. "Okay, then."

The three of them walked with their bags out into the parking lot. Past one, the sky had darkened to a deep blue. Visibility was low.

Daryl picked up his pace to walk backwards in front of Sam and Sally. "When will we see you again?"

"We're not parting yet. I don't have a car, I hitchhiked up here."

Daryl's face quickened. "So we'll drive you back!" He turned out Sally, who let out an "All right!" and snuggled more tightly against Sam's side.

Daryl got the keys out, going around the station wagon unlocking doors. "You should be careful hitchhiking though, Sam," he called out happily as he rounded the hood. "A lot of them have been reported missing lately."

Sam pushed his duffel bag over the top of the front passenger seat into the back. "Daryl, you drive first; Sally, you sit in the middle."

Everyone settled across the front seat, Daryl and Sam pulling their doors shut, Sally in the middle looking up into the rearview mirror at her hair. "Do you like my hair tangled like this, Sam?"

He reached over the top of his seat, unzipping and then rummaging in his duffel bag. The station wagon started up. "I like it like that."

She angled the rear view mirror around to see more of her hair in the reflection. "I do too, then. It makes me look more wild. Less...goody."

Sam put his left forearm up on the back of the front seat, turning to Sally. Her eyes went sulky. All three of their bodies jostled to the side slightly as Daryl started curving backwards out of the slot. "Will you do anything I tell you to do?"

She lolled her head back, long black tresses shifting as the wagon went under the lot's overhead lights, big black eyes gazing up at him from shadow and illumination. Her white teeth made her lips redder. "Anything. Anything you want."

His right hand brought up a wide, flat bottle. The big label across the front said Johnnie Walker Whiskey. Sam unscrewed the cap, the tax stamp strip across the top pulling until it tore on either side.

Daryl, at the wheel, glanced sideways to see what was going on.

"Open wide."

She did, in a deliberately childish way, enjoying herself.

Sam brought the full bottle over her mouth, tilting it just slightly so a thin stream of whiskey ran over the rim, down to her mouth.

With her first swallow she coughed, head coming forward so some of the whiskey splashed across the bridge of her nose.

She coughed again, hand pressed to her chest, then went into a coughing fit.

The station wagon drove down the street, past the darkened stores and empty side streets.

Daryl braked slowly for an upcoming red light, so no more of the whiskey would slosh out on her. "Maybe she should hold it herself."

"Do you want to hold it yourself?"

"Do you want me to?"

"No."

"Then I don't either." Her voice was strained from the coughing. She put her head back in position again. "Whew!"

Sam poured it in a thinner stream, a secret little smile on his face. She had more time to quickly swallow, Sam jerking the bottle back upright each gulp so only a little of the liquor splashed over her lips and chin. Finally he adjusted the stream to such a thinness he could keep the bottle tilted continuously. "Drink," he crooned.

Daryl turned left towards Seward Highway. As they approached the entrance the area got brighter. "Aren't you giving her an awful lot?" He looked out the side windows and in the rearview mirror for cops.

"Sally likes it. Don't you, Sally?" He tilted the bottle up again so she could speak. About a third of it was gone.

She grinned slowly, eyes dull. "My lips feel numb. It feels like I ate all these onions." She rocked her head on the top of the car seat, then tracked where Sam was. "You don't have to get me drunk, you know. I'd let you fuck me regardless."

Sam's middle finger stroked the tip of her nose, making it wrinkle. "This isn't to let me fuck you. This is to make you do something else."

Daryl glanced over at them.

"Whattaya want me to do, Sam?"

"First I want you to take these." He uncurled his left hand, showing, against his fingers' ridges, anonymous white pills.

She giggled, pushing her chin down so the flesh across her throat buckled. "Those aren't aspirin, I'll bet."

Sam giggled back. "They sure aren't."

Daryl switched lanes. "What are they?"

"Do you want to know what they are, Sally?"

"I don't care." She swung her face towards Daryl, eyes blinking at a slow rate. "If he - Sam - wants me to take 'em—"

“Seriously, what are they?”

Sam shrugged. “They’re pills. That’s all.”

Sally shrugged clumsily at Daryl, sliding down a bit on the car seat. Her voice was loud, indistinct. “They’re pills. That’s all.”

“If Sally doesn’t want to take them, Daryl, I’m sure she won’t.”

“If I don’t want to take the pills, then, Daryl my dear, I won’t take the pills. Got it?”

“Would you like these pills?”

“Sure. Sounds good.” She grabbed Sam’s forearm suddenly, stopping his hand. Her words came out with more concentration. “This won’t stop me from having babies, though, right? Sure?”

“These pills don’t affect your uterus. They only affect your mind, and your reaction time.”

“They’ll make me a little clumsy.”

“Right.”

“Okay. Give me the pills.” She rolled her head back, breathing through her nose, spreading her jaws to show the pale pink bowl of her mouth, tongue lolling out like a wide, wet stamen.

Sam dropped the pills one by one, aiming at the tongue’s middle line, watching as each one bounced off the taste buds, eight in all. Once they had all landed, with one dry swallow they tumbled to the tapering rear and sank down the gullet.

Sally righted her head. “One got stuck.” Her fingers fumbled around the whiskey pint Sam handed her. She chugalugged then rested the half-full bottle in her lap. “Dizzy.” The station wagon shuddered over a pothole. Sally lurched left and right on the seat. Sam took the bottle out of her lax fingers.

“I’m glad you took them when you did, because we’re almost there.”

Daryl glanced over, seeing the flat darkness of Glacier Bay passing in the side window beyond Sam’s face, then turned further to check on Sally. “Where?”

Sam pointed at Daryl’s side window.

“There.”

Across the highway, beyond the yellow breakdown lane, the land rose straight up into the starry sky, pines growing sideways out of the slope, the mountain’s rim dark as the night. Melted ice rushed down its slope in a brook worn into the mountain’s side, the brook spilling over outcroppings forty feet above the ground, widening into a waterfall that splashed endlessly into a deep, wide pool of its own creation in a rock

hollow at the mountain's base. Surrounding the pool was rough green grass; surrounding the ring of grass was a black dirt clearing rutted with tire tracks.

No cars were coming from the opposite lane this late at night. Daryl swung the station wagon in a curve across the double yellow line, bumping off the pavement down onto the dirt.

Sally's head bounced atop her shoulders as he rode over the ruts to the grassy edge of the wide, deep pool.

Daryl put his thumb and index finger around the head of the ignition key, glancing at Sam.

"No. Back it up to the edge of the highway, then turn it off."

Daryl pushed the stick sideways and back into reverse, turning around in his seat to aim the rectangular back window at the road they jerked towards, pool receding in the front windshield.

He brought the wagon alongside the highway a yard from its pavement, turned the engine off.

Sally got out on Sam's side, helped by him.

He let go of her elbow once she was away from the wagon, swaying and uncertain.

Sam looked down the direction they had been headed. The road ribboned around the base of another part of the range, disappearing in a curve of night silence.

He stepped in front of Sally. Her chin jerked up in a drowsy imitation of her usual liveliness. He watched her sway for a moment, eyes glittering. "How are you feeling?"

Her hair was blown across her face. She tried to raise her hands up, but couldn't get them higher than her waist. "Real slow."

"Good." Sam studied her for another moment as she kept trying to raise her hands. Daryl circled around to see both their faces, his own growing worried.

"Can I do anything I want to you?"

"Huh?"

"Huh? I said, can I do anything I want to you."

"Sure."

Sam gave Sally an open-handed crack across one side of her face, then the other.

She staggered sideways with a heavy shuffle, first left, then right.

His big palms cracked left, right across her hair-hidden face a second time.

Her legs buckled, she dropped to her knees.

Daryl jumped between them.

Sam raised his eyebrows at Daryl, a grin on his face. "You heard her."

"She's drugged."

Sam looked down. Through her tangle of black hair Sally's nose and lips protruded. Her lips were moving, muttering. "She's conscious."

Daryl pushed at Sam's biceps. "It's over. You hitchhiked up, you can hitchhike down. Sally and I are leaving by ourselves."

Sam spread his hands to show there weren't any weapons in them. "Why, Daryl? You know why you came up here. Why she came up here. Why I came up here."

Daryl went down on his haunches behind Sally's head, carefully combing her hair away to see her face, like gingerly lifting a bandage to see underneath. "We came up here for sex. You're demoralizing her. Destroying her." Her face revealed, it looked remarkably normal. Redness across the cheekbones where she had been slapped, but nothing else. She opened her black eyes, pupils swaying in their stare.

Daryl held her limp hand. "We're going now."

"Do you want to go, Sally? What do you want to do?"

Her lips split in a toothy, satisfied smile. "I want Sam to keep doing things." She swung her dilated eyes to Daryl's, so close to his they blocked the world, two side-by-side pupils floating in happiness. "Yeah."

Daryl felt a coldness crawl up towards his shoulders. "You don't understand. This isn't sex or love or passion. It's methodical."

Sally listened in three-quarters profile; hair mussed, face sensual, still toothily grinning. When Daryl stopped talking she brought her plump lips together, eyes glittering wickedly. "Daryl," she explained hoarsely, "I want methodical."

"Because you think I want it?"

"No longer. Not even any longer because Sam wants it. Sam just taught me how to want it for myself." She glanced up submissively at Sam standing over her. "And all. It entails."

Daryl lowered his eyes away from hers towards the ground, watching his tears asterisk the dirt.

Sam grabbed Sally around the elbows and hauled her to her feet. She stumbled sideways, but stepped her feet around on the ground quickly enough to stay upright. She grinned at Sam, swinging her arms at her sides. "What's next on the agenda?"

“Strip.”

She lowered her chin, guiding her hands to the hem of her tee shirt, taking a balancing step back.

Sam winked at Daryl. “This is the one you’ll remember tomorrow. And every other time you see her or think about her for the rest of your life.” He opened the station wagon door, leaning into it across the seat.

Sally sat in the dirt, long legs in front of her, childishly trying to get her pulled down jeans over her sneakers.

Sam came back with her purse, flipped it open and pulled out wallet, Kleenex, bankbook. He found what he wanted and dropped the brush on the dirt beside her now naked body. “Brush your hair.” He rummaged some more and dropped mirror, mascara and lipstick. “Fix your face. I want you to look as beautiful as you are.”

She groped through the dirt for her makeup. “Honest? You think I’m beautiful? No fooling?”

Sam scanned both vanishing points of the dark highway. “Right now there’s a little over three thousand beautiful women in the world, truly beautiful women, but that’s out of a population of four billion. There’s only one beautiful woman currently in Alaska. You. Before you make your face up, wash in the waterfall pool. Get your body completely clean.” He tossed her a square of soap from their motel room. “Wait a minute, toss that back to me.” When Sally did, Sam unwrapped the bar, snapped it in half. He looked at both broken edges, and then tossed the two pieces back to her.

Both men watched her walk away from them until her nude body melted completely into the night.

Daryl rubbed the back of his neck. “Some nut could be out there, she could get raped.”

“None is, she won’t.”

“That water must be ice cold.”

“I want her sober.”

“With pneumonia?”

Sam made a face, pulled some white towels out of his duffel bag. “You can dry her off before she applies her makeup.”

Daryl read the borders of the towels. He laughed for the first time in hours. “You stole our motel towels?”

“They expect you to. It’s figured in with the room rate.”

“Bullshit it is.”

Sam shot him a disgusted look.

Daryl bobbed his head. "I suppose it is a stupid thing to argue about right now."

Off beyond their visibility they could hear water splashing, and Sally singing. After a refrain Daryl recognized the song: "Obla De, Obla Da", by the Beatles. "What was that all about, breaking the soap in half before giving it back to her?"

Sam lit a cigarette, prompting Daryl to pat his front pocket. "Every time I stay in a motel or hotel I carefully open the little packages of soap they give you, then run the bars under warm water to soften them. Once they're pliable, I work double-edged razor blades into them and lick the edges of the bar so you'd never guess the bar had been tampered with. A little dab of glue on the wrapper's seam, and the packages are left neatly stacked for the room's next occupant."

Daryl backed away, unlit cigarette between his lips falling out. "Are you serious?"

"I left one undone tonight for Sally, but thought I'd better check to make sure I tossed the right bar in my bag. Otherwise she might accidentally lacerate her legs, or slice her nipples off."

"That's crazy," Daryl sputtered. "What—how—no one's ever put two and two together and looked up who stayed in the room last?"

"I always travel under an assumed name." He studied Daryl's face. "Always." He looked off in the direction of the pool, where the splashing and singing had stopped. "Did you rent the room tonight in your real name?"

"Of course. Oh."

"Let's hope they don't put two and two together this time, Daryl."

Sally came running out of the night, hugging herself and shivering.

Daryl stepped up with the largest towel.

"Thanks." She rubbed it over her body, teeth chattering. Once her body was dry she wrapped the towel around her long hair, squeezing, squeezing.

When she was through she handed the towel back, looking athletic and sober. Her face seemed larger with her hair still partially wet, her eyes even more alive. Sam was right. She was that rare creature, a truly beautiful woman.

"Now what? Oh, right. Makeup. Daryl, could you turn the headlights on, please?"

She squatted at the front of the station wagon aborigine-style, dabbing colors on her face, the slanted mirror in her hand reflecting eyes first, then lips.

When she was satisfied she left the makeup on the hood, standing to brush her hair out between the two headlights.

Daryl spoke to Sam in a whisper. "What happens now?"

"Now? An ordinary guy." Sam walked over into the twin beams, turning Sally around, the tips of her black hair phosphorescent in the two electric lights. "Ready?"

She spread her palms away from her hips, inviting his eyes. "Willing and able."

"Good. Get up on top of the station wagon."

"Get up on top of it?"

"On its roof."

She arched an eyebrow prettily. "Okay." She took a step back to look at the wagon's front hood. Daryl could tell she was trying to figure out the most graceful way to get on it. Finally she lifted her right foot, placing it on the bumper and wrapping her toes over the bumper's top, and hoisted herself up with a tightroper's sudden spread of arms. She staggered forward quickly up the hood, cleng, cleng, cleng, makeup kit sliding off from the vibration. At the windshield she paused again, giggling, arms still out sideways, then took a giant step across the curved glass so she had her right foot on the roof, left foot still on the hood. She lowered her body closer to the windshield, then with a push off the hood pulled her left foot up.

The momentum tripped her forward a few hollow-sounding steps.

"Okay, I'm up here." She looked down at her bare feet. "The metal's sinking under me slightly."

"Lay on your back."

Daryl looked over at Sam's raised profile.

"Like this?" She raised her head off the roof to see Sam.

"Now spread your legs as far apart as they'll go. Now raise your knees up some. I want it so anyone traveling down the highway from that direction, the first thing they'll see is this girl on top of a car laying on her back with her legs spread apart, showing them her cunt."

"Got it. Now what?"

"Now we wait."

The moon came out.

A set of headlights appeared in the spiraled distance, pointing left and right around the curves at the base of the mountain range, towards where Sally waited with her legs spread open.

The last fifty yards to Sally was a straight stretch. Daryl watched the lights grow and brighten.

At what point would they first see her? At what point would they believe what they were seeing?

Sam pulled Daryl backwards into the shadows.

Sally was on her own.

The headlights grew so large they started to join. The tumble of boulders at the edge of the clearing lit up, then the black dirt of the clearing, Sally on the station wagon, the waterfall pool, the boulders at the other edge.

The car sped past without changing its speed, its headlights swinging above the waters of Glacier Bay as it went into the highway's next curve, away from them, the sudden screech of brakes making both Daryl and Sally twitch.

The car came to a stop in the middle of the curve, a hundred yards away. The bright red taillights lost some of their brilliance as whoever was driving took their foot off the brakes. Nothing more happened.

Sally stood up on the roof, turned around, and lay down with her opened legs facing the car in its new position.

A white light for backing up appeared under each red tail light. With the growl peculiar to driving any great distance in reverse, the car started snaking backwards towards Sally.

When it finally reached Sally it paused a moment alongside the station wagon, but on the wrong, farther side of the highway, then drove backwards into the clearing, about twenty feet away.

Sally stood again, turned around again to face the car's new position, but this time stayed standing on the roof, arms at her sides. In the bright moon beams Daryl could see her lipstick.

Engine still running, the driver's side of the stopped car opened a crack. A switched-on flashlight emerged through the opening, shining up at the sky, the aim lowering, once it was all the way out, to Sally's face.

She squinted and blinked, but didn't turn away.

The light played over her large breasts, narrow waist, pubic hair, and legs. It even went down to her feet, checking to see if she had shoes on. When it rose again, it stayed on her left shoulder, so she wasn't blinded.

A man's voice called out from behind the light. "Are you okay?" It sounded like an older voice.

Sally stood up on tiptoe. "I'm fine." She avoided looking where Sam and Daryl were hiding. Instead, she smiled at where, behind the cone of light, she figured its wielder must be.

The circle of light glowed over her breasts again, her navel, her pubis, back up to her breasts. "Why are you naked?"

Sally lifted her arms slightly away from her sides; let her hands fall with a carefree slap against her bare hips. "I just feel like it." She raised one arm to point to the sky, the light moving to watch her breast rise with her gesture. "There's a full moon tonight, I guess I decided to do something kinda crazy for once."

"I'll say. Aren't you afraid of being raped?"

"No. Why, are you going to rape me?"

The voice sounded embarrassed for bringing the subject up. "No, I'm not going to rape you, but I mean, someone else might, you know."

Sally tilted her head to one side, looking up at the full moon. "You wouldn't have to."

That brought a long silence. Finally, the man spoke again, his voice slightly tense. "What do you mean?"

Sally bowed her head to watch the light move more freely over her body, illuminating breasts, legs, and hips. She turned slowly around, the bright circle sliding over her hip onto her ass. Over her shoulder she watched it play back and forth from cheek to cheek. Over her shoulder she made a pout. "You like my ass?"

The voice was embarrassed, husky. "Yeah."

She faced forward again and walked daintily to the front of the roof, breasts bobbing, raising her arms sideways as she skied down the windshield. When she reached the edge of the hood the light went down to the black dirt, so she could pick out a safe place to jump.

When she landed she grinned at the light in triumph. "All right! Want to come closer?" She leaned back against the front of the station wagon, resting the heel of one foot on the license plate, her lipstick case rolling off the hood.

The light wobbled, then rose up a few feet. It moved forward as a car door shut.

The man's voice sounded nervous. "What did you mean about not having to rape you?"

"What I meant," she said as the light started circling around to the side of the wagon, pointing under it and through the windows, "is that I

decided today that I was going to give myself to someone I had never met before in my life and probably never will again. Just for the hell of it."

The light circled around the rear of the wagon. "You're crazy."

"Probably."

The voice laughed, coming around the other side, heading towards Sally again. "You ever do anything like this before?"

"No. I probably won't again, either. This is a one-time thing. You?"

"Hell, no." The light stood in front of Sally, about five feet away. When it lowered to look again at her body, she could see by his silhouette that the man behind the light was tall and husky.

She glanced up at the night sky again. "The moon's bright enough to where you probably don't need that flashlight."

"Sorry." It clicked off. In the resultant gloom both sets of eyes waited to adjust.

"Are you married?"

"Me? No. Once, long ago. She left me."

"Sorry."

"It was long ago. I was a kid."

"How old are you now?"

He hesitated. "Forty-eight. Is that gonna make a difference?"

"No. Come closer."

He came shyly into her view, looking apologetic. Tall, like she thought, husky but pot-bellied, with a plain, large-nosed face and pale blue eyes. His hair was short on the sides, bald on top.

He shrugged self-consciously. "Here I am." He rubbed his knuckles together, avoiding her eyes. "I'm sorry I kept shining that light over you, it's just...you have a beautiful body. I didn't mean anything by it."

"You can look at my body all you want."

He shuffled some, looking unhappy. His shoulders moved as he tried to phrase it right. "I'd love to look at your body. I'd love to do more than just look at it if you know what I mean, but I don't get why a young, beautiful girl like yourself would be doing this in the first place, or be willing to do it..."

"With you?"

"Well, yeah." He looked upset. "I mean come on..." He gestured at himself. "I never had anyone like you in my life, even when I was young. I never even paid for anyone who looks as good as you." He

snorted. "Now I get you for free, willing and able, just because I was drivin' by?"

Sally pushed off from the wagon's front. Her lips shrugged down. "All that doesn't matter. Do you want me?"

He backed up a step, nervous. "Yeah. Anyone would want you."

"Do you?"

"Yeah."

"Say it."

"I want you."

"Say it again."

"I want you."

"Whattaya wanna do to me?" She slid her hands up his chest, watching the alarm and desire grow.

He took a deep breath, hands fumbling around her waist, clamping her against him. His voice was shaking. "I want to fuck you. I want to bend you back over that car and fuck you." He lowered his mouth on hers clumsily. Sally kissed back, feeling his hands on her ass, his tongue wagging past her teeth.

They stayed standing and making out for a long time, Sally letting him put his hands anywhere he wanted.

After the initial passion his hands slowed, becoming gentler. She stopped saying "ouch" and started, very gradually, saying "oh".

They remained standing in each other's arms, she naked, he fully clothed, faces so close they breathed each other's breath as he rolled both nipples back and forth in his fingers. She kissed him under his jaw. "They tingle when you do that."

"I can't believe you're letting me do this." He reverently stroked the swelled side of one breast. His eyes were wet. He gave a sloppy grin. "I—even when I was young, I never—not with someone who looked like you."

She reached her hand down past his potbelly, slid it between his legs, feeling his spine stiffen. His cock was long, but soft. She glanced up around his jaw at him, smiling. "How long's it been since...you know."

He looked abashed. His eyebrows rose, giving his big-nosed face an even more vulnerable appearance. "It's been....years. I've lived alone for a long time. My life's mostly television now. I watch too much TV." He looked down timidly into her eyes. "I'm really enjoying this. I know, it doesn't seem that way physically, but I'm just

really shy after all this time. To be damn honest with you, I feel a little scared of you.” He overlaughed. “You’re out of my league.”

Sally gave a little smirk. “Out of your league, and—” she pulled his zipper down “—in your pants.” Her fingers fumbled through the slot of his shorts onto his cock and balls. He drew in breath, grasped her shoulders.

After a while it was clear to both of them he wasn’t going to get hard that way. In fact, he had shrunk some. She tut-tutted his anguished apologies while she got him out of his clothes.

Naked, he stood just over six feet with broad but sloping shoulders, thick, soft-looking upper arms, and a potbelly that probably prevented him from seeing his own cock. His legs were long and strong looking though, and his ass seemed small compared to his gut.

Sally got down on her knees in front of him, lifted his cock with her hand, and put it in her mouth. It felt warm and soft between her lips. She started moving her tongue over it, tasting its silky texture. Her hand went between his thighs, fingertips lightly flicking the backs of his balls. After a long time, his hands settled on the crown of her head, and she had some more length to move her lips down. When she felt the sides of his cock finally get rigid, she moved both hands up onto his ass, cupping the fat of his cheeks, and started rubbing her breasts across the fronts of his strong thighs.

When at last he brought her to her feet, his cock was standing straight up. He didn’t look shy any more. She lay her back on the hood of the station wagon, spreading her legs for him, feeling more aroused than she had intended.

He didn’t tease her with it; he didn’t have a fancy way of starting. He simply walked up to her, slanted his cock in one hand to aim it, made sure he had it at the right hole, and slid it forward and up.

She let out a reflexive moan, legs lifting and wrapping around his waist. She adjusted their position by sliding down a little on the hood, getting her cunt past his stomach so it was directly under the straight in and out slides of his cock.

Daryl crouched in the shadows with Sam. At first he watched only their faces, the man’s homely profile bobbing in mid-air, Sally’s finely drawn features sliding up and back on the hood. But then the betraying sounds of moisture drew his eyes reluctantly down past the curves of wobbling breasts and crowding pot belly, to the man’s pale hips slapping against the undersides of Sally’s thighs, building up speed and confidence. Her legs seemed heavier in their spread open

position, the hairy ass clenching within the slackness of her thighs wider, fat fucking fat. As Daryl watched in disgust, Sally's closed-eyed face began inevitably succumbing, pump-by-pump, to the growing authority of the thrusts. Her ass, softer and plumper than he remembered it, lifted awkwardly off the hood, questing with its cunt for the best angle to get fucked from. Her hands appeared under her lifted ass, fingers sinking into her cheeks to hold her cunt up in its spread of black hair right under the greased cock. Breathing through her mouth, she switched all the support of her lower back to one hand, slipping her right hand between her legs, starting to masturbate.

Both of them closed their eyes, faces turned away from each other, talking privately between their legs, cock to cunt, cunt to cock.

The moist sound between Sally's legs grew louder, and Daryl knew with a shriveling of his own balls that this middle-aged, overweight man now owned this young, beautiful woman. The wide ass flexed more comfortably in its cradle of thigh, ass and thighs sharing the same shameful enjoyment of his victory and her defeat.

Sally's lips trembled as she felt, deep within, the birth of possibility. She took her fingers off the slickness of her clitoris before the birth bloomed to likelihood. Her legs tilted farther back as the man started dropping his crotch against hers, forcing his cock even deeper inside. Her hands ran over his large stomach, caressing its size, admiring the weight that propelled him so heavily into her.

Daryl watched limp-dicked as Sally's face squeezed closed in greedy concentration, as she started letting out thankful little grunts he immediately recognized. He saw the truth. It wasn't just himself that could make her come, it wasn't just Sam. Any man who got the chance to fuck her could make her come.

He felt a rise of nausea as the grunts grew louder, more tortured, until she was all breath and begging. And then it happened. The stomach twisting moment, the sudden suspension of time with her body nearly upside-down, suddenly motionless, her shoulders braced in the moonlight against the hood while everyone waited, the horrible resumption of time as her hips finally jerked, frantically stabbing her cunt with his cock, celebrating each spasm.

Sam turned to Daryl, speaking in a whisper. "So you see, Daryl, the real reason for our stop here wasn't to demoralize Sally."

\* \* \* \* \*

After they dropped Sam off, Sally took the wheel. She chose the long way around Little Muncho, driving about ten miles an hour, lost in thought. It was after four in the morning, the sky and lake both dark.

Daryl lit a cigarette, looking at her through the spreading grey smoke. Despite everything, because of everything, he found her more desirable than ever. "A lot happened tonight."

She raised her eyebrows, grinned at the empty road in front of her. "Yeah." Her hands clenched at the wheel.

He wanted to touch her, put a hand on her shoulder or hair to see how she reacted, but was afraid. "Feels a little funny being alone together now. After all that's happened."

She took her stare off the road long enough to meet his deliberately mild eyes. "Funny?" How?"

"Well, I mean you fucked Sam, and then you fucked that other guy..."

"So?"

"So, I mean—"

"We agreed to it. You're the one who wanted it."

"Well, with Sam I agreed to it, I mean that you would get fucked by him, but this other guy, I didn't know that was going to happen."

"Me neither."

"But—I mean, I guess we really didn't have an opportunity to discuss this ahead of time about how we felt about you doing that with this absolute stranger. I want to be honest with you, I guess I could understand how you'd want to with Sam, after all the fantasies we had together, but this other guy, he just came along and you right away let him fuck you."

"You didn't stop me."

"I stepped in when Sam started slapping you."

"Daryl, part of the reason why I agreed to go along with this was our understanding that whatever happened, happened."

"Now it's apparently going to happen some more though, right?"

She pulled into their drive, not saying anything.

"I thought - I admit we never made this clear, but I assumed this was going to be a one time thing."

She gave him a dead-level look as their station wagon wobbled over the gravel to the rear. Up on top of the knoll, the kitchen light in their garage apartment was still on.

"Did you tell that guy your name and telephone number?"

She looked confused. "Did I?"

"After you had your head in his car window for twenty minutes or so, sucking his cock."

She opened the car door, buzzer coming on to indicate the key was still in the ignition, got out, closed the door behind her with a loud slam.

Daryl passed by the front of the station wagon, seeing for the first time the frosting of dried sperm on the hood, then followed her up the stone steps.

Instead of heading to their front door though, she wandered out into their small yard.

"Sally, let's go inside." He gestured at the door.

She walked around with her back to him, looking up at the night sky. "You go inside. I want to get fucked again."

He felt a chill inside him. He walked over to her, grabbed her hand. "What does that mean?"

She pushed him away playfully, laughing. "Silly. You can't figure it out?" She pulled her clothes off, then dropped to her knees on the grass, going back on her haunches so the muscles in her thighs bunched. "Wanna fuck me, Daryl?"

Daryl looked over his shoulders, then took his clothes off. His cock was hard and leaking.

Sally lay on her back, opening her legs and raising her arms.

He got on top of her, sliding his cock in, feeling her legs go around his waist, her arms across his back. She brought her lips to his ear, her voice a knowing whisper. "The 'other guy'. That made you really jealous that I fucked him, didn't it?" She stroked the back of his head.

"Yeah."

"Don't pump, Daryl. I'll do the pumping. See? See how slow I can pump? I'll make it last a real long time for you, just like you always did for me, all those nights in the darkness." She smiled slyly to herself, and then pulled his ear against her lips again. "Want me to tell you how it felt to fuck him?"

"No." He rose an inch away from her, but her arms and legs yanked him back against her warm, slowly moving body. "When I leaned into the car, you're right, I did suck his cock. He put his cock everywhere, Daryl. Your cock is coated with his sperm now, and if you put your tongue in my mouth you can taste his sperm like I can."

She smiled around his passionate tonguing. When he finally removed his tongue, she started her slow pumping again, continued her

sly whispering, and when she did finally let him come it was more than an orgasm. It was an agreement.

Sunday morning Daryl rolled over, eyes still closed, luxuriating in laziness. His eyelids suddenly popped open. All of last night poured into his mind. He blinked so fast taking it in he almost spluttered, then twisted around on the sheet to see if Sally were there.

She lay on her back, one forearm over her eyes, still asleep. Across her breasts and over her thighs were three sets of finger-sized bruises. Daryl raised her limp leg and pressed his mouth against her cunt, licking into her. As her fingers settled on the crown of his head the telephone rang.

She jerked awake with a mutter that cut off as all of last night came sliding into her mind. Her head rose quickly to see who was licking her.

The phone went into a second ring.

"Lemme get it." She swung out of bed, staggering over to the phone. Daryl sat cross-legged on the sheets, hoping it was a wrong number.

Her voice was hoarse. "Hello? Oh." She glanced over at Daryl, then turned partly away from him. "Hi."

Daryl got out of bed, walked around to face her bent head. She glanced up at his questioning look, waiting for a break in the conversation. "Sure, Sam. Anything." She listened a while longer, looking puzzled. "Okay, if...sure. No problem." She hung up. "That was Sam."

Daryl followed her back to the bed.

She picked up her wrinkled pack of cigarettes and pulled one out.

"So what's he want?"

She blew out smoke. "He wants to see me. You can come—I mean come along, but you can't go inside. Inside the pool house."

"What's he going to do?"

She shrugged, looking at her bruises. "He didn't say. But he said I had to do this for the next nine days. We can't make love during that period."

"That goes into next weekend. We can't make love next weekend?"

"That's what he said. You can masturbate if you want to, that's okay, but I can't take part in it. You have to do it alone."

“What about you?”

“He said I wouldn’t need to.” Her smile was conciliatory but happy.

“Did he say anything else?”

“He said the thing with that guy last night was a one time thing, just to mess you up to make you realize how important I am to you, to make you see that we’re both equal, you don’t call the shots. Also, we both have to go on diets. He’s going to give me some literature when I see him. We have to start doing exercises too. Most of them are weight lifting and stretching, but he also wants each of us to locate the muscle in our bodies that lets us cut off a stream of pee, and clench and unclench that muscle for two continuous hours a day.”

“What?”

She counted off on her fingers. “Also, I’m not to cut my hair anymore or wash it, just let it go completely natural, and you’re supposed to get a shorter haircut, flatter on top and without any sideburns. He said to tell you he knows a good barber in Anchorage who’ll be able to do something with your hair. His words, Daryl, not mine.”

Sunday afternoon Daryl and Sally took a drive along the far side of Little Muncho Lake, motoring slowly past the tall twitches of fishing poles, the darting bright colors along the shore of children.

Deep down Sam’s driveway, Daryl killed the engine.

Sally rested her head against the back of her seat, her black tangle of hair making her cheekbones sharper, her eyes larger.

Daryl leaned across the seat, lips bumping into her eye. She rubbed it with her small knuckles. “Sorry. I thought you were going to kiss my forehead.”

They got out of the station wagon on their separate sides. He looked across the top of the wagon, remembering their first visit here, the short black dress, the done-up hair, both hands holding her purse in front of her.

Now she wore slacks and a long-sleeved shirt. A must, she explained, quoting Sam.

“I don’t know how long I’ll be. Probably hours.”

Daryl nodded. “I should have brought a book.” He patted his front pants pockets, palms feeling a full rectangle of Winstons in each. The glass entrance to the poolhouse was quiet in the sunshine. He could hear the buzzings of the bees as they lifted and lowered among the pink flowers of the flanking Indian Hawthorne. “Is he even here?”

She stood feeling her hipbones with her fingers. "I saw him in one of the windows." She pointed with her forehead at a now empty reflection of sunlight, looking tense and gorgeous. "You're going to wait in the car, huh?"

"I don't mind waiting here. Do you mind me waiting here?"

"Of course not." She took a step towards the poolhouse, self-consciously hooking her fingers through the sides of her hair, drawing the tangles back to frame her face.

Daryl came around the front of the wagon, banging his knee on the chrome bumper, limping towards a last kiss.

She raised her elbows in the air, palms down, waiting for him. "Is this a mouth kiss or a forehead kiss? So I'll know how to position my head." She smiled good-naturedly, forearms still out. "I don't want to smear my mascara."

Out of the tan convergence of cigarette butts in the wagon's pullout ashtray, a tendril of smoke rose.

Daryl poked around gingerly through the small cylinders, feeling tiny nips of fire against the tip of his index finger. He tried pushing the most recent butts farther into the ashtray, compacting the contents, getting his fingers dusty with black ash. The burning smell grew.

Swinging his driver's door open, he dislocated the ashtray from its runners, feeling its radiant heat, and carried it like a small metal jaw past the front of the wagon, walking up to the tall row of hedges alongside the driveway, disappearing into them.

The other side of the hedges was danker, darker. Holding the jaw upside down he agitated it, butts falling. When it was empty he switched it to his left hand, unzipped his pants, ashtray lolling against the front of his slacks as he pulled his snailish cock out and peed on the scatter of cigarette butts.

A black cricket, large and leggy, ran over the tops of both shoes. The downward curve of urine looped in reaction.

Coming through the hedges again, Daryl heard noises.

A sob, a slap.

He hesitated in front of the station wagon, pants zipped, listening.

Bird songs, insect sounds.

He blinked, walking down the driveway on its clovered edge, avoiding the gravel, towards the poolhouse. When he reached it he continued down the side, the brick corner at the back moving to the left as more and more of the rear lawn came into view.

They were both naked in the garden by the back door. Sam had her trapped against the brick wall, elbows in a straight line with his shoulders, giving her quick, stinging slaps. She cowered against the brick, forearms over her teary face, feet lifting with each sharp blow.

Sam turned around.

Looked across the distance straight at Daryl.

His grin faded.

Sally keep cowering and crying against the wall, eyes shut, head twitching in anticipation of the next punch.

Sam grabbed her shoulder and force-walked her back into the house. The door slammed.

Daryl went around the front, each crunch on the gravel louder and angrier.

He rang the doorbell, pounded the heel of his hand on the frame.

Sam opened the door a crack, hard and hairy between his legs.

Daryl felt like the desk clerk at the motel. "Let me in."

Sam kept the entrance blocked, moving his jaw over his shoulder to talk into the dim room. "You want to leave?"

It was her voice, weak, frightened, resolute. "No."

The triumph in Sam's eyes. He swung his jaw over his shoulder again. "Sure?"

"Sure."

Sam slammed the door in Daryl's face.

Behind the door three slaps landed. Sally sobbed after each one, hopelessly.

Daryl raised his fist to knock again.

Bunched his knuckles together.

Bunched them even tighter.

Lowered his hand, went back to the car.

She came out around six, alone.

He helped her into her side of the car like she had just been released from a hospital.

Sliding in on his side, he looked warily over at her.

Her eyes were sunken, her mascara two webs down her cheeks. She gave him a tired smile. "Hi."

"What'd he do?"

"I can't say."

He looked through the windshield. "Did he fuck you?"

"A little bit. Just enough. Can we go? Please?"

He started the car. "You're not going back, are you?"

She looked surprised.

During the week, they went over each night right after work, without eating first. Daryl would wait in the car, smoking his cigarettes and staring down the long driveway, wondering where it went. He never drove down to find out. He never remembered to bring a book.

Sometimes she got out around ten, often later. Once she didn't return until after 11:30. He'd wait patiently in the car, remembering all the other times he had waited for women outside restrooms and classrooms and restaurants and apartments. Each time she'd get quietly in the car on the passenger side and not talk or move until they were almost home, when she'd light a cigarette.

One night, fixing their dinner for them after midnight while she sat at the kitchen table smoking and being silent, he asked her what the significance of nine was. "I mean, why not eight days, or ten?"

She shook her full-lipped face, dark exhaustion around her eyes. "I don't know."

After she picked at her dinner each night for a while, cigarette still going in the ashtray, she'd withdraw to the bathroom, door shut, to shower. She'd come out fully covered in buttoned-up pajamas, a reminder to him they weren't to have sex until the conclusion of this nine-day period. When he'd go into the bathroom afterwards to pick up the damp towels, there'd always be the same wrench of seeing the shower curtain spread out over the floor, toilet and sink, the habit she had started again to prevent monsters from creeping up on her while she showered.

He tried getting her into the conversations they had always enjoyed in the past, about movies or music or their separate pasts or shared future, but her interest and voice would flag.

She was changing. She was becoming more beautiful, more intelligent when she did speak, more womanly. Sometimes, maybe to avoid conversation while he fixed their dinner, she'd doodle. She had before, loops that inevitably converged on each other, but now he'd flip through the four pages of the local paper while she touched her food with her fork, and find in the unused spaces in bait and apartment ads meticulously drawn pencil sketches of opened flowers.

But her spirit was changing also. She seemed happier, more quietly happy was the best way to put it, but the old Sally, tomboyish in talk, feminine in gestures, the Sally who determinedly yanked with her teeth at the triangular tip of a pizza slice, whose secret touch he

sometimes felt on his back as they fell asleep, checking in the darkness to make sure he was there, who wore his glasses once pretending to be him, flirting with the opportunity to poke fun at him—was gone.

He remembered in medical school reading the account of a felon during a prison riot who had methodically battered the back of a guard's skull against an iron stairwell support, remembered the man's description of how with each slam against the support he could feel the solidity of the guard's skull give a little more, until finally there was absolutely no resistance, and the next slam brought a softness that sunk the side of the guard's head around the rail.

And that's what Daryl felt now looking into her eyes whenever she'd meet his look anymore, seeing the spirit in the eyes more battered each evening, more fissures in it, more grey oozing through, until the one night she got in the car and looked over at him and it was gone absolutely, irretrievably, and he was sitting in the car with a new Sally.

It happened on the ninth night.

When they got back to their garage apartment that Monday night it was after one in the morning. The day outside was mostly gone, just one gash of pearly light left, incredibly high in the sky.

Once the door was shut and locked behind them she went into his arms, her kisses soft and probing, her hands light, knowing. Surprised at her new adeptness, Daryl felt his flesh immediately respond to her touches.

She left his arms to stand in front of him, black-haired, gorgeous, smirking. "Hungry as I am?"

"Food or sex?"

"We're supposed to be on diets, remember? Sex." She held him off with a raised hand. "I'm going into the shadows, and stripping. Then I'll come to you. You strip too, here."

She backed into the dimness of the room. Daryl could see only the outline of her as her hands moved around her body, shedding her clothes.

As he pulled his underwear off his cock Sally advanced slowly towards him, her body taking shape as more light touched it.

Daryl ran his hand over his much shorter hair, cut the way Sam wanted it. He licked his lips.

Like passing through a wall, Sally emerged into the light. Her face, hands and feet were as pale as ever. The rest of her body, arms, legs, torso and breasts, were black.

Daryl backed up with a frightened sob. "What did he do to you?"

She twirled slowly around, showing her black back, black ass. “Look closer.”

He tentatively approached her, staring at the tops of her breasts, lowering his earnest face to examine the skin more carefully, suddenly raising his face to her eyes in horror. “These are bruises.”

She arched an eyebrow.

He started crying, he couldn’t help it. “He did this to you, you let him bruise every fucking inch of your body like this?”

She fought back with a crumpled smile. “Yes. He wanted to. He said it was to change the texture of my flesh.” She advanced towards him, irritated to see him back up. “Daryl, what’s wrong? It’ll fade. Just like that big bruise he put on my breast at the pool faded.”

He wiped the back of his hand over his eyes. “But that really upset you then, you thought you wouldn’t be able to have babies, and now you let him—what did he do, just keep walking around you, hitting you as hard as he could for nine nights?”

“It wasn’t all that. It was scary at first, and painful, but I think it’s kind of interesting now. Let me get more in the light.”

She trotted prettily into the kitchen, standing under the overhead light. She looked up with a smile to make sure he followed her, and then pointed to a swell above her right breast. “For instance, look at this one here, see? If you look at it—turn your head this way, Daryl—if you look at it from this angle, it looks like the ocean at night, and there’s the night sky over the ocean, meeting it.”

Daryl looked. He looked at her arms, her stomach, between her legs, along her back, inside the crease of her ass. Sam hadn’t missed a single spot. Outside her face, hands and feet, her body was swollen with dead, blood-engorged tissue just beneath the surface, like dark, overlapping tattoos.

She stepped back from his inspection, hands on her hips. “Things are going to be different now, Daryl. We used to be so scared. You used to always fear these creatures that would come to you in the night, I’d always be afraid of what might be creeping up on me while I showered. But that’s all in the past now, forever.” She opened her arms, beckoning him with her blackened body. “There’s no more monsters now.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Sally lay on her back on their kitchen floor, clad only in panties, pumping the barbell with its ten-pound weight on each side up into the air. Her blackened breasts trembled each time her elbows locked.

Daryl watched from his seat at the kitchen table, underpants and glasses on, legs crossed, pencil in his hand. "So we both had Slim Fast today for lunch, that's 210 calories."

Sally grimaced with the effort to raise the barbell up a final time. "Right."

"Then we had one drink each when we first got home, water instead of mixer, that's another 135 calories, that's 345 calories."

Sally rolled her head back, eyes watching as her arms lopsidedly brought the barbell down onto the tiles above her spread of hair. Her bruised abdomen sucked in and out rapidly, skin tightening across her rib cage. "I did. Ninety-nine tonight. Couldn't do a hundred."

"Don't overexert yourself. Sam has to understand it's going to take some time to get in perfect shape. Now we're planning on having one more drink tonight, right?"

Sally put her arms straight against her sides, raising her feet several inches off the ground, inside ankles touching. "Where's that put us?"

Daryl's pencil eraser made little loops in the air. "That's 480 calories, our goal is no more than eleven hundred a day, that leaves 620 for dinner. This is like figuring the bills." Daryl smiled down at Sally, whose attention was on keeping her feet off the ground. "Minus 65 calories for one of those diet frozen fudge bars, that's actually 555 for dinner."

"How much is the Tomato Garden Chicken Strips with Spring Vegetables?"

He turned the brightly colored container over, feeling the thawing moisture against his fingertips. "360 calories. That puts us up 195 calories."

Sally stood erect, looking at the floor, then bent her upper body down, laying her palms on the tops of her feet. Daryl could still only touch his feet with his fingertips, and even then he felt the thick pain of overstretched musculature around and behind his kneecap. "Good." She held her right hand straight out like a nazi, lifting her rigid left leg to touch it.

While he watched, Daryl surreptitiously felt his own biceps, then his waistline. A slight roll of fat still bulged above his hipbone. He dieted to the same degree Sally did, but only exercised a half hour or so

each evening. Sally was up to two hours a night now, limbs lifting through the same motions over and over again, eyes firmly fixed forward.

“Sheriff Bob Cable called me today.”

“What’s he want?”

“He has more evidence in the Sylvia Gold case. He wanted to know if I could drop by tonight after dinner.”

“You can’t. Sam wants to see us.”

Daryl started. “He does?”

“Yeah. Now that the nine nights are over, he wants us both to come out to his place. This time you can come inside.” She smiled at him. “He wants to show you something.”

“What something?”

She mopped her arms and stomach with a blue plaid kitchen towel. Her eyes regarded him, superior in her secret information. “Our trick.”

Sam was waiting for them in the poolhouse’s Florida room. He sat in a tall-backed wicker chair wearing a short-sleeved white shirt and canvas pants whose upper-legged creases all pointed inwards towards his crotch.

Sally and Daryl stood by the glass door, Sally up on her toes with a radiant smile, Daryl feeling like a proposed member at an exclusive club.

Looking at Sally, Sam tapped a long index finger across his lips. “Cunt me.”

Sally hurried over, pulling her top off on the way. In front of Sam she got out of her jeans and sneakers. She wasn’t wearing any underwear. She twirled slowly around before him, white head, hands and feet, body still blackened, a little yellow starting to show in the bruises like candlelight.

Sam’s lips split away from his teeth. “You’re getting better. The bones are starting to show under your flesh. That’s the perfect body, the flesh suggesting the bones beneath, hiding them only in a few displays of flesh for the sake of flesh, the thighs, the ass, and the breasts. Daryl, your middle is still unacceptable. It’s thickish.”

Daryl took a helpless step forward. “I’m dieting just as much as she is. Which is dieting even more than she is really because I’m bigger than her to start with.”

“Daryl only had one thousand sixty five calories tonight, Sam.”

“That’s all I ever have. Not just tonight. I’ve been under eleven hundred calories for a week and a half now, ever since Anchorage.” Daryl shut up, hating the pitch of his voice.

Sam grunted. “Must be the exercise then. Concentrate more on the stomach exercises. Remember, sit-ups alone aren’t enough. You’ve got muscles going every which way through your abdomen. You’ve got to exercise them all.”

Daryl blew his lips open with exasperation. “Sam, I know all about the abdominal muscles. I do have a medical degree, remember?”

Sam looked up at the expectant Sally and tapped his finger across his lips again. “Cunt me.” He rolled his head back.

Tenderly, Sally interlaced her hands behind Sam’s neck, and then gently pulled his face over to her cunt. Putting one foot up on the wicker seat to get her legs open, she started softly rubbing her cunt over Sam’s contented smile. Daryl looked up at her face as her rubbings spread in a slow, loving circle over the jaw, the nose, and the long black eyebrows. Her eyes glowed with alert, jealous pride.

When she had finished rubbing all of his face, Sam sank a kiss into her pubic hair. She dropped her foot to the floor, excited. “Now?”

“Now.” Sam rose, went over to a desk covered with airmail envelopes and potted geraniums, and opened a drawer. He strode back over to Sally, holding something behind his back.

From her standing position Sally fell straight down to her knees, closing her eyes with pleasure at the pain of her kneecaps banging onto the floor. She looked up sulkily at Sam, wetting her lips.

Daryl walked over, as much to see well as to assert his presence in the humid room. “Oh, does he ‘cock’ you now?”

Sally giggled, closed her eyes again and silently shook her head.

Sam brought a cellophane bag out from behind his back. Inside were colors. Gum drops.

He stood feet apart in front of Sally. His hand made a noisy entrance into the bag, fingers within the cellophane walking over the different colored gumdrops. “Let’s see, which flavor for my little doggie tonight?”

Sally, closed-eyed, grinned in anticipation.

Sam held one up. He tossed the bag away behind him on the floor. “Lime. Lime tonight for my little doggie.”

She shuddered, blind hands reaching out, grabbing onto the fronts of his trousers, pulling the material forward. She wet her lips again.

“Tilt your head back, doggie.”

Daryl sat down in a side chair, crossing his legs over his hard on.

Still closed-eyed, she tilted her head back as instructed, lips falling apart in a happy smile.

Sam pushed the lime gumdrop onto the small bridge of her nose, mashing its bottom over the bridge to hold it in place. Sally started giggling again, but softly, so the vibrations through the bones of her face wouldn't jiggle the gumdrop off.

Sam took his pants off, knotted the front of his shirt together so it hung well above his belly button. He stepped up to Sally, feet on either side of her ankles so his balls hung heavy directly above her rolled back face.

His oversized cock, its height, its thickness, its rigidity, looked brutal to Daryl now, the wide sac of balls with its slowly moving double bulges beneath the wrinkled skin looking tumorous above the smooth, innocent beauty of her face.

Sam snapped his fingers.

Sally eagerly opened her eyes, crossing them to focus on the gumdrop right in front of them. Daryl's stomach flip-flopped.

She was breathing faster now, excited, focusing all her energy on the gumdrop.

Sam raised his right hand where she could see it in her peripheral vision, touching his thumb to his middle finger.

Her eyes never left the gumdrop. Her smile melted away, lips slackening, pupils starting to vibrate, waiting obediently for the second snap of the fingers.

Sam pressed the pad of his thumb more firmly against the upper pad of his middle finger. Sally whimpered, still staring at the gumdrop, waiting for the second snap.

Sam looked over at Daryl with a cold, hard look.

His thumb pad teasingly rubbed over the pad of his middle finger.

Sally's chin started jerking at the faint rustle of fingerprint against fingerprint. Concentrating so intently on the gumdrop, her eyes started to water.

Sam moved his right hand farther behind her. Her kneeling body swayed backwards to stay near the hand.

He brought the thumb and middle finger right up to her ear, rubbing their pads together.

Her lips parted, saliva trailing from upper teeth to lower, a musical note issuing out of her throat, over and over, plaintive, beseeching.

Sam's hand rose slightly.

The upper pad of his middle finger pressed a concavity into the softness of the thumb.

Sally sobbed.

The pad broke off the thumb.

As it passed the widest curve of the thumb's side, a loud snap barked.

Sally flipped her nose up, lips shaking as the gumdrop fell between them.

She swallowed it straight down, without chewing.

The tears came freely now, relieved, grateful. She babbled her thanks, covering Sam's balls with kisses like they were the face of her rescuer.

Daryl, still sitting, twisted every part of his body away from the center of the room except his eyes. Upside down in his pupils, a hand patted the crown of Sally's head. Her hands formed two seats for Sam's muscular ass, her fat red lips sliding down the tall thickness of his cock.

Sam finally walked backwards off her licking kisses.

He pointed at the sun-washed rug in front of his wicker chair, snapping his fingers. His voice was deep. "Here."

Daryl uncrossed his legs.

Another loud finger snap, another point of the finger straight down at the rug.

Sally, sitting in the center of the room, gave Daryl a steady look. Holding his eyes, she slowly crawled on her hands and knees over to the chair.

Daryl stood, stripped his clothes off his hard-on, and crawled alongside her.

Sam peeled his short-sleeved shirt off and dropped naked into the wicker chair. His eyes stayed on Daryl's as Sally laid straight out on her back, head at Sam's feet, then acrobatically flipped her body up so she was standing on her head. The backs of her legs lowered onto the arms of the chair, the highest point of her body the spread of cunt and asshole under Sam's jaw.

Sam looked down at the spread, then across to Daryl. "The best plate that's ever been laid out for a man." He blew down softly at the

holes, the soft black pubic hair twitching. "I get the cunt, you get the asshole."

Daryl scooted up, his cock rubbing against her upside down spine. He looked down at the spread, and then blew warm breath over it like Sam had.

"While you're licking her Daryl, reach your hands down around her breasts and keep squeezing them. Squeeze them so hard you think it must be painful to her, and then squeeze 'em just a little bit harder. She likes it that way now. Don't you, Sally?"

Daryl looked over the edge of her cunt, the crown of his head touching the crown of Sam's. Way down her blackened body he saw the white jetty of her chin's underside bob as she talked. "Squeeze 'em real hard, Daryl. Real hard."

Sam and Daryl's touching crowns rolled against each other until their foreheads touched, their noses touched. Eyes to eyes.

Daryl's hands reached down around Sally's breasts, both of them feeling funny in his hands hanging towards her chin rather than her waist. He squeezed. He felt Sam's hands on the backs of his, curving his squeeze into a vise.

Sally moaned, her long, upside-down legs going into a grateful bicycle pump.

Daryl kissed Sam, teeth clacking as their tongues rolled warm and wet against each other. Sam grinned as he moved his lips away, talking softly. "Our next kiss will taste like cunt for you, ass for me." He gestured with his sharp eyes down at the spread, blew gently again. "Lucky me."

The two holes, rose and pink, opened and closed imploringly.

Sheriff Bob Cable's face looked shrunken against the wide white pillow, dried mucous from his nostrils to the sides of his lips like adhesive left from a fake moustache.

"I thought you were coming Monday night."

Daryl looked around the hospital room, then chose a chair next to the bed. The bed was so high he was at eye level with Cable. "I couldn't come during the week. You said you found out something about Sylvia Gold?"

Cable nodded weakly. "I got the Anchorage police to pick up her mail at her apartment. Big pile of it. Smart, huh?"

Daryl sat up. "What's it say?"

"I didn't open it. It's in that drawer." Cable rolled his eyes towards his bedside table.

Daryl pulled the drawer all the way out, setting it on his lap. The wooden square was filled with different-colored envelopes and magazines. He started eagerly flipping through it, pulling white corners out from under catalogs. "There's some utility bills, junk mail, notices from banks—here's a personal letter!" His thumb slipped into the end of the flap, burrowing underneath across the back of the envelope. He looked up. Cable's eyes were closed. "Can I open the personal letter?"

Cable nodded.

Daryl unfolded the light blue sheets. "It's to Sylvia. It's in another language. Shit." He shuffled to the last page. "Posso. That's what it looks like." He turned the envelope over. "Posso Ursento, dah-dah dah-dah, Italia. Italy. Is that a man or a woman?"

Cable's bloodless hand came out of the starched sheets. "I'm Italian. I speak it."

Daryl handed him the letter, looked around for no smoking signs while the sheriff's lips moved.

Cable rested his hands on his chest, the letter still in them. "The one who wrote the letter offered his condolences over the death of Sylvia's great-aunt Anna Greenway. Most of the rest of the letter's about men."

Daryl rummaged through the rest of the drawer. No more personal letters. He started looking at the bills. Some of them had yellow forwarding stickers on them for the Anchorage apartment. Those envelopes were addressed to a location in New Orleans.

He held up for Cable's weak eyes to see. "Sylvia must have moved to Anchorage from New Orleans."

Cable coughed, tasted something bad in his mouth. "Looks like it." His eyes went into shallow thought. "What's the paper there?"

"The paper?"

"Newspaper."

Daryl's eyebrows rose. "I don't know."

Cable gestured vaguely at Daryl's side of the room. "Get the phone book, find out the area code for New Orleans. Call information, ask them what their paper is."

The Anchorage phone book was on the floor under the nightstand. Inside was a map of the United States, with area codes for each locality.

New Orleans' was 504. Daryl reached up to the telephone on top of the nightstand and took off the receiver.

With a buzz in his ear he dialed 9. After a moment of silence, the buzz came back. He dialed 1-504-555-1212.

Click and a ring. Second ring. Third ring.

Out of the static from three thousand miles away the line was picked up and a black woman's voice spoke. "Hello?"

Daryl's own voice in contrast sounded unnecessarily loud. "Is this information for New Orleans?"

"Sure is."

"What's the name of your newspaper?"

"Here in New Orleans? Times-Picayune."

Daryl sat in his chair listening to Cable's instructions, then picked the phone up again and dialed.

"Times-Picayune."

"The obituary department, please."

"Hold on."

"Cedrics."

"Hello, I've been out of the country the past year and I just found out that an aunt of mine might have died. Could you tell me if you have an obituary for her?"

"When'd she die?"

"About a year ago, I think."

The voice sighed. "What's her name?"

"Anna Greenway."

"Oh, Anna Greenway. What's your name?"

"Daryl. Daryl Gold."

"Were you close to her?"

Daryl panicked, waving his hand around. "Not really. I hadn't seen her in years."

"She was a nice, lovely lady. Got her name in the paper a lot helping out with charities. Here it is. She died September ninth last year. What else d'you need to know?"

Daryl bit his lip. "You wouldn't have heard of my cousin, would you? Sylvia Gold? She lived out on Lake Pontchartrain."

"Name means nothing to me."

"Okay, thanks. How'd Mrs. Greenway die?"

The man cleared his throat. "She was strangled. Sorry."

Daryl felt goosebumps creep up his spine. He looked over at Cable, who was staring up at the ceiling. "Did they catch whoever did it?"

"I never saw it in the paper if they did."

Cable lay on his back in bed, Daryl holding the receiver to his ear and mouth while dialing the New Orleans police. Cable's voice was faint as he identified himself over the telephone. Halfway through the conversation, evidently in response to a direct question, he explained he was sick, calling from a hospital bed.

When the call was completed Cable moved his head away from the receiver. Daryl hung it up.

Cable rubbed his eyes. "What's a quadroon?"

The question caught Daryl by surprise. "Someone who's one-quarter black."

"Anna Greenway had two houses, one on the lake and one right in the French Quarter. She had been living in the French Quarter house the last six months or so of her life, because she had taken up with a quadroon. She was from an old New Orleans family. The investigating officer said she was wealthy. The house at the lake that the letter went to for Sylvia Gold was Anna Greenway's house. A servant found Greenway in her bed at the French Quarter house. She called the police. She was strangled. She had sperm inside her. They're not sure if she was raped.

"They suspected the quadroon boyfriend, but they never found him. He considers the case closed now, unless something new comes along. He asked a lot of questions about what I was working on. Maybe this boyfriend followed Sylvia Gold up here, maybe Sylvia saw something, and killed her too. Same type of murder."

"What's the boyfriend look like?"

Cable smoothed the sheet over his chest. "Tall, dark, very thin. Had the letter F branded on his right bicep."

"What's that mean?"

"The officer said it's something some of them do in college down there. It's like a fraternity. Stands for 'freedom'. But it's not a cult or anything. They don't see it as connected with the murder. The boyfriend's not in Lodgepole, the town's too small. Maybe he's up in Anchorage. Or maybe he left already. I would."

Outside the hospital it was a cheerful Saturday afternoon, the sun on the lawns, birds singing, a breeze high in the treetops. In their garage apartment Sally would be putting her purple and yellow body

through another set of exercises; over on Lakeview Sam would be doing whatever it was he did before he came over to fuck them.

Two weeks into his diet, Daryl was starting to feel thinner. Plus, after Sam's criticism, and with Sally's coaxing, he had increased the amount of time he spent exercising each day.

He stopped on Alaska Street in front of the drug store, pretending to look at the sun tan lotion display in the window, but actually checking out his body in the bright glass. He did look better. Sally and he fucked longer and harder now at night once the lights were out and the last words said. He didn't squeeze her breasts like he had the day he watched her get her gumdrop. She didn't seem to mind he didn't. Maybe she didn't really like it, only pretended to because she knew Sam wanted her to like it. Or maybe she did really like it, and Daryl was too nice for her new tastes. At the word 'nice' he pictured himself at the motel after having talked Sally into letting her guard down just this once, pictured himself watching from the sidelines while Sam, unopposed, fucked with her mind hour after hour until the destruction was completed and the guard could never be raised again. When was it too late? Those nine nights after the motel? The motel itself? The first time he rubbed her to orgasm telling her to imagine Sam fucking her? Or the first time the three of them met in the coffee shop?

He looked at his short hair in the sunny glass. He was getting used to it, especially with his cheekbones showing more now. He was getting used to everything, even how good it had felt to squeeze her breasts that hard. Tonight, while Sam was there, he'd squeeze her breasts really hard again.

Behind his reflection in the glass was the reflection of town hall.

On a hunch he crossed the street.

There was a tall, thin woman with a beauty parlor hairdo behind the counter in the records department. She looked anywhere from thirty to fifty.

Daryl put his hands on the counter, smiled at her. "Hi. Are you the person I'd see to find out if there's any property in town registered to a certain person?"

She put her right hand up to her right shoulder, looking uncertain. "Yeah."

As an experiment, he dropped his eyes to her breasts for a moment, then raised them to her eyes again. "I'm looking for any property registered to an Anna Greenway."

"Here in town?"

“Right. Here in town.” He looked at her breasts again, looked back up into her eyes. What would she do? Would she turn cold? Or friendly?

She stared at him a long moment, then brought both hands up behind her neck, breasts rising up and out towards him as she massaged her nape.

His felt his cock stiffen. He looked from one breast to the other, slowly, deliberately, then back up into her steady eyes. “Headache?”

“Yeah.”

Unused to flirting, he went through different phrases in his mind, looking down nervously at his hands on the counter. “Sounds like you could use a back rub.” He held his breath.

She chuckled sexily, bringing her hands down, the fingers lightly brushing against the sides of her breasts. “Sure could. I’ve seen you around, haven’t I?” She leaned forward on the counter, making him even taller than her, raising her eyes to his.

He didn’t answer, he just looked back into her eyes. When their mutual staring passed the few seconds when conversation would normally continue, both saw the same permission. You can fuck me.

Daryl looked away, flustered. The woman straightened back up, a rueful smile on her face. “Greenway?”

She reached under the counter, still looking at him, and brought up a big book, opening it, looking down, flipping pages. “She’s not here.”

It suddenly occurred to him. “Wait. I just thought of something. Greenway’s dead, it would be in her niece’s name. Gold.”

“First name?”

“Sylvia.”

Her finger went down the page, up the next. Stopped. “She owns property on Lakeview. 99 Lakeview.”

Where Sam was living.

Daryl pushed the heels of his palms against each other in front of his chest. “The house Sam lives in is Sylvia Gold’s.”

Sally, flat on her back on the black and white tiled kitchen floor, rhythmically lifted her arms and legs through her exercises.

He lit a cigarette, blew the first plume down at the dirty plates. Almost nine. Sam was expected by ten.

Sally finished, resting spread-eagled across the tiles.

He waited until she rolled over, hair in her eyes, groping for the ice water she had placed on the floor. "The house Sam lives in is Sylvia Gold's."

Her eyes glanced up while she gulped. He impatiently watched her wipe her lips with a well-defined forearm. "They used to date."

His knees twitched. "What?"

She rested on her haunches, body aquamarine and yellow. For the moment her figure was perfect with the definition that lasts longer and longer after each regular exercise, until the muscles start slowly relaxing again. "He told me during the nine days."

Daryl's genuine surprise came out as slightly theatrical incredulity. "You didn't think to tell me?"

She chuckled to herself. "Daryl dearest, there was a lot going on those nine days."

He felt a stab of loneliness. "What's with this 'Daryl dearest'? You never used to call me that. It sounds condescending." He watched fearfully as she strolled over, strong hands holding her hair behind her head, rubberbanding it into a ponytail.

She stood in front of him, looking down at his unhappiness, letting go of her ponytail, breasts staying firmly forward even as her hands came all the way down to the top of his head. "Relax, baby." Her fingertips traced the tender curve of cartilage behind each of his ears, getting a tentative smile out of him. "That's my baby. He'll be here in an hour."

His smile faltered. "What about us? We can't have fun without Sam here?"

Sally hesitated, then knelt in front of him, putting a hand on his thigh, angling her face to see up into his downcast face. "Would you want to fool around before he gets here?"

Daryl pulled back. "'Before he gets here?' Why can't you end the sentence, 'Do you want to fool around?' Why do you have to add, 'until he gets here?'" He turned sideways angrily, looking out over the dirty dishes.

"Daryl, I don't know what's bothering you." Still kneeling she let her head shake, mouth open. "I asked if you wanted to fool around. I thought that was what you were suggesting."

Daryl rubbed a hand over his face. "Is this every night now? Sam's going to come over every night?"

She dropped back to her haunches again. "Well yeah." Her eyes turned sharp, anticipating the direction he was going. "We want him to

come over every night. That's what this was all about, remember, Daryl? We agreed to this. You pushed for it."

He got out of the chair, retreating to the sink. There was nothing to do at the sink. He turned his back to it, looking across the floor at her. "We agreed you were going to go to bed with him, yes, but now this has turned into a situation where he's over here every night. We don't have any time to ourselves anymore. We don't talk about our future together, we don't - about where our honeymoon will be, or the house we want to get... where's our savings book right now?"

"You want to know where our passbook is?"

"Yeah. Where is it?"

She sputtered. "I don't—it's here somewhere, I don't see—you don't trust me with it anymore?"

"You don't know where it is though."

"It's here in the apartment somewhere. It's safe." She got to her feet, staring back at him.

"But you don't know exactly where in the apartment it is at this moment."

"At this moment, no." She twisted her face into a look of exasperation. "So what?"

Daryl pointed at her purse. "So it used to always be in there, that's so what. Only now it isn't. We used to look at it at lunch and before dinner—which was a real dinner, not some frozen thing with fucking little carrot cubes—we used to look at it in bed, we used to make love with the lights on and later on make love with the lights out and wake up and make love and look at the savings book but now you don't know where it is, now we take turns sitting on the edge of the bed listening to the mattress creak while the other one gets their turn getting fucked by Sam, we don't talk to each other anymore, or laugh or confide or do our most-interesting-thing-that-happened-to-me-today, because we're too busy exercising to get perfect, and the most interesting thing that happens now is always the same thing, getting fucked by some fifty year old guy." He stopped, leaned against the sink, shook his head, from the lower rim of his right eye one tear shaking loose. "We're dead." He waved his fingers sarcastically in the air. "We're tingly, we're vibrant, we're dead."

Sally, having stood quietly, lifted her head. "Do you know where our passbook is?"

"Sally, that's not the fucking point. The fucking point is—"

She came over to him, put a finger on his lips. "Let's find it. Let's look at it together." She looked around from where she stood in front of him. "I asked because I thought maybe you knew."

"No, I—" he started sheepishly looking around. "It might be on top of the fridge." He walked over, lifting his hands to flip through the small pile of Lodgepole Weeklies stacked on top.

Sally came back into the kitchen, wagging the thin book in her hand.

"Where was it?"

"My side of the bed, near my drink glass." She took his hand. "Let's lay on the bed and look at it."

They walked on their knees across the mattress to their pillows, Daryl feeling awkward at being indulged. "I just don't want us to lose sight of ourselves. We're always going to be here for each other. Sam could take off at any time."

She fixed his pillows for him then lay next to him, putting an arm around his shoulders. "Let's look at it."

Daryl snuggled closer. "Do you want to open it, or should I?"

She pointed to him, then playfully nipped his ear.

He picked the passbook up off his chest, feeling embarrassed at the fuss he had made. "We have to start saving more."

"Our food's costing us less."

"Yeah, that's true." He opened it up, flipping through all the blank pages to the first, which itself was mostly blank, trying to put himself in the same happy mood he always felt when they looked at their savings, hoping she was in that mood too. The balance read thirty thousand, one hundred and forty-one dollars.

He stared stupidly at how far to the left the three and the zero were, then finally noticed on the line above a deposit of thirty thousand from a few days ago.

Still holding the passbook open he turned confusedly to Sally. Her eyes were shining. She nodded up and down with a big grin on her face.

"Where—this can't be right."

She slapped her hand on his chest, not able to contain her enthusiasm anymore. "It's ours! It's all ours, Daryl!" She nodded eagerly at him.

His lips bumped against each other without any words forming. He sat up, checking the balance again, amazed at how two typed

numbers could mean so much. "Where'd we...did your parents die? No, of course. Sam gave it to you."

"Isn't it great?"

"But when...it had to be when you were alone with him, right?" He felt his anger rise. "That was what he did to keep his conscience clean after he beat you with his fists night after night? He wrote you a check at the end of it?"

"No, no. Sam doesn't have a conscience. That first night he asked me what I wanted most out of life. I told him I wanted to be married to you—" she tilted her forehead at Daryl, who was wiping tears from his eyes—"with our own little house with a white picket fence." Her happiness clouded. "He asked how much I needed. I didn't know. He said if he wrote me out a check for thirty thousand, what would I do for it? I'd already gone to bed with him, 'cause we agreed to that, so I said sure, you know, anything you want. Make love to me all night long. Thirty thousand. It wasn't like I was gonna be a prostitute, 'cause I went to bed with him already. For free." She laid her head on his shoulder. "But. He said I had to do more for thirty thousand. For thirty thousand I had to let him beat me. For thirty thousand I had to stand there while he walked around me and punched me, and if I didn't get up before he counted to ten each time I fell down I wouldn't get the thirty thousand." Her small fingers wiped the tears on Daryl's cheeks. "He'd show me the check each night at the beginning, and I got to see it at the end too. I kept pretending it was us looking at it like we look at our passbook, like we're doing right now with the thirty thousand in it. It was tough to stand there sometimes. The pain would make me cry, but then after an hour or so all the tears would be out of me, and it was just pain. I'd close my eyes, I'd think of every detail of our little house, the curtains I was going to put in the windows, the pot holders we could hang up together on the wall in the kitchen, the pretty flowers we'd water along the fence with this green, green lawn stretching all the way to our front door, and right next to our front door would be this big green tree, our very own tree that we completely owned. Every little detail."

Daryl snuffled, reached out and grasped her hand. "Let's stop it with Sam now. Let's keep it just the two of us from now on, without Sam. We don't need him."

Sally tilted her head to one side on the pillow, looking sad. "It's not that I don't want to stop. I just don't want to stop yet."

"Sally, I'm sure that check he gave you is no good. You don't need money to write a check, just ink."

She smiled. "Daryl, come on, I thought about that. I used to be an assistant manager, remember? I got checks all the time I had to take care of. I had no way of knowing that first night, but the next morning I called the bank it was drawn on and pretended to be a store. I asked for a rating on the account and they told me it was a high five, meaning there had to be like seventy or eighty or ninety thousand dollars in the account. Once I did get the check from him, I went to our bank and had them do it as a wire to the account, to get it right away. Our bank didn't deposit the money in here until they actually had it. It's ours."

"What bank was it drawn on?"

"One in Anchorage. I forget the exact name."

"He keeps almost a hundred thousand dollars in his checking account?"

"That checking account. Who knows how many he has. He told us he travels a lot."

"When'd he tell you he dated Sylvia Gold?"

"One of those nights. We were talking about Anchorage, and the conversation got around to us going up there that time looking for clues."

"Did he seem interested in whether or not we had found out anything?"

"He didn't seem to. I mentioned her name at one point, and he just said, 'Oh, I used to date her', or maybe it was, 'I dated her a couple of times'."

"He knew she was dead?"

"I don't know."

"Was he surprised when you told him?"

She thought about it. "He didn't seem real surprised, but don't forget, it had been in the paper for weeks by then."

"Right, I forgot."

She looked over at him. "You think Sam had something to do with it?"

"Do I think he murdered her?" Daryl looked at the thirty thousand dollar deposit again to make sure it was still there. "To be honest with you I'd like to, but then why would he still be here? Living in her house, for christ's sake?"

Sally shivered, hugging her upper arms, nipples erect. "I don't know how I'd feel about that, that the hands on our bodies giving us

such pleasure were strangler's hands." She looked at her erect nipples, and then scooted down on her pillow so her head was lower than Daryl's. She looked up and across at him. "I've been working on a poem. Do you want to hear it?"

Daryl blinked. "A poem?"

"Yeah." Reaching off her side of the bed, Daryl admiring the slender length of her spine, she rummaged around on the floor among the ashtrays, glasses and paperbacks, pulling out a folded square of lined paper. She lay on her back again, unfolding the square. "Wanna hear it?"

He propped himself up, intrigued. "Yeah."

She held the sheet by both sides. "'When you suck my heart. Out of my nipples. Where are you? In your bedroom. Where a man stands.' What do you think?" She blinked up at him.

"I think—it's really different, I didn't expect you to be writing a poem. You're drawing now, writing poems..."

"My life is changing. All this is changing me, opening my mind up." She read the poem to herself.

A hard rap started on their door.

Sally jumped out of bed, putting her poem back.

Daryl sat on the edge of the mattress, drink in one hand, joint in the other, his back to the creaking springs, the moist cunt farts, the grateful, high-pitched cries of pain.

He felt the sharp thunk of Sam's foot against his back.

Daryl turned around.

From this angle most of what he could see were legs. The smooth outer ones were spread dreamily apart, their small feet twisting in delight; the powerful middle ones were bent at the knees, slowly flexing muscles and tendons.

Comparing both sets of legs, Daryl realized with a sinking feeling that after having held onto them so many times during orgasm, he actually now found Sam's legs, with their strength and their soft black hair, more attractive than Sally's.

Sam looked over his shoulder at Daryl, one long black strand of hair hanging in front of his eyes. He gestured with his pursed lips at his slowly rocking ass, and then out of the lips burst his wagging tongue.

Daryl crawled between the legs, lying down so his face was just below Sam's ass. His hands stroked Sam's legs, then Sally's, settling

on Sam's. He worked his kisses up the backs of Sam's thighs, moving in a spiral across the small of his back until his mouth was directly over the asshole, feeling his cock grow between the sheet and his stomach.

He cupped Sam's ass, one perfectly formed cheek in each palm, teasing himself with the slowness with which he pulled the cheeks gently apart.

Sam's asshole, pink and clean, lifted slightly from the sideways stretching.

Lowering his mouth, feeling the humidity of the fuck increase against the underside of his jaw, smelling the slight fecal odor that rose like a perfume, Daryl delicately traced the tip of his tongue along the rim of Sam's silkily soft asshole. Sally was right: not yet. As he wiggled his tongue tenderly up, the warmth of the closing cheeks settling in a comforting embrace around his face, he felt Sally's hand slide into his and squeeze.

As he continued licking Sam's asshole, waiting for them to come, his face riding the cheeks as they rocked back and forth with Sam's thrusts up Sally's noisy cunt, he heard her cry out, startled.

He felt her right foot twitch beside his knee, then go into a vibrating tremor.

Daryl lifted his face out of Sam's ass, stretching his tongue out and down so he could keep licking. From this slight height above Sam's ass he could only see the long spine of Sam's back curving up to a wide, motionless shoulder.

Daryl's tongue tip curled off the wet asshole.

Propping himself up on the backs of Sam's thighs, he raised his head slightly as Sally cried out again, more weakly. Her foot thumped against Daryl's knee, then continued trembling.

What was he doing to her?

The back of Sam's head rested between Sally's jaw and her shoulder. As Daryl watched, the tips of her four fingers appeared on the top of Sam's motionless shoulder. Was she trying to push him off? Or holding him in place?

Again she cried, now almost inaudibly. The four fingertips lifted. Just before the cry Daryl saw the side of Sam's jaw move upwards.

Daryl raised the front of his body up off Sam's thighs until his elbows locked. From this height he could clearly see Sam's head between Sally's jaw and shoulder, Sam's hands cupping the rounded tops of her shoulders.

On the pillow under Sally's neck, several large, red splatters were slowly merging in the cotton fabric.

Sally's face was turned away from Sam, her eyes motionless, staring straight out, as though even to move them at this moment might be dangerous.

Daryl got off Sam, easing himself down the side of the bed onto the carpet, and crept up the bed to the top.

Dried tendrils of blood trailed down the side of Sally's neck from where Sam's mouth was clamped. Sam lifted his lips off her throat, and another long bead of blood rolled down. The tip of his nose, his lips, his chin, his front teeth were all sticky with blood.

The side of Sally's throat held a pencil-sized hole, the epidermis circling it pulled up in a ring.

Sam's tongue bent back and wiped across his upper front teeth, cleaning them some. He smiled at Daryl.

Sally weakly rolled her head over to face Daryl, her eyes still far away, lips pale. Her face crumpled suddenly in laughter. Hand on the back of Sam's neck, she gazed up dazedly at him, the red nose, the dried rivulets at the corners of his mouth. "You actually drank my blood. I could feel it being pulled out of me." She swung her head on the pillow to Daryl. "I could feel the veins in my legs tugging as he sucked it out of me." Her head wobbled back to Sam. "My blood's inside you now." She blinked to regain focus. "A lot of it."

Daryl leaned in, examining the naked redness inside the hole. "We'd better put a compress on this." He glanced at Sam.

Sam got off the bed, picked up and put on his white dress shirt, pushed his long black hair back with preening motions.

Daryl chugged a pillow out of its case, folding the case into a white rectangle. He pressed it against the side of Sally's neck, putting her listless hand on it. He felt her forehead. "Did you come?"

She looked up with docile black eyes. "Yeah. Yes."

"I didn't hear you."

"I came while he was sucking my neck. It was different. It was...more intense, but more inside me. I was more inside me. I wasn't out here, thrashing around." She pulled the folded pillowcase away from the side of her throat with a sticky sound, looking at the deep red dime in its center. Daryl rose, moving away from the fuck bed that had turned into a sick bed in time to catch up with Sam at the kitchen door. His nose and chin were clean, but bits of blood still speckled his teeth.

Sam looked at him. "What?"

"Did you kill Sylvia Gold?"

"No."

"When I did my autopsy on her, the side of her neck had a sore on it about the size of the hole you just put in Sally."

Sam opened the door, letting the night into the kitchen. "I dated her. I didn't kill her."

Looking into Sam's eyes, listening to the tone of Sam's voice, Daryl knew he was, unfortunately, hearing the truth.

"Are you sure you want to drink after losing so much blood?"

Sally took the joint out of her mouth, lips pressed together holding the smoke in her lungs, and nodded. After a few moments she exhaled noisily, sitting back in her kitchen chair with renewed laziness. Daryl had strapped one of her belts around her neck to hold the compress in place. She was otherwise naked. The whiteness of the folded up pillowcase made the bruises all over her body as vivid as thunderclouds.

"How much blood d'you think he took out of me, anyway?" It was her turn to wait while Daryl sat straight up in his chair, holding in the smoke. "I'm not going to do my exercises tonight."

Daryl felt his body grow lighter, limbs lifting into their own ghosts as more and more of his mind converged directly behind his eyes. He exhaled, no smoke coming out. His voice was slowed. "I think you probably lost..." He wagged his head, trying to compute it. "I don't know. How could I know? How long was he sucking you?"

Sally wagged her head. "I don't know. It was timeless."

"Okay, let's say at the rate of one teaspoon every half minute, multiplied by timelessness, that's, ah...how many teaspoons in a pint?"

"I don't know. The cooking books are over there."

Daryl rehearsed two sentences again in his mind, deciding to plunge ahead and say them out loud. He shifted nervously in his seat. "I have two confessions to make." He looked across the kitchen table at Sally. "I think I'm turning homosexual, and also I flirted with a woman today."

Sally was staring off into space, fingers lightly rubbing against the compress.

Daryl waited for her reaction, lit a cigarette, watched the smoke rise up towards the overhead light, a naked, spiraling fluorescent tube that always reminded him of intestines. "Did you hear what I said?"

"What?"

Now he had to say it again. "I think I'm turning homosexual, and I flirted with a woman today."

She frowned, which made Daryl's stomach flip-flop. "Who, Daryl? Is it someone who knows me?"

"I don't think so. I don't know her name. She works at town hall, in the property records department. She's middle-aged. She wasn't that attractive."

"Why'd you flirt with her?"

Daryl watched his hands move towards and away from each other on the table, feeling like a little boy. "I don't know. I guess I wanted to see if she'd respond."

Sally rubbed her nose. "Were you like flirting with this woman because I'm sleeping with Sam?"

"No, I don't think it's that. Although I do think it's because we've become more sexual since Sam."

"I wouldn't want you—I mean me, I sleep with Sam but you do too, and there was that guy on the highway but you approved of it, but other than that I don't flirt."

Daryl hid his eyes. "When the three of us were fucking tonight? Sam's legs were turning me on more than yours were. And I started thinking that, like..." he squirmed, embarrassed. "I don't know, I started thinking that maybe men's legs were always more sexy than women's legs. I—when I came, I was thinking of sucking this guy's cock."

"What guy?"

"This is embarrassing."

"Do I know him?"

"You've spoken to him on the phone."

Her eyes drifted to the left. "The owner of the flower shop where I work? Mr. Bayer?"

"No! If it were someone you see everyday, I wouldn't have said it's someone you've spoken to on the phone, I'd've said it's someone, you know. You've seen every day. It's Nelson Nimmitz."

"I spoke to him on the phone?"

"Well, regardless if you ever have or not, that's the guy whose cock I fantasized sucking when I came tonight."

"Isn't he kind of fat, from what you've told me? I would've thought you'd fantasized about someone else, like some young, well-built guy."

Daryl shrugged nonchalantly, feeling jealous. "Do you fantasize about 'young, well-built guys'?"

"No. But if I were going to fantasize about having sex with another woman, for example, it'd be with a young, beautiful redhead with bigger than average breasts. It wouldn't be with somebody who's really fat." She waited while Daryl took another hit from the pipe.

He let the air out, coughing at the end. He took a sip of his drink. "You fantasized about Emily, my high school teacher, and she was over fifty back then." He blinked. "Do you still fantasize about her?"

She held her finger up for him to wait, black eyes roving above her puffed-out cheeks, and then exhaled. "This is more powerful than the last bag we bought. And it cost the same price."

"Do you still fantasize about Emily?"

She thought about it. "Yeah. In the morning, sometimes, when I first wake up. Yesterday morning I fantasized about Sue, the girl I work with."

"She's kind of heavy-set, right? Kind of tomboyish?"

"Yeah." She folded one hand over the other on the table. "Very bossy."

Daryl smiled, intrigued. "What do you fantasize about with her?"

She answered matter-of-factly. "Her bossing me around."

"You fantasize sexually about it?"

"Yeah. Sometimes, when she really starts bossing me around at the shop, browbeating me until I agree to do whatever it is she wants me to do, wash out the pots or sweep the floor or whatever, it turns me on to give in to her." She flicked her hair back. "To let her tell me what to do."

"Is she a lesbian?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Have you ever thought of going to bed with her?"

"No. I'm not attracted to her physically, I'm just attracted to the way she pushes me around. I'm sure Sam saw that, that trait in me. That's what he exploited. Just like he exploited these homosexual feelings you have. He knew our secrets better than we did." She rested her chin in her hand.

"Yeah." Daryl sat back, disturbed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Daryl sat at his desk at work, pretending to read the long paragraphs of a rabies report. His eyes lifted again from the page, focus deepening to the distant smoked glass window set into Nancy Costello's cubicle to see if her profile were still there.

The profile reared back. Daryl shot his eyes down.

Nancy came around the edge of her supervisor's cubicle, at four feet ten looking even farther away than she actually was.

As she passed Daryl he glanced up from his studiousness only high enough to see the wrinkles of her hand and paper lunch bag, his "Have a nice lunch, Nancy", echoed on the other side of the aisle by Getsi Gooner.

Fortunately Nelson Nimmitz was in another one of his cycles of calling in sick, so Daryl didn't have to worry about his nosiness. As he picked up the phone on his desk he checked Getsi. Her eye was bent to the microscope on her desk, her fingertips over the slide on the tray, checking her nails again.

He pushed the squares on the phone's pad as gently as he could, hoping to make the tones quieter so Getsi wouldn't hear how many there were. Next week there'd be the summons to Nancy's cubicle, the having to stand with his hands at his sides while she sat with the department long distance bill on her lap, her gnarled finger on the green and white striped computer paper, her sharp eyes, and he dreaded it but his knuckles kept rising and falling over the pad until the number was done.

He checked Getsi again. Still examining her nails through the microscope's long black tube, sitting on the hem of her skirt without realizing it.

Little musical nonsense notes danced in the ether against his ear.

Black stockings covered her legs today. They were always colored stockings, never flesh-toned. With her skirt bunched under her he could see the top of her crossed thigh to a few inches above her knee, the underside of her thigh almost all the way up to her ass. Before Sally, he used to think about her while he masturbated in his gloomy apartment. She always wore short skirts. He'd picture her legs in his mind, wondering what they looked like bare. He felt his cock start to stiffen.

Her crossed thigh started flexing as she swung its calf back and forth on the knee joint. He admired the way her thigh flexed,

uncrossing his own legs to accommodate his growing hardness just as he noticed her sidelong gaze at him above the microscope's eye socket.

He looked away, caught, as a tiny voice in his ear said, "Mobile coroner's office. Frank speaking."

"Mobile coroner's office?" Daryl picked the base of his phone up to turn his back on Getsi for some privacy, shooting a glance at her. Her face was turned full in his direction now, the bleached blonde hair, the knowing smile showing teeth. Below the rim of his sight he was aware of movement: she was swinging her calf quicker now, trying to pull his gaze down. Their eyes met. Look or don't look?

He looked, planning to only for a second, but then got caught by the movement of muscle in her thigh, getting hooked further when she raised the thigh up, leaving it still crossed, so that he could see the other, right-angled leg beyond, for the first time since they had known each other openly trying to lure him with her legs.

He turned away, face hot. "Coroner's office?"

"Who is this?"

Daryl hunched over his phone, back to Getsi. "This is—" he lowered his voice—"Daryl Putnam, I'm the—" he lowered it further—"coroner for the town of Lodgepole, Alaska. I'm investigating a murder that might be connected to a similar case in New Orleans. I've been calling all the major cities in the general area down there to see if you might have come across a corpse about a year ago, black light-skinned male with the letter R branded in the side of the right bicep."

There was a tiny laugh from three thousand miles away. "I was wonderin' if anybody'd ever call me about that." Daryl heard a coffee cup get set down.

Daryl shut the kitchen door behind him, not bothering to lock it since Sam would be coming over later. "Guess what?"

Sally stood in a pair of panties with her arms straight out from the shoulder, a dumbbell in either hand, looking a thousand times more beautiful and alluring than Getsi. She bent her elbows, pulling the dumbbells in to click in front of her, her cleavage deepening. "What?"

"Charles Etouffee, the quadroon who was Anna Greenway's boyfriend in New Orleans and disappeared after her murder?"

She put a dishtowel around the back of her neck, sat down at the kitchen table with him. "Yeah."

"I found him. He's dead." Daryl sat back in his chair.

Sally's black eyes widened. "Dead up here?"

"No. They fished him out of Mobile Bay about a year ago. Mobile, Alabama. Listen to this: when they cut his abdomen open, they found live fish laying on their sides inside his stomach."

She reared back. "Gross."

Daryl leaned forward, excited. "But the fish didn't swim through his mouth to get down into his stomach." He laid a hand on hers. "They swam up through his asshole."

Sally shifted on her seat. "Weird. But..." she looked at him, eyebrows together, shrugging.

"What makes it significant is that normally a fish couldn't do that. Not ones the size this guy Frank found in the stomach." He showed the side of a fist to her. "The anus is too small for fish that big to gain admittance, plus even if they could, once they got inside the rectum it'd be virtually impossible for them to wend their way through all the lengths of intestine to arrive within the stomach."

"So how'd these fish do it?"

"The anus was severely dilated—widened—to the point where they could wiggle right in. And inside the rectum, the whole mass of digestive organs—large intestine, small intestine, and duodenum—had already been burrowed through all the way up to the stomach. And something had already burrowed itself down the body's throat, too, because of the massive hemorrhaging in the throat tissue, straight down to the stomach from that entrance too. With all the teeth shattered." He rapped his knuckles on the table, going over it in his mind for the hundredth time. "They know the fish entered from the anus because of the fish scales they found embedded in the tissue of the burrowed tunnel through the digestive organs."

"Oh."

"So what does all this remind you of?"

Sally looked scared and unhappy. "Well, obviously, the body of the man they found out in the woods here."

Daryl hit the table. "Exactly! So what do we have? A woman in New Orleans is strangled, and the primary suspect, her boyfriend, is found dead with indications that something had burrowed its way up his asshole and down his throat to his stomach. And up here in Alaska, another woman, who's related to this first woman, is also strangled, and a short while later a male corpse is found who's also been burrowed through from both ends. What's a reasonable conclusion? The dead man up here is probably Sylvia Gold's boyfriend. Clark Release."

Sally digested it, slowly shaking her head.

"So on the way home I was thinking, if there's that connection between the two deaths, I wonder if there's any more." He went into the main section of their garage apartment, coming back out into the kitchen a moment later with the telephone. "Do you mind if I make one long distance call?" He plugged the phone in and sat back down.

"No. Daryl, who killed who?"

He started excitedly pushing at the pads. "The women had to have died first, because the men had to be alive at the time of the women's deaths in order to have intercourse with them. Going by the Anna Greenway murder and assuming the same pattern was followed up here, it had to be that someone killed Anna Greenway, then Etouffee, then Sylvia Gold, then Clark Release. Etouffee couldn't have killed Sylvia Gold, because he was already dead then. And it's unlikely that Clark Release killed the other three, because he died the same way Etouffee did." He brought the ringing phone to his ear. "After this phone call I'm calling Bob Cable to let him know what I found." Sally's eyebrows jumped. "I have my own hunch. Times-Picayune? Obituaries, please. I'm willing to bet Etouffee killed Greenway and Release killed Gold, and then someone else killed both men. Hi. My name's Daryl Putnam, I'm calling from Lodgepole, Alaska. I spoke to someone there a few days ago; I think it was you? Hi. This isn't about Anna Greenway, but I wanted to know if anything strange was happening in New Orleans about the time of her murder?" Daryl listened and laughed politely. "But even stranger than usual?"

Sally could hear the distant cadences coming out of the phone, but couldn't make out the words.

"Thank you." Daryl hung up. "A year ago? About the time of the murders?" His voice shook. "Big rabies outbreak, first they had in years. A lot of spoiled crops, dead trees, the whole bit. Skunks appearing out of nowhere, getting run over in the streets." He shivered. "Just like here, Sally."

Sally rubbed her forearms. "But Sylvia Gold's been dead for almost two months, Daryl. Why would this still be happening here?"

Daryl wet his lips. "Because maybe what was in New Orleans is still up here." He gestured with his worried eyes to their kitchen door, and then looked right at her. "Know what I mean?"

"Sam?" It came out in a tiny voice.

He nodded.

She pushed her chair back from the table. "I don't want to think about that. I mean he's coming over any minute now to fuck us, I don't want to think he's a murderer."

Daryl pointed at the side of her neck. "I found a sore like that on Sylvia's corpse, remember?"

She stood up, blinking, upset. "Daryl, I don't want to hear about it. He's gonna be here any second to fuck us, what are we gonna do, get in an argument to where he won't fuck us?"

He reached for his Winstons, found out the pack was flat. "He's not going to fuck me tonight." He looked up hopefully at her.

She turned away, hugging herself, black-haired and beautiful, breasts hard nipples above her crossed forearms. It took her a moment to talk over her shoulder. "I just can't, Daryl. Maybe someday, but...right now, tonight, I've gotta get fucked by him. My body's just...gotten too dependent on that." She turned towards him, letting her forearms sag, looking plaintive. "I just can't."

Daryl regarded her, let out the breath he had been holding, nodded.

Sally's legs trembled, her sweaty thighs locked farther apart, her breath coming in eruptions out of her agonized face, lips sliding gratefully around her teeth as Sam's cock shook her body by the cunt.

Her elbows fell on the soaked mattress, hands twirling spasmodically at the ends of her wrists. Daryl stood up from the foot of the bed to see well.

Sam was at her throat again, lips cupped around the side of her neck. When his lips shifted, a bead of blood rolled out.

Her eyes stared straight ahead like a doll's, her hands no longer twisting, the fingers curling inwards.

Her mouth drifted open, but no sound came out.

On the mattress her thighs kept jumping up around Sam's cock, hairy pubis slapping up desperately against Sam's.

Daryl watched Sam's eyes, saw how, while he sucked, he twisted his head down so the sharp blue eyes, still open, could rove over her body, looking at her hair, the curve of her spine, her ass, arms and breasts. The eyes met his, and pointed between Sally's jerking legs to his beautifully shaped ass.

Daryl felt himself sway forward, pulled from the ankles, but sucked all the air around him in his mouth and got up the courage to shake his head no.

Sam kept his eyes on him while his lips pulled at Sally's neck, slowly flexing the muscles along the sides of his ass, tempting Daryl, exciting him, reminding him of how good it felt to feel those flexings against his palms while he tongued Sam's asshole, how good it felt to ride his face on Sam's fuck of his girlfriend, how good it felt to give in and let Sam make you do whatever he wanted you to do.

Daryl's left foot jerked back. His right foot jerked forward.

His right foot jerked back. Jerked back again.

After a beat Sam hooded his eyes. He directed his attention to Sally again, hanging onto her neck with his mouth as Sally hung onto his cock with her cunt, the double connection holding until Sally's lips shook wide open and out of her mouth came a breath so heavy with tension he was surprised she could lift it out, another one, one pitch higher, and still another one, and another one, each heavier and higher until the strain of getting them out made them rise torn and ragged, and here it finally came, the sudden suspension, the moment of absolute silence, legs up, cunt up, throat up, face up, her body held down from shooting straight up only by Sam's body, and then the twist, the crash straight down into orgasm, wonderful orgasm, beautiful orgasm, orgasm so big and fast it buried her alive.

Sally sat on the edge of the bed, dried blood on the side of her neck, dreamily running her fingers through her hair. She looked incredibly beautiful and content, and slightly pale.

Sam walked over to her, still hard, his balls at a level with the crown of her head. Sally's hands slowed in her hair, her eyes tracking listlessly to his cock in front of her, the pupils swooning in her eyes.

Sam's deep voice dropped down on her from above. "Daryl doesn't want me to fuck him anymore."

Slow astonishment registered on her face. She turned her head to where Daryl sat naked by the pillows. Letting out a contented laugh, she furrowed her eyebrows at Daryl in honest puzzlement.

Daryl stayed sitting where he was. "I don't want to. Not tonight."

"But it's so fucking incredible! Why wouldn't you want to do it?"

Daryl glared back, said nothing.

Sam stroked her hair. She looked up at him obediently, eager to please. After a moment her eyes went sly, her smile sloppy. "I get it."

She got up on her knees on the mattress facing Daryl, shaping her hair to make it fall evenly over her head. The bottom of her spine pulled inwards as she curved the front of her body out slightly towards Daryl like a beautiful bow of breasts and belly button and soft-fleshed thighs. "Daryl baby," she called softly.

Daryl got up on the mattress also, but backing away.

Sally shuffled her bowed body forward, breasts swaying, cunt still dripping. She tilted her head further back, still holding onto his stare with a dull arrogance in her eyes, her wide, wet lips puckering into a coo. "Daryl baby, Sally wants you to lie down on your stomach." She shuffled petulantly forward, lifting her wrist, letting her hands go limp. "You wanna do what Sally wants, don't you, baby?"

Daryl walked backwards off the bed, feeling the wall against his shoulder blades. "Go away."

Sally left the bed also, moving closer still, until he could look right into her confident eyes and realize which of the two of them was stronger.

He tried going left, but she put a hand to the wall, blocking him with her arm. He looked to the right and she used her arm to block that side.

Grinning wickedly, she brought her face up close to his, hooding her eyes, blowing tiny kisses from her lips across the short space to his mouth. He felt his own lips twitch.

Her black, dilated pupils roamed over his face. "You know you want it, baby. You know you dream about it. You know how good it feels to have Sam's big, greased cock slide up inside you."

Daryl gulped some breath down. "You're going to whore for him now?"

She nodded sweetly, blowing him little kisses, shooting little glances around his face. "I am his whore. I'd do anything for Sam." She put a tiny kiss on his cheekbone. Her lips, hot and wet, nuzzled his ear, muffling the world on the left side of him. Her voice turned husky, private. "Remember how good it felt to watch him fuck me that first time, baby? The look on my face when I lost my last little shred of resistance?" She won the finger duel below their waists, got to stroke his cock. "That's my good little boy. That's my little baby. That first time in the coffee shop, you were so shy and nervous about talking to me, and there I was, a naive little virgin, imagining myself sitting on

his cock, letting him put it up inside me.” She chuckled lazily, triumphantly, lengthening the strokes up his cock. “There we go, baby. Good little baby.” She put an arm around his neck, pulling him sideways, surprising Daryl with her strength.

She got him on his back on the mattress, and then lay her body down on top of his, breasts and stomach and soft thighs. Her teeth nibbled the underside of his jaw; her hands ran coolly around the insides of his knees. When she was ready to roll him over, he was too confused and weak to resist.

Lying under him now she chuckled again, twirling her fingers across his nape. He felt her calves cross over his, her ankles locking against his, pulling his legs apart. He tried keeping his legs closed, but found he couldn’t. Another soft chuckle. “I’ve been exercising much more than you, Daryl. My legs are stronger. My will is stronger. It’s a new relationship.” Another little kiss, this time on the side of his lips. “Starting now.”

Her hands cupped his ass, fingers spreading the cheeks apart. The cool air of the room dipped against his exposed asshole.

He tried to rise off her. She kept him against her. Still holding his asshole open, she scooted her cunt down onto his cock, sliding it all the way down. He could feel Sam’s sperm inside her coat his cock like the most potent salve. Putting his lips to her ear, he turned his voice down as low as it could go. “Save the sperm. Sam’s sperm. Save it.”

Daryl felt a third hand between his ass.

He looked down at Sally. “Let me go.”

She locked her arms around his back, pinning him to her. “No. Let it happen, Daryl. Give in to him again. We’ve both already given in to him so many times. We both know how good it feels.”

“This is our last chance.”

She hugged him tighter. “We had our last chance, Daryl.”

He felt Sam’s cock start to slide up inside him, stretching his asshole, widening the tender, incredibly sensitive passage between hole and bowels. When Sam’s cock was all the way up, Daryl felt its big, fat head bump up against a part of himself deep inside, sending the most delicious tinglings down his legs, up his spine.

Sally blew at his eyes until he opened them. Her tone was mocking. “Want Sam to stop, baby? Want him to stop fucking you?”

Daryl let out the longest sigh, getting all of the tension out of him, all of the worry at work, all of the feeling that his life was going

nowhere. The rocking of Sam's cock in his ass rocked his own cock in Sally's cunt.

"No," he sighed. "No. I don't want him to ever stop. Never ever. When he's not fucking us, you forget about how good it feels when he is. Thanks for making me remember."

Sam's pace picked up, picking up Daryl's pace. Daryl looked at Sally, Sally looked at Daryl. They both grinned gleefully at each other.

Half an hour later, Daryl and Sally were both twisting against each other under Sam's steady rocking in the most delicious torture, breathing in moans, toes wriggling separately like fingers. Daryl's face rested on Sally's, both their eyes shut, eyeballs roving wildly under their lids, his drool and agonized groans going into her mouth.

Sam suddenly lay fully down on Daryl. Daryl could feel Sam's chest against his back.

Sam's lips brushed over the side of Daryl's neck, goosebumping the skin.

Here it comes, Daryl thought from far away.

The warmth of Sam's lips settled around a patch of skin on Daryl's neck, making the hair at the nape of his head rise. First came a pinch in the skin of his neck. The pinch grew in size and intensity until it was red hot, almost unbearable. Daryl felt his eyes pop open, but everything was out of focus, even Sally's labored face directly below him. He heard Sam breathing through his nose beside his ear, felt the underside of Sam's jaw rub over his collar bone as his mouth nuzzled more firmly against the side of his neck, tightening its grip.

The pain swelled up and down the side of his neck as though the skin were stretched three feet away from the throat, then quickly grew far worse, so bad that Daryl lost hope it would ever reach a crescendo. Suddenly, unexpectedly, the horrible feeling of pressure under Sam's lips burst, and Daryl feels a forked tugging below the surface of his skin, strongest right around Sam's mouth, lightest around his legs. Tides change direction within his body, and all blood pulls up, with the faintest whistle, from his feet, his legs, his abdominal organs, his heart and lungs.

And flows past the lips, most of it, only sips here and there rushing into the mouth. Now his whole body is more alive below the skin surface than it is above: he feels the tugging through the branches of every vein and artery, feels the level of blood rise and fall through every upward tilting organ.

Blood vibrates through him, blood is light splashing inside the interior darkness, blood is love watering down on his organs and through them and over them and oh what a joy it is to finally feel, to get swept up and away in the speed of blood.

Daryl came back, eyes still shut, his consciousness back above skin level. What was that? There was something on his neck, something huge and awful and dry laying across his back with just its very front curled around his neck, and he dared not open his eyes because he didn't want to see even that small part of it, like opening the pantry door and surprising a swift brown whisper under a shelf, the abrupt halt showing a leg there and a feeler much too farther away.

Sally was humming off in the distance. Sally was here somewhere humming. He was on their bed, face down, Sam's cock up his ass. Daryl had come, he remembered now. He lifted his crotch off the bed, the dried sperm sticking him to the mattress until the sperm tore off with a ripping sound.

The cock slid out of him, the weight slid off his back. He turned around on the mattress. Sam was standing, his long, brown-tipped cock pointing down.

That's right, he wasn't going to let Sam fuck him tonight. But then he changed his mind, once Sally coaxed him. He turned to look at Sally, feeling a horrible pain shoot out in all directions across the side of his neck like an embedded spider.

The upper pad of his middle finger came away from his neck hot and sticky.

Sally walked over, still naked, dried blood on the side of her neck. She smiled down at Daryl. "Quite a trip, huh?"

Sam pulled his pants on, the flopping head of his cock still coated with Daryl's shit. "That's nothing. Next time, you two are really going to take a trip."

Sally turned eagerly to him. "Really?" Her eyes lit up. "What's gonna happen?"

Sam shook his head. "You'll find out next time. But I guarantee you—I'm going to give you something that's going to open your eyes like they've never been open before." He looked from one to the other, then headed for the door.

He stopped with his hand on the knob. "That is if I'm still welcome here, Daryl."

Sally and Sam waited.

Daryl staggered to his feet, head woozy, turned carefully around so that his back was to Sam in the kitchen, and bent over. Grasping his ankles with his hands, he looked up between his legs at the distant, upside down Sam. "You own it, Sam."

Sam opened the door. "I know. So does Sally. I just wanted to make sure you did."

The door closed behind him.

Daryl lit a cigarette. "Remind me to call Sheriff Cable to tell him about the phone calls I made."

Sally shook her head. "It's too late."

"I'll call him in the morning."

"Really too late. His wife called before you got home."

Daryl stopped pacing.

"I meant to tell you, then we got caught up in talking, then Sam came over." Leaning forward, she rested her forearms on her knees, the dark eyes looking at him sympathetically, gauging his reaction.

Daryl stood still. "He's dead?"

Sally nodded, eyes soft and watchful. "She said he died at the hospital. She said they still didn't know—his doctors—what he had, what had caused him to waste away like that." Forearms still on her knees she joined her hands together, fingers interlaced, thumbs crossed on top, writhing the clasp until knuckles started cracking. "I didn't know him that well..."

Daryl wanted to sit down for a minute, but the nearest chair was too far from Sally. "I knew he was sick, but...I saw him just before I got home. He was alive." He thought back to the eyes with too many light points in them, the band of dried snot across the upper lip.

Sally kept her hands linked. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. I honestly did forget. Do you wanna talk some about it?"

"No, I—we weren't close, I barely knew him before the Sylvia Gold strangling, it's just a shock, a surprise, that's all." His eyes shifted. "I don't know what we do now about the investigation. He didn't have a deputy; the hospital certainly isn't going to pursue it. Until they appoint a new sheriff, the case is probably closed."

"Mr. Bayer told me once, he was being critical of the mayor, he said before Sheriff Cable Lodgepole didn't have a sheriff."

Daryl nodded. "There's not a lot of money in this town."

"Except for Sam."

Daryl raised his eyebrows. "Yeah." He looked over at Sally. "He's not going to pay for a sheriff though." He rubbed a finger over his lips, looking at her legs. "We both came inside you tonight, right?"

Sally's head wobbled on her shoulders, caught off-guard by the question. "Well, yeah."

"Do me a favor? Reach up inside with a finger and get as much of the sperm out of you as you can." He looked around at tabletops, headed out into the kitchen. When he returned, Sally's head was bent forward, her finger drawing out. She rubbed both sides of the finger against the center of the clean ashtray he held out for her. "Get as much of it as you can."

"What are you going to do with it?" She curved her finger and reached up again.

"I want to see what blood type he is. Sylvia Gold had intercourse just before her death. It was either very violent voluntary intercourse or rape. There was a lot of trauma to the walls of her vagina. The sperm I took out of her was blood type A. My blood type is B." He nodded at the wet pile of sperm Sally had collected in the ashtray. "If the other blood type in here is A, I can test it further and be almost certain if it matches the sperm I found in Sylvia Gold's corpse, which would mean Sam was the one who had sex with her just before her death."

Sally's large black eyes went from the ashtray to her crotch. "If that's true," Daryl said, "then I think what happened is Sam tried doing with Sylvia and her boyfriend Clark Release the same thing he did with us, only with them it got out of hand, maybe Release objected when Sam actually started fucking her for the first time, maybe she objected, and Sam killed them both." He looked over at Sally, did a double take.

Sally pulled the finger out of her mouth, licking the film of sperm off her lower lip. "Sorry." She shrugged. "That's interesting the way you put it, saying first that maybe the boyfriend objected. Like the girlfriend, the one being fucked by Sam, wouldn't have any objection. Don't you find that interesting?"

"Well—we've both been fucked by Sam. At the time we're being fucked by him, I don't see any one of us objecting."

Sally shot him a surprised look. They both started laughing. "Yeah, well, that's true. But be honest, Daryl—even if you find out he killed them both, is that gonna make you no longer want to get fucked by him? Or watch him fuck me?"

Daryl hung his head. His hand reached up to the hole in the side of his neck. "When does this stop hurting?"

She tenderly felt her own. "I don't know." She raised her eyebrows; let her lips go loose again around another whatayagonnado laughs.

Daryl lit a cigarette. "Why do you think he's sucking our blood in the first place?"

"I don't know. Maybe he's a monster." She raised her right forearm laterally across her nose, peering at him over the top. "Or maybe it's a sex sadism thing."

"I don't feel like he gave me all my blood back. I could feel him lapping. Hear it." He shivered, then looked around at the electrically lit, silent apartment. "This is fun, staying up late, isn't it?"

Sally smiled from the easy chair. "Yeah. I like it. Like the whole world is doing mundane stuff with its head down, and here we are, outside it all with our heads up, finding out about this whole different type of life."

Daryl arched an eyebrow at Sally as she exercised gracefully in front of the TV set, knees and arms lifting, pony tailed hair whipping sideways behind her flushed face. "Party time."

She nodded in acknowledgement, grin bobbing up and down as she finished out her aerobics. A girl's voice from the TV said, "We'll be back with more 'Hullabaloo' in a minute, folks!"

Sally clicked it off.

"I'm going to shower." She widened her eyes comically at Daryl to show how good a mood she was in, then walked with her head down towards their bathroom. Daryl watched her melt naked into the bathroom's open doorway; heard a moment later the toilet flush and then the shower curtain get tugged off its rod ring by ring.

They sat at their kitchen table, both underwearing, Daryl stirring ketchup into mayonnaise, Sally with five different bottles of perfume on the table in front of her, inverting each over a different finger of her right hand and then drawing that finger along the curves of her soft, clean body: breasts, stomach, legs, small of back, throat, so Sam could smell five different scents as he traveled his lips over her.

Daryl tapped the spoon at mid-handle on the rim of the bowl. "I'm making a thousand island dressing in case we want Reubens when we get high from whatever drug Sam is bringing over."

"I figured you were."

"You're drinking tea?"

She held her cup by its handle and opposite curve, wide lips sipping as the thin steam rose between her eyes. "Scented tea. I scented it myself, with cumin, oregano and thyme. I'm hoping it'll flavor my blood, for Sam." The warmed lips parted in a smile, head tilted, eyes looking opposite to the tilt. "That's such a feeling, when your blood is going into his mouth."

Sally stood in the middle of their living room, pulling her bra up over her face without bothering to unfasten it, stretching both naked arms back with the two-cupped tangle in her hands, letting it drop three feet behind her heels. "I'm not going to wear a bra. I'm not going to wear panties." Down, off.

She came out of the bathroom wearing a black silk dressing gown. Her movement forward fluttered the lapels away from her tall, white throat, swirled the hem back from her ankles baring her beautiful legs, so long, so nude.

The doorbell ding-donged.

Sally arranged the black silk on her hips so it fell forward in a frame exposing the soft inside curves of both legs. "You get it, Daryl."

Daryl walked over to the faraway door wearing a Chinese red bikini and unbuttoned short-sleeved shirt, also red.

Sam didn't kiss Daryl. In the middle of their living room he did kiss Sally, his white, monogrammed cuff passing through the part in the front of the black silk gown, rising, Sally's face above his shoulder seizing up with joy, lips quivering, eyes slanted under the weight of lust he was summoning between her legs.

Her cunt tried to follow his hand as he withdrew it, feet clumsy in an undignified dance forward.

Sam's voice was as deep and rough as always. "Later."

Daryl slipped his shirt off, approaching Sam in just his bikini. "Do you have it?"

Sam squared off in front of him, grinning with twice the teeth of others, drolly looking Daryl up and down. He put his hand between Daryl's legs, gently kneading. Daryl's back arched with the sweetness of it, hands gratefully caressing the muscles moving in the forearm, feet dreamily going up on tip toe while Sally watched from the sidelines, jealous.

Pulling Daryl's body by the balls up against his, Sam licked nastily at Daryl's twisting eyebrows. "Yeah, I got it." He studied Daryl's face, then dropped his hand off his balls. Daryl whimpered, balls trying to mount the palm again.

Sam backed up, chuckling.

Daryl and Sally exchanged addict looks.

“What I’ve got,” Sam said, unbuttoning his dress shirt, “Is very powerful. It’s stronger than LSD.” He looked from one of them to the other. They were watching his trousers come off. “Are you both sure you want something that powerful?” Sam pulled his underpants down, cock flopping out heavily. He looked again from one to the other. “Are you both sure you want something that scary?”

Daryl was out of his bikini, Sally out of her gown. Both moved in orbit around Sam, nodding.

Sam’s eyes glittered. “Good. Before I give this to you, I have to tell you three little words.”

Their orbits both stopped in front of him. They waited.

Sam smiled. “I am immortal.”

The three stood naked in the living room, Daryl and Sally in front of Sam.

Sally breathed first. “I knew it.” She touched her dark pubis with a hand.

Daryl grunted. He felt his erection tip forward slightly.

Sam noticed. “You’re scared.”

“Yeah. Of you. The drug.”

Sally talked sideways to Daryl, eyes fastened on Sam. “Daryl, don’t blow it for us.”

Daryl’s forehead dampened. “Will it make us go crazy? Will it make me want to die?”

“No.”

“What will it do?”

Sam walked over to Daryl, putting a hand on the side of his face as Sally leaned her head forward to see Sam’s small, muscular ass. “It’ll make you immortal. For a while.” He removed his fingers from Daryl’s cheek, holding his blue-veined wrist under Daryl’s eyes. “The drug is my blood. If you drink my blood while I drink yours, within ten minutes our blood will be exchanged. Mine in your veins, yours in mine. As your veins fill more and more with my blood and less and less with your own, you’ll fade out. Once the exchange is complete, we’ll pull away from each other, your blood in me, mine in yours, and for a while you’ll know what immortality is like, until your body changes my blood in you back to normal. When we pull away it’ll be like a loud gong sounding: your experience of immortality will last until the gong’s last vibration.”

Daryl thought about it. "And what will you feel?"

Sam raised his eyebrows. "Mortality. Pain, hopelessness, a sense of death." His palm went out to Daryl, waving back to himself. "You get your high, I get mine."

Sally kissed Sam's bicep, running her hand over the back of his shoulder. "Do it to me first, Sam?"

Sally lay on her back on the bed, pupils at the lower rims of her eyes so she could watch over her chin as Sam climbed onto the foot of the mattress.

Daryl watched him lay alongside her body, their lips finding each other, the back of Sam's head concealing her face, watched as Sam's hand moved freely over her breasts, stroking the already erect nipples, Sally's legs opening for him, knees up, calves at a slant, thighs forming a cradle, and knew that however much she might be confused by Sam, or sometimes hate him, or plan on a day when he'd be gone forever, he'd always remain her one great lover.

Sam moved inside her, cock and teeth. Her hands went up, then settled peacefully around his shoulders, fingers caressing the soft hairs at his nape. Her thighs climbed against the sides of his rib cage, calves closing in a criss-cross over the small of his back. Her eyes shut, she sighed, her face grew younger.

Still feeding at her neck, Sam lifted his left arm, gently tapping the side of his bicep against her mouth. Her full lips parted, her teeth came out. The two slightly irregular white rows clamped a line of skin between them, then slowly, redly met. One bead of blood ran down the inside of Sam's bicep to his armpit; another bead ran over her lower lip. Her tongue tip flicked it in off the corner of her mouth.

Her bottom row of teeth dug more deeply into the flesh until blood suddenly spilled out. Quickly her mouth covered the flow, short lines of effort forming around her lips as she sucked, the front of her throat flexing as she swallowed.

Her and Sam's hips pumped more languorously against each other as the mutual blood sucking continued. Her legs, which had risen to cross Sam's back almost to the knees, settled back to mid-calf, then ankles, then fell off sideways.

Her hands fell off the nape of his neck, bumping with boneless fingers off his back onto the mattress.

Only her throat and hips still moved.

Her hips slowed.

Stopped.

Her mouth fell off Sam's arm.

She lay face-up on the bed, her lips and chin caked with blood. Her eyes dilated to the white rims.

The gash on Sam's bicep was much wider. She must have chewed it further open while sucking.

Sally didn't move. She looked dead.

Sam clumsily got off her, all elbows and knees, his effort to rise pulling his cock out of her with a moist pop.

He crawled over to the edge of the bed and swung his feet over the side, sitting facing away from her.

Sally lay motionless. The blood surrounding the hole in her neck looked like dark pudding.

Sam sat hunched forward, hair in his eyes. He fumbled with a half-empty pack of Sally's cigarettes on her nightstand. Got one out, stuck it between his messy lips, and lit the opposite end. He inhaled, then went into a coughing fit, crossing his forearm over his mouth. Bent over, his back looked skinnier.

Lips still apart, a deep, low sound came out of Sally. The skin below her eyebrows started twitching. The sound came more frequently, like long exhalations broken into stops and starts. Her eyes were still nearly all pupil.

Sam found the issue of the TV Guide Daryl and Sally had kept as a memento of their first trip to Anchorage. He stared at the dog-eared cover, holding it in his left hand, fingers of his right hand trailing across the actress' face, the colorful lettering.

Sally started rolling her head back and forth on the mattress, as though she were having the spins. Her lips finally came together, little pink bubbles blowing out between them.

She sat up abruptly, eyes still filled with her pupils, and started babbling urgently. Daryl pushed his ass further back on the mattress, frightened by her loud voice, even as his hands reached out to hold her.

His fingers touched each arm. She swung her face awkwardly around as though she were blind, as though she knew someone were touching her, but couldn't comprehend where.

Sam was on his hands and knees in front of the nightstand, tracing the little wooden beads running decoratively under the table's top.

Sally's head jerked forward, her mouth yawed open, and she vomited onto her thighs.

Alarmed, Daryl grabbed her. He slid his feet off the bed and rose, pulling her with him. Her feet turned sideways as they touched the

carpet. She looked up blindly at him, muttering as her face slowly sank to the floor.

Daryl looked anxiously across the stained bed. "Sam?"

Sam was lolling on his back on the floor, staring up at the rafters.

Daryl stooped over. He got a grip under each of Sally's armpits, and hoisted her up against him.

Her swollen face drooped over his shoulder. She vomited down his back, warm and pink.

Daryl walked her backwards, like dancing with someone asleep, towards the bathroom.

Inside, still propping her up, he lifted his right foot, nearly losing his balance, and slammed the toilet lid down. Shuffling forward, arms feeling tired, he lowered her weight onto the toilet lid.

Down on his knees in front of her, he looked up anxiously into her puffy face. "Are you okay? Sally? Are you okay?"

She raised a weak hand up into the tilted vase their profiles made. Her mouth opened. She belched.

Daryl kept one hand on her collarbone while he stretched over to the sink and twisted the tap open. He knocked a roll of toilet paper into the basin, pushing it under the water to get it wet. "Sally?"

He craned his neck to look out into the living room, but the angle was wrong to see how Sam was doing.

The roll of toilet paper was soaked.

Wrapping four fingers around her neck below the hole, placing his thumb under her jaw to keep her face level, he started pressing the cold, wet roll into her eyes.

Her babbling became less restless. When he lifted the waterlogged roll away, her pupils were already diminishing. She blinked distractedly a few times, then focused on him.

Her smile was restful, sappy. "Hi, Daryl."

He used the side of the roll to rub some of the blood off her mouth. "Hi. You okay?"

"Yeah." She tracked her focus down to the toilet paper roll. "It's all wet!"

"So are you. How do you feel?"

She stopped the roll with a thin hand. "I feel fine." She stood up, Daryl hovering, and walked over to the sink. Bending forward, she splashed water up over her eyes, nose, and mouth. "Ah, that feels good." Sally straightened up, looking her old self again. She glanced around. "I know we must have a clean towel here somewhere."

Daryl handed her one.

When her face was dry, she looked in the mirror. Her eyes widened. She raised a hand to her hair, lifting it away from her face, then letting it slowly fall. A surprised laugh escaped her. "Wow, I'm really beautiful." She didn't say anything else for a moment, looking at her face from different angles, the reflected eyes swinging from left to right as she admired her looks. She glanced sideways at Daryl. "Either this is just a friendly mirror, or I'm really gorgeous." She tried holding her hair around her face in different arrangements, obviously pleased with each result.

"I always told you you were beautiful," Daryl said uneasily.

"Well I know, but..." She stepped back to see more of herself in the reflection. Her jaw lowered. "I've got really good-looking shoulders. Look how straight they are, how you can see the collarbones, the way the skin stretches over them." She turned left and right. "Really nice skin." A thought occurred to her. Instead of looking in the mirror, she looked down at her actual body. Her black eyebrows drew in, her bloodied lips came together.

Tentatively, shyly, she lifted her hands and touched the sides of her breasts. Her lips pushed out, nostrils flaring. "God, my breasts look fantastic." She moved her hands over them, clearly getting aroused at looking at them. She raised her eyes to him, excited. "What do my legs look like?"

She bent forward, lifting each one at the knee. "God, look how great my legs are! See the way that long muscle flexes there whenever I lift 'em like this? Jesus, they're beautiful."

"Sally, we should check on Sam."

She walked on her own back out into the bedroom, watching her reflection in the night-darkened windows she passed on the way back to the bed.

Sam was sitting with his back against the headboard, smoking a cigarette. He looked strong and mean again.

Daryl and Sally sat on the mattress in front of him.

Sam blew some smoke rings, looking at Daryl through them. "Ready?"

"I don't know, I'm..." He glanced at Sally. She was looking at her legs, eyes half shut, lips pursed, left hand running sensuously over the softness of a thigh. Still admiring them, she slipped her free hand onto her clitoris. She raised one leg up, bringing her face up against it, kissing the hollow behind her knee, then running her tongue up the

supple line of her calf while she masturbated. As she moved her kisses around her knee she moaned with arousal, not at being kissed, but at kissing.

Daryl looked back at Sam. "Why's she getting so turned on by her own body?"

Sam smiled wickedly, showing between his lips his teeth, like showing on an outstretched hand a syringe. "Find out."

Daryl lay on his back, drawing his knees up around Sam's lowering body. When their cocks touched, both men let out involuntary grunts at the tingling pleasure of cocks criss-crossing.

Sam's cold blue eyes stared down at Daryl while he licked his right palm. The hand went down their bodies out of sight, Sam's body rocking on Daryl's as he rubbed the spit over the head of his cock.

Sam went in slowly, the head bunching with increasing pressure against the sphincter, then suddenly popping past, bullying up the canal and into the rectum as Daryl's head rolled back with a grateful, lopsided smile. Daryl's eyes shut, switching behind the lids, picturing the cock pointing straight up within him, feeling his sphincter wrap around Sam's cock, feeling his body and soul spiral down to wrap lovingly around Sam's beautiful cock until his eyes and his ears and his nose and his tongue and his fingers had all spiraled down to lovingly wrap around Sam's beautiful cock.

Teeth in Daryl's neck, Sam laid the side of his throat over Daryl's mouth. Beyond the neck, beside the bed, Sally, standing, was slowly and repeatedly blinking her eyes. "How weird!" she said to herself. What was she seeing behind her eyes?

There seemed to be two fuzzy holes in the neck pressed against his nostrils until Daryl's eyes focused, sliding the two together into one ragged sore in the veiny flesh. He kissed the glossy red hole, feeling the dried roughness of it against his lips, then opened his kiss, hiding the hole with his mouth, unseen tongue questing against the warm, tendoned skin until it tapped the scab. Using the tip of his tongue, Daryl licked and licked at the sharp edge of the scab until it lifted like a little manhole cover. Leakage slid down the inside of his lower lip, tasting sweet and yeasty.

His tongue tip explored the inside of the shallow hole, the tip switching back and forth over a thin line inside, enabling him to identify it as a vein. It had no taste to it except at one small, ragged point. Pursing his lips, Daryl sucked above that one point, lips in the vacuum caused by the sucking lowering until they were against the

small tear in the vein. Up, up he sucked, the vein lifting and tapping against his lips until it was in his mouth and he was sucking at it like a soft straw, and suddenly, startlingly, the blood flowed over his teeth into his mouth, rich, thick and rhythmic, like the smoothest, sweetest fudge.

Against his own neck he felt his own blood start being pulled out of his body, and he sucked and swallowed, sucked and swallowed to match the pace, thinking, here were go. Here we go.

Gone.

Back. He rolled away from Sam's neck, feeling the other man's teeth pull off his own neck. How long had he blacked out? He glanced around nervously at the ceiling, his outstretched feet, the distant kitchen, waiting for the blood to take effect. Sam, more used to the effects of blood exchange, was sitting naked at the side of the bed already, picking up the TV Guide and weighing it in his hand like he was high. His head rotated slowly on his neck, face twisting into view to grin back at Daryl. His pupils were huge, his grin bloody. He raised his black eyebrows as if to say, ain't it great?

Daryl rolled onto his back, silently monitoring his body. Everything felt normal. Did he get enough of Sam's blood? He felt disappointed, a little relieved. Except his eyes were starting to smart.

With the suddenness of drugs, his eyes started to really hurt, as though an enormous light were being shone directly into them. The lids began closing on their own, out of protectiveness. He felt his head settle down, his knees draw up, so that his body was slanting backwards like someone sitting in a car climbing the tall track of a roller coaster ride.

Inside his head was a tiny pinpoint of light. So bright it was white, and a little larger now. Growing, growing larger in his head, the size of a dime now, a silver dollar.

The interior of his head became brilliantly lit.

He floated on his thoughts amidst the brilliance.

His consciousness rushed suddenly forward, speeding into the whiteness.

His flight propelled him through whiteness after whiteness. Whiteness above, whiteness below, whiteness on all twelve sides.

Far up ahead and a little below, there was a tiny dot of darkness.

He was rushed towards it.

The dot grew, turned into a vertical line.

Even at this great distance Daryl could see it was a man, a man standing with his back to Daryl's rushing approach.

What's this person doing inside my mind?

Daryl was raced into the back of the man's head—hair, brain, pupils—and out the forehead, then turned dreamily around to see the face.

White man. Slightly familiar looking. Himself.

He floated in front of the face, studying it. Not quite as handsome or happy looking as he had imagined. Slightly sinister.

He let out a disappointed sigh.

The face's lower lip jutted, air puffing out.

Daryl sighed again.

The man in front of him did the same.

He looked at the eyes. They stared straight ahead, wide pupiled and vacant.

Keeping his eyebrows down, Daryl concentrated.

The man's left eyebrow arched up elegantly.

I've never been able to get just one of them to arch in real life, Daryl thought. He looked at the lips and pictured himself with a happier expression. The man's lips turned up, up, up into a smile.

This is like making faces in a mirror, he thought, only you can walk around your reflection.

He left the eyebrow arched, made the smile less glassy, flared the nostrils devilishly, cocked one of the hips, put one hand behind the neck, noticing the bright red hole, and had the other hand rest on the front of the slacks, teasingly near the crotch. Raised the jaw some, ready to take on all comers. Changed the smile into a pout, then into just the very beginning of a smile. Had the hand come out from behind the head, go into a pocket. Had the other hand lift off the front of the pants and go into a pocket too. Made the eyes look shy, the shoulders a little hunched. Made the dawning smile look a little hesitant, a little fearful. Changed the shyness of the eyes into sadness.

With a whoosh he got sucked right into the body.

Inside the body, moving its limbs, he felt the heaviness and sensuality of flesh again.

Something started crowding him, enveloping him from behind, coming around both shoulders, under his ass, crushing him forward. The world turned darker, redder. He found himself on his back, floating on top of, then deep under, an ocean of redness.

Blood. He twisted his body around under this sea of blood, panicking, mouth squeezed shut so he wouldn't drown, running out of air, lungs growing bigger. I'm going to drown, he thought. I'm going to die.

His lips held against each other as long as they could as he tumbled within the blood, the whole lower half of his face aching with the effort, the front of his chest pounding. Blood seeped in, tickling down his throat. He gagged, coughed, his intake sucking in the blood before he could get his lips together again.

The blood slid down both holes in his throat, filling his stomach and lungs with its thickness. Deep down within the ocean of blood he tried coughing his lungs clear, more blood rushing in with each attempt. His feet kicked out, his body twisted left and right in its suspension, and then he discovered to his surprise that in his hyperventilation he was actually breathing blood in and out without suffocating on it. In fact, it actually felt good to breathe blood, like breathing something richer and cooler than oxygen.

He turned around in the red, breathing easily now, trying to get his bearings. For the first time he was aware he wasn't alone in the ocean of blood. A school darted close by on his right, so near that he could identify them as kidneys, each double-humped organ staying in its place within the school as the group swam forward through the blood. In front of him, dropping a long trail of red bubbles that listed to the left in the current's sway, a set of lungs flapped majestically up towards the lighter layers of shimmering blood.

Daryl started seeing spots in his vision like phosphenes, each one rapidly swelling and diminishing, to be replaced by others. He crossed his eyes to watch one, then another. The spots were life cycles, each spot a person living their whole life in five seconds: egg fetus baby adult corpse skeleton, over and over again.

He felt sadness, great sadness. Was one of them him? Was one of them Sally?

The speed at which he had been drifting accelerated. He tried swimming against the current, but his feet were pulled ever more rapidly forward.

He was being sucked forward towards something vast, as though this ocean ended in a waterfall.

As his speed forward became dizzying he craned his head to what he was being swept towards, and saw an end stretched across the ocean infinitely wide, infinitely high and deep.

He fell forward over the sharp edge of the ocean, spinning wildly away from it into dark, weightless nothingness.

As his tumble slowed, he saw distant white points millions upon millions of miles away. The desolation terrified him. He opened his mouth to scream, no sound coming out no matter how forcefully he felt his throat muscles constrict.

He rolled over further and saw, looking up, that the entire solar system lay stretched above him, each planet remarkably three-dimensional and solid, like different-sized billiard balls in a slow-motion juggle. He stared up at them, Saturn's rings, Jupiter's bigness, Venus' clouds, feeling love and pride, awestruck at being able to actually see them, like meeting the famous people of history. All the planets wobbled in their orbits, and it struck him that the wobbling gave variation to the orbits, that if the wobbling ever produced orbits that exactly matched previous orbits it would mean a finite pattern, and all the planets would fall.

Directly above him was the cold, grey pockmarked curve of Pluto. He looked behind and above it for Earth, and had to squint his eyes even at this distance from the fiery brightness of the Sun.

Which grew as he was drawn past the planets towards the solar system's center.

The pull on him was irresistible. Neptune swelled and passed, Mars fell away, the Earth whizzed off with its little moon, and then the Sun's huge surface was beneath him, in front of him, above him as he splashed up into it, floating through all its layers of fire to its white hot core and out the other side into glowing blackness.

The glowing blackness was the universe, and he was outside it, looking across at it. It was in the shape of a circle with a smaller circle in front, and a circle at either side near the front, all attached, like a stylized animal with front paws. The shape's light-rimmed edges had odd configurations along them, as though they were corrugated. He was zoomed in towards one of the corrugations, and saw that it was comprised of the same shape, an animal with front paws, edged with the same corrugations. He was zoomed in towards one of those corrugations, and it was made up of the same shape. He was zoomed in again and again, getting deeper and deeper into the universe, and each time the animal with front paws shape appeared. The universe was that shape, and was entirely composed of that shape.

His eyes popped open.

He was back in their apartment, sitting on the bathroom floor.

Through the open door he could hear meat frying, and Sam and Sally carrying on a conversation.

Sam suddenly appeared in the doorway, looking down at Daryl. He hadn't bothered to clean the blood from the side of his neck, but his mouth had been wiped. "Feeling any better?"

Daryl looked around the floor in front of him. There was a half empty pack of Winstons, an ashtray full of butts, a glass of water with melting ice floating on the surface, and a TV Guide folded open to its completed crossword puzzle. "Who did the puzzle?"

"Sally, while she waited for you to come out of it."

Daryl got to his feet, blinking in confusion. He started to say something, then blinked some more instead, each one slower. He shot a look at Sam.

"That's one effect of blood exchange: from now on it's light inside your mind instead of dark. You've been awakened. Pretty neat, huh?"

Daryl shut his eyes, opened them, shut them again. "How do I sleep with the light constantly on inside?"

"It's a different kind of sleep. You'll be aware that you're sleeping, instead of losing consciousness. It's a little like the sleep you get in the morning, when you keep waking up and then drifting off. Only better."

Daryl opened his eyes, unsure. "If I find I don't like it..."

Sam snorted. "My blood's in you now. It's changed you inside. Like it."

"Did any of the stuff I imagined really happen?" He rubbed at his eyes, still trying to get used to the light inside.

"Your body stayed here, but everything else went."

"Will I see the same thing each time?"

Sam shook his head. "Just the first time. Now that you're past all that shit, it's smooth sailing. Clean yourself up and come out, and I'll show you what I mean." He left the doorway, heading back to the kitchen.

Daryl looked down. He had vomit and blood all over his chest and trunk.

He stepped under the shower, rubbing the soap over his chest hairs, working up a lather. Bending over to clean his crotch, he noticed how shapely his raised leg was. He distractedly put the soap back on its ledge, then ran his soapy hand over his bare thigh, getting a hard-on from caressing it.

He stood with his back to the sink's mirror, looking over his shoulder and going up on tiptoe to try to see his ass. God, it looked sexy. He started fondling his ass with his left hand, masturbating himself with his right. He looked down suddenly, surprised at how good and warm it felt to be able to touch his cock. It gave him the same thrill as it would touching another man's cock.

Sally appeared sideways in the door. "You OK?"

"Yeah, sure. Jesus, did you ever notice how sexy my ass is?"

She nodded. "Sam explained it to me after your blood wore off him. It's like your body is someone else's now. When you look at it it's like looking at a stranger's body, so naturally it turns you on. That's what happened in the part where you fly into the back of your own head?" She raised her eyebrows, giving him a trembling smile. "Neat, huh?"

Daryl tore his hands away from his body. "I'll say. What was that thing at the end, that shape that was made up of its own shape?"

She nodded knowledgeably. "That's death."

"Death? In my trip it was the universe."

"Ah-hah. But, see, the universe and death are the same thing. The universe is dead, because it exists. Anything that exists is dead. Existence is what makes it dead."

Daryl started drying himself off. "Then what's life?"

"Life is nonexistence. If something doesn't exist, then it's alive. The moment it comes into existence, it dies."

"So in other words, we're dead?"

"Yeah." She nodded. "We were alive before our mothers got pregnant, but the moment the sperm fertilized the egg, we died. But don't worry about it, because we'll become alive again once we cease to exist."

"Are you making some hamburgers?"

"Oh, right. Sam said our appetites might increase now. We're going to eat, and then he's gonna have us exchange blood with each other." Her finger went from him to her. "Sam says that's when it really gets fun."

Sam pushed his empty plate towards the center of the table, where it bumped against the other two. The refrigerator was empty now. "You're going to have to start buying more food." He glanced idly at their icebox. "You might want to get a second fridge in here, maybe a freezer too. It helps if you buy from several different stores, so nobody notices the quantities. Hard to do here in Lodgepole, of course."

Sally finished the last pickle. "What do you do, Sam?"

"I have my stuff brought down from Anchorage, and up from Seward. If you get low, I can load your wagon up with groceries. You can hit all the restaurants in town. None of them need to know you're having more than one dinner."

They stripped by the bed. Sam tore the scab off the side of his neck, then bent forward. Sally went up on her toes and threw her arms around his shoulders, pulling at the red hole. When she stepped away, lips bloody, Sam walked over to Daryl and bent his neck to the side. Daryl drank where Sally had, feeling the strong, rich fudge take over his veins.

Daryl and Sally grinned at each other across Sam, both of them infused with his blood.

Sam motioned from one to the other. "Now both of you drink some of the other's blood."

Sally padded over to Daryl, putting her hands behind his neck and pulling the hole towards her. Her mouth was rough, hungry on his hole. She drank until Daryl weakly pushed her away.

She smirked. "Now you drink me, Daryl."

His lips pulled at her hole, but she didn't flinch once. While he sucked she rubbed her nipples back and forth across his chest.

When they were both full, they looked to Sam for the next step.

He sat at the end of the bed, lighting a cigarette. "Now Sally lay on your back. Daryl, you sit on top of her, on her hip bones."

They did what they were told, glancing over at him.

Sam blew out a stream of smoke. "Now Daryl, you lean forward, put your hands around her throat, and slowly strangle her."

Daryl, sitting on Sally's pubis with a folded leg outside each hip, looked at Sam.

"You have to strangle her to activate the exchange. You're not going to actually kill her, you're just going to bring her so close to it the exchange will activate."

Daryl hesitated. "I—that sounds dangerous. What if—"

Sally picked his hands up, put them around her throat. "I'll let you know, Daryl. I'll wave both my hands if I get scared."

"You have to do it, Daryl, to get it to work. Otherwise, you won't experience the next step. You're a medical doctor, you'll be able to tell when she's been without air too long." Sam's voice lowered, became cozy. "Besides, once you start it, you're going to be surprised just how good it feels."

Sally had already placed Daryl's hands at her throat. He let the four fingers of each hand curve around the sides of her neck, and positioned his thumbs in front.

"The trick is, as you do it, don't press straight in. Press from the sides. You want to pinch her windpipe shut, not force it straight back into her esophagus."

Daryl felt the ridged windpipe underneath the throat's thin flesh. One thumb on either side of it, he started applying pressure.

Sally stared straight up at him, hands laying palms up by her ears.

Daryl's thumbs slowly compressed Sally's windpipe. When there was just the smallest line of skin between the thumbs, he looked down into her eyes and saw the surrender, the willingness to let him go all the way. Raising his ass off her pubis, he increased his grip on her until the nails of each thumb touched.

Her hands lifted slightly off the bed, but didn't wave.

He started counting. He saw his hands around her throat, strangling her, preventing the air from getting to her body, and realized how easy it would be to keep this forbidden grip on her right through to the end, like jumping out a window.

Her hands waved.

He let go.

She coughed slightly, raising her head. His thumb marks on her throat were ghostly pale, haloed by bright red skin. She nodded at him, at Sam. "I'm there."

Daryl laid his head back on the mattress, feeling Sally's weight as she climbed onto his pubis. Her face came into view, long black hair hanging down until it and her abdomen had curtained off the outside world from him. He looked up in their shared tent of hair and flesh at her eyes. They were dilated, determined. Her fingers settled around the sides of his neck ticklishly, her thumbs resting on either side of his Adam's apple. In the world outside their private tent, he felt rather than saw her cunt slide down over his cock.

Her thumbs started pressing against the sides of his Adam's apple.

The pressure gave a sensation of numbness to the sides of his windpipe. As her thumbs pushed deeper into the sides the numbness turned to a dull, bearable pain. He could get only a little air down now, not enough. Instinctively, he tried to raise himself up slightly—her cunt slid up and down over his cock a few times, soothing him while she bore down harder on his throat.

He looked up into her eyes again, and saw the same unexpected enjoyment in them she had probably seen in his. They locked gazes and her thumbs shut off his breathing.

Spots slid in front of his eyes. His mind dipped down, then rose again. The thumbs touched a second time and his mind dipped again, like a diver who can only stay below the surface long enough to get, each time, a glimpse. But this time the thumbs stayed together.

His eyes fell from hers to her breasts, full and hard-tipped above him. When he looked up again into her eyes, it was with surrender. He had been dipped down long enough to want to stay there.

Her thumbs released his throat; she straightened up on his cock. Neither said anything for a moment. They looked at each other's throats; they looked at each other's hands.

"I'm there," he announced.

Sam stood, walked to where they lay, Sally sitting on Daryl's cock, and clapped his hands once, hard, over his head. "Make love!" he commanded.

Sally turned into a blond teenage boy, his cock hard, his balls covered with long, fine hair. Daryl recognized him immediately: he was the locker room bully at his high school, the one who went around domineering all the others once the teacher had left. He shoved his cock up Daryl's cunt, pinning his arms down while he slapped his crotch against Daryl's. Daryl moaned with pleasure, finally able to admit how aroused the domineering had made him back then, wrapping his smooth white legs around the boy's hips, cooing with delicious humiliation.

Sam clapped his hands once more above his head, the sound loud and insistent. "Make love!"

Sally's eyes widened with delight. She lowered her mouth down to Emily's far more beautiful breast, sucking softly on the nipple while she put Emily's hand between her opened thighs.

Sam's clap sounded again, with an oarsman's regularity. "Make love!"

It took Daryl longer to recognize this one: she was a tall, young, gorgeous looking blonde with small breasts, a tattoo of a flower above one nipple. As her lower abdomen rolled languorously towards and away from him he suddenly remembered: he had seen her years ago crossing a street in upstate Vermont as his mother was driving him to his SATs. That night he had masturbated thinking of her, and now she was on top of him, making love to him.

“Make love!”

He was a white male, but not Sam. He didn't know who he was, but Sally was in ecstasy, lowering her body over and over on his cock, tongue spilling over her lips. His hips jiggled up into her, driving her frantic. He pulled her face close, looking into her rolled back eyes, and saw Elvis staring back. So it can be famous people too, not just people we've actually met?

“Make love!”

She was Marilyn Monroe, the woman in the original King Kong, Fay somebody, a model in a commercial they had seen up in Anchorage advertising a leg hair removal system, the weather girl who used to be on the local Vermont newscast when he was growing up, a girl who used to sit next to him in Political Science, and Sylvia Gold. His own body changed just as rapidly, broad chest, big breasts, white, and black, yellow, red.

Sam clapped high over his head. “Make love!”

They looked at each other. Both were women. The woman on top was redheaded, with a small beauty mark on the inside swell of her left breast. She looked down teasingly, rubbing her cunt over his. He sighed tensely, watching the golden red hairs of her pubis trail into and out of the blonde bush above his cunt. His smooth legs rose and wrapped around her hips in need. The redhead smiled meanly at him, then slipped her cunt over his. He felt their knobs rub over each other, sending shivers down his legs. The redhead reached down and started caressing his breasts, pulling at the nipples. He felt himself succumbing, didn't want to, but couldn't stop the joy the redhead was leading him towards. The redhead smiled at her approaching victory. “Say, ‘You own me.’”. Daryl closed his eyes, mouth opening. His cunt hitched up against the redhead's as the first wave started. “You own me,” he cried in surrender. “You own me.” As he came, he felt the redhead's hand slap hard over his breasts, hurting them, but because it had been timed just right, he knew with a feeling of self-disgust he'd ask her to hurt him next time, too. Only worse.

Daryl and Sally fell apart, both exhausted. They crawled into each other's arms, trying to catch their breath.

Sam stood over them, smiling. “Like it?”

They both looked up, grinning and sweaty.

“We can do that again. We can do it forever, in fact. If.”

They both stopped panting, looked up. “If what?”

“For us to continue, you have to take the next step.”

Daryl sat up, holding his hand to his chest. "Okay. Sure. What's the next step?"

Sam pulled his pants on. "The two of you have to pick someone, seduce them, and drink their blood."

Sally and Daryl blinked.

Sam picked his shirt up off the floor. "You don't have to kill them, just drink their blood. There has to be orgasm, and there has to be blood. If you don't, I'll never be back."

He buttoned his shirt, picked up his car keys, and walked out of their apartment. He didn't look back.

Light reflected off the surface of their kitchen table up into their faces, Sally and Daryl, as they breathed smoke. Two such nights had passed, both of them facing each other until after midnight across the table, smoke trails from a dozen forgotten cigarettes rising, ice melting in the humid June night.

"If we did do it," she started again, each cautious 'if' a lowering of the front teeth to the lips like almost daring to pronounce 'fuck', "if we found someone, if we brought them here, poured them some drinks, shared our pot, waited awhile, turned down the lights..."

Daryl swiveled his ass in his chair to sit sideways. "Yeah."

"If we did all that, wind it up with the three of us laying on the floor, listening to records, and I could gradually withdraw, pull back to the chair legs, the shadows, and then you start playing with their hair, or playing footsie, you start kissing, you get inside her, you wait until she's really...hot, then you start it like it's a love nibble, like you're going to give her a hickey..."

Daryl shrugged. "Yeah, that sounds good."

Sally placed her spread hands on the table top as if she were going to play the piano, looking at her nails, and then looking up at him again. "Then when it's over you just got carried away—" her black eyebrows slid sideways—"I'll be there with a cold pack or a band aid, and we just make sure she's calm before she leaves."

"Yeah, we could do it like that."

"Daryl, 'could' or 'will'?"

"I just—" he squirmed, seeing he had a lit cigarette at the end of his hand already, he couldn't release tension by going through the action of lighting another one. "I mean it's a scary thing to do, to lure someone up here and...I mean it's hard enough to seduce someone, to

just have sex with them, but then to also have to get them to agree to let you actually bite into their neck to where you've bitten into a vein—a big vein—and then they're still supposed to be aroused and have an orgasm while they're bleeding profusely. I don't know if I can be that distracting. And then there's another thing, I feel slightly funny talking about it, but I'm a little on the shy side, and I'm supposed to not only ask someone out, but bring them here and then get them to decide to have sex with me on the first date, and I'll have to undress in front of them, and our bodies will be touching, and you're going to be right in the same room..."

"It'll be exciting. You've seen me with another man—two other men—but I haven't seen you with another woman yet. It's gonna be this incredible turn on for me to watch you and her fucking each other, forgetting about me."

"Yeah, well." He looked unhappily around their brightly lit kitchen. "I mean I'm not Sam, I don't know how to do all these really athletic things."

Sally reached across to touch his forehead. "You don't have to do what Sam does. Whoever we choose, Daryl, they're not gonna wanna be really athletic. We're all going to be drinking, and smoking pot, and lying on the floor, remember? They'll just want to be held, they'll want it to be slow, and gentle. Taking your time. And it'll be lowly lit in there too, don't forget. You can undress right on the floor, roll over into her arms, put it in, and just wait a little while and then start masturbating her. You start kissing her neck, you give her a couple of little love bites there, she'll get real excited. Then maybe you bite a little too hard, it'll probably turn her on even more, and if...she goes 'ouch' or something, you say 'Sorry', you turn it into a joke, you start licking it and you're technically drinking her blood."

She sat back, spread her hands apart, palms up, let them fall back on the table. She looked over at the open window, at the night beyond the screen, as though he were in the room with them. "Then Sam will come back."

"I don't know though who we would choose."

Sally shut the refrigerator door by leaning her back against it. She unfolded the white butcher paper in her hand, pulling out hunks of thinly sliced roast beef, eating them quickly out of her raised palm. "Here's my idea, Daryl." Her black eyes slid sideways, sly, confident. "You know a lot of different women right here in town, right?" Her tongue ran over the fronts of her pink teeth. "Women you work with,

women in the shops, maybe women where you used to live. Now everybody, when they get to know somebody else, or even people they just start talking to, they can tell if that other person is willing to have sex with them or not. Out of all the people you meet chances are it's not going to be a lot, or at least a lot that you're sure of, but you still know. You can tell. Nothing's said, but you know when you're talking to someone if this person would let you make love to them. And you don't do anything about it, but you still file it away. It's always there, the knowledge that this person and that person and that other person, if you made a serious pass at them, they'd take you up on it. Right?"

Daryl fidgeted. "Yeah."

"And they know you know, because they made a point of letting you know in the first place. Maybe they held your eyes a little too long, or smiled a little too long, or looked you over a little too frankly...right?"

He bobbed his head, grinning embarrassedly. "Well, yeah."

"Okay." She came back over, sat down in her chair. "So in this town, who fits that category? Who do you know would fuck you if you asked them?"

"Well...there was that woman at town records. I mean I only talked to her for a minute. Of course, that ended kind of badly..."

Sally made an impatient sideways gesture with her hand. "Getsi Gooner. She'll fuck you."

"Getsi where I work?" He gave it some troubled thought. "I don't really talk to her that much."

"Daryl, I've been to your work, I've seen how she looks at you, and I've seen how she looks at me. She'll fuck you."

He sat back, thinking. "Getsi? You think we should use her?"

"Do you find her attractive?"

"Well...I mean she's nowhere near as—"

"Daryl, let's just cut through all this bullshit, all right?" She picked up a cigarette from the ashtray, relit it. The stream of smoke came out long and hurried. She calmed down, then looked across at him. "Have you ever fantasized about her?"

His hands flapped on the tabletop. "I...may have, once or twice." Daryl checked the expression in her eyes to see her reaction.

"She's got nice legs."

He grinned despite his nervousness. "Yeah, okay, her legs are nice."

"Her breasts are bigger than mine."

"They might be. I haven't really looked at them, you know, that closely."

She studied him. "Have you ever masturbated thinking of her?"

"Masturbated thinking of her?" He lowered his voice. "I...maybe, I might have. Once or twice." He nodded, kept nodding. "A long time ago."

"Do you ever look at her?"

"Now?"

"Yeah. Do you ever look at her and wonder what she'd be like? What it'd feel like to have those 'nice legs' wrapped around you?"

The image she was putting in his mind and the fact that she was made him bolder. He met her knowing eyes. "Yeah. I do."

"Ever...wonder what it would feel like to bury your face in those big breasts of hers, feel her hands on the back of your head, holding your head there?"

He shifted in his chair. "You're talking dirty, but yes."

She leaned forward, hand going under the table, between his surprised legs. Her fingers withdrew from the clothed hardness. "That settles that."

He glanced around their kitchen, the echo of her fingers still felt in his crotch. In a voice neither happy nor sad, he said, "One day we'll be sitting at a table like this somewhere in the lower 48, and there'll be sunlight in the window, and we'll be talking about seed catalogs and PTA meetings, and whether or not we need more milk."

His and Getsi's eyes rose as both employees wished Nancy Costello a good lunch from opposite sides of the aisle.

Daryl usually brought his eyes back to the work on his desk then, but today he lowered his eyes across the aisle into Getsi's. She smiled as if she had always expected him to one-day do that, lowering her gaze with an unexpected demureness.

He had to pee from nervously sipping so much water just prior to Nancy Costello leaving, but he'd put it off, that would be his reward, being able to pee, for having the courage to do this. "Guess Nelson's still sick." It was the only thing he could think to say.

She looked forward across her desk at the empty, weight-deformed swivel chair. "He's not sick, he's just lazy." She looked shyly at Daryl, giggled. "Num nuts."

Daryl laughed back. His laugh ended. Silence. He started a new laugh, trying to think of what to say next. "How'd that—did you ever get your oven fixed?"

Getsi pushed her chair back, put one foot up on the handle of her desk's lowest side drawer, elevating her leg. "My refrigerator?"

"Yeah. Sorry." He grinned like a baboon.

She looked up at the suspended ceiling's large, soft squares. He checked out her slightly raised leg. It was a little heavier than Sally's, but still shapely. Getsi brought her gaze back down, smiled across at him. "No, they never fixed it, the bums." She smiled again.

"They didn't? So what do you do, you know, to store food?" He reached behind him, bringing his glass of water closer. He didn't take a sip yet, wanting to see how long her answer would be. As he turned back to her, her eyes slowly rose from his chest to his eyes again. She smiled. "I went up to Anchorage? And got one of those, you know, what do you call them, a compact one?"

Daryl raised his eyebrows, nodded solemnly. "Oh. So how's that work?"

She looked forward, rotating the sole of her high heel over the wood above the drawer's handle, her skirt's hem slipping back to show more leg. "It works really good. I don't have a lot to put in it, though." She gave him a sideways glance. "Cooking just for one." Another smile. The panic of taking a chance came into her eyes, he could see it, as she let him watch her gaze lower to his chest again, then back up. She tilted her head, probably to get some of the tension out. Her voice was cool and neutral, but a pitch higher. "So what have you been up to?"

"Oh, this and that."

"Looks like you cut yourself shaving."

He touched the bandage over the hole in his neck. "Yeah." He grinned at her, shrugged.

She raised her foot up higher on the desk. Her voice turned flirtatious. "As long as I've known you you've always been this quiet, serious type, but you're really just a silly little boy." She cocked an eyebrow at him, about to add something, then froze silent, happy, as his eyes traveled over her exposed leg. She went on, eyebrow still cocked, voice taunting. "Can't even shave yourself."

Daryl's heart was beating faster from the chance of letting her see him look at her legs. He smiled back at her, feeling happier, lighter that she obviously hadn't minded. "Yeah, I need someone to shave me, I

guess.” He stroked the back of his knuckles over the rough stubble along his jaw, producing a whisper.

He could see Getsi’s confidence growing, and seeing it grow realized he was enjoying talking to her. She let her high heel come back down to the carpet. Her brown eyebrows came together, like Sally’s black ones would. “Are you still living with, I can’t remember her name now, that girl you brought around that time?”

“Huh? Oh yeah, we are.” He held an arm out, slowly flexed the fingers at the end of it. “That’s a pretty blouse you’re wearing. Is it silk?”

She pulled her chin in, looking down at it, using both hands to pinch the blouse on either side of her breasts, stretching the material tighter across her breasts as she examined it. “I don’t know.” She made a sudden hangdog expression. “I doubt it.”

“It’s shiny like that red one you wore on Monday. The one with the chinese design on it?”

She looked up, pleased, still holding the material over her breasts. “Yeah?”

He barely nodded. “Yeah.”

She pushed her chair further back, hesitated, then slowly stood up. She started walking across the aisle towards him, hands open at her sides. Her hips swung slightly. “I wish I could make my own clothes, but I don’t have any talent in that area.”

Daryl didn’t look down at her body as she approached, but he could feel the power of her sensuality. Behind his pants he felt his cock, which had been shyly curled, rotate its head up. He cleared his throat. “You don’t have to sew.”

She stopped about three feet in front of him. Her voice was softer now that she was closer. “I try to dress nicely.” She looked down at her clothes, her high heels unhurriedly rotating in little steps on the carpet until she was faced away from him. Now he could look at her and did, the mystery of her ass beneath her skirt, the way the material clung to the undersides of her cheeks before hanging down, the stockinged backs of her lower thighs, the swells on the backs of her calves. Despite his continued shyness, he felt himself get half hard.

Her rotation continued, until she was facing him again. Saying nothing, her hands went down to smooth her skirt at her hips, his eyes following. She took her hands away from her hips, smiling again at him, looking him in the eye, still silent.

The mutual stare and silence grew.

Knowing she was watching him, he dragged his stare down over her body, electrifying them both, her body coming alive under the clothes wherever his eyes touched, the shelf of her breasts lifting, the hourglass abdomen with the buckled belt hanging a little low in front drawing in, the draped fronts of her thighs shifting with involuntary dance. He looked back up into her face, seeing the brown eyebrows and dyed blonde hair, seeing Getsi, seeing the invitation.

“I—this Friday—why don’t you come over my place—”

She looked away, blushing, frozen smile on her face.

“—and we could have dinner together. Listen to some records. Maybe get high together.”

She looked at the polish on her fingernails, tried pulling her belt taut over her stomach. She’s going to turn me down, Daryl thought with a horrible surge of embarrassment. Her eyes flicked back to him, face composed. “Is your girlfriend going to be there?”

Hope renewed, Daryl shook his head. “She’ll probably be in and out, she might be in the apartment itself, maybe not, maybe in another room, or doing things while we talk and everything.”

She listened, looked down at her high heels. “I’ve been around.” She looked off. “I’ve dated a lot of guys.” Her profile considered that fact for a moment, went on. “I don’t want to get into any kind of weird thing. I mean, if it’s just...you and me, you know.”

“That’s all it would be. Like I said, she may be there off and on, but she wouldn’t be there constantly.”

“She knows I’m coming?”

“Yes.”

“What did you say to her?”

His mind went blank. “I said, I told her that there was this girl at work, of course she knew who you were already, she met you that time, and I said that I was thinking of inviting you to dinner.”

“So what did she say?”

“She said, she told me that she knew that we worked together, that it was okay.”

“She sounds awfully understanding.” She hesitated, then shot him a testing look. “If you were my boyfriend, I wouldn’t let some other girl come over.” She waited for his response.

“Everybody’s different.”

“Yeah, I guess everybody is different. So what time?”

“Seven?”

She smiled, started back to her desk. Stopping midway, she turned around quickly, catching his eyes on her. Another smile. "I was going to ask why you were inviting me, if it was just because we worked together, but maybe I don't have to ask, huh?" She waited, posing in profile with her hands by her buckle, for his answer.

Daryl grinned back at her. "I never asked num nuts."

Later, he heard her on the phone, quietly breaking a date.

When they heard Nancy Costello loudly greet someone down the hall on her way back to lunch, they both looked over at each other, smiling at their secret. Before Nancy Costello would be within earshot Daryl suddenly blurted out, "You've got great legs."

Getsi's head rose up on her neck. She planted her high heel on the edge of her desk top, then impulsively pulled her skirt all the way back, showing him the full length of her thigh, all the way down to her black panties. It was meatier than Sally's, but it gave him a good, old-fashioned, honest hard-on.

Daryl stood sideways at the mirror, observing how his tie fell against his shirtfront.

Sally waltzed into the bathroom wearing a tiny skirt across the tops of her bare thighs, a sleeveless stretch top, no bra, and eye makeup. Her black, glossy hair was brushed away from her face. "Wearing a tie?"

Daryl looked down at it. "Yeah, I thought I would." He looked at himself in the mirror. "I'm not wearing a jacket, though."

Sally bit off another inch of her celery, leaving lipstick on the stalk's new ragged edge, looking from the tie to Daryl's cleanly shaven cheeks. "From what you told me about her, I figured the way I was dressed was more appropriate." Her teeth came down around the celery chunk in her mouth.

There was a woman-shaped shadow on their front door's curtain.

Daryl strode towards the door, Sally hanging back at the kitchen table.

The late afternoon sun was shining in Getsi's face, lighting the plucked eyebrows, the shy, lively eyes, the light rouge along the cheekbones to cover a pimple.

Daryl said "hi", there was an awkward moment where both didn't know if they should kiss, shake hands or do nothing, and then he moved his bulk out of the way so she could come in.

As Getsi passed him, he noticed a tiny gold hoop in her ear lobe.

She turned around once past the doorway. Glanced at his tie, clearly relieved he had worn one. Daryl pushed the door shut behind him, looking her over in a curious, rather than sexual way. Her dyed blonde hair, thinner than Sally's, had been combed into soft waves around her face. Unlike how she usually dressed, she was wearing a tailored white blouse unbuttoned to a discrete point, wide brown belt with a big, square buckle, and a navy blue skirt. The blouse, belt and skirt looked new. The skirt ended at her knees.

She reached out jerkily and touched a finger to his tie. "Nice. Looks real nice."

"You look...that's a really nice outfit."

Getsi touched her hands to her hips, elbows out. "Yeah?" She started looking around. The back of her head stopped in mid-swivel.

Sally walked over from the table, bare arms and legs swinging easily, hips tilting up and down. "Daryl told me you were coming. Glad you could make it." She stopped in front of Getsi, smiled widely.

Getsi stood a forehead taller. Although Daryl had been surprised at how much thinner than usual she looked at the entryway and turning around to face him as he shut the door, next to Sally's sleek body she seemed to gain most of her weight back.

Getsi's brown eyes quickly registered that Sally was beautiful and braless. Her hands jumped to her big new belt buckle, fidgeting with it as she thanked Sally for inviting her. While her lips kept a smile framed around her teeth, Daryl saw Getsi's eyes panickily registering the gorgeous black hair, finely sculptured shoulders, long, slim arms. Her head, erect as Daryl swung the door open, bent forward.

Even the blunder of dressing differently than Daryl and Getsi had worked to Sally's advantage: now it was Getsi who looked like the modest girlfriend, Sally the exciting unknown.

Except she wasn't.

Sally led Getsi over to the kitchen table. Daryl, walking behind, glanced at the backs of Getsi's calves. They looked shapely and vulnerable below the navy blue hem.

Sally sat at one side of the table, Daryl at the other. Getsi picked up a chair by its back, moved it so it was closer to Sally than to Daryl, and sat down. Her smile was discouraged, her eyes looked like she wished she hadn't come. She bent her head forward, massaging her nape. "So, what are we having for dinner?" She didn't look at either of them when she asked, but her face was more in Sally's direction.

Sally, seeing Getsi's eyes were looking down, glanced at her breasts in the tailored white blouse, then across at Daryl, shooting him an impatient look. "What are you and Getsi having, Daryl?"

He talked to Getsi's profile. "I thought we'd have Lobster Newburg. On toast points."

Getsi half-turned towards Daryl. "Sounds ritzy." She faced Sally. "Do you guys buy them live? You're not eating too?"

"I might eat something later on. While you and Daryl eat out here I'll probably do my exercises. Daryl, why don't you pour us all some drinks?"

"You've got a really great figure. I'm always too lazy to exercise." She smiled self-deprecatingly at Sally, who stopped angrily urging Daryl with her eyebrows to get up and smiled back, glancing again at Getsi's breasts. "We bought vodka and orange juice. We can have screwdrivers. Is that okay?"

Getsi brushed the front of her blouse, looking down to see if she had something on it, laughing. "Sure, that's great. Anything you got, long as it's booze."

"We've got pot too, we can smoke some of that later on." She pressed her cigarette into the ashtray, looking through the rising rings at Getsi. "You smoke pot, right?"

Getsi drew her plucked eyebrows together. Her smile faltered for a moment. She shrugged. "Yeah. Sure, I smoke it."

The kitchen table top was crammed with ashtrays, glasses, a toilet paper holder that had been turned into a pipe, crushed and full cigarette packs, a bag of pot, a bottle of fingernail polish.

Getsi held up her right hand, looking at her dark red nails then blowing on them. "I don't know how you can paint them so neatly."

Sally held Getsi's left hand, her head bent forward, black hair spilling over the ashtrays as she concentrated on keeping the thin wet brush on top of the nail.

Getsi swung her head around, to where Daryl was mixing fresh drinks. "So you're not around here, right? I mean Alaska?"

He used the heavy new carton of orange juice to push the empty old one into the sink. "No, I'm from Vermont." He turned around to look at Getsi sitting there at the table, getting her nails done. Their eyes met and they smiled at each other.

Getsi kept her head turned around, facing him. "Vermont's real pretty, I hear. Nice trees. Prettier than these trees." She started to say something to Sally, saw she was concentrating, said it to Daryl instead. "These lodgepole pines they have here?"

Daryl laughed, standing at the sink, not fixing new drinks while they talked. "Yeah."

"They always remind me of—you ever see that movie, either one of you, the Day of the Triffids?"

He pointed at Getsi. "Right. I was telling Sally that once."

"That's what they remind me of. Tall, skinny things with that grey-green mop on top. Look just like triffids."

"That was a good movie."

Getsi nodded. "They remade it, you know. As a BBC production. It was like four or eight hours long. It was a lot better, it got more into the political and social changes the John Christopher novel goes into."

Sally lifted her head to look at the first painted nail on Getsi's left hand. "They made that movie into a book? I'd like to read it."

Getsi shook her head. "Just the other way around." She glanced at Daryl again, dared to laugh at Sally's mistake.

Daryl dared to laugh along.

Daryl sat at the kitchen table with the other two, watching Sally tap the razor blade over and over the small pile of cocaine, thinking, I have to pee.

He got to his feet.

Sally looked up. "Where are you going?"

He flopped his hands at his sides. "I have to pee."

Getsi, face turned towards him, back of her head propped up with a hand that pushed her hair out behind her ears, laughed hoarsely, looking the front of his body up and down. "God, he just announces these things, doesn't he?" She looked the front of his body up and down again, her other hand, with two painted nails on it, flat on the table. "Sure you can find your way?"

He took a step away from the table, spreading his hands out, laughing. "Are you offering to show me?"

"Hey, it's your house, buster." But she looked him up and down again, pleased.

Stomach full of booze, lungs full of pot, nose full of cocaine, Daryl turned around and left the kitchen, the coke speeding him up so that once out of the kitchen he unzipped his pants, halfway across the

living room he reached in, approaching the bathroom door he had his cock in his hand, holding it and moving forward into the bathroom, the open toilet bowl looming underneath, thinking, do I normally pull my cock out this soon?

Getsi pressed an unpainted fingernail to her left nostril, closing it, violently sniffing up. Her eyelashes fluttered, her fingernail gradually let the left nostril breathe again.

She leaned back in her chair, legs stretching out under the table, shoes coming off. She smiled at Sally. "Did we eat the Lobster Newburg yet? Did I already ask you that?"

Sally pushed her long black hair away from her face, left her palm on her forehead. "No."

Getsi picked up her compact from the tabletop, talked to her face in it. "This is kind of a strange evening."

Sally rolled her finger in what was left of the cocaine dust on the table, put it in her mouth. "Like what?"

Getsi put the mirror down, said it to herself. "Well, I come over here because Daryl invited me over, and here's the three of us getting high together—getting drunk, high and coked-up together—and, like...I mean, I can't compete with you. He brought you around that one time, I guess it was when the two of you first started going out and I'll be honest, I thought, well, I stand a chance, I mean you looked real cute but who knew? But now, you're like drop-dead gorgeous." She giggled. "I saw you—when I first saw you when I came over tonight, I just thought, Jesus, give me a fucking break."

"Daryl likes you."

"Yeah, well, I guess the big question is, how much?" Getsi saw her glass was empty, pulled Daryl's over. Her voice was quieter. She tilted her head to herself, raised her eyebrows. "We worked together all this time, but he never asked me out. I always thought maybe part of it was my reputation. I get picked up a lot. I'm sure he's aware of that. There's enough bitches there at the hospital to tell him. Mostly married guys. Usually it ends up in the back of the guy's car, or his buddy's apartment, or inside his store if he's got a store. Most times now it's really not even intercourse, it's just me blowing them. Great life, huh?"

"Do you have a regular boyfriend?"

Getsi brought her feet up on the chair, hugging her legs. "There's this guy I see off and on, between the others." She looked sideways at Sally. "He's a janitor, janitor at the school here in town. He's older

than me, not much to look at. He keeps calling me up though. He's not married. Divorced, three times I think. Two or three times. I broke a date to come here tonight. I've done that before with him, he accepts it." She poked Sally's upper arm. "So what's your story? How come you're letting your boyfriend bring a girl over? Or do I have this really wacko, there's no possibility of romance here, he's just being nice? Or thinks he's being nice."

Sally shrugged casually. "We have an open relationship. I sleep with other guys. He can sleep with other girls."

Getsi laughed, bewildered. "You sleep with other guys? Why would you sleep with other guys when you can have Daryl? I mean he's sweet, he's intelligent..." She shot Sally a coy look. "...I'm sure he's great in bed."

Sally rubbed the top of her head, annoyed. "I don't see what the big deal is."

"Sorry. I guess the real question is, why would Daryl sleep with me when he can have you?" Getsi glanced over and down at Sally's beautiful face, her perfect body.

"Who knows? He apparently wants you."

"My mother said once, this was when I was growing up, you don't have to be the prettiest girl, or the most intelligent, or the funniest...you just have to be new." Her eyes met Sally's.

"Three cheers for your mother."

Getsi put her feet back down, rubbed her thumb under her chin. "He looks at me, you know."

Sally's eyes widened. She picked up a cigarette, clicked a lighter under its end, and couldn't get a flame going. She threw the lighter down. "Does he?"

Getsi's skirt was still bunched-up at mid-thigh. "My legs, mostly."

Sally looked at Getsi's legs, looked at her own.

Getsi lightly flipped her skirt back over her thighs, covering them. "So what's the deal, this is Daryl's opportunity to fuck me? And you're supremely confident there's nothing I can do while I have him in bed that'll make him go home with me and leave you, right? What are you going to do during all this? Watch?" She made a face. "Join in?"

Sally gave a harsh little laugh. "I don't think so." She crossed her bare legs, swinging a foot angrily. "I have my exercises to do."

“So when do I get my shot? After he comes out of the bathroom? What’s he doing in there for so long, anyway?” She raised her eyebrows at Sally.

Sally stood up, smoothing her skirt over her hips. “Stay here, I’ll check.” She started walking around the chairs, banged into one.

Getsi snorted.

Sally stalked out of the kitchen, red-faced.

Daryl was sitting on the toilet with the lid down, smoking a cigarette.

Sally walked in, swung the door shut.

He looked up. “Sorry, just having a smoke.”

Sally went over to him, took the cigarette out of his hand and tossed it in the sink. She put her hands behind his head and pulled his face up against the fronts of her thighs, rubbing his eyes and mouth over them, breathing heavily. His fingers slid up the bare, round flesh, tickling the skin, right hand settling between her legs.

He pulled his face back, surprised. His hand felt again. He grinned. “What’s going on out there? The crotch of your panties are soaked.”

She climbed her crotch onto his nose, rubbing it there, hugging his head. “There’s been a change in plans, Daryl. I’m gonna fuck her.”

He pulled his face away. “Oh, you’re gonna fuck her?”

“Yeah.”

“No, I just thought maybe I missed something.”

Sally’s eyes reddened, tears dropped down. She stood in front of him with her short skirt hiked up over her panties, looking fearfully over her shoulder to make sure Getsi wasn’t coming. “You didn’t tell me you look at her all the time at work. Look at her legs.”

“I told you I’ve masturbated thinking of her. What more do you want?”

“Shhh! She’ll hear you. If you masturbate thinking of her she’s not gonna know that, but if you look at her she’s gonna know.”

“She told you I looked at her legs Wednesday?”

Sally did a double take. “Yeah,” she said quietly. “She told me all about it. What exactly happened?”

Daryl looked at the smoke rising from the sink. “Nothing happened. I just asked her out, and she sat back down in her chair, and—” he suddenly remembered. “Well, I mean we were doing this to get her over, and I, well, I guess I made some comment about her legs, I said she had beautiful legs or something.” He looked up defensively.

Sally angrily wiped the tears off her cheeks. "You told her, you actually said to her that she has beautiful legs?"

"Well what do you do with Sam, I mean you're always mooning over him."

"We both fuck Sam," she hissed. She calmed herself down, looked over her shoulder again. "So what happened when you told her she had beautiful legs?"

Daryl shrugged. "She flipped her skirt back, and showed me her legs." He felt himself getting hard, remembering the moment and knowing Getsi was in their kitchen.

Sally's eyes narrowed. "That bitch is out there right now, challenging me that she's gonna take you away from me." She started weeping helplessly again. "She's not, is she?"

"What's going on out there? When I left, everybody was talking about ponies."

Sally looked at her face in the mirror. "She's threatening to steal you away from me. She wants you, Daryl. She's always wanted you. We should have picked up someone on the highway." She turned on the tap, pushed the smoking cigarette in the sink over to the stream.

Daryl stood up. "Well we picked her. You had two people, Sam and that other guy. Now I get my second person."

Sally pushed her skirt back down over her panties. "I don't see what's so hot about her. Her breasts are big, but she's what? Three years older than me? A has-been. Everybody in town's fucked her already, Daryl. She told me so herself. Even the janitor at the school. That's her boyfriend. Sometimes." She saw the straight-up erection in his pants.

Daryl saw her see it, then fixed his tie. "Maybe everybody else in town has fucked her. But I haven't."

Daryl walked across the living room into the kitchen, Sally following in her short skirt. Her high heel caught on the rug and she toppled forward, falling into an easy chair.

Daryl stopped in front of where Getsi sat in the kitchen. Sally pulled up behind him, teary-eyed with her top twisted sideways.

Getsi saw the erection, saw the tears. She tapped her ash. She ignored Sally, speaking only to Daryl. "So do I leave, or do we dance?"

Daryl put a long-playing record on then straightened up, turning around. His tie swung over his shirt buttons.

Getsi stood in the middle of the living room, near the bed. As Daryl came closer, she raised her arms.

Sally, bare-legged, watched from the sofa as Daryl's hands rested between Getsi's shoulder blades, Getsi's resting on Daryl's shoulders like Sally's used to.

Getsi smiled up at Daryl, lightly running her fingers over his biceps. "I always knew you had strong arms. I could see their outlines in your shirt sleeves."

Daryl made fists behind her back, bulging the biceps under her fingers. He flattened his palms against her spine again, surprised once more at how delicate she felt in his arms. His face dipped closer to hers. He could smell her perfume, her skin, the lotion she had used to wash her hair.

Getsi gently placed her breasts against Daryl's chest, laying her profile under his collarbones. Her eyes coolly stared at Sally. "I thought you had some exercises you wanted to do?"

Sally shook her head stubbornly. "I'm staying here. You can't make me leave."

Getsi arched a silent, mocking eyebrow at her. Holding Sally's eyes, she let her hands move slowly down Daryl's back. As Sally bit her lip, Getsi's hands slid sideways onto Daryl's ass, cupping it. Sally saw the seven painted and three unpainted nails glitter as Getsi squeezed both cheeks.

Now Daryl's hands were moving freely over Getsi's ass, the passion in the caresses hiking the back of her skirt up, showing two inches of thigh immediately above the hollows of her knees. Sally looked tearfully down at her own legs, looked back up at the glimpse of Getsi's thighs.

The four hands were all over the two bodies now, sliding over arms, squeezing breasts and chest, slipping between legs. Both sets of eyes were shut, both mouths oohing and aahing at the other's long-awaited touch here and here and especially here.

Getsi kissed Daryl, rather than the other way around, holding his face in her hands and rising up on tip-toe to bring her mouth fully up to his, twisting his neck sideways, her lips pulling back, the wet, pink tongue sliding between his lips, then sliding out, mouth closing over his again.

Sally heard Daryl start to moan from Getsi's kisses, saw his back arch as Getsi's palm rubbed slowly, knowledgeably up and down the hard cock in his pants. When they broke, Daryl stared wide-eyed at

Getsi, breathing hard, wetting his lips for more. Getsi shot Sally a rival's triumphant look. Sally lowered her head meekly, saw the tears dropping on the tops of her bare thighs, saw her fingers lightly caressing the insides of her bare thighs. No! She thought. She lifted her hands off her thighs, put them on the sofa alongside the thighs. She looked down at her bare legs, wondering how they compared to Getsi's, let them spread apart just a little. Her hands twitched on the cushions outside her legs.

When she looked back up, Getsi was standing several arm lengths in front of Daryl. Holding his eyes, she reached under her navy blue skirt, way up under it, and peeled down her pantyhose. She held it out sideways, let it drop.

Smug smile on her face, head held tall and proud, still holding his eyes, she undid her blouse button by button. Held the blouse out to the side, let it drop.

Hands reaching behind her, she undid the catch at the back of her skirt. Pulled the zipper down. Sally put her hands on her thighs again, but down by her knees. She snuffled.

Getsi let the skirt drop down, exposing her bare legs. She stepped out of the circle of skirt on the floor, thighs flexing.

She reached behind her back, undoing the catch for her bra. As she brought the loosened straps around, the two white cups slid off her breasts. Her breasts were large and slightly low-slung, with over-sized areolas and nipples. She held the bra out to her side, smiled at Daryl, let it drop.

Sally looked down at her own breasts in her stretch top, feeling like a little girl.

Getsi pushed her white panties down, picked them up, and walked over, completely nude, to Daryl. She held the panties up to his face, then gently rubbed them over his features, getting her scent on his eyebrows, his cheeks, his lips. Sally bridled on the sofa, but stayed put.

She watched vacant-eyed as Getsi lifted Daryl's shirt out of his pants, undid the buttons, pushed it off his shoulders, down his arms.

Getsi kissed each of Daryl's nipples, getting a grunt out of him Sally never had, then licked lightly at one while pinching the other. Above her dyed blonde head, Daryl's breath came out in explosive little sighs.

Getsi glanced over at Sally, then slid Daryl's belt out of its buckle. Her fingers nimbly undid the catch to his pants. Holding the zipper tab in thumb and forefinger, she pulled the zipper slowly down,

the vertical bulge of cotton underwear swelling between the metal teeth. One hand caressing Daryl's stomach, making it flutter, other hand still on the zipper, Getsi slid the zipper up and down over the swelling, faster and faster, Daryl's face contracting with pleasure.

Mischievous grin on her face, she knelt in front of him, bringing the pants down his legs with her. Sitting on her haunches she untied his shoes, took them off, then slipped his socks off. Tapping the back of his calves in turn, she got him to lift his legs to get the pants off.

Getsi knelt in front of Daryl, hair swinging to her shoulders behind her, and reached up for his underpants.

Her fingers curled around the top of the elastic waistband.

She crinkled her nose at Sally, a sloppy grin on her face, then pulled the underpants gently down, Daryl's cock rising out, then his balls sliding free.

She pulled the underpants down his bare legs to his stepping feet.

Her hands vined up the sides of his thighs, left hand coming over the front of his thigh, around his hip, to cup his bare ass, right hand rising up behind his balls.

The right middle finger, with its red polish, disappeared to the first joint up inside his asshole. Sally watched the lower joints revolve as the fingertip rolled around beyond the rim.

Getsi looked over at Sally's tear streaked face one last time, then knelt straight up, swung her hair away from her face, moved her mouth directly above Daryl's cock, and rode on her lips all the way down.

Sally watched open-mouthed as the lower two joints of Getsi's finger wriggled up inside Daryl's asshole. Daryl put his hands on the top of Getsi's head, gratefully caressing her hair, his own head back.

Getsi's free hand started caressing up and down Daryl's bare legs. Sally let her own hands start caressing up and down her own legs. She let her fingertips brush over the webbing of panty at her crotch just once, experimentally. It was so soaked it felt like she had pee'd in her pants, though she hadn't. The brushing touch sent jolts down both her legs. No!

Daryl and Getsi were standing now, rubbing the fronts of their bodies against each other, biting each other's shoulders, arms and necks. Getsi giggled suddenly, putting a hand to the side of her neck. The undersides of her fingers came away red. Her eyes were bright, her smile wide. "That's a new one!"

Daryl grinned back, brought both his hands down and around her hips to clasp her voluptuous ass, and attached his lips to her cut.

Getsi's hands climbed up his back in delight, eyes hooding, mouth letting out little cooing sounds as he sucked.

After a moment Daryl stopped. Getsi licked the blood on his lips, then they both opened their mouths wide and licked each other's tongues in midair like two cats.

Getsi fell on her back on the bed, laughing.

Daryl started at her feet, unhurriedly moving his kisses up her calf, switching back and forth between legs when he got to her thighs.

Getsi spread her legs a little further apart, and Daryl greedily buried his mouth up against her cunt, smelling the new smell of Getsi, tasting the new taste of Getsi.

Getsi's head rolled over on the pillow to look at Sally. The look was arrogant. Still staring at Sally, she lifted her legs slightly, clamping the insides of her thighs against Daryl's head. She raised her eyebrows to Sally. "He can't hear me now, because my thighs are over his ears. This time you're present, but you won't be the next time. Or the time after that. Or the time after that. You're never going to fuck him again because he's mine now. Understand, bitch?" She clasped Daryl's head tighter with her thighs, stared right into Sally, and raised her voice. "Understand, bitch?"

Sally started crying helplessly. She couldn't tear her eyes away from Getsi's. Snuffling noisily, she nodded her head.

Getsi gave her a cold smile. "So who's boyfriend is he now? Whose boyfriend?"

Sally raised a weak hand, eyes squeezed shut with tears, and pointed to Getsi.

Getsi looked down at Daryl. "Like I said, he always loved looking at my legs. He must be having fun now." She loosened her legs' clasp around Daryl's head, started lovingly rubbing the insides of her thighs up and down over the clean-shaven sides of his face. Both women watched his hands roam ecstatically over Getsi's flexing thighs.

When Daryl finally lifted his head out from between Getsi's legs, his nose, mouth and jaw were glistening wet. He moved up her body, pushing his rigid cock down towards her cunt. When he had the head in, her legs rose and wrapped possessively around his hips.

He slid forward into her. Both their heads rolled back on their necks at the feel of him in her.

They fucked slowly, easily, as though they had been fucking each other all their lives. Both kept coming out of their personal pleasure with the fucking to grin at each other, like they couldn't believe they

were finally getting to fuck each other. After a long while Getsi dropped her legs off Daryl, spreading them wide to take him all the way in. Daryl touched his hand between her legs, found her clitoris, and started gently massaging it. Getsi shut her eyes happily, a contented smile on her face, arching her chin as his strokes slowly brought her up. Her hands landed on his wide shoulders, his hairy legs pumped more rapidly between her shivering smooth legs, and with a sudden gasp she banged her cunt up against his pubis, slapping it up over and over as her orgasm rang up and down her limbs.

When hers was finished, she rolled him over onto his back, and lowered her cunt down over his cock. Sally watched Getsi's broad woman's ass flatten repeatedly against the tops of his thighs, saw his thick cock's ridged underside shoot up and down into her.

Getsi turned around suddenly on Daryl so that she was facing away from him.

Facing Sally.

With a smirk on her face she kept riding his cock, pumping it in and out of her, slamming her ass on his stomach. She raised her hands up behind her head, elbows out, so her breasts waved heavily with each thrust up and down.

A lost look on her face, Sally pulled her panties off, spread her legs apart, reached between her bare thighs, and started roughly masturbating herself. Her eyes stared at Getsi's shapely legs resting on Daryl's, then at Daryl's long, hard cock sliding tan between white, then rose to Getsi's beautiful, swaying breasts, her mocking eyes. When she reached the eyes, the cold, brown, knowing eyes, Sally's stayed riveted on them until her legs bucked around the most powerful orgasm she had ever had.

She looked down between Getsi and Daryl's legs. Thick rivulets of sperm were rolling down the dark underside of Daryl's cock. Getsi's brunette bush, hitting Daryl's black bush with each slowing pump, had beads of his sperm belled in it.

Sally waited in their apartment while Daryl walked Getsi down to her car. He was down there about an hour.

When he came back up, he avoided her eyes, stretched his arms out and said he was going to bed.

Sally ran over to him, got down on her knees in front of him.

He went to brush her hand away from his zipper. "I'm really tired, Getsi. Sally, I mean."

She got his pants down. She looked up at him from his waist. "I don't want to fuck you." She bowed her head. "I can't fuck you now. I just want to put your cock in my mouth while I masturbate." She pulled his cock out, slid her hungry lips over it.

Daryl instinctively put his hands on the top of her head, looking down at her with surprise. "You want to suck my cock?"

She took his cock out of her mouth, shaking her head. "No, no. I don't want to suck your cock. I want to taste your cock." She put his cock in her mouth again, hand snaking between her legs, tongue drifting dreamily down around the dried skins of vaginal juices stuck to Daryl's soft cock.

In their home, in their kitchen, by the sink, naked, lipstick'd, Sally ran water. The column hit inside the colander at a slant, vibrating the green beans.

The kitchen door stickily unsealed. Daryl passed behind the panes, shutting the door, shooting a glance at Sally as she turned her breasts and cunt towards him, then choosing to look at the floor.

Sally rubbed the tip of her nose with a knuckle. In a small voice she said, "You're late."

"Yeah." He took his sports jacket off, quietly laid it across the top of a kitchen chair. "Sorry." He shrugged. He looked around at the appliances, nervous.

Sally walked into his body, hands going to his shoulders, lips going up to his, but then moving off without a kiss, touching the side of his neck instead, nostrils filled with the sharp smell of another woman's cunt, eyes big, dark and glistening.

She touched his arm as if unsure she still had the right to, then got down on her knees. Daryl pushed at the top of her head, but she got his pants down anyway. And his underpants.

His balls were bigger than his cock. His cock was slack between his balls, caked with crinkles.

She looked up unhappily at him. "She fucked you, huh? At work? How'd she do that?"

Daryl hung his head. "At lunch. After work."

"So how many times?"

"Six."

"So you're drained now, right? You can't get hard?"

"Maybe tomorrow."

"Maybe like, lunchtime tomorrow? So she can fuck you again and drain you again to keep you in this cycle where she gets your hard cock all the time and I don't get it at all anymore?"

"I don't know." He shuffled in his pulled-down pants over to the kitchen table, sat down. He looked as sad as Sally. "Tonight, I—we went to her apartment. I told her I loved her."

"Yeah?" Her face collapsed, then pulled together again almost the way it had been before. "When was this?"

"While we were making love. The fifth time."

"What did she say?"

A tear trickled down his cheek. "She said she loved me."

They sat silently, he in the chair, Sally on the floor. She finally sighed. "When Sam comes, this'll all get straightened out. We had to go to bed with someone, that was what he wanted—" She looked up suddenly at him. "Did you drink her blood tonight?"

Daryl shifted uneasily. "A little. Some."

She stared darkly at him. "She didn't drink any of your blood."

His hands moved around. "I gave her a little, out of the hole." He touched the side of his neck, tenderly. "Just a little."

"Daryl, you have to be careful what you're doing! We don't know how that'll affect someone else. This is for us, it's not for her. It's special. It's going to make us be able to do things normal people can't." When he didn't reply she asked, "Didn't she think it was odd, you drinking her blood and her drinking yours?"

"No." He shrugged. "It turned her on." He looked down at his lap, raised an eyebrow. "She's starting to get a hole now. A little one, now."

Sally got up on her knees, angry. "Daryl, don't be doing that! She's not supposed to have the blood—the blood is for you and me only. We're gonna live forever, and have a really nice house all by ourselves, and children, and everything else, and she's not a part of that! That's for you and me only!"

Daryl looked off, didn't say anything.

"Daryl?"

He scratched his bare knee. "You see the thing is, it's different with her. There's not all this Sam stuff mixed up with her. She didn't let herself get slapped around by him for nine nights, or get debased into doing dog tricks for him, shit like that. She's normal. She wants a normal fuck, a normal, quiet evening at home eating and talking about books maybe, or listening to some music. She has plants in her

apartment, they're all over the place, they make it look really nice, she grew them from potatoes."

Sally spat her words into his face. "I didn't debase myself with him for nothing. I did it for us. We've got thirty thousand dollars in the bank now because I let him do those things to me." Her face shivered, shaking tears down on her cheeks. "You're being unfair!"

He sat back, away from her spittle. Looked at her. "You didn't do it just for us, the money. You did it because you wanted to, too. He reached something inside you. You let him reach it. You let him pull it out into the open."

Sally got off her knees, stalked over to the sink, banged the water off. She whirled around. "You don't think she would? Do you honestly think she'd be able to stop him from plowing right through her? And love it, Daryl?" She folded her arms over her breasts.

"That's it. That's what I mean. You do love it. You do love getting fucked over by him. He changed you to love it. Got inside and rerouted everything while you lay there letting him. And now you can't change back."

She talked nastily to him over her folded arms. "You're immune though, right?" Her lips shrugged down, she looked up at the ceiling, spoke airily. "Strong old Daryl, he went through all those changes with Sam, but now he's been able to bend himself back. He's all straightened out now, all by himself." Sally put a hand on her hip, raised both eyebrows at him. "Why I'll bet that it wouldn't turn him on at all now to think of Sam between the beloved Getsi's legs, watching that lean ass of Sam's bob up and down between Getsi's thighs, making her ooh and ah and start grunting like a big, soft pig."

"Stop it!" Daryl clamped his hands over his ears. "Don't give me that idea, that hadn't occurred to me!"

She stalked over, hands spread out dramatically. "Sam's hard chest rubbing against those big breasts of hers, then maybe squeezing her breasts until she starts crying 'cause it hurts so bad, but letting him keep squeezing? Discovering, gee, I had no idea how goddam good that could feel. Then maybe she'd be turned on enough to let him start doin' other things to her. Like maybe letting him punch her cunt? While he fucks her? Ooh, can you picture those long, beautiful thighs of hers shivering with each punch, wanting to close after each one but I don't know, maybe I'll let him punch me there just one more time, one last, final time 'cause it does feels good, as a matter of fact, it feels

damn good, it feels so goddam good I'm gonna come all over his knuckles any second."

She walked, feet on either side of the chair, past his knees to above his lap, then settled her cunt down triumphantly over his hard cock. Her pumps were slow, careful. "Bite my neck, Daryl. Bite it."

He feasted on her blood, pulled away with dilated eyes and a messy mouth.

Sally fed on the side of his neck, tendons flexing in her throat as she drew deeply.

She sat facing him in his lap, still slowly fucking him. Grinned at him, blood all over her teeth and lips. "You want Getsi, Daryl? Why not?"

Her breasts swelled, until they were large and pendulous, swaying heavily with each downward sit in his lap. Her waist thickened slightly, her legs grew longer, fuller. The long black hair pulled up off her breasts until it hung only to her shoulders, where it lightened to dyed blonde. The last part that changed was the face. One moment it was Sally's face on Getsi's body, and then the cast shifted subtly, you could still see a trace of Sally in the forehead and chin, then that was reshaped and it was Getsi looking down at him with her paler eyes, her more patrician nose, her wider mouth; Getsi sitting in his lap fucking him.

Sally kept her own voice. "Now you've got Getsi, Daryl. Like you can have any woman—or man—you see or imagine. Like I can. So now..." the voice changed, became Getsi's, "...who do you want to make love to me, Daryl? You? Or Sam?"

No, he thought. Don't think of it. Don't. His thighs lengthened, hardened, lightened. Stop it. Don't find out. Picture her and me. Her and only me. His chest grew more muscular, his cock started rising up inside her, making her moans burst out. No. Throatier. No. Noisier.

He pushed a finger up between her soft cheeks, letting the thin ridges of shit inside her act as lubricant. Yes. All the way. Turn into him all the way. That's what I want to see. That's what turns me on. Her face with his cock in her.

He grabbed the meat of her hips on either side and lifted her off his cock, pulling her in mid-air closer to his chest, lowering her until her asshole was right above the head of his cock.

Getsi put her hands on Sam's shoulders. "Wait. I—" She looked down between her legs at his thick cock, flustered. "You're too big, Sam."

Daryl pursed his lips. "Shhh." He lowered her hips until her asshole touched the top of his cock. Her thighs shifted, a look of panic in her eyes. "Sam, I'm serious, this isn't a good idea."

Daryl's lips curled up. "Shhh." He let her hips lower, feeling the small hole offer resistance, then dilate inwards.

Getsi grabbed his shoulders, swallowing. "You're scaring me."

His cock, coated with the wetness from her cunt, slid a cramped inch up her hole, until the head was buried inside. The grip was much tighter than her cunt could ever be. He lowered her asshole further down his cock, feeling the rounded ring of her sphincter stretch the skin of his cock as it passed down its length.

Getsi clung to Sam's shoulders, holding her thighs stiffly out of fear of rupturing something inside her if she dared move.

Eyes glittering, he brought his cock all the way up inside her.

Getsi cried out, squeezing his shoulders hard enough to redden them. "Don't move it! Please, Sam!"

"It's all the way up now. Feel it?"

Getsi blinked rapidly. Her face and breasts and belly were sweaty. "It's extremely painful. Would you take it out, please?"

"Just a sec. Let your asshole settle around it, get used to having it in."

Getsi held herself still, looking down at her right hip. Daryl could feel her weight in Sam's lap, could feel her sphincter spasming around Sam's incredible cock.

Gradually, her breathing became more regular. The front of her body dried. The balls of her feet slid forward on the kitchen floor, letting her knees lower, letting her asshole settle all the way down around the black-haired base of Sam's cock.

She raised her head, swung her hair away from her face, away from the paler eyes, the more patrician nose, the wider mouth. She gave him an up and down look. She could have said she didn't like it, or that she wanted him to turn into Daryl again. Instead she said, "I've never been fucked up the ass before." Through Sam Daryl saw her pale grey eyes steady on him, saw the thrill of trespass in them, the hunger for surrender he had never seen in those pale grey eyes when he watched them with his cock in her. The wide mouth parted, Getsi's voice came out softer, huskier, more womanly than it had ever been in his and Sally's bed, in the hospital's file room, in her plant-filled apartment with its doorless refrigerator. "What do I do?"

For the next forty-five minutes she kept her soft arms around his neck, her contented profile at his chest, almost as though she were sleeping in her mother's embrace, her tall spine twisting sinuously, her asshole slowly riding around the bottom two inches of his cock, keeping the looping spiral unhurried until the final moments when her long, full, beautiful thighs snapped up and clasped the sides of Sam's hips. Through the skin of Sam's hips Daryl experienced by the strength of her legs' embrace the power of Getsi's orgasm, felt without wanting to, in the way Getsi's thighs rubbed ecstatically against Sam's hips, her love.

Afterwards, Daryl and Sally again, Sally asked if he were going to fuck Getsi in real life anymore.

He shook his head. "But I'd like to have you still turn into her occasionally, if that's okay."

Sally smiled happily. "Oh, sure. As a matter of fact, I'd like you to turn into her sometimes too." Her eyes drifted left. "She did turn me on." She looked back at him. "Maybe later on, after Sam leaves, we could both turn into her."

Daryl brightened. "Then she can fuck herself."

They both laughed, loudly, teeth still bloody.

Daryl and Sally ate their second dinner around midnight. A roasted chicken each, a plateful of ham sandwiches, two frozen lasagnas, and a couple of cans of chili. They washed it down with a quart of vodka each, drinking straight from the bottle, pushing ice chips down the narrow neck, swirling the bottles in their right hands.

Sally sat back in her kitchen chair, looked down at her slim abdomen. "It's amazing how much we can eat now without ever putting on weight. Plus get high without getting drunk." She looked up at the clock. "Sam should be here soon."

Daryl stood at the sink, washing his palms and fingers. He didn't say anything until he had a towel in his hands. "Of course, if for any reason he doesn't come—I mean, we do have the power now ourselves. We don't really need Sam anymore."

Sally gave an irritated laugh. "Don't need him? Daryl, we're only halfway there. What we have now, we want it to last forever. We've got the power now, but we don't have it forever yet. That's the next step."

He flopped back in his chair, grabbed a pack of Winstons. "So what's he going to do now? Come over here like some kind of encyclopedia salesman and try to sell us immortality?"

"He doesn't have to sell me."

He blew out smoke, looking sad. "Sometimes I wish we never met him. Sometimes I wish we just went our own way, watching TV together and eating at the Open 'Til Eight pizza shop." He looked over at her. "We've really changed. Me watching him fuck you in that motel and getting such a perverse pleasure from it—there is that in me, but...I liked it better when it was just the two of us, going to the drive-in and me nervous about how I was going to seduce you."

Sally gave a surprised smile. "The point is, Daryl, it never was just the two of us." She gestured with her head towards the living room.

Daryl turned around in his chair.

Sam stood in the middle of the room, naked.

Sally rose. "How'd you get in? How long have you been there?"

He walked over, kissed Sally on the cheek, kissed Daryl on the forehead. "Like you said, I've always been here."

"Who are you and who are we?" Daryl asked. The three of them were sitting on the living room floor by the bed.

Sam looked at the back of his hand. "You're the chosen." He looked at Daryl, then Sally. "Chosen by me."

Daryl absently tapped his cigarette, paying close attention to Sam's words. "According to what criteria?"

Sam shrugged. "I can see all over the world. Unlike you, at least at this point, I don't see only in a straight line. If there's a wall in my way, I can bend my sight to see along the wall to a window, then out the window to continue seeing even further. Last night, while the two of you were seducing the girl, I went up to the top of the Eyebrow Mountains, and I looked south. I saw people all the way down, from Juneau to Washington State, California, Mexico, Argentina; then up the other side through Australia, Korea, China and Russia, then over the top of the globe until I was staring at the back of my own head." He looked from one to the other. "I can see everything. And as I look, I choose."

Daryl persisted. "But according to what?"

Sam showed his teeth. "Sweetness."

"That's it?"

He nodded.

“What exactly do you mean by—”

“Most people are ordinary. They’re not bad, they’re not unusually good, they just go about their lives until they die. Some of them have brilliant minds; some of them jump into rivers to save strangers from drowning. But every so often around the world, a child is born who is especially sweet. The breath of God stays inside them as they grow up. They may lose their way in life, or they may not, but everyone they meet is somehow touched by them, made better by them. They’re the ones you remember from your past, even if your encounter with them only lasted a few minutes. And they don’t know themselves fully that they have this quality, but everyone recognizes someone who is like that when they meet them. Mixed up though they can sometimes be, they are the closest Man can come to angels. Those are the ones I look for, when I look around the world.”

Sally spoke. “Are you saying that’s us?”

Sam shook his head. “Not both of you. Only you.”

She touched her chest. “Me?”

He nodded.

She looked at Daryl, her eyes getting red. “Daryl’s a really good, really nice man.”

“Sorry.”

She screwed up her face. “Then why—I mean, the way we’ve figured it, Daryl and me both, but Daryl’s the one who did most of the thinking on it, is that you’ve been messing around with us all our lives. Not just me, but him too. Why would you be in his life too if you’re saying now that he’s not like me?”

Sam looked bored. “What I’m saying is that I chose you, and I chose Daryl because I knew that one day you would choose him.”

“You can’t see into the future though, can you?”

“No. But I’ve seen so many millions of people, watched them live their lives from cunt to grave that I can tell how their lives are going to turn out. That’s all life is, just a passage from a hole in a woman to a hole in the world. And I knew that if I changed you a certain way over the years, and then changed Daryl here a certain way over the years, when the two of you did meet, you would both be changed to the right degree for each of you to want the other. It’s a process of tilting lives to line them up with each other.”

Daryl interrupted, looking put off. “So what are you, some kind of matchmaker?”

Sam shook his head again. "It was purely for selfish reasons. I wanted Sally."

"Then why not just get her yourself? Why go through me?"

Sam's grin was wolfish. "That's it. Sally was too pure, even with my changes. She still would have rejected me." He leaned into Daryl's face. "But. I knew she wouldn't reject you, the poor, shy, bookworm; and I also knew that you wouldn't reject me."

Daryl stretched his legs out angrily. "You used us. From birth."

"Not from birth, in this case. I actually didn't spot Sally until she was three. An afternoon when she was playing with lettered blocks, looking over her little shoulder as her parents left to visit her mother's sister. Then it took a while to pick you for her. But yes, I did use you."

"What gives you—"

"But if I hadn't crept into your lives, the two of you would never have met." He raised his eyebrows at them.

Daryl and Sally looked at each other.

"Remember the two impatiens I showed you? The one that was flourishing but predictable, the other that was stunted but far more complex?"

"Because of the caterpillar you put in it."

"Right. I was telling you then what our relationship is. I'm the caterpillar."

They both shivered.

Sam lit a cigarette. "To understand each of your lives, you have to imagine a stretch of beach. Up ahead, the sand is smooth, gentle waves washing over it. Behind you, there are two tracks of footprints in the sand. One track has been made by you, as you've moved forward in your life. The other track is me, walking beside you in life like an invisible man. And at the hardest times of your life, when you've faced the personal crises in your life, you'll notice that there's only one set of tracks. That isn't because I left you." He looked from one to the other again. "Those are the times I climbed onto your back to feed on you, to create the crises. To make sure you choose the path I wanted for you."

Daryl exploded. "What gave you the right—"

"I gave myself the right, Daryl. If you have the ability, you have the right. That's the way it works."

Daryl looked at Sally. "What if we said right now we want you out of our lives? Sally and I have already met, we don't need you for

that anymore. You can even take away these powers you gave us. We'll go back to being regular people."

Sam laughed, cruel eyes squinting. "Do you want that? Do you want to be just part of humanity again?" He made a flourish with one big hand, laughing, shaking his head. "Let me tell you a story. I was traveling through a land with probably the shitiest soil in the world. It shouldn't even be called soil. The people there were starving, but they were too stupid to leave. They looked like skeletons. You could actually see through their skin where the bones articulated with each other. These people would spend the early mornings out on the ground, trying to plant seeds. Know where the seeds came from? Weeds. They ate weeds. The whole group of them would be out there, on their hands and knees, skin-covered skeletons trying to feebly scratch a line in the soil with sticks. They had no tools. They'd drop a weed seed into the line they had managed to draw in the ground. Since there was no water, they had to spit on the seed to give it moisture to germinate. Then they'd put the dust back over the seed and shamble down a foot to do the next one. That was their whole lives: stick, seed, spit. And nothing ever grew. Their group kept getting smaller and smaller. The oldest one looked about ninety, his face all wrinkled up, his hair gone. He wasn't even out of his fucking teens.

"So here I am walking past them, and off to one side I see this baby on the ground, left by himself. And this baby has this beautiful, gem-encrusted piece of jewelry hanging from the bottom of his nose—this was a land where the extremely rich pierced their noses and wore jewels dangling over their upper lip. But even then, none of them had anywhere near the size of the piece of jewelry this little baby did, out in nowhere. It fucking sparkled. Rubies, emeralds, sapphires. I moved closer because I had to know why these fucking stupid people were dying out here under the sun when they had a piece of jewelry worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. I had to know what was so special about this one baby.

"And as I moved closer, I saw what it was and couldn't stop laughing. The 'jewelry' was a swarm of flies, big blue, red and green flies, feeding off the snot seeping out of the baby's nose. That's what was so special about the baby—it was dying. That's what humanity is. Food for flies."

Sally wiped her eyes. "Are you Satan?"

"No. I was down here already when Satan fell. When Satan fell it was from a height so high He broke apart into millions of little pieces that could never be put together again, just like Humpty Dumpty."

Daryl asked, "Do you mean that literally? Where are the millions of little pieces now?"

Sam waved around the room. "Everywhere. The millions of little pieces are humanity."

Sally blinked. "We're Satan?"

Sam nodded. "But don't be too upset. Satan has a bad reputation, but that's only because of mankind's self-hatred. Remember, He was an angel once. He had some good. There's no good in me."

Daryl shifted on the floor. "So what exactly are you asking us to do now?"

"I'm not asking you to do anything. I'm offering you eternal life."

"In exchange for what?"

"Betrayal. You betrayed an innocent person by being willing to seduce her and drink her blood. Now you have to betray each other. Each other's love."

Sally's eyes went wide. "How?"

Sam smiled, showing his teeth. "How? The ultimate betrayal." He put his hands around her neck. "Daryl, who loves you, has to strangle you. To death."

Daryl snorted. "How's that going to give her eternal life?"

"You'll see."

"Then she comes back to life and strangles me?"

"That's not necessary. All that's necessary is the betrayal. That's all the two of you have to agree to and do. Then you both live forever, you do anything you want, you have incredible power. You never grow old. You never have to worry about who will die first, or if you're getting a cavity, or cancer, or how you're ever going to be able to get enough money. No more heartaches, toothaches or backaches. I'm offering you both absolute freedom." Sam inclined his head to one side. "Or, you could decide against what I offer, and go back to your regular lives. Both of you want to travel, but you'll never make enough money to see Europe or Asia or probably even the lower 48 again. The money I gave you will run out soon. If you buy a house you'll suffer the pain of losing it because you can't keep up with the expense of it. You'll both put on weight again. Daryl, your teeth will get worse, and eventually over the years you'll probably lose some. Maybe even in

front. You like his smile now, Sally—how will you like it when it's gap-toothed? You'll still love him, but won't the gap-toothed smile be a constant reminder of how things could have been? Of all you've had to do without?"

Sam stood. "I'll be back tomorrow night for your decision. Either way, you won't see me again after tomorrow."

Daryl put his hand on the knob, turning it, opening the door, opening a passage between the dark outside and the bright inside, the door creaking as the opening widened until the tall portal was fully rectangular.

He and Sally stood with their backs to the portal, looking back into the reaches of their apartment, like looking back into their past.

Daryl's first thought was, we should have done more. The walls were blank, the covers at the foot of the unmade bed plain brown, the curtains on the windows the ones that had come with the apartment. But then he saw their decorations: the multi-cornered stacks of half-price paperbacks at either side of the bed, the crumpled cigarette packs scattered like colorful origami on the carpet, the smudges of their hands on the soft, white walls. He remembered them in their bathroom, getting ready for work in the mornings, Sally under the showerhead, her black-lashed eyes closed, her hair like kelp, soap spilling from her shoulders, the stereo playing in another room, the water in the sink lifting the black flecks of facial hair. Talking in the morning about the evening. Before Sally, evenings were short, evenings were eating, reading, going to bed. He remembered them here in their kitchen late in the evenings, near midnight, dinner stopped in pots and pans for another drink, another story, another thing to share in the night. Although I've seen your face illuminated by sunlight, firelight, starlight, no light have I seen your face in more than electric light, beneath the overhead light in our messy kitchen, all burners going, above the lamp on your side of the bed, the light coming from behind around the side of your face, softening it, shadowing your large eyes, putting into relief, like making it bigger, your quick smile, beside the bulb in the bathroom mirror, your eyes bulging, lips slack, tongue spilled out as you brush your teeth.

Sam met them in town in his black Cadillac. Daryl and Sally stood on the sidewalk smoking, making small talk, Daryl holding a knapsack, when the car slid up and the window slid down. From

inside, the face tilted up and out, black hair, blue eyes. "Do you want to live forever?"

They drove out of town all in front, Sally in the middle. She kept her hands in her lap. Sam steered in silence, one hand draped over the top of the wheel, the windshield wipers swishing through their arcs intermittently. Beads of rain clung to the side mirror outside Daryl's shut window; he watched in its reflection as passing cars' headlights momentarily crowded out the blackness.

They drove south on Seward Highway until they reached the town of Seward itself. The Cadillac moved slowly through the few streets, past the trailers and small houses, down towards the shore. White-wall tires crunched and popped across an empty parking lot of pebbles, coming to a rest against a strip of shaggy grass at the edge of the lot. Beyond the grass was the water.

Snaked at a height above the water's dark surface, held up by trusses, was a huge, black pipe. It ended in the middle of the bay.

Daryl turned to Sally, smiling. "That's the end. Of the Alaskan pipe line."

"Oh."

Daryl looked past Sally at Sam. "So what do we do now?"

The three of them got out of the Cadillac. The rain had stopped, or else it hadn't rained this far south. High up in the night sky, far above the mountains and clouds, the moon shone brightly, about to witness another moment of history down on Earth. The old Chinese legend came to Daryl, that rabbits clean the moon.

The three of them walked, Daryl and Sally together, Sam to one side, over to the strip of grass. Closer, it was wider, wide enough to lie down on.

Sam took the cigarette out of his mouth. "Do it here."

Sally kept looking at Sam; Daryl looked around.

Sam shook his head. "No one will see you. No one will disturb you."

Daryl glanced around again. "There's a restaurant over there. It's darkened, but what if there's a clean-up crew, or—"

Sam dropped the cigarette, stepping on it. The dark waters of the bay continued lapping unseen against the edge of where they stood. Sam raised his face. In the high moonlight the flesh had the appearance of cold, smooth marble. Even the eyes were pale, as though belonging to a bust unearthed hundreds of feet below the ground. "You want to know if I have the power?"

Daryl and Sally looked away.

Sam walked across the pebbles, across the grass, stepping into the bay. A few feet away from the shore he turned, facing them. His voice was quiet, but it carried. "I'll show you I have the power."

He stood knee-deep in the water, in the moonlight, sides of his face flexing and popping as he emitted clicks and hoots and whistles and growls.

Behind them, at the other end of the lot, they heard treads on the pebbles. Daryl and Sally turned around. The Cadillac's headlights cut across the lot, making the far side dimmer. The treads kept approaching from far away, getting nearer the two suspended beams from the headlights. Pebbles were being trod on all along the width of the lot, approaching them.

Under the beams brown and grey shapes appeared, passing over the pebbles. Some came willingly, others jerked across the small, loose stones, but all moved forward, towards them.

As the shapes came closer, into the moonlight, Daryl relaxed. It's only dogs. It's only cats.

The carpet of animals moved slowly closer. Sally gasped. "Look, Daryl! Look! Squirrels and rabbits and there's coyotes over there and oh God, look at the wolves, Daryl, look how big they are!"

He looked from one edge of the lot to the other. Thousands of them. Tens of thousands of them. He must be pulling them from the neighborhoods, the hills, the mountains.

Something big shuffled into the beams, cutting off their ends. As it passed through, in the backlight from the beams Daryl saw the tall, ragged outline of a moose, its antlered head swaying sideways, trying unsuccessfully to make its hoofs stop stepping closer.

There was wonder in her voice. "Look up, Daryl!"

High in the night sky dozens of eagles wheeled helplessly under the clouds. From all sides of the dark dome more were being pulled into the circle, some backwards.

A rumble sounded out in the bay, under the surface. Again it sounded, like submerged thunder. The bay rose up in its center, ten feet, twenty feet, the water sliding away from the rounded blackness of its rise like rainfall. From the top of the rise a stream of water shot straight up. Music like from the largest, loneliest violin drifted plaintively across the bay. The white underside of the whale slapped down on the dark surface. Sam stood further out in the bay, the reflection of his trousers across the surface making it seem as though he

were standing on stilts, his head back, the teeth in his mouth gleaming as he jerked the helpless whale closer and closer to him. When its glossy black head loomed directly beside him, Sam turned towards the shore. "I have the power."

Back on the shore, his teeth went into each of their necks, Sally's first. When Sam's mouth withdrew from Daryl's hole, Daryl blinked and swayed. "This is more than you've given us before." He turned around in a dazed circle, seeing everywhere haloes and auras.

Sam stepped into his vision. His voice was neutral. "I'm going to walk along the shore. I'll know when you're finished."

They watched him stroll off until he was just a small, dark patch between the shore and the water.

Sally looked down at the grass. "I guess this is it." She looked back up at him. He couldn't tell if she wanted to do it or not. He reached a hesitant hand out, touched her cheek. "Are you sure?"

She hunched her shoulders. "Now that we're actually here...I had my doubts. But." She leaned against him, looking up into his eyes before talking to his buttons. "I love you. I honestly love you. I don't want there to come a time when one of us is dying and the other's still healthy. Or you get a call or I get a call that 'there's been an accident, Mrs. Putnam'". Although her eyes were filled with tears, she smiled at using his name to refer to herself. She shrugged in his arms. "I like being young. I like the way my body looks when I take my clothes off for you. If there's a way to make that last—forever—I want it. Who knows how many other couples there are around the world living forever?" Her eyes searched his. "Don't you want to be one of them? No more worries, no more pain. Just a beautiful, peaceful weekend that never has a Monday at the end of it. Ever."

They undressed each other, standing up. When both were naked they stood back, looking at each other in the moonlight. It reminded him of that first time, after the drive-in, after hitting the moose.

They lay down on the grass together. The blades felt cool and soft under their bodies. Daryl reached over for her, putting a hand on her temple like he had so many times before, drawing her closer, drawing her against him. He kissed her forehead, feeling her warm breath on his jaw, kissed the bridge of her nose, making her laugh.

When it felt right, she rolled over onto her back, and he moved between her legs. Looking down at her, her eyes seemed simpler, her mouth smaller. "Who do you want to be this time?"

"Ourselves." She smiled self-consciously.

Daryl nodded. "I was hoping you'd say that." He brushed her long, black hair to one side. "Sometimes it's hard for me to picture your face in my mind. I see it more than any other, but when I'm away from you the features blur. Even when we're together, your face seems to change. Sometimes it's beautiful, truly beautiful; sometimes it's pretty or even plain. I've never felt so close to anyone before—I doubt I ever could again—but every once in a while when we're together I'll feel a sudden aloneness and I'll look over at you on your side of the car while we're talking and I'll realize that as close as we are, we're still two different people. It disappoints me, sometimes it scares me—it makes me feel like I've let you down to feel separate."

Sally reached up, wiped the tear from his eye. "I know. Thanks."

They started making love, looking at each other. After a while Sally closed her eyes, turning her head to one side. Her pupils moved slowly under their lids. When a few minutes had passed, Daryl reached his hand down, finger finding her clitoris. He rubbed the top pad of his finger over it, not passionately fast, not teasingly slow, just at a normal speed. His cock, her cunt continued coupling at a relaxed rate, neither one wishing to tire the other one out, enjoying the shared familiarity of this experience. At one point she held onto her raised ankle, and he knew that her leg was starting to feel cramped. He rubbed a little more firmly against her clitoris, to bring her orgasm closer. The bottom of her nose started twitching—he could tell she had an itch. With his left hand he rubbed across the nostrils. Keeping her eyes closed, she smiled her thanks.

When she was close, she groped for his left hand and placed it at her throat. Her eyes opened for a moment, her black, wide eyes, and then they shut again.

He put his thumb on one side of her windpipe, his four fingers on the other. He started to squeeze, the whole time continuing to rub her clitoris. He could feel her body tensing, but he wasn't sure if it was because of an approaching orgasm or because she could no longer breathe. The back of his left hand started to ache from the effort his thumb and fingers were making. It started to burn.

Her hips lifted up suddenly, and he felt the rhythmic contractions around his cock. He came on top of her orgasm, lifting his head, grinning down at her. Her eyes were open again, staring straight up. Her hips banged up into his a few more times, then settled down. The last spasm of his orgasm went into her.

He pulled his hand away from her throat, the five fingers still tipped together.

"Sally?"

Her hand was still holding his bicep, like she always did. He moved his arm. The hand fell away.

Still in her, he lowered his face to hers, letting out a sob. Again he brushed her long, black hair to one side, then kissed her. The movement of his lips on hers made hers slackly part, so that he was kissing her teeth instead. They felt cold.

He held her left wrist up, looking at the tiny-linked gold-plated chain on it. Her mother had given it to her; he remembered her telling him that one night in their apartment soon after they first moved in together. He looked at the chain, then he looked at her wrist, how small it was, how perfect, then he looked over his shoulder, his face eyebrows and trembling mouth. The look on his face was a request for reassurance.

Sam stood behind him.

Daryl sniffed noisily. "Can we stay to watch her come back?"

Sam shook his head.

Daryl wiped at his eyes, his voice shaking. "I'm worried that before she comes back a wolf might get at her, or a dog, or..." He started crying again.

"I control all animals, remember?"

Daryl withdrew from her. Squatting between her legs, he reached for his knapsack. "I want to do this before we go." Out of the knapsack he pulled a black bra and panties, a black dress, black shoes. "It'll be a surprise to her when she resurrects that she has this on. She'll be expecting to be naked, or wearing the jeans she had on before." He lifted her feet. "It'll let her know. She'll come to and see the dress and know that I love her, that I'm waiting for her."

He slid the black panties over her feet, up her calves, around her knees, tugging them side to side up her thighs until the frilly laced waistband was straight across from hip bone to hip bone. Threading her loose arms through the hoops, he holstered her black bra into place, lifting her weight to hook it in back. He looked down at her empty face, the sideways hourglass shape of her netted breasts.

Sam's black Cadillac was the only car on the Seward Highway on their drive back up to Lodgepole. On the dashboard was a crumpled green and white pack of Sally's Salems. Daryl took it in his hands, bringing it to his lap, the cellophane quietly crackling. Underneath the

double layers of cellophane and paper his fingertips felt the broken length of the twentieth cigarette. He couldn't remember if she had a pack in her purse.

Sam turned off the highway onto Lodgepole Road, the Cadillac bucking side to side as it sped over the ruts in the road. "Now it's just you and me again, Daryl. Like it was in the beginning."

They drove through the unlit town, no life on its streets except a couple of dogs, and around the western shore of Little Muncho Lake to the house where Sam lived.

Sam stopped the car in front of the pool house at back. Daryl put the crumpled cigarette pack in his shirt pocket. "Why didn't Sylvia Gold live forever?"

"I used Sylvia to start the sequence of events that led us to this, you getting out of my car one last time, asking me that question."

"What about Clark Release? Whatever happened to him?"

Sam chuckled as the two of them walked to the pool house's sliding doors. "Clark was the corpse they found in the woods, the corpse the sheriff had in his garage."

"With the dilated anus and the enlarged passage down his throat. Like the corpse of Etouffe, Anna Greenway's lover."

Sam slid the heavy glass door open. "Come inside."

The large living room was filled with wooden crates. Daryl stopped at one to look at the mailing address. Seoul.

Sam stood beside him. "There's a boy and girl in Korea who have just gotten married despite both families' strong objections. They live in a tiny little apartment, nothing but a used bed, a hot plate and some pictures of themselves thumbtacked on the walls. Outside the one window, they can see the flat roof of the car repair shop next door. They like to watch the rain form puddles on the roof in between lovemaking. Their love for each other is so intense they don't have jobs. I've been hidden in their lives for years, waiting for this moment."

Daryl looked at the cold, stark face. "Hasn't anyone ever tried to stop you? Doesn't anyone know about you?"

Sam shrugged. "Over the long centuries there've been a few people who've found out. They form secret societies to hunt me down. They never find me. When they die the conviction that I exist dies with them. The young respect the old on their deathbeds, but they don't believe them. The last group I'm aware of fizzled out in the late eighteen hundreds. Now knowledge of me is limited to legends.

Bloodsucker, shape-changer, ghost, alien. And this modern world long ago gave up legend for electricity. I want to show you something.”

Daryl followed him into the kitchen. The round table Daryl and Sally sat at during the lobster dinner was cleared of the books and CD’s that had been stacked on it. He looked at the empty chair where Sally sat that night, Sam standing in front of her, putting his crotch at her eye level. The ovens were off.

Sam unhooked the catch on the basement door. “Last time you were here, you didn’t get to go into the cellar. Want to now?”

As the ordinary-looking door swung open, Daryl glanced down the descending darkness. “Okay.”

At the bottom of the stairs Sam flicked on the lights.

They were standing at the entrance to a rec room. Inside the room were a billiards table, ping pong table and card tables. The card tables were pushed together. On top of each table were two or more twisted forms a yard or so across.

“Come closer. Look at them.”

Daryl stepped towards the billiards table, hands starting to shake.

He looked down at the nearest form on the felt surface, trying to figure out what he was seeing, knowing by the skin and the hair that it was somehow human. At the thing’s top was a soft stretch of skin with a belly button to one side, the skin rising and falling in breath. He looked underneath, seeing a crazy-angled jumble of broken limbs, like folded spider’s legs. The thing itself looked like a large crab made out of flesh.

“I break their limbs at the shoulder, hip, upper arms, forearms, thighs and shins, then reset them with the limbs rearranged underneath so they won’t be able to climb up the stairs and get away.”

Daryl stared dumbly at the I.V. bottle hooked up beside the thing, contents cloudy enough with nutrients that he could see his pale reflection, a plastic tube at the bottom of the bottle snaking underneath the flesh crab into a bruised limb. Another tube ran over the side of the table into a large jar on the linoleum, filling drip by drip with blood. Pulled out through the crab’s anus, laying in a glossy pastel pile, were the intestines and kidney, each organ hooked up to a ringed vacuum tube which ran stiffly off the leather edge of the table to a white plastic bucket on the linoleum.

Daryl felt light-headed. “What are they?”

Sam stroked a crab-thing’s hairy stomach. “Food.”

“I mean—” he swallowed down his nausea.

“They were hitchhikers.”

From out of one twisted mangle of limbs a head rotated around from under its own back. Daryl saw the bony face, the dark circles above the cheekbones, the shaved head. The face still had lipstick on; the lips receded from the gums far enough to show the back fillings. The eyes appeared to be deeply inset until the eyebrows lifted out of the shadow cast by the face’s own chin, and Daryl saw the two concavities.

“I remove the eyes. I don’t like them looking at me.”

Daryl put a hand over his face.

Sam walked around the edge of the room, gesturing at the shapes. “I file them on the tables according to how they taste. You taste the lives they’ve lived through the blood, and each one’s different, like cheese. Some lives have been cream cheese, some cheddar, some blue.” He grinned wickedly at Daryl. “Every once in a while you even run across a Limburger. That’s nice to feed on during a quiet, rainy afternoon.”

Daryl backed away. “Sally and I could never do this.”

Sam laid his hand on a stomach, the torso’s head lifting, questing blindly towards the sensation. “You won’t need to. Watch this.” He swiveled his head on its neck left, right, making a back of the throat sound.

Daryl looked around at the forms on the tables to see which one was about to be turned into a puppet by Sam, and realized with a start that his spine was starting to go numb.

His arms and legs stiffened, straightening out until it felt like his elbows and knees had fused. He tried bending his fingers, found they were rigid. His eyes looked to Sam.

Daryl’s body lifted up on tiptoe. The stiffness rose up the back of his neck, down into his toes, fanning them apart in his shoes.

Daryl’s eyes dilated with horror.

Sam clapped his hands together, laughing. “This is always the best part. Once they realize. It’s worth the decades of waiting, of lining things up.”

Daryl tried to form one word, lips quaking. The stiffness spread underneath his jaw, over his upper teeth.

““Why?” Is that what you’re trying to say? Daryl, when you’ve lived as long as I have, you’ve outlived everything but cruelty. Goodbye, Daryl.”

Sam changed the sound coming out of his throat.

Daryl's jaw snapped open then snapped shut again, teeth meeting off-bite. Helpless, he hung stiffly on tip toe, feeling his lower jaw adjusting itself beneath the upper, teeth sliding over each other with grating sounds that filled his ears as the lower jaw was positioned an inch to the left of the upper so that the teeth of both no longer met properly.

His eyes pleaded with Sam.

His jaws snapped open again, then started clacking violently against each other, upper and lower rows banging together, sliding over each other, teeth shattering, the force popping out shards.

When it was over, all Daryl had left in his mouth were bloody stumps.

He hung on tiptoe, blood dribbling out of his mouth down his chin, nose and cheeks speckled with bits of teeth and fillings. He started to blubber.

Sam stood in front of him, watching him sob. "There are people all over the world who have their lives twisted by me, and most of them don't even know it. Sometimes it's just because they love someone my shadow has fallen across. But I'm there. I'm there when the baby dies during birth and the husband and wife go home and cry themselves sick in their empty blue room; I'm there when the six-year old is raped in the dress her mother made for her, and found cowering in a closet. I bend the spines of children until there's nothing left but eyes wanting death. I fill the lungs of kittens with mucus, and put worms in the hearts of puppies. If it weren't for me, humanity would have turned out very differently. But I learned long ago that the only way to kill the best in people is to kill what they love. Over and over and over and over and over and over again. Before I go to Korea, Daryl, I'm going to touch down in Vermont. When I'm through with her, your mother's going to be one sick little bitch. Sally's dead, but parts of her may be reanimated for future uses. Just like Sylvia Gold's legs were with you. Any last words?"

Daryl felt the stiffness drain from his jaws. He cried uncontrollably, spit pouring out of his mouth, snot running out of his nostrils. His swollen eyes stared accusingly at Sam. "You said we'd live forever. We had a deal!"

Sam shook his head. "That's what they always say when I let them speak just before I eat them." The glittering eyes looked into Daryl's. "I lied, Daryl. I only make deals with myself."

He reached his fingers into Daryl's mouth, pushing his hand in all the way, dislocating the jaw. Daryl felt the fingers start to wiggle their way down his throat. He gagged. His neck filled with throbbing pain as his throat was forcibly widened to get Sam's forearm down it.

Underneath, he felt his pants and underpants get yanked down, Sam's fingers pushing up roughly into his asshole, dilating it so the ridge of knuckles could pass up inside. Daryl screamed around the elbow in his mouth as his sphincter expanded until it ruptured.

His limbs jerked in their paralysis as Sam reached down and up inside him. He felt one hand pushing up through his intestines, tearing, ripping, distending, the other shoving down between his lungs, fingers pushing the heart to one side.

The two hands met in his stomach, making it bulge out.

One arm down his throat, the other up his asshole, Sam hoisted Daryl up into the air over his shoulders, holding him over his head face down.

Sam grinned up at him. "See, Daryl? I'm shaking hands with myself inside you."

Sam's grinning face below him was obscured by light. The grin seemed to fall further and further away as bright, colorful memories of Daryl's life shuffled in front of his eyes. Although he could see all simultaneously, the one flash he lingered on was Sally in the rose shop, surrounded at the cash register by flowers and customers, looking up in private thought and merrily announcing, "Hi! I love you!" as he died, whiteness filling everything.

Daryl's limp cock dangled above Sam's face. With preying mantis jaw movements, Sam gobbled up the cock in two bites, like gulping down a small plantain. His teeth ripped into Daryl's inside thigh, pulling out a vein, the blood splashing down over his face. Sam's face was crinkled with joy as the blood spilled down over it, like the face of the happiest child in the world.

Sam lowered the body to shoulder level, turning it sideways in front of him to be able to watch the eyes. The pupils slowly dilated, black pupils crowding out the blue irises, then, as always, both pupils suddenly shrank, as though confronted with a great light.

Sam grunted. He pulled his arms out of the husk, blood and feces spilling, and tossed the body.

For the first time ever Daryl flew, downwards.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sam stepped out of the shower. Wet and naked, he walked through the dressing room into the pool house's master bedroom.

In one corner of the bedroom stood a three-way mirror, the window beside it showing the sun just starting to rise over Eyebrow Mountain.

Sam stood in the center of the mirror, seeing his reflection in front of him and on either side.

He stared at his reflection's eyes for a long time.

The first ray of the new day's sun brightened the middle of the white windowsill.

He lit a cigarette, inhaling and exhaling, then placed the cigarette on the windowsill.

Licking his palms, he reached his hands down, rubbing his cock and balls with saliva. Grasping firmly, he pulled his cock and balls off, dropping them on the floor.

Between his legs now was a raw, bloody patch with ragged edges of stretched skin.

He wet his right middle finger, brought it down to between his legs, and started gradually rotating it up into his groin, making a narrow red hole.

He took another puff on his cigarette, putting it back by the burn mark on the windowsill, blood and bits of tissue on the paper.

He put his finger back up the hole between his legs, tilting the finger to change the angle of the hole.

Blood dripped slowly off the open wound, dropping onto the carpet.

He licked the fingertips of both hands, reached down, and started pulling the skin on either side of the wound closer together until he was left with the hole and a shallow groove of raw flesh above and below the hole.

Licked his fingers again.

The tips patiently shaped the groove, forming labia and clitoris. He ran a fingertip along the inside of slit and hole, smoothing the skin.

Took another puff on his cigarette.

Holding a hand mirror under his crotch, he examined the cunt he had formed.

It looked delicate, almost virginal.

He pulled most of the pubic hairs out, leaving just a young brush of them around the slit.

Using his wet fingers, he slid the tips over each remaining hair, each curl springing out from between his fingers silky and golden red.

He positioned the hand mirror under his crotch to examine the end result.

Satisfied, he wet his palms, turned backwards to the mirrors, and pushed down on his ass, widening it only slightly, making the cheeks softer, fuller. His hands came up either side of his abdomen, forming an hourglass shape.

Sitting on the floor, legs in front of him, his palms moved slowly over his thighs, pulling the black hairs out, reshaping the thighs' lines so there was a leanness right above the back of each knee which tapered up to an alluring fullness the closer the thighs came to the crotch.

After he did his calves he made his feet smaller, pushing the veins far below the surface, using his thumb to reduce his ankles until there was just the slightest swell.

Sam stood up, checking his work in the mirror.

From the stomach down he had the body of a beautiful young woman. His biceps bulged as he spread the cheeks of his soft derriere apart to make sure his asshole was tiny. He added a little golden-red down just above the crack, at the bottom of the spine.

Grabbing onto each nipple, he pulled them forward until he had spherical breasts. He checked them sideways in the mirror, then pulled them out a little more. Checked them again.

Still unsure, he walked over to where he had spread out photographs from recent fashion magazines over the carpet. Looking down, he compared his breasts to the breasts in the ads and layouts. His were larger. While he was there, he checked through some of the pages to make certain the overall body type he was creating was still fashionable. His thighs and ass were just noticeably fuller than the models'. Satisfied, he went back to the three-way mirror.

He made the aureole for each nipple much larger than the ones he had seen in the photographs, and made the nipples larger also. His hands slimmed his arms, leaving each long and supple, with no wrinkles behind the elbows. Checking the magazines again, he thinned the flesh at his shoulders, making the shoulders themselves narrower, but not by much.

Wetting both hands, his fingers began massaging his face into something new.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Anchorage cab pulled up to the large house at nine, honking its horn.

The front door opened and a woman stepped out in a green silk dress. She shut the door behind her, locking it, then walked gracefully towards the cab, her long golden-red hair blowing in the morning breeze.

The woman cabbie behind the wheel watched her approach. She looked over at her baby on the seat next to her.

Once the redhead was in the back seat, she smiled at the cabbie's turned-around face, showing perfect white teeth. "Hi. I appreciate you coming all the way down here. My name's Desmona. My friends call me Des."

She offered her hand, which the other woman shook, both women laughing at the awkwardness of shaking hands with one of them twisted around like that.

The cabbie closed her eyes for a moment. "I'm Jerri. I love your dress."

Des looked down at her dress. The hem had ridden up over her bare thighs. She didn't pull the hem down. "Oh, thanks. It's silk." She shrugged, then laughed self-deprecatingly.

Jerri turned around to put the cab in gear. "That's the closest I'm ever going to get to silk, seeing it on someone else." Her eyes appeared in the rearview mirror, looking back at Des. "Is your husband rich?"

"Oh, I'm not married. Do you have to put your baby in a special children's seat or something before you start?"

Jerri tilted the back of her head to one side. "I don't have one. I can't afford it. I usually drive with just one hand, and hold onto George with the other. I know I shouldn't." She stroked the top of his small head. "This little guy's the only thing keeping me going."

The redhead looked at the back of Jerri's neck, at how soft the tendrils of blonde hair which had fallen out of her bun looked. She had a lovely nape. "The road out of town is really bumpy. I could hold George in my lap."

Jerri turned around, looking at Des over the top of the front seat. "Oh, I couldn't impose."

Des held her slim hands out. "I wouldn't mind at all, really. It'd be much safer. If he ever had an accident, you know they'd never let you drive a cab again."

Jerri looked at George, watching him pull his feet up with his hands. "You have that beautiful dress on though."

Des swam her head around. "It's cool."

"Really?"

"Here, pass him back to me. We'll let him decide."

Jerri passed her son over the top of the seat.

George's face, as it neared Des' hands, started to crumple, eyes looking alarmed. His toothless mouth opened, eyes glistening.

Des made a weird kind of clucking noise.

The baby shut its mouth; its tears dried on its eyes.

Des bounced the baby in her lap, looking at its face, then turned it around so its mother could see. "What'd I tell you? He's smiling."

The cab pulled out.

They drove through the middle of Lodgepole, past the hospital, past the House of Roses.

The redhead looked out the window, baby in her lap. Clean, sweet-smelling air drifted in, and bird song. She flicked her eyes front again. "Where's George's daddy?"

"Him." Jerri sighed. "He left me four months ago. Now he lives with one of his co-workers."

"That's so like men. I've given up on them."

"Yeah, sometimes I think I should too."

"Is 'Jerri' Italian? What's your last name?"

"Spetting. Yeah, it is Italian, but I married a German."

"Do you live in Anchorage?"

"Yeah, that's another problem. My ex lives there too, and it's a small enough place I'm always seeing him at the store." Her eyes blinked in the rearview. "Him and her."

"Where do you live? Is it a bad neighborhood?"

"No, it's okay."

"Is it over on the west side?"

"No, it's north of town, just past the Seward Highway turnoff."

"I've been there. What street? Fairley?"

"No, Marrow."

"I'm into numerology. That's where you can tell something about someone from the numbers in their life? For instance, what's your street number?"

"Sixty-three."

"All right! That adds up to nine, which means you're on the verge of something totally different, just like nine is the last single digit before you go to double digits."

Jerri snorted.

"Are you from Alaska? You've got an accent."

The cabbie grinned. "No, I was born and bred in Idaho. How's that go? I was bred in the country, but I'm just a crumb in the city." She smiled in the mirror at the redhead, blushing.

Des laughed, stroking the baby's face. "I've been to Idaho. What town?"

"Idaho Falls, it's right above the border with Nevada." She steered around a tree limb that had fallen onto the dirt road.

"Jerri Spetting from Idaho Falls."

"I was Fargensi back then. I met him up here."

Des pointed her finger at Jerri. "You know, we're getting along really well."

"Yeah!"

"Usually that doesn't happen to me with women. My flight doesn't leave until tomorrow. I'm staying in the best suite in Anchorage—hey, if you've got the money, why not, right?"

"Sure. If you got the money."

"I don't want to go out to a bar. You know what that's like."

Jerri gave a derisive laugh. "Tell me."

"What if—now this is just an idea, okay? What if you came by my suite and we had some laughs together."

"What do you mean?"

Des shrugged. "Well, I could get some champagne—we could order room service. Anything you want to eat. Plus they have cable too, they said. HBO, Cinemax, all the premium stations."

Jerri wet her lips, squinting her eyes at the changes in shade and sun as the cab passed under and out of trees. "You mean like stay at the hotel with you?" She glanced up in the rearview.

"Just until you wanted to go home. Or if you got too drunk, you know, there's an extra bed there."

They rode in silence for a moment.

Jerri cleared her throat. "I don't—I mean, it sounds good, you know."

"It'd be just the change you need. Instead of going home, there you'd be in this fancy hotel suite, ordering any kind of food you want,

drinking really expensive champagne. You could even take a bubble bath. The suite's got one of those square marble tubs."

"I couldn't find a babysitter for him though. Not on this short notice."

Des raised her voice. "Oh no, bring him with you!"

Jerri snorted, lips parting in wonderment. "Are you sure? Really?"

Des saw the eyes drop from the rearview to the road, and slipped her pinky under the baby's diaper. The manicured tip quested quietly through the cotton for the little hairless scrotum, found it, and started lightly rubbing the skin underneath. George lolled his head back, big bald baby's head, looking up with astonished innocence, eyes registering it was experiencing something new for the first time ever.

Des looked up, flashing a toothy smile at Jerri's lovely blonde nape.

"Really."

Des stared back down into George's dark eyes, feeling the bump and growth, against the side of her pinky, of the short, thin erection.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ralph Robert Moore's fiction has been published in America, England and Australia. His website SENTENCE at [www.ralphrobertmoore.com](http://www.ralphrobertmoore.com) features a large selection of his writings, published and unpublished.