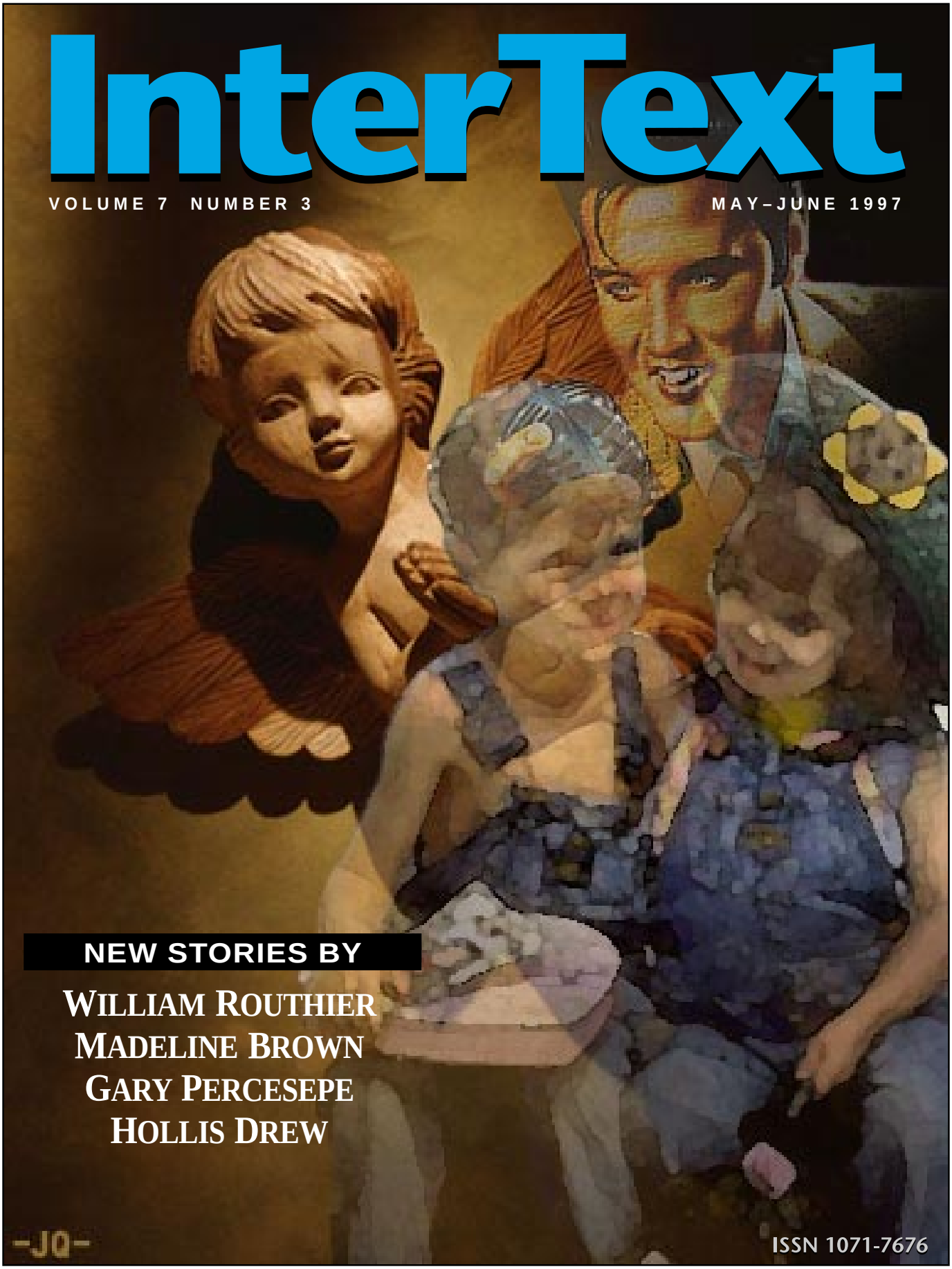
InterText

VOLUME 7 NUMBER 3 MAY–JUNE 1997



NEW STORIES BY

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-JQ-

ISSN 1071-7676

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MAY–JUNE 1997
VOLUME 7, NUMBER 3

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***InterText*'s next issue will be released in August 1997.**

SHORT FICTION

InterText **Vol. 7, No. 3.** *InterText* (ISSN 1071-7676) is published electronically every two months. For more information about *InterText,* send a message to *info@intertext.com.* For submission guidelines, send a message to *guidelines@intertext.com.*

Graceland

WILLIAM ROUTHIER

Those who accuse the music industry of deifying its stars have no *idea.*

JASMINE'S BEEN AFTER ME FOR ABOUT A MONTH NOW to go with her to church. She says it'll cement the relationship. Now these are two words I don't like to hear when it comes to women—cement and relationship. See, I see love as more a fluid kind of thing.

I tell her I wouldn't mind going once, but don't go thinking I'm going to join. I like the music all right, I tell her, but the preachers ruin it for me, with their the gold belts, white jump suits, mutton chop sideburns, wrap-arounds. "They look so cheap and old," I say.

Jasmine gets a hurt look on her face but in a blink she segues into her conversion mode. "That's just false perception," she says. "You can't judge by the superficial, you gotta take a leap of faith, then everything that seemed superficial before shines in glory and you're rocking on real gone holy ground."

"Yeah, yeah, easy to say," I say, "but once I leap, there's no way I can know what ground I'm landing on till I land."

"Exactly," she says, then shakes her head. "Don't you trust me?" she says, and I don't answer. She casts her eyes downward and quietly tells me I might just be the type who'll never love someone tender, who'll never take care of business. Then she looks up and says "TLC," waving her hand in the air like a benediction. "You may never know burning love," she says. Unless of course I go with her to a service.

I could show you a thing or two about burning love, I'm thinking.

After our dramatic little scenario, though, Jasmine cuts me a beautiful, forgiving grin, says, "You're so square, but baby I don't care." It's my greased black hair, I know. She can't resist. There's something about religious zealots that's so sexy to me. Everything so clear cut.

I looked into it, for the sake of keeping her. I'm not against the whole idea. I just liked the young guy better. Even though most churches admit to two distinct periods, they all seem to settle on the Vegas one, the overweight, glitzy one. The "Peace in the Valley" one. I hate that song.

I read an article in a magazine once that some Ph.D. at Harvard wrote. Said the Church of the King—Jasmine's particular church is the First Church of Grace of His Trembling Lip—was a natural step in religious development, came at the right time to snatch up millions of disillusioned Catholics after the gay Pope scandal.

Then when they found those scrolls, archeological evidence recounting Jesus' actual death, how he got no burial, was left for the dogs after they took him down, that nixed the resurrection, this Harvard guy says, which upset a lot of Fundamentalists and other Christians as well. Some called it a fake, some tried to adapt their dogma, but then scientific proof came in showing how eternal life and reincarnation were real. So the abortion argument lost its zing, not to mention the heaven idea. The walls came tumbling down.

The mass recognition, Harvard Guy goes on to say, led to Him replacing Jesus as Christ figure easier than anybody could have guessed. What with the tragic death, the numerous sightings and visitations, the spontaneous pilgrimages to Graceland on Death Night which started up a few years after He died and turned into what's now the largest annual gathering in the whole damn world. Not quite so spontaneous anymore, of course. August 15th, Death Night, day before the tragedy—just like Holy Thursday and Good Friday. It all fell right into place, Harvard says.

That's why the churches go with the Vegas guy. Historical continuity of myth. Hot buttons. Works the crowd better. It's true, people love a tragic story best. The King's tragedy turns into our salvation, just like with Jesus. Makes them forget about themselves. Shakespeare knew it, littered the stage with bodies. And costumes make the show. Give 'em enough for their dollar, people'll believe what you want 'em to believe. Colonel Tom Parker used to say that, but they don't talk about him.

They had a vote on which guy back when, before the turn of the century. Post office asked people to decide who they wanted on the stamp, young or old. People picked young. People had a better sense of style then.

So with all this myth and spectacle, why would anybody want to believe in the rockin' song of holding onto everlasting youth, like the young guy tried to do? He sure couldn't, anyhow. Hard to live that way, Daddy-O. I know.

They had a vote on which guy back when, before the turn of the century. Post Office asked people to decide who they wanted on the stamp, young or old. People picked young.

People had a better sense of style then.

I play His music all the time. I never bought any official church holy discs. All that sanctified crap they give you along with it always creeped me weird. I got the old RCA ones. Songs sound good still. The man could sing.

JASMINE TELLS ME AS WE'RE DRIVING DOWN A1A toward Miami, palm trees swaying in the warm spring breeze coming off the ocean, that Elvis—all the preachers call themselves Elvis—that her church's Elvis, Elvis, told her she was a real Priscilla. Jasmine's squealing, practically creaming her gold silk pants and she runs a pink lacquered fingernail to her mascaraed eye and brushes away the touch of a tear, she's so happy because he said she was a real Priscilla. I think maybe I'm wasting my time on this whole thing with her. Then she throws both hands into the air, squeals again and shakes her glorious mane of black lacquered hair, as much as she can, leans over with her silky white blouse all billowing in the wind, puts her arms around my neck and lunges in, kisses my cheek, and the thick whiff of her perfume drowns out all my doubts as her heavy breasts rub through my black cotton t-shirt onto my chest and it makes me believe, good lord, yes. Love me tender, love me true.

I sing the song to her in my… His voice. She's nuzzling my ear, melting like a chocolate bar left in the sun.

PERSONALLY, I'D LOVE TO HAVE SOMETHING TO believe in like Jasmine does, something to console myself with. My parents were traditional Christians back when preachers were still guys with white hair sprayed into a stiff pomp talking Jesus on Sunday TV. Florida was the main place for television church back then, and unlike many, my folks went out to worship and watch in person every Sunday. Part faith and praying, part the kick of being on television. I liked it too. We always videotaped, and that afternoon before Sunday dinner, we'd sit there and watched what we'd just sat through, pointing and cheering from our living room couch when we'd spot ourselves in the crowd, among the faithful. Weird how something as strange as that can be a sweet memory. The clear-cut simplicity of it, I guess.

Took quite a while for the whole Jesus thing to die. They held out, even with the growing popularity of Elvis churches encroaching and eventually taking over established Christian church buildings, like when the Crystal Cathedral went belly up after the big scandal with Preacher Morris Delbert and the four choirgirls. That's pretty well forgotten now, but it was plastered all over the tabloids back then for months.

The day I realized it had really changed, I was about fifteen. I remember it clear, this one Sunday morning, driving down Federal Highway with my folks and hearing for the first time church bells chiming "Love Me Tender."

Wow, I thought. The whole thing started to blossom after that, till pretty soon you couldn't find Jesus anywhere for looking. My folks still went to one of the last Jesus churches, a small one in Pompano, blue hair country. Mom said the Elvis stuff signalled the coming of the apocalypse, but the century had passed a little while back, Christ didn't return, so the wind was gone out of those sails too.

A few years later I remember getting a historical biography of Him out of the library, a real book from the reference section, with paper pages and black and white photographs and everything, the kind the church doesn't like to acknowledge or talk about, the kind they call secondhand tales told out of turn, falsifications and lies, blasphemous trash. The librarian looked at me like I was some kind of devil.

Book said He wasn't so holy after all, He wasn't any saint. He had sex with hundreds of women when He was on the road, wasn't particularly faithful to anyone. He was a young guy full of the juice of life. Later on, He took drugs by the fistful to dull the pain of seeing His juice slipping away.

NEXT SUNDAY I'M SITTING IN CHURCH BESIDE Jasmine. Jasmine's beaming with the victory of me being there. She's looking so good, her hair in a high tease, tight pink angora sweater and black capri pants, doused in perfume, that gold bracelet I just gave her for her birthday jangling on her thin, pale wrist, I'm thinking I might convert, just for today, just to have a night of pure bliss peeling it all off of her back at her place. The deal is she won't go past kiss and touch without me first "joining in the oneness of the King's holy rocking soul." Right now she's got my soul rocking and my rocks aching, jumpy to join in that oneness, and she knows it.

All along the circular walls between each stained glass window are these big black velvet paintings of the King. One's a warm, compassionate face. One's a serious face in profile, contemplating a light from above. One's a full figure of him performing in the white suit, microphone in hand. One's him in the same suit standing sideways, doing a karate chop. One's him with arms outstretched, eyes heavenward, half circle of white cape under the arms. One's him in a dark suit, strumming a guitar on a leopard skin couch, wearing the shades. On and on, the many aspects of the King. Jasmine told me on the drive over it's considered sacrilegious to refer to him as Elvis. It's always the King. The preachers, though, they get called Elvis.

Up on the big altar stage, there's a choir of women singers in white robes, swaying and clapping, singing—

"See, with your eyes now, see, what the King has done, o-ooo see, with your eyes now, what the King has done, Lord…"

The choir's wailing this to the old tune "C. C. Rider." The band is hot, tight as Jasmine's pants, slick as her red lipstick. They got these beautiful old vintage guitars, authentic brass horns, real drums, no programmed stuff, everybody's playing for real, working up a sweat and damn if it isn't starting to get under my skin, down into my twitchy zone. My leg is bouncing, Jasmine's noticing, wearing her cat just ate the bird grin, but I don't give her the satisfaction of even a hint of a smile.

The congregation is weaving, clapping, singing. A little boy in front of me is kneeling on his seat, bobbing his head to the music, staring at me. Black boy about five, cute, got on a little beige suit, daffodil yellow shirt and red bow tie. I wink at him and he grins and starts gyrating to the music as best he can from his knees, two little hands holding the back of the seat. His whole family, sisters and brothers of various ages on either side of Mom and Dad are all bobbing their heads and clapping in a grooving, rhythmic oneness, like some kind of human caterpillar undulating along the branch of a tree. Except, of course, they don't slide sideways.

I been used to seeing blacks and whites together all my life, in school and work and the market, but never in church. It was always black church and white church. A few spill-overs either way, but here I'm looking around seeing how it's all real intermingled—black, white, Hispanic, Asian, and there's no big pockets of any one kind though the congregation either, it's cozy and mixed nice, mostly couples and families. The other odd thing I notice is I've seen about a dozen dwarfs.

The band kicks into "Good Rockin' Tonight," the choir changing it slightly and singing "Have you heard the news, there's good rocking today!" The little kid throws both hands up in the air and is bending his body, swaying side to side at the waist. I'm hoping he doesn't fall over in his seat. With the entire congregation going at it like this, I'm feeling it too though, and that's what I'm beginning to concentrate on, how I feel good. I groove along for a while until I get this calm inside, like I used to feel when I was about ten years old and it was early spring, not hot yet, just before summer hit and I'd go outside in the morning on Saturday early before the day had started, everything quiet except the occasional whoosh of a car going down the highway or the buzz of a lawn mower far off. Balmy air cushioning me like soft white cotton. I'd pick some green palm leaves off a small tree next to a hotel pool and go around to the back of the Wal-Mart parking lot, sneak down to the edge of the intercoastal canal and float the leaves out into the water and watch until they sailed out past the docked boats. Then I'd make up all kinds of little stories and adventures about where they were going, what they were going to find.

I turn and look at Jasmine. Her blue eyes float dazed in the black circles of her mascara and they're coming closer.

"You're real gone now," she says, and kisses my cheek.

I look at the velvet paintings along the wall. They look like they got lights behind them shining through. I stare.

Then I look around at the people, and their faces are beaming and I think I never saw anything as beautiful.

The band all of a sudden finishes and the music stops. The crowd hushes and the lights go down. Even though there's some light coming in the stained glass windows, it's fairly dim. One spotlight hits the microphone and an orchestra is coming over the speakers, a recording of the theme from the classic movie "2001."

Dah—dah—dah! Last note, lights go up, he comes whirling out in his white caped suit, its golf ball sized spangles shooting off lines of light, he's twirling the cape and holding his hand out in the air to the congregation, who are standing now and going nuts. He's not as fat like I thought he'd be, and he's pretty good looking. The hair is jet black, he's got the big weird mutton chop sideburns. No shades. The band is ripping into something I can't place. He stands in front of the microphone, raises his arms three-quarters up and the cape falls out full bloomed. In a flick, he whips his arms down, karate chops the air twice. I'm hearing a few screams and he grins. The lip curls.

He knows he's making the women go crazy and he's loving it and that transfers to me somehow, this sexual feeling, that it's something I can do too.

I feel this pure sexual thrill of identification with him, how he knows he's making the women go crazy and he's loving it and that transfers to me somehow, this sexual feeling, that it's something I can do too.

I look over at Jasmine, and she doesn't know I'm there anymore. Her mascara's running a little, a tear out of the side of one eye and she's breathing too hard.

Elvis grabs the mike and starts in singing.

"Train I ride, takes me to the King
Train I ride, takes me to the Lord
If you wanna go there with me,
Just gotta hop on board."

The congregation's right there with him, singing and clapping. He goes along, singing new words to "It's Now or Never," "Can't Help Falling in Love," and "Suspicious Minds."

As the last song's about to end he holds his hand up behind him to the band and wiggles it, bringing it down, signalling for quiet. Dead silence. Then he points at the choir, not looking back, and their voices start up gloriously in *a capella* ooo's.

Elvis sings, to "Are You Lonesome Tonight,"

"Are you holy today,
Are you going his way,
Are you free from the doubt and the pain?"

Everyone is swaying, some got their arms in the air, some are shouting "Amen! Yes, King! I'm free!" Elvis signals the choir and it drops down to a bare hush of oooo's cooing soft in the background. He points out at the congregation.

"You feeling holy today?" He's got the voice, the deep, mumbly honey-throated Southern drawl.

The place shakes from shouts.

"Are you going my way?"

A joyous babble of Amen's agreeing.

"Are you free from your doubt and your pain?"

Yes, King! I'm free!

"Listen to me, then," he says, the choir still cooing soft. "We all want a burning love, don't we? We all want a love that'll free us, purify us, make us clean, holy and whole. Well, the King can give you that love!"

Amen, King! Gimme that love!

"But the mistake churches always used to make was to try to confine that love, stop up that love, connn-troooolll that love."

Everybody goes quiet. I realize it's basically the same performance every week and this is a cue.

"Did the King control his swiveling hips?"

No!

"Did the King control his wiggling leg?"

No!

"Did the King control his burning love?"

No!

"Why not? Because you cannot control love, that why not! You gotta give love, take love, shake with love, love with love!

"All love is good in the spirit of the holy rocking oneness of the King. But of course, we can't be wanton and unfaithful. As man and woman, we must care for one another. How? How does the King instruct us, what are the two special rules we must follow to keep it all together, keep it from going astray? One! TCB. Taking care of business. Responsibility. Faithfulness. Hard work. The men especially need to pay attention to TCB. Two! TLC. Tender loving care. Nurturing. Comfort. A kind word. Specialties of the female. These dictates were handed down directly from the King to his personal entourage. If we follow them, we can't go wrong.

"Can we follow the King?" he shouts.

Jasmine's head's bent forward, lines of black snaking down her soft cheeks. She's shaking all over.

Both hands are up into the air like possession blew into her and she's shouting "Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes!"

I look to the stage. Elvis' casting a strong look her way.

"Who feels holy enough today to pledge their burning love?" he shouts into the mike. "Any first timers out there, new to the King? Who wants to pledge a new found burning love?"

Now, part of the reason for what I did next was definitely because of Jasmine and the look I see Elvis give her, but part was maybe because I really did feel something.

I hear myself shout "I want to pledge my burning love!"

Amen's come up all around. Jasmine turns, shocked, snapping out of a trance. She's beaming, squealing, kissing me on the lips.

Hands guide me out the aisle then I'm bounding onto the stage.

A hush comes over. I'm wearing my blue sharkskin suit, my hair's slicked on the sides like usual, pomped a little on top, jet black as Elvis' and from a distance, you'd might say I had more than a passing resemblance to the King. People have remarked. So standing beside Elvis we're the two Elvises, young and old. He puts his arm on my shoulder, leans in.

"Any chance you can really sing, son?"

I nod. "Bet on it."

I look in his eyes. Steely brown, no wavering in them. Grins. He's got deep lines on his face you can't see from stage hidden under a heavy foundation of make-up, crusted at the edges around his sideburns. All his magnetism disappears as I stand there beside him. He pats my back, says, "Then you just jump right in wherever you can," flicks his hand behind him and the band breaks into "Burning Love."

He's good, I admit. After he sings the first verse, we do the chorus together, then I stay on the mike and take the next verse myself, Elvis beside me clapping. We're both on the mike at the end, side by side singing, "I got a hunka-hunka burning love, gotta hunka-hunka burning love."

The place is going nuts. Jasmine is looking at us in ecstasy, doing spasmodic little half crouches, pressing her knees together and going into squeals and I know what that means.

Song finishes. He pats me on the back, gauging crowd reaction.

"I might just bring you back another time, son," he says. Then he looks down at Jasmine and leans over, intimate, confidential Elvis-to-Elvis arm and says, away from the mike, "Sweet little piece you got there. Real choice A-1 Priscilla. Best keep your eye on that though,

'cause I've had mine eye on it a while. I might just steal it if you don't pay attention."

Then he laughs, big white teeth, slaps my back.

"That so." I slap his back a little too hard, wink and grab hold of the mike.

"Pastor here just graciously asked me," I shout out to the congregation, "to do a couple more on my own. What you think of that?" Applause comes strong up over.

I see him go white under the make up. Then grits his teeth to a tight smile and waves out, turns, glaring anger and unease as he walks past to side stage.

The band is looking this way and that. Confusion. I step back to the guitarist and ask if they do "All Shook Up."

"'Course," he says.

"Then make it really rock, man."

He nods.

I hold the mike out shoulder level, do a couple hip swivels. Screams. I count it off—One, two, three, four!

They hit the first chord like thunder. It slides up nice and slow. The drummer's got the in between beats cracking.

Dah dum! Dah dum!

I point my finger at the middle of the congregation, slow glide it until it's right on Jasmine. Give her a wicked grin. Hell, my lip curls. I turn and wink at Pastor E., then I'm singing to Jasmine.

"I'm proud to say that your my buttercup, I'm in love… unh—I'm All Shook Up! Umm, umm, umm—ummm, yeah, yeah!"

The place is crazyland now. Chaos. They're rockin', on their feet, some are standing on the chairs, young girls are making unrestrained noises. I look over to Pastor, see him bravely clapping along, smile plastered ten times tighter. I'm thinking he looks like what he is, cheap old car salesman in a loud suit waiting to get back and make his tired tried and true. Song's ending, I point at him, shout, "I'd like to sing this next one for that man there, your Elvis!"

Crowd roars. He waves to them then gives me two fingers off his eyebrow for show.

I run back, quick consult with the guitar player, who I can tell likes me now, then back to the mike.

"Wellllllll…" Band finds the key. Guitarist nods.

"It's… a one for the money - two for the show - three to get ready - now go cat go! But don't you, step on my blue suede shoes…"

My antennae are up, nerve ends tingly. I'm rock solid on the beat, in the middle of the music, hearing each instrument clear, separate, rocking on real gone ground, just like Jasmine said. I'm cueing the band with my body to where the emphasis is, like a conductor. Like the King.

I feel the crowd and I'm right there with them.

I sense waves of tension in some of the older folks, though. The challenge in the song. Young against old.

I cast a quick glance back. Pastor Elvis isn't clapping anymore. He's studying them, squinty-eyed, waiting for the time to move.

The song's ending; I'm on the last line—"But lay off of my blue suede shoes—" I snap around, point at the guitarist, then turn sideways and face the Pastor.

"You ain't huh-na-thin-buh-da—Hound dog! Crying all the time. Y'ain't nothing but a hound dog, crying all the time. You ain't never caught a rabbit and you ain't no friend of mine!"

Drum beat goes rat-a-ta-tat-a-ta-tat-a-ta-tat-a-ta-tat!

Swiveling front I point down to Jasmine.

"Well *she said you was* high class, but that was just a lie!"

The congregation's barely clapping now. They're stunned, except the little boy in the beige suit, yellow shirt and red bow tie, who's standing on his seat gyrating, going crazy still till his sister slaps him on the shoulder. It's like he's waking up. He looks around and starts bawling.

Pastor Elvis isn't clapping anymore. He's studying them, squinty-eyed, waiting for the time to move.

I finish the song. Dead silence. A few boos. The Pastor strides over to the mike.

When he's close enough I put a hand out to hold him at bay.

"I just insulted this here man, pastor of your church," I say. "Why? Why would I insult a man I just met? And why would I insult you in your church? Am I crazy, a rabble rouser?"

Silence.

"No, ladies and gentlemen."

There's murmuring, unquiet shifting. Pastor stands back, watching close.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I have to tell the truth, and the truth isn't always nice, but see, this old man here, he said something to me, disturbing."

Pastor Elvis pushes in to grab the mike from me. I shove him away. A shocked inhale out there an audible "Ooohhh." One sound. Pastor yells to the crowd without the mike.

"This disrupter… he's obviously disturbed. Please treat him with care—TCB—TLC—but please—come up, somebody help me… get him off the stage…"

Several burly guys are heading down the aisle now.

"Wait a minute," I say. "That beautiful young woman there, see her? When I came to the stage to receive

salvation from this Pastor, well, he winked, whispered she was one sweet piece."

Congregation hushes, the big guys slow down.

"Said she's a real Priscilla he had his eye on a while and if I didn't watch myself he'd steal her when I wasn't looking. Guess he thinks he can, because he's Pastor Elvis."

The big guys stop. Someone shouts "No!"

"Yes! What reason do I have to lie?! I'm standing here 'cause of a leap of good faith. Don't know a thing about this Elvis but what Jasmine told me—she said she was happy because he told her she was a real Priscilla."

There's general hubbub, babble. Jasmine's nodding, big.

"That innocent girl," I say, "didn't know what was waiting. Now I don't know how you people run things, but that don't sound like TCB to me. Personally I'm offended, as you might figure."

Pastor Elvis is square-jawed, shaking his head in the negative, making broad gestures as if pushing me away with his hands, playing like what I'm saying's hogwash.

"Well, then, you all tell me," I say, "if I'm lying. 'Cause if I'm not, I just bet Jasmine's not the only one, I bet there's another woman out there done to the same, someone who maybe didn't want to say so publicly before, or someone who knows about such a thing. Anyone confirm what I'm saying? Pastor made someone else his Priscilla too?"

Dead silence. I got a strong feeling my instincts are good but at the same time I'm not sure if I just hung myself. A half minute goes by. People are looking up at me, over to Pastor.

Out of the back a woman's voice yells "Yes! It's true!"

Down the aisle she comes, big teased hair, blue eye shadow and thick mascara, gold lame jacket, tight black pants packing sagging weight, pushing I'm guessing forty. A flash hits me. Looks just like what Jasmine's gonna.

"He told me I was his Priscilla too!" she says, up close to the stage, pointing a long red fingernail. Then she faces the congregation.

"When I was fresh, he loved me. Then I wasn't anymore, my sin was I got older, so he dumped me. That's not TCB. I don't know why I keep coming here, I still have some TLC for him in my heart I guess. But I'm just a fool, 'cause his love wasn't tender and it sure wasn't true."

Poor old Elvis is frozen. Drops of sweat are falling off his sideburns.

Out of the crowd pop two more teased hair brunettes, younger than the first, older than Jasmine, shimmying down the aisle.

In the front row a woman who looks like the oldest of the Priscillas gets up, hurries off to the side and pushes herself through the emergency exit door.

Pastor's wife, I figure.

Pastor Elvis' looking at me. Hard. Then he suddenly swings around flourishing his cape and disappears.

I wait a beat. Don't know if it might be blasphemy, but I say it anyway, can't resist.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Elvis has left the building."

There's a pause, then they start to laugh and clap.

One eternal minute goes by as I stand there at the mike, thinking, Maybe got what I wanted. The young one. Only it's me.

Destiny breathing down my neck hot and heavy. Clapping's louder. Deafening. I can't help…

I feel my lip curl, looking at all of them looking at me.

Shouting "Sing!"

"But I ain't Elvis," I shout back. "I ain't the King."

"Sing!"

Jasmine is gazing up glassy-eyed, they all are, like I'm a velvet painting. I want to run but my leg's twitching.

Shouts grow louder, trying to drown it out of my head, voice in there telling me over and over, "You ain't the King. You ain't the King."

WILLIAM ROUTHIER

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The Lady of Situations

MADELINE BROWN

"Under the firelight, under the brush, her hair
Spread out into fiery points
Glowed into words, then would be savagely still."
— T.S. Eliot, The Waste Land

ONCE WHEN I WAS A LITTLE GIRL MY MOTHER took me to the best place I have ever been. It was on a summer evening and I had on a new yellow dress that she had sewn for me and that matched one she had made for herself. I woke up the morning of that day and went into her workroom and saw it there hanging up, newly done; she had promised me it would be ready and it was, and it was the most beautiful dress I had ever seen.

And that summer evening in the flower-laden air we walked down the dusty path from our doorstep past the farthest spot I'd ever been before, which was the village church, and it seemed to me as we went that we were making up the world as we went along, or at least that she was; that past the church, which I knew was real, every bush, every squawking mockingbird, every leaf stirring in every breeze was a moment's imagining for her, and that what she was showing me, what she was teaching me, was how to build a magic world and people it.

And so when I think of that place—Summer, The Past, Araby, Oz, Xanadu—and the festival we went to that night, where the ice cream truck's tinny music mingled with the haunting silver notes of flutes, and youths and maidens in bright colors danced all night long, and where my best friend found us and grabbed my hands and kissed my lips; that place—I think of it as my mother's invention, the sign of her consummate artistry.

It was the last time as a child I felt her power so palpable, the last time I felt myself protected, initiated by the magic of her company. It was not so much that I felt her power weaken and die as that I slowly discovered the power did not exist, and never had. After my father's death, or in the year or two right before it, when I had to watch her smoke straight through a pack of Viceroys every afternoon, leafing through magazines since her soaps had gone off the air, until she'd dulled her senses or sharpened her desperation to the point where she could bear to do what she had to do, which was to stay alive a little longer—then I thought the cruel thing. Not, how art the mighty fallen; nothing so kind as that. But rather, how could I have ever so mistaken who she was.

Now I know better than that disenchanted child-self. Now once again I believe in magic. Sitting here in the afternoons, when I have tired of working at my loom, as I look at the green flag flying from the tower across the courtyard, I think of her and how, were she still alive, she'd fly through this window and carry me away, carry me away from all this.

Every night I climb into the bath whose water I have scented with the spices that remind me of her and I emerge recreated from those waters. When I dream at night I am back in her arms.

IT PLEASES ME SOMETIMES TO BE THOUGHT, TO ACT the part of femme fatale. It is so far from what I actually am that the imposture makes me feel safe, perfectly disguised. I watch myself smile, walk, flirt with infinitesimal motions of eyelash and fingertip (so subtly accomplished am I), and I wonder: Where did I learn this? how did I become so skilled? I think I must be a natural actress, or at least have found a perfect part to play.

But I am also capable of judging my behavior. What a bitch, I think sometimes. I am a bitch, for instance, to my lover's former concubine. But I don't know how else to express my desire for her. For isn't the jealousy I show her a form of flattery? And flattery a form of flirtation? She is a shell-pink creature, and the sweat-damp, dark gold curls that cling to the back of her neck in the heat of the day move me unspeakably. But she will never see me; when her glance hits my body it cuts through me—the shape I have for her is that of the woman who stole her lover, and who now gives her orders besides. But if I didn't have this power over her, to so command her distress, I'd be nothing to her.

It was the last time as a child I felt her power so palpable, the last time I felt myself protected, initiated by the magic of my mother's company.

I desire her for her innocence. It pleases me at times to fantasize about corrupting her innocence; at other times, to fantasize being redeemed by it. Pleasant reveries, an afternoon's pastime, such rumination.

MY LOVER VISITS ME EVERY NIGHT, EXCEPT WHEN I tell him not to come. When I have lived the long weary afternoon through, and made my state appearance in the banquet hall on my husband's arm, I retire once again to this chamber and wait, but in the evenings there's a direction, a focus to my waiting. Inside my clothes my

body feels different to me then, exotic and exciting, as if the imminent prospect of its being seized by other hands has somehow estranged me from it, made me able to desire myself. And I do. I look at myself in the mirror, lips parted, eyes wide, my dark hair loose around my pale face, while at my back I hear my lover's spurs jangling on the stone as he mounts the stairs, and I reach the pinnacle of ecstasy. I feel as if I am about to ravish myself. Then there is the denouement of his entrance, the entanglements of clothing—which once I enjoyed so much, the abrasion of wool and hard buttons on my skin (and I remember the time he fucked me with his boots and spurs still on, the pleasure and the danger of it)—but which repetition has dulled the piquancy of. No, it is the intervals in our affair that now most arouse me, the fact of it and not the acts—I have a lover, I am someone's mistress! And I delight in it.

But sometimes that delight seems so strange, so odd to me. Because I am a Queen, because all eyes are trained on me, everything I do has a consequence, a political significance; in short, it matters. And if what I did didn't matter, would I want to do anything at all? Isn't my desire for my lover, my joy in being his mistress, in part the result of this sense of our being watched? And if that is so, can it be that these things I call "feelings," that I think of as part of me, don't come from inside me at all but from outside me, are scripted somehow by the expectations of others? And yet they feel like they come from inside me.

I don't like to think very long along these lines. It's funny—in college I could go on for hours, spinning theories and discussing them. That seems so fruitless to me now.

I GRIEVE MY HUSBAND. HIS GRIEF BEGAN BEFORE I cuckolded him; he married me so that I should grieve him, I think. If I didn't understand this at the very outset, it wasn't long before I did—no later than our honeymoon trip, certainly. He had left the planning of that to me, giving me carte blanche to choose where we would go. I wanted the Cape, though ours was a late-winter wedding and the marshlands would be soggy with snow, the shops and pleasure-places boarded up. But I had gone there on holiday once before, as a child with my mother—it was after my father's troubles began, in fact they were why my mother took me there, to protect me from full knowledge of them—and it was a happy month I had spent there, dutifully ignorant. The idea of going there again seemed exotic to me as a new bride—the ferries of course have long since ceased to run and we had to get a special dispensation to drive on the scarred and pitted highway, but I thrilled at my husband's power to command such privilege. I didn't want a police escort and so we were on our own, like any young married couple from a fairy-tale past, setting out for a seaside pleasure jaunt with a map and a picnic basket. But it took us over an hour to even find the bridge across the river—a mountain of crumbled cement had fallen over the exit ramp—and the ruined roads depressed me, with their decade-old litter of broken bottles and hubcaps and cigarette butts, paper bags and cups emblazoned with the logos of defunct fast-food restaurant chains. And the motel we stayed at, the only one we found between the bridge and the outermost Cape, was a cheap cinderblock kept in business by teen-agers and extramarital affairs, for of course there were rarely any tourists anymore. We must have been the first any of the residents had seen in years. And though some of them must have seen us on television—they still ran occasional news programs at that time, seven years ago now—or at least our pictures in the papers, you wouldn't have known they knew who we were from how they treated us, with a kind of brusque indifference. In the morning after our first night there I took my husband to the beach and even the ocean looked different from what I remembered, lapping at the shore in scant ripples like thin-lipped smiles.

My husband knew by that morning what I had known sooner, that I felt no desire for him. But he was kind to me. After the beach we sat at the motel's outdoor cafe, by the empty swimming pool, in the pale February light, and we ordered drinks and my husband read me poetry. "Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee/With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,/And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,/And drank coffee, and talked for an hour."

I KNEW THE POEM, HAD HEARD IT READ ALOUD ONCE before. I'd had a professor in college who'd read it to me, along with many other poems. My mother was dead by then, had been for some years. I'd been adopted by a kind older childless couple, my guardians—they'd been colleagues of my father's before his fall but had survived the political vagaries of ensuing years and were doing well, and could afford to give me the best of everything. They told me I had a fine mind, and should have an education; I could be whatever I wanted, they said, but I knew they wanted me to be a theorist. So when they sent me to college I studied theory. First one kind, then another, each terribly important to me at the time. And then in my senior year I found my professor, whether by accident or as part of some design, I don't know. In the beginning of the fall semester I was browsing through the course catalog when I saw a listing that intrigued me: "Readings in Counter-indicated Complexity," it was called. The professor's name was not one I had heard before: some junior person, with no reputation yet, it seemed. But I had taken all the recommended seminars taught by well-known faculty

already, so I went to the first class meeting.

He was young then, just barely into his thirties. But even then he had the solemnity of a cleric about him. When all the students had entered the room and taken seats, he closed the door, opened a book, and began to read poems to us. It had been years since I, or any of the others in that room I would warrant, had heard a word of poetry. We students sat there transfixed, and I remember the way the late afternoon fall sunlight slanted through the windows into the room, made and held a kind of space for the syllables to unfold in time like music. We were waiting, of course: waiting for the poetry to end and for him to begin to theorize about it, for surely that was the point of it all, that was what we were there for, but while we were waiting we held our breath, and tears formed in the corners of our eyes. And that expected theorizing never happened. From that first day until the end of the semester, all he ever did was read aloud to us, poem after poem, sonnet and free verse and narrative epic. He never asked us to write for him, never even learned our names, but sometimes he would gaze at one or another of us as he read certain lines, as if he were speaking them to us individually, and whenever he looked at me I felt he was looking into my soul. "Here is Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks,/The lady of situations," he read once, from a poem called The Waste Land, and he looked at me as he read it.

It made me shiver to hear my husband read the same poem to me, on our honeymoon, as we sat on the concrete terrace with our drinks tasting like rust in our mouths, tasting like metal and blood and vitamins. (As I write this I am looking out my window at the tower across the courtyard, and the green flag flying from it. It means the Minister is in his study there, or so I've been told.) I felt a sense of threat and excitement both, the way I feel when there's going to be a thunderstorm. It seemed to me my vision of things changed then, or completed an act of change that had begun that semester in college. The barren landscape all at once ceased to depress me—looking past the chainlink fence, I saw the sparkle of broken glass in the tough tall marsh-grass and thought it pretty, and I saw the brown water lying in the lowlands and thought it scary and interesting. And far away, over the edge of the horizon, I half-expected to see a horseman come riding toward us bearing portentous news. There was a kind of shouting inside my head, a shouting that was like a silence too, and I knew myself a part of this place, its beauty and its danger.

Across from me at the table my husband went on reading, his voice dry and sad. He looked small to me, smaller than he had been before. As if he could feel my gaze on him he broke off reading and looked up, and our two glances met, and I knew he knew what I knew too: that the sad parentless maiden he had married to share his mournfulness was no longer me. That I would not make my home in loss, or if I did I would call it by another name and so transform it. And that in living thus I would bring him pain after pain, and that it would be this pain that would keep him alive. So we forged our contract.

WHEN I WAS A GIRL AND MY HUSBAND THE CROWN Prince, I was in love with him, as young girls often were. But I didn't actually meet him until I was grown and had graduated college. I had returned from the university only weeks previously, and was living with my guardians, trying to decide what I should do next. My guardians, though kind as ever, were growing a little impatient with me, with my persistent ennui and sudden irritable bursts, which I sometimes directed at them; impatient and a little worried—they thought I had suffered a disappointment in love while I was away, and they tried to get me to talk to them about it. But I couldn't explain what had happened to me. It didn't occur to me that the kinds of things I was feeling could have names put to them and be translated into an awareness, an understanding in someone else's mind. What would I have said? That I had sat in a room and a man had read poems aloud to me, and that because of that experience nothing else, not my degree in theory, not my promising future, seemed to matter anymore?

**"Here is Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks,
The lady of situations,"
he read once, from a poem called
The Waste Land, and he looked
at me as he read it.**

Still, it mattered to me more than I realized not to disappoint this kind couple, and so when my guardians made requests of me I complied when I had spirit at all to do so. It was at their request that I accompanied them to the debutante party of the daughter of friends of theirs, a great decadent display of fabric and food and furniture such as was popular at that time, in the first flush of the Restoration. I accompanied them, but in my sullen pride I wouldn't dress for the occasion—I wore instead my college uniform, the plain blue smock that was the habit of my order, and I didn't dress my hair or put makeup on. But because it was a party for the very best people, no one raised an eyebrow at my austerity; the men all kissed my hand and the women my cheek with perfect aplomb, and I felt foolish, childish in my petulant withholding from pleasure.

It was the feeling foolish, I think, that made me want to behave really badly. I had drunk too much wine too

quickly besides, and felt overheated in the crowd. Someone, a youngish man, a graduate of my own university who had a Cabinet post, was saying something about a new post that was soon to be created, a Ministry of Culture, and in a voice that sounded thin and reedy to my own ears I heard myself say, "My father wanted to establish such a post fifteen years ago, and they destroyed him for it." There was a pause after I spoke for just a heartbeat's length before the smooth momentum of the conversation around me resumed, and in my memory it seemed that that pause in time opened up a physical space too— the crowd around me parted for a moment and through the gap I looked down the room and saw the King nearby, in just the next knot of people, saw him hear my words and turn to see who'd spoken them, saw something register in his eyes when he saw me. I felt a moment's shock as I recognized him—I hadn't known it would be quite so grand a party—but I was compelled by some other directive to look past him, further down the length of the room, to the great gilt mirror that hung on the far wall, and in that distant glass I thought (and even now I am not sure) I saw my professor, he who had read me poems, his face half-turned from me.

When I turned around the wall of people behind me had closed again, and someone was calling us to dinner. And at dinner there was no sign of my professor, if indeed he had ever been there. But the King was there.

What did my husband think of me that night, at his first sight of me? What was it in me that drew him to me? Curiosity, a kind of prurient interest, because of my being my father's daughter? Perhaps that was part of it, but it couldn't have been all—there were other victims of the purge, after all, and many of them had daughters. I try to see myself through his eyes, as I must have appeared then: a pale, eager creature, awkward in her schoolgirl disguise, thinking she was burning with strength and arrogance when all she was showing was a shame and fear and rage so deep it was like a request to be preyed on. Did he want to prey on it? Or did he want to protect me from being preyed on by others? Or some combination of the two?

But no, this is just me speculating—it is what I now think of my younger self, what I wish someone had been able to think about me then. Who knows what my husband thought, strange man?

The next day my guardian brought up to me in my room the fateful calling card as heavy (or as light) as beaten gold, with the famous monogram scrawled across it in fountain ink, and that series of interviews began, in the private sitting-room at the palace where the spaniels lay on the rug and the timed intrusions of tea and sandwiches or scotch and sodas punctuated the formal courtesies of our exchanges. And though I delayed and hesitated and even feigned illness or hysteria at points in that chess-game courtship, it seems to me now that nothing was ever in any real doubt: there was never any question that I would marry him, for the plot had been set in motion, and I'm a sucker for a plot: on and on it draws me, eager as I am to discover what's going to happen next.

BEFORE THE PURGES BEGAN, BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR, before the restoration and the truce—for so people of my age count time—but after my father had begun to be unfaithful to my mother, for so my own sense of history dates it—there was a story that came on television in the afternoons that my mother and I watched everyday. All my friends at school watched the program too, and we talked about it at recess, and acted out our favorite parts and made up new scenes, but there was something about the show that was intensely private to me all the same—it was like it was my secret dream, this television show, despite its widespread broadcast. It was about a fairy-princess whose name was Laura. Her face was like a painting, quiet the way the faces in paintings are. I remember I didn't think her pretty, the first time I saw her, because I didn't think she was fancy enough. Then after a week or so I understood how beautiful she was, and it was as if my eyes had grown new wisdom. She had wavy hair that was the color of wheat with the sun in it, and eyes like the ocean, sometimes green, sometimes gray, sometimes blue. She was ageless and young at the same time. The story she was in had many sub-plots and many characters, but the single central strand was the mystery surrounding Laura and her great, secret lost love. Every episode ended with a vision of her face at a window, gazing out, speaking in voice-over to someone in low, intimate tones: "And so another day ends, my love. Another day without you near me…"

I remember how I used to sometimes whisper those words to myself as I lay in bed at night, and try to imagine who that person could be, the person to whom those words were addressed. Thinking about that story now, about its sweet continuance, I know that it wasn't the promise of revelation that kept me enthralled with it day by day, but the certainty that there was always something that would never be revealed.

The story was on for years before it was finally cancelled, one of the last of the television shows to go off the air. After the first year or so, the actress who played Laura didn't want to be in the story anymore, and so they replaced her with a different actress. I remember the harsh jarring sensation, the outraged betrayal, I felt the first time I watched the story with the new Laura. But after a few weeks I got used to her, and a few weeks after that I stopped thinking about the previous Laura. Sometimes, I remember, I felt a vague kind of loss, a longing for

something out of reach, that now I associate with loyalty to the first Laura—but then again, wasn't the loss and longing there even when the first Laura was in the story? They had five or six Lauras over the span of time the story was on, I think.

As I sit here in my tower room, working my tapestry, I get a feeling that takes me back to that time, that quiet afternoon time when my mother and I curled up together and lost ourselves in that story, each losing our separate selves but staying connected by the contact of our physical bodies, each to each. It is a feeling of quivering expectation that fills me now, a thing I almost want to call joy—it makes me want to run down these stairs and out onto the green and up the bell-tower, and set all the bells a-swinging.

But at that thought I always stop, and my joy is strangled in my throat. For the Minister's study is in the bell-tower, and the green flag flying tells me he is there.

IT IS TIME TO SPEAK OF HIM. I HAVE PUT IT OFF LONG enough. I have tried to wade in slowly, referring to him here and there, trying to prepare. But I can't. He's a jarring note, someone I can't make sense of. Someone I can't work into the tapestry without tearing the thread, warping the woof. But I can't ignore him either. (Write it, Terah, I tell myself, and even as I do so I hear the echo of a poem, read by his voice.)

I will, I will write it. I will tell you.

HE FIRST CAME, OH WHEN WAS IT? SIX YEARS AGO? Though I knew before then that he was coming. When was it I knew for sure that it was he who would come? Coming to know that I knew was gradual, the way getting to know you're in love can be gradual, the recognition of one's state trailing so far behind the important event that the event itself—the moment of falling, the Great Moment—is located in an unlocatable past (does the theoretician in me show?).

There was talk even before my marriage about the new Minister of Culture, how the King had surprised everyone by choosing someone young and unknown, and surely I must have at least suspected then? (For I thought I had seen his face in the mirror, the night I met my husband.) (But why does it seem important to try to puzzle this out? Because somehow I think of my knowledge as guilt, and my ignorance as innocence. Was I ever ignorant? Was I ever innocent?)

Certainly by the day of the culture festival, held to honor his arrival in the capital city, I had long since known that the new Minister was my professor. I knew too, by then, that his wife came to the city with him, for she had been appointed Priestess of the Chapel. (It shocked me to hear that archaic title brought forth again after so long, and it frightened many people. Not all the old traditions are best reinstated, some said.)

On the festival day my husband had the avenue that led from the palace to the tower strewn with flowers, and musicians, jugglers, actors, painters thronged the square, plying their trades. Makeshift bookstalls displayed dusty volumes for sale, dug out of obscure storage in recent months. And I was there, on my husband's arm, dressed in my regal robes, in my powdered hair. I was there when the closed litter (for as of times of old her face was never to be seen) carrying the Priestess went in procession down the avenue, and I saw the Minister riding behind her on his white horse.

He had changed. Once, in that distant classroom, he read to us as Satan, speaking to the sun, and he had said:

There was a brightness there. I moved toward it. When I reached him he was naked. It was his skin that was glowing.

"Me miserable! which way shall I fly/Infinite wrath, and infinite despair?/Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell;/And in the lowest deep a lower deep/Still threat'ning to devour me opens wide,/To which the Hell I suffer seems a Heav'n." And I thought how like a fallen angel indeed he looked as he read those lines, his florid face twisted into passion and his short yellow hair standing on end, and the sensuality of the mouth with the clarity of the gray-blue eyes …

But he had changed. His face was a stately mask that festival day, immovable, it seemed.

It made me want to make it move.

WRITE IT, TERAH. SAY: IT WAS ALL MY OWN DOING. He never once gave me any sign, of recognition or of interest. Unmoved mover, he greeted me in the formal manner on state occasions, making me the low bow, kissing my brow with cold lips. But a fire had flared into being somehow (As kingfishers catch fire, so dragonflies draw flame —). It raged in my blood and would not let me sleep, let me eat, or let me work at my loom. (What I do is me; for that I came.)

And so one night, I followed him after vespers. It was still and dark on the stairs to the tower. He preceded me, seemingly unaware of my presence, his robes a faint glow up ahead. But when he reached that round chamber at the top of the stairs, he turned and stretched out his hand to me. There was a brightness there. I moved toward it. When I reached him he was naked. It was his skin that was glowing. His naked sex, erect, curved, pure white. My

own skin, when I removed my robe, looked gray next to the whiteness of his. His hands on my shoulders, I went on my knees, the bones of my knees on the cold flagstone, and then his cold sex in my mouth. How could it have been cold? There must have been some heat there. And then the sudden force of his ejaculation, the jolt of that.

With that unholy milk still on my lips he lifted me up, led me to a curtain at the back of the chamber, swept it aside, and there she was, as if entombed. The Priestess. I had never seen her face before that I could remember, and yet she looked familiar to me. She was younger than I had thought, but her face was like a death-mask, white and still. There was a blue cloth covering her, but there was a rent in that fabric over the rent in her, her vagina open like a sea creature lifting itself to the air, a pink stain like spring blossoms in bare woods. His hand on my hair, he put my mouth to her bleeding gash, and his milk on my lips staining her was like the breeding of maggots in her flesh, and I gagged and struggled free and fled. Out into the night. To the Knight, who became my lover.

For the Knight, my lover, was encamped on the green between the tower and the palace, sleeping his troops there for the night, just returned as they were from the northern regions where they had put down the recent rebellion. One of his guards seized me as I fled the tower, naked as I still was, and bound me and brought me to him. I saw from his shocked eyes that he knew who I was, had seen my photograph, or me myself in some state procession.

And he was kind to me. He said, Bring her a cloak, it is a holy madness that is upon her, for such things afflict royal folk sometimes, 'tis said. I grasped those words and held them, hold them still. Perhaps they are true.

His simple lust restored me. His concubine, the pink and gold girl, lying next to him on her divan as he received me from the night, I thought not of then. Later though, after I had crept to him from the separate bed where he had couched me (for he thought not to return me to my husband that night,) I heard her weeping. But I did not stop. I needed him, needed his clumsy surprised passion. Afterwards I slept, as I had thought I never would again. I found refuge in the passion and the pain of this simple couple, from the unholy holiness of that other pair.

Who yet are always with me, even as I write this, breathing on my shoulder, the troubling sun and moon of my nights and days.

MADELINE BROWN

Lives in Somerville, Massachusetts. She is at work on a series of interrelated fictions, of which "The Lady of Situations" is one.

Missionary

GARY PERCESEPE

"So they drew near to the village to which they were going.
He appeared to be going further, but they constrained him, saying,
'Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent.' "
—Luke 24:28-29

RIGHT AFTER HIGH SCHOOL, I SPENT ALMOST A year at a fundamentalist Christian college in upstate New York, where I seduced my English professor and got C's in all the courses not in my major, which was psychology. My papers in John's classes were all weeks late, which explains the C's, if you believe in explanations.

I wasn't dumb. I left before we were caught. They didn't have anything on me, or on him, but they were on the scent. I could tell. John was hopeless in the area of deception, and they had ways of finding things out, a whole legal machinery of sin detection, complete with informants. Leaving was something I could do for him, at least. I never got to say goodbye, which was the way I thought I wanted it at the time. Just check out, like a rehab gone bad. Failed fundamentalist. Don't look back. Lead him not into temptation. Deliver him from evil.

I know what people think when they hear all this, and it's OK—maybe I think some of that too. But the thing is, it's been six years since I left, and I still don't know what any of it means, or even how to make this sentence keep going until it made sense to anyone who wasn't there. Or to anyone who was.

Like Garbo

WINTER IS MY FAVORITE SEASON. I'VE ALWAYS KNOWN this. It seems wrong to speak of other seasons, as though they exist. I liked it there in winter. The sky was low like

a snowy roof and in the brilliant woods adjoining campus a furious wind was blowing, always. The lake was frozen three straight months. Sometimes John would walk me across it, laughing and moving in a half-skate. We danced, a kind of tortured mock tango there on the lake, remembering bits from old movies that John had seen in videos that he rented and played late at night in his cabin, where I'd go late at night, breaking curfew with the help of my roommate Kit, another fugitive from fundamentalism, who'd let me in the locked dormitory door at six the next morning.

When we stumbled and fell we'd lie in a heap on the ice, kissing. After, I'd pull away and stare at him, my face lit by moonlight, immobile, like Garbo. Like that, yes. I knew what he saw when he looked at me, his conflicted desire.

It hurt to look at him then, seeing the shape of his care reflected in his cloudy eyes. Poor boy. It was then that I knew he was as lost as me. At these times and no others I'd let myself think, "he loves me," but then I'd remember that to him, as a fundamentalist Christian, love and rescue meant the same thing. He's big on salvation, I would think. Then: It's not his fault; it's all he knows.

John

JOHN DID HIS BEST TO IMPERSONATE A NORMAL fundamentalist college professor, but it was an unconvincing performance to me. He'd tell me that he didn't belong there at Redeemer College, that he took the job only because he was desperate for work in his field, that he got the job because the Dean knew his father (a pastor), that he'd leave when he finished his dissertation, that something better would come along. And I'd say "What?," sweeping my hand in a dramatic gesture that took in the eight-by-eight square of his office with the droopy tile overhead and the blinking fluorescent lights. "And leave all this?"

John believed that leaving would be the best thing, after what had happened between us, but I observed that belief was precisely his problem, that he was excessive in his need for belief. Besides, I'd tell him, you're needed here. You're a missionary.

Mr. Darcy

WHEN I WAS SMALL, THE SINGLE MISSIONARIES WOULD stay with us at the parsonage, and my sister and I always dreaded it. The women, with faint moustaches and impeccable grammar in their fund-raising newsletters, always seemed to have the most terrible physical problems; they limped, they gave off a vague medicinal smell, they used no makeup, they wore K-Mart shoes and hose with seams. I changed the sheets when they left, holding them at arm's length as I threw them into the washer.

It's possible that the single men, however, were worse. Once, in sixth grade, a man named John Darcy stayed a week with us, and I never saw him come out of his room—that is to say, my room; I had to stay with my sister—until the last night, just before dinner, when he appeared before me and Cassie and our girlfriends and started doing calisthenics with an unholy enthusiasm. Amazed, we watched as he stood on his head in the living room, his glasses awry, his spastic mouth twitching with exertion. I was twelve, and horrified. I wondered what he had done all that time alone in my room. I grew up deathly afraid that I would become a single missionary and do calisthenics in the houses of strangers.

Class Notes

WHAT I REMEMBER COMES IN PIECES, LIKE THE SOFT doughy squares of bread my father served at communion in the Baptist church, the crust carefully cut away by deaconesses. I reach inside and seem to pick up a piece of Wonder Bread memory. *This do. In remembrance of me. This is my body. Broken for you.*

I remember John lecturing on the history of romance.

John did his best to impersonate a normal fundamentalist college professor, but it was an unconvincing performance to me.

It was a morning in early January, missions week at Redeemer. Slouched in my seat against the pale green wall, notebook in my lap, I sleepily took notes. Tall titled columns of them. But when I look, my notebook now looks like the haphazard ramblings of a bright but disorganized deity:

happy love has no history
Tristan lands in Ireland
Iseult the Fair love has always been nourished by obstacles
romance only comes into existence
when love is fatal, frowned upon doomed by life.
what draws us is the story?

It surprised me that a fundamentalist college would offer courses on Shakespeare and the age of Romanticism, lots of Keats, Byron, Shelley, but I've learned that fundamentalists are very big on love and romance. They're suckers for tales of conquest and heroism, evil dragons slain, fair damsels rescued from distress. They don't really believe in happy endings, at least not in this life. They want to believe that all are sinners, all are lost (they're right, there!), that everyone and everything can be saved through a personal relationship with Jesus.

I'd say: Jesus saves. Moses invests. Lead us not into Penn Station. Deliver us from Evel Knieval.

This was not what John wanted to hear.

Mother, Milky

I HAD SEX FOR THE FIRST TIME AT FOURTEEN, AND BY the time I was sixteen I had had four lovers, a drinking problem, and an abortion. My parents were oblivious to what was going on in the house. They were never home, always at church, organizing, or practicing the cure of souls, and Cassie and I quietly became famous in the Grand Rapids underground, a loosely knit criminal network of mostly pastor's kids. It was fun, until Cassie fell off the back of a motorcycle, and my parents remembered me, and started to use my name in sentences in a way that seemed to me excessive, and began asking to spend time with me, their cadaverous eyes haunted, their skin stretched tightly over remaining flesh.

Late one night I got up for some milk. My mother, drawn like a moth to the light of the refrigerator, silently sat down in the middle of the kitchen floor, naked. I dropped the milk. I laid down next to her, my head in her lap, and kicked the carton away, then drew my milky legs up until they were under my chin.

There was no money for college, but Redeemer offered free tuition the first year for the children of pastors, so there I was. I figured I'd do one year, then transfer some place. It wasn't much of a plan, but it was what I could manage at the time. My parents said they'd find a way to help pay for a secular school later if I gave them that one year at Redeemer. They'd say it just that way, like a prayer: "Give us this year."

Like it was a gift.

To them, I guess it was.

To me it was a life. Or half a life. A half-life.

I was eighteen years old.

Chapel

THE FIRST WEEK OF WINTER QUARTER WAS MISSIONary week at Redeemer. Did I say this? We were required to attend chapel twice a day during missionary week, in the morning and again at night. The missionaries that came to the conference were the real item, all the way from Chad and Brazil, Zaire, Mexico, the Philippines, Japan, England, France, you name it. And "Home Missions" people too, from Grand Rapids and Atlanta.

I found it odd that they would have missionaries in a lot of these places, especially England and France and Grand Rapids, where there's a church on every corner. Kit said the evening sessions were a great time to catch up on your homework. We'd sit in the back of the chapel in the part we called "The Zoo." We'd pass notes, giggle, set off the occasional alarm clock, and make fun of the nerd boys they had there, who carried gargantuan designer Bibles with their names printed in gold block letters on the cover. (They prayed over ice cream cones when they'd venture out on dates, which was rare.)

One night I asked to look at one of these Bibles. A nerd boy had come in late and had to sit in The Zoo, so I reached over and opened it to the inside cover, looking for the inscription Kit said was always there, in the five line space Zondervan made for this purpose. Sure enough, there it was: "To Travis, in the hope that this book will keep you from sin. Remember, son, This book will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from this book. For prayerful study at Redeemer, where we trust you will get a safe education, by the grace of God. Your loving parents." I gave the Bible back to Travis and squeezed his sweaty hand, dragging it into my lap. I pecked him on the cheek. I put my tongue in his left ear and smiled sweetly. I did not ask him how safe his education felt then.

Sex

I DIDN'T TELL ANYONE ABOUT US, EXCEPT FOR KIT, but I knew that we were being watched. At Redeemer points could be scored for bringing someone down; a sexual fall was a biggie. Sex was preached against on a daily basis in chapel, but the really funny thing is, all that did was call attention to it, heightening anxiety and, of course, curiosity. Lust was everywhere. The place was a hothouse of love, love, love; everyone was a possible victim, anyone could fall. It was the most sexually democratic place on earth. I'm saying there was an obsession there about sex. Even Hugh Hefner got tired of it, for Christ's sake, but at Redeemer they just didn't know when to stop.

John, II

SOMEWHERE IN HERE I CONCLUDED THAT JOHN belonged there. I say this because I watched him pray (while safely disguised as a good-attitude coed in a navy blazer and plaid skirt). John sat up front on the right side of the College Chapel, with the other faculty. His head cradled in his beautiful hands, the long slim fingers threaded through his wavy hair, when he prayed he seemed to be lifting off the pew, as if elevated by an invisible wire. Afterwards, students and colleagues would gather around him to ask what he thought of the sermon. Even if it was a disaster— say the preacher had gotten off one-liners on abortion, the ACLU, how God made Adam and Eve not Adam and Steve, liberal apostate theologians, all in a commentary on the first chapter of Paul's Epistle to the Romans— John would look each of these petitioners in the eye and speak carefully, without condescension, giving his careful critique. Evenhanded. He must have known that it was killing him to be there, that

he should leave, but I began to feel that this was because of me, not because he had outgrown the place. How could I take him away from all this when I didn't even know what it was, the life he had there?

I'd think: If anyone finds out about me and John, we're fucked. I felt bad about this, because as I said, John was so hopeless in the area of deception. He wanted to turn himself in. He was unprepared to live in the world, that was pretty clear.

One day we went to the post office in Albany. He wanted to mail a package to his grandparents. We were in the downtown office, it was crowded, and he drifted from counter to counter, unable to settle anywhere, until finally he found the right one. But then he realized he didn't have the right zip code. He stood there, turned to stone. He was ashen. I asked what was wrong and he said it was impossible, we'd have to return home and look up the address. I told him that was ridiculous, it was a thirty minute drive back, and besides, one of the clerks at the window could look up the zip code. He stared at me as though I were a Martian, as though this were news from another planet. Finally, he got in line, the clerk addressed the package complete with zip code, and John paid him. But when he counted the change, he saw that he had one dollar too many, so he gave it back to the clerk. Then he walked away slowly, counting again, and in the middle of the staircase he realized that the missing dollar belonged to him after all.

I stood next to him, at a loss, while he shifted his weight from one foot to the other, wondering what to do. Going back would be difficult; a crowd upstairs was pushing and shoving in line.

"Just let it go," I said. He looked at me, baffled.

"How can I let it go?" he said.

Not that he's sorry about the dollar, money in itself is of no consequence to him. But it is the fact that there is one dollar missing. How can he just forget about something like that? He spoke about it for a long time, and was very unhappy with me. And this repeated itself with different variations, in every shop and restaurant. Once he gave a homeless person a five dollar bill. The man had stopped him and asked for a dollar so he could eat. Five was all he had, so John asked the man to change the five, but the man claimed he had no change. We stood there for a full two minutes trying to decide what to do. Then it occurred to him that he could let the beggar have the five. But we hadn't gone ten steps when he began getting angry. This is the same man who would have been eager and extremely happy to give the poor man five hundred dollars with no questions asked. But if he had asked for five hundred and one we would have spent the day trying to find a place to make change, he would have worried himself over one dollar.

His anxiety in the face of money was almost the same as his anxiety over women. Or his fear of things official. Once I called his office in the morning, begging him to take me away from there that day. I was beside myself, I needed to get away, just for half a day, somewhere, anywhere. I cursed him when he said he couldn't. Afterward, he didn't sleep for nights, he tormented himself, wrote me letters full of self-destruction and despair. Why didn't he come? He couldn't ask for leave. He was unable to bring himself to ask the Department chair for release from his one remaining class that day, the same Department Chair he admired in the depths of his soul—I'm not kidding—because of the Chair's skill with computers. How could he lie? he'd say. To the Chair? Impossible.

Lying is possible for most of us because it gives us a safe place, at least momentarily, a refuge from some situation which would otherwise be intolerable. At one time or another all of us have taken refuge in a lie, in blindness, in confusion, in enthusiasm or despair, or something.

Lying is possible for most of us because it gives us a safe place, at least momentarily, a refuge from some situation which would otherwise be intolerable.

But John had no refuge, nothing at all. He was absolutely incapable of lying, just as he was incapable of getting drunk or high. He lacked even the smallest refuge; he had no shelter in the world. He was exposed to everything that most people are protected from. He was like a naked man in a world where everyone is clothed.

This is why he could not continue seeing me, and also why he could not continue teaching there. He knew this, but was unable to leave either me or Redeemer. Like at the Post Office, I thought: He will move from counter to counter, trying to find a space to work it out, a place from where he can see through to tomorrow. He couldn't leave because of me, but he couldn't stay either. But what would be his reasons for leaving? He loved what he did there; he felt he was needed by his students. And of course he was. If he were to leave, where would they go? Had he left last year, he would have never met me, and then my suffering would have been greater. I know that he thought about this, but for him it was more than a practical problem, it was also a theological issue: How could God do this to him?

I told him: lying is inescapable. If he stayed there he lied, because he couldn't remain and be the type of person that he was. But if he left that was a lie too, because there

was part of him that very much belonged there, that would be misplaced anywhere else.

I told myself: Maybe we are all searching for places where we can stay the longest without lying.

Later, I thought, who knows? Maybe he reached his place of optimum truth there.

Cabin Stories

WHEN WE MET FALL QUARTER, JOHN WAS A VIRGIN. He told me there was a girl once when he was in high school, but they broke up before it ever got to that. One had to know how to listen with John. He tended to leave things out.

One night I followed him home to his house on the north end of College Street. The street was lined with run-down shacks, with broken down cars on the dirt driveways and little kids playing tackle football in the street. No faculty lived on this side of town. As we walked our shoes clacked on the concrete pavement, then afterwards crunched on the long cinder path that led up to his little cabin at the edge of a dark wood. Dry leaves rustled. It was Thanksgiving break. I'm sure, to him, I was a waif, lost and errant. It's true that I had nowhere to go. Everyone else had gone home, most to their parents' houses. For many reasons, my parents' house was out of the question. I called and told them I was staying with a friend. They sounded relieved.

Over wine at dinner I got the rest of the story out of John. It turns out that he had never even kissed this girl, whom he had met at a dance when he was fifteen. She was the great love of his life, there had never been another, and he hadn't so much as kissed her.

There was a black coal stove in the center of the main room, but the bin next to it was empty. The tiny bedroom was in the west corner of the cabin. The bed was covered with animal skins. It was funny to see John's white hands shooting out of those dark skins at dawn, like some prehistoric creature with good reflexes. We'd laugh and squirm around to get warm, grinding ourselves into the cotton sheets while John re-positioned the skins above us. I'd ask him to tell me a story, and he'd tell me how he used to tug his little brothers on a sled up a snowy hill in Peekskill, or about the time when he was four and his older brother's dog bit him, and his parents made Matt destroy the dog in the back yard, in front of him.

Right here was when I told him about Cassie. I mentioned her wavy dark hair and did her laugh for him and made him get up to get my jacket, which had been hers, for her scent, and we both put our noses into the collar and rutted around, and when he cried I knew I wanted a different story. After that he began telling stories about God and I got less and less interested, and finally I just told him to stop and then there were no more stories.

We stayed in that cabin almost a week. John found some coal for the stove, and it was a good thing, because on the second day it snowed. The windows frosted over, and snow blew in through small gaps between the logs in the northwest corner. When we talked we could see our breath. John said it looked like something out of *Dr. Zhivago*. I took his word for it.

We got into a routine: wake up, cook breakfast, back into bed, up for lunch and long walks in the woods, drive into Albany for dinner at a different restaurant each night, bed again. There was no talk of Redeemer College.

The day before classes resumed we were lying in bed. We talked past noon. I took a deep breath.

"John, how did you get into this whole fundamentalism thing? Why are you here? I mean, you can't really believe all this stuff?"

" 'Jesus made as though he would go further.' "

"What?"

"That's it. That's why I believe."

"What are you talking about?"

"Luke 24. After his resurrection, Jesus is on the road to Emmaeus and he meets up with two of his disciples, but they don't recognize him. They think he's just another guy and they're amazed that he hasn't heard about this Jesus person, so they say, 'Haven't you heard? You must be the only one in town who hasn't! He's risen from the dead!' Then Jesus finally reveals himself to them, going back through the Old Testament and showing them how all this was speaking of him, how he really is the messiah. The first time I read this story, Zoe, I thought to myself, this is sad, this is really so sad. I mean, to have to explain yourself like that. After all the great things he did, all the miracles and the healings and to top it off Jesus rises from the dead, and here these guys that claim to be his followers don't even recognize him. He was traveling through the world incognito. Even the ones who claimed to know him best didn't recognize him, or denied him, they all somehow missed him, or betrayed him with a kiss. After three years they still didn't know who he was, they still didn't get it."

"But what is this, Jesus made-as-if-he-would-go-further stuff?"

"After Jesus goes through this whole routine with them, and now they recognize him, and believe again, it's dinner time, and the disciples were going to spend the night somewhere. But the text says that Jesus made as though he was going further, and they had to persuade him to stay with them. I think that's why I love him. I think that's why I'm here. He was just so incredibly polite, he didn't force himself on anybody, he had the most incredible manners. He didn't want to offend. He wanted to help them to see. Jesus—"

"Wait a minute. That's why you're here? Because Jesus made as though he was going further, because he had good manners? That's a reason? You're saying that you came to teach at a fundamentalist college with weirdo rules and a pervert for a President, and you choose to stay here, the whole thing, because Jesus was polite to these bozos?"

"Because Jesus goes unrecognized in the world, Zoe. Because we've been in the presence of grace and we didn't even know it. Because the greatest mysteries in the universe have been revealed to us and we've forgotten or overlooked them or somehow screwed things up but he's too polite to embarrass us again. Because he travels through the world, travels through us, incognito. We keep pushing him away, out of the world, out of our lives, and he lets us! Because he's been right there with us, hell, he's carried us and we didn't even notice."

He sighed, and looked into his hands.

Outside, the wind was picking up. Voices of children could be heard at play in the street, and farther off, the low rumbling of a train. I watched the grimy curtains move toward us, disturbed by the wind, then lie limp against the window pane, suddenly still.

John got up and threw some more coals on the fire, then came up behind me and waited. I didn't say anything.

Then he said, "I know I'm not saying this very well, Zoe. I just think I can help here, that's all."

Kit

ONE DAY DURING MISSIONS WEEK A VICE PRESIDENT of one of the big missions boards used maps and charts to share with us missionary possibilities all over the world, particularly in the former Communist bloc, and could it be that God would like to use us in Russia for His glory? Five hundred students raised their hands and come forward down the aisle to go to Russia. That's one third of the student population. I thought, What are all these people going to do in Russia? I felt sorry for the place. I pictured all those Bible thumping classmates tearing up the countryside, knocking on doors and handing out tracts in poorly translated Russian. I thought, if I were in the Kremlin I would pass laws immediately to stem the tide of evangelistically minded American students with large Bibles. The way I looked at it, the country had enough problems.

But then, Kit and I figured that 498 of them would change their minds. They'd get married, get a mortgage, have kids. Most of the students I knew would rather die than think of themselves in a country without shopping malls. And what would these students wear? Kit and I tried to imagine the Redeemer girls with their blazers and pearls, trying to talk to vodka-smirched Russian women waiting in line for brown bread. We cracked up.

Besides me and Kit, there were our trainees, Alix and Jennifer and Sara. After the missionary conference ended at 9:30, we'd sit around complaining about how we were expected to get any work done when they had us going to meetings all night. We'd trade favorite missionary stories. Sara thought she had the best one, about this missionary from Brazil who used to tell repeatedly, every time he spoke, about how this giant bug was in his skull for three weeks, how they eventually prayed that bug right into oblivion, and Alix recalled a missionary who somehow failed to tie up the livestock on a plane and wound up with goats chewing things up and raising hell in the cockpit, but we all sat there in amazement when Kit told us about her mother.

"I grew up in West Virginia, right, and down there we take our religion seriously. No room to fuck up, I mean you've got to toe the line, sister, or whump, they'll toss your sorry ass out the church. So my mom tries, right, really tries, to please my dad—who incidentally is the pastor of the church—you know, to be the total woman. She even wears only Saran wrap when he gets home from work, kinky sex to the Song of Solomon, the whole fundy thing. But she knows that she's going nowhere in that small town and she's itching to get out and back to school so she can get herself a life before she's too old."

"That's why you're here? Because Jesus made as though he was going further, because he had good manners? That's a reason?"

Jennifer stopped looking at Kit, and stared at the wall, a vacant look in her eyes. I put my arm around her.

"So one Sunday night at church my mother shows up with three roses, each in a Dixie cup of dirt. One rose is completely closed, the other is partially open, and the third is in full bloom."

"What was she doing with three roses?" Alix asked.

"They were her props, see. She was about to give us an object lesson, just like she might have done in junior church or something, but that congregation was about to hear something it never heard before, I promise you. Us kids are sitting quietly in the pew, we've got our coloring books, our Barbies, the whole thing, like a normal Sunday night. But nothing was normal that night.

"So now my dad, who remember, is the pastor, says it's testimony time, and the minute he says that my mother stands to her feet and in her hands she's holding her three roses, and she starts in on her testimony.

" 'My dear sisters and brothers in Christ, I want to share my heart with you. You see these three roses? They represent my life. As you can see, the first rose is unopened. It signifies my life as it has been for the first 33 years. All this potential, all of my possibilities, going to waste. Do you know what it is like to have a good mind, a sound mind, that the Lord God has given you, but you are unable to use it? Well, that has been my life. This is the old me, a beautiful rosebud, unopened, yearning to burst out into bloom.

" 'And this second rose you can see is in bloom. Its petals have opened, all the world can see its beauty, but it is still a veiled beauty, isn't it?' My mom held the second rose aloft in her hands. I could see old Mrs. Bartle sitting on the edge of her seat, following that rose with her eyes. 'But something is still wrong,' mom said. 'This rose is not all it can be. It has yet to become all the rose that God intended it to be.' Now she had her head bowed. She was weeping. 'This is my life now, this rose. I've opened up to the Lord, I'm willing for the world to see me now, but not all of me, just a part. I'm still only half a person.

" 'But this rose.' She waved the third rose in the air now, triumphantly. 'This rose is in all its glory! It is the rose in full bloom. Nothing can be more beautiful than a rose that has completely opened to its possibilities. And this rose is what I want to be. What I shall become, by the grace of God.' "

"God, Kit, that is so beautiful," Jennifer said.

"Yeah, they all thought so. Mrs. Bartle was bawling so loud you could hear her across town. But what no one knew is that I had heard my parents earlier. They had a huge fight. They thought I was outside playing with my sister. My father was pleading with mom to stop having the affair, to stay with us, and she kept screaming, over and over, 'Leave me alone, you're smothering me!' That woman was heading for the door long before the trinity of roses speech, I'm telling you. It was a great performance, and it bought her some time and a lot of sympathy afterwards, when she left town. *Masterpiece Theatre.*"

"God, Kit," Jennifer says. How did you stand it? Did you tell her that you knew?"

"I've never told anyone," Kit said, "till now."

On The Ward

KIT WAS THE REBEL. I DIDN'T HAVE THE ENERGY FOR rebellion. For that, you had to care. I was just there for observation. I told myself constantly, "You're on the ward, pay attention." But it was weird, since they all thought the same thing, they were observing you. After all the services at home, all those Redeemer chapel messages, all the Bible classes, I had internalized a fundamentalist voice. It talked back to the other voice, my voice. I heard these conversations all the time.

—It's wrong to have sex. The Bible says so. Whoremongers and adulterers God will judge.

—That's ridiculous. Sex is the most natural thing in the world. You see a gorgeous guy, you think you're going to live forever. God gave us sex. He made us this way.

—You must learn to overcome these lustful thoughts. God will judge.

—Then God's judging himself, since he gave us these bodies in the first place.

—That's blasphemy.

—Your God's perverted. Do you really think he's hanging around the Ramada Inn, checking out what's going on in Room 208? Shouldn't he be more interested in Northern Ireland, or Lebanon, Bosnia, something more worthy of his time?

—He's working on that. Besides, God knows everything about everybody. He is not only omniscient, He is omnipresent.

—So he's got the Holiday Inn covered too.

—You have a bad attitude.

—So what?

—You're headed for hell.

It's like fundamentalism is a double-voiced sickness, but the ones who observe it are themselves observed, so no one knows how to chart it. It's a standoff.

Chapel, II

I DID SOME MATH: IF YOU STAYED AT REDEEMER FOR four years, and went to chapel and the special bible and missionary conferences at the beginning of the semesters, and to church twice on Sunday and Wednesday night prayer meetings you would have heard 255 sermons per year, for a total of 1,020 in four years.

Redeemer was in session for thirty weeks a year, fifteen weeks per semester. This means that a student could hear 255 sermons in 210 days in one year; graduating seniors will have heard 1,020 sermons in only 840 days. If you want the prayer figure, take the sermon number and double it: 2,040 public prayers, minimum, not counting required dorm bible studies and prayer meetings.

Many of these were about sex. Not having it was the idea. There was no mention of child abuse, homelessness, racism, or sexual harassment. Math was not my strong point, but I checked my figures three times. I thought these figures were not widely known. When I told John he suggested I write a letter to the school newspaper. When I told Jennifer, she said that's not counting the summers, when you attend church and prayer meeting at home with your parents. She went off to calculate the number of times that worked out to in terms of hosiery bought and put on. When I told Kit, she said, "What'd you expect, that they'd leave anything to chance?"

The President

THE PRESIDENT OF THE COLLEGE FRIGHTENED ME. His name was Jack Sampson. Since Redeemer was so small, we all got to see him way more than we'd want. When he looked at me it sent shivers down my spine. One day, waiting for John after Chapel, he looked at me; well, not at me, he looked at my body. At my legs and butt. It was a "degree day" today, meaning it was below zero and the girls got to wear pants. Pants on girls were so unusual that when we got to wear them, we'd flaunt it, whatever we had. So I had on Jennifer's too-tight striped pants and he looked at me in this really ugly way, and I knew he wanted to undress me. I wanted to take John's hand and run out of the building.

That night's topic of dorm conversation was President Sampson: Was he a pervert? Kit thought so. "Think about it. This guy comes right out and says he is a friend of Jimmy Swaggart, I mean this guy knows that weirdo! He has Swaggart's home phone number, can you believe it?"

"Did you see the news when Swaggart asked forgiveness from his congregation? Wasn't that nauseating? His poor wife."

"I saw the interview they did with the prostitute Swaggart was with. She has a kid. She said the stuff he asked her to do, it was sick."

"I don't know, Zoe. I don't think Sampson's a pervert. The president asked for prayer for him, is all. And besides, we're different from Swaggart in doctrine, right? So Swaggart doesn't really represent the Christian community. I mean, Swaggart is a charismatic, right? We don't believe that stuff about tongues and all."

This was Jennifer. She was somewhat in awe of us.

"Right, Jennifer." Kit said, "Sampson doesn't speak in tongues so he can't possibly be a pervert."

John, III

I WORRIED ABOUT JOHN CONSTANTLY. IT WAS unbearable. He was wracked with guilt. I didn't believe in guilt. I thought it was a false emotion that we manufactured to torment ourselves. I watched my parents manipulate each other and my sister with guilt. Fundamentalists are expert at guilt, but this is a cliché. What's not widely known is how much they suffer.

I looked at it this way: I'd been around fundamentalism enough to have received an inoculation. I think I'm immune to it now, that enough distance has been created, but it's still in my blood, traveling in me, silent and potent.

Saved Sex

JOHN SOMETIMES WONDERED IF HE WAS STILL SAVED, what with all that we had done together. I'd tell him we need saving from something every day, what makes this day any different? And take his hand and place it on my breast.

Kit and Me

ONE OF THE WEIRDER RULES AT REDEEMER WAS THAT if two girls were on a bed, they both had to have both feet on the floor.

I ask you.

So one night Kit and I were lying in bed in our underwear with the door locked. Kit was admiring my panties, which were white, with red hearts. My mom sent them to me for Valentine's day, but they were too big. I knew Kit didn't have much money. After her mom ran off her dad lost his church. He got another one but it was a small congregation and couldn't afford to pay him much. I said what the hell. I took the panties off and gave them to her. My bra too.

Kit gave her professors fits. That day in New Testament she had embarrassed her prof by asking him if he had sex before marrying his wife. He deserved it, he kept going on and on about the biblical view of sexuality and Kit just couldn't take it anymore. I had to put my head on my desk to keep from laughing out loud. The prof asked if he could see her after class. He questioned her attitude. She had an appointment with the Dean the next morning at eight.

She lip synched to the tape: "Got it bad, got it bad, got it bad, I'm hot for teacher." Then she kissed me on the lips, and asked me out to dinner.

Anyway, we're lying in bed, me naked now, regretting my decision to stop seeing John outside of class, when Kit jumps me. We wrestle till we're panting with exhaustion, our sides splitting with laughter, but she has a good twenty pounds on me, and it's clear I'm going to get pinned, so I decide to just lay back and enjoy it. Kit pins me, then counts slowly to three in a referee's voice, and calls me a wimp. She lip synched to the illegal tape I had playing: "Got it bad, got it bad, got it bad, I'm hot for teacher." Then she kissed me on the lips, and asked me out to dinner.

I got back to the room the next day after classes and found a note on my bed. From Kit. They'd kicked her out. I ran down the hall crying. I found the Residence Hall Advisor and asked her what happened to Kit. She looked at me like I'd dropped in for the day from Jupiter. Then she said out of the side of her mouth, "Kit had an attitude problem. As you know. She's gone."

IT'S BEEN SIX YEARS. I MADE MY ESCAPE THE DAY Jennifer was kicked out for attitude in The Zoo. I piled all

my Redeemer clothes in the middle of the floor with a note saying "Help Yourself!" and caught the next bus out of town. I didn't say goodbye to anyone. I called my parents from the bus station and they freaked. But they didn't ask me to come home, I'll give them that.

I stayed with Kit in Ithaca until I got a job cutting hair and an apartment. I took some night classes and tried to get into a degree program at Cornell, but I couldn't get my Redeemer credits to transfer. Whenever I said that word, Redeemer, I'd get this look, like I was bad meat. There were fights with the Registrar, and scenes in the Admissions office. Finally I just gave up.

That was years ago.

I am twenty-four.

Last year I got married to this guitarist. We're on the road a lot. It's OK at night, when there's so much set-up work to do and then the band is playing and everything is moving by so fast, the lights winking at the dancers on the crowded floor and the crashing wall of sound that seems to flatten the room, picks us up and throws us down again. But the days are slow. Sometimes, after dinner with the guitarist and his friends, I stand up and walk outdoors, and keep on walking till I'm in sight of a church.

I just found out that I'm pregnant. I haven't told the guitarist. I haven't told anyone, yet. I've given a lot of thought to what I'm going to call the baby if it's a girl. Katherine Anne, after Kit and my grandmother. And if it's a boy? That's easy.

There's this song playing at work. I hear it all day long. The one about God on the bus, trying to make his way home.

I think: What if God *was* one of us?

I don't know what happened to John. For a while Kit was getting Redeemer newsletters at her house but she called and told them to fuck off. I never got any. I guess to them I never existed.

I still think about him sometimes, and yeah, about our conversation that last day in his cabin. And I see John's point in the Luke story. But I think Jesus made as though he would go farther because he just wanted to get away from those two guys. Maybe that's the difference between believers and non-believers when you get right down to it: the believers think it all comes down to this one person, and they know how to hang on to what they have.

And then I remember: We were in bed when he told me that funny story about Jesus walking on the road. John's hands were there on my belly, like mine are now, soft and warm, and he was sobbing, shaking so hard I thought he would fall apart, and he kept saying my name, over and over, Zoe, Zoe, Zoe, Zoe.

I tell myself I may be remembering this all wrong, that things change and your life plays tricks on you, but I mean, there we were, in that little cabin at the end of the road, and I was in his presence and I never knew what it was, what he meant, what was mine.

GARY PERCESEPE

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Paddlefish Sky

HOLLIS DREW

Those who know the most about the people of the River aren't the ones who pilot the boats.

THIS IS MY LAST DAY TO DRIVE A SCHOOL BUS. I usually wake early, but today a fat rain sweetens my sleep until a foghorn way off on the Mississippi River roots through a rich, moody clabber to bait me from my dreams. In the early spring the River can be mulish and unforgiving; its swollen waters pulls along giant trees, loose barges, even dead people, so bloated and dark and sexless it takes weeks to identify them, in its hungry prowl towards New Orleans. Hundreds of tiny islands along this stretch of the River clog its waters. Sandbars and currents are tricky through here. A tug pilot blinks at dark visions from inside the dim, green light of his wheelhouse and prays his tow won't bugger some careless fisherman who nods off in his skiff. Even with million-dollar radar, the older pilots still only trust their eyes.

The River changed its course long ago, which supports my daddy's notion that only three rules in life are certain: "Time will tell. Shit will smell. And water will seek its own level." The State of Tennessee claims most of the islands, even though they now snuggle up against our side of the River. My daddy probably heard when it

happened, but I didn't ask him before he died. Even if my daddy didn't know, I'm sure my granddaddy knew the history of the River.

I was young when my granddaddy died. I'm not sure now if I remember him or just the stories my uncles tell. His name was Tyrece and his people came from Virginia. He was a hostler, a main man. He was also a tiny man, but unafraid of the meanest mule in the lot. He dipped Garrett snuff and quoted scriptures from memory all day. He played a piano by ear; and if he heard a song played once on his old battery-run radio, he could play it forever, banging proudly upon a tinny-sounding upright, with his fingers hammering it out like little black hammers. He chopped cotton for more than eighty years and died at one hundred three. He outlived five wives and was buried beside them in a grove of yellow catalpa trees.

He told wonderful stories from his youth: of the time when his mother and two aunts, left alone and hungry during a spring flood, paddled out in a boat left tied to the second story bedroom window to slit the throat of a doe swimming through the tops of a flooded corn field; and of a black panther that clawed into the attic of their cabin one night to give birth, safe from the hotly baying hounds; and of a groggy rattler seeking heat that crawled into his bed when he was five, which he kicked three times with a heavy thud out into the floor before his puzzled mother came to investigate; and of winter mornings so cold his father's moustache was caked with ice from his steamy breath. He remembered when an ancient forest covered this land and six men clasping hands couldn't reach around its huge hardwood trees. My grandfather would have known all about the River changing its course if asked, but a man only thinks of such things when it's too late.

I LIVE NEXT TO A DOGLEG IN THE LEVEE JUST OUTSIDE the small town of Lazich, Arkansas, with the same wife, and in the same house I did as a kid. I can brag on it some because I can count on one hand folks who can say the same. Stella and me are still here. No doubt, we've been pretty lucky.

Stella is spooned around a pillow on her side of the bed; her breath hitches upon itself like something fancy, and I know she will live forever. She cruises through her dreams. I am comforted by her sighs. She makes me laugh and feel cozy. Some mornings she rolls over, only partly awake, and mumbles in a deep rubbery whisper, 'You still lovin' me?' But this morning the rain also holds her under. She won't wake up for another hour. I'll be gone to the bus garage by then. After a cup of black coffee, though, she'll air dry and be good as new.

Stella has made a good wife; if it is true, as my daddy said, that all good marriages begin and end with a steady woman, then I have been blessed, but he was still disappointed we married as we did. It had nothing to do with Stella—she is humble as a parable and he loved her from the start—but we were just fifteen. He wanted me to finish school; but I thought I was old enough and smart enough I didn't need his permission. I came in one day to say this is what Stella and me was going to do.

"Okay, Mister!" he said. "Now, I'll tell you what you gon' do: Come Monday, you gon' give your books to your cousin to take back to school. Then you gon' grab a hoe and join me in the fields." That was all he ever said about it. But he was hurt. None of his children had finished school. He had it worked out in his mind I would be the first. Even though I finally earned my diploma through the Army, it wasn't the same. He lived to be eighty-two; and he held it against me until Robert, my firstborn, finished school. Then it was okay between us. His intentions were good, but he just didn't know Stella.

WE OWN A COUNTRY GROCERY AND BAIT SHOP THAT Stella runs. Nothing fancy. We have a little meat counter in the back of the store where we sell bologna and souse and slab bacon, sticky meat bought by the slice and wrapped in white butcher paper. (Poor people can't afford stuff that's low-fat or organic.) We don't carry

My grandfather would have known all about the River changing its course if asked, but a man only thinks of such things when it's too late.

many fruits or vegetables. Fruits spoil too quickly in this humidity. And most people around here tend a small garden; squash and tomatoes and okra grow like weeds. So, we don't sell many vegetables anyway. Some folks still make cornbread in black iron skillets. Stella will buy a hundred pound sack of potatoes each week off the produce truck from Osceola. But now most people seem to prefer such stuff in a box.

Stella sells sack lunches for the cotton choppers. Stuff that won't spoil; mayonnaise will kill you quicker than a moccasin in summer. The farmers pay for the choppers' lunches and even pay social security on the choppers now. Like the man says on TV, "And so it is…"

A gravel road passes by out front and crosses over the levee onto Island 35. We sell bait and beer to the local fishermen. And I have a large tank where I sell fresh fish and soft-shelled turtles bought off the fishermen on the River. But only the old folks buy turtles from me now; they just scoff at the high-minded talk in the paper about the danger of chemicals. They speak, instead, in their

high feverish voices of haunts and swampdevils and croup, which worry them much more than the poisons that rain down from the bellies of those swooping yellow planes.

Children slip inside the store to dangle over the tank and watch the turtles. They jump and giggle at their fear when the turtles scrape their claws against the sides of the tank. The children are suspicious and hopeful, and I tell them stories from my youth, when giant alligator turtles crunched dainties from the bodies floating down the River—before the oily poisons softened their dough-colored eggs and tainted the turtles' sweet meat. Sometimes one of the brave ones will reach down into the tank and poke the soft leathery skin of a turtle with a finger, but not many do. I admire the brave child who thinks she risks a finger.

MISTER FEENY, THE DRUGGIST, COMES IN EACH DAY at noon from his shop on the town square to pray inside the walk-in freezer at the back of our store. Three years ago he moved to Lazich to set up business in an empty clothing store. People say he has a family somewhere back up north, but they didn't move down here with him.

Feeny is a short man with thinning hair; he sprays his scalp with black dye, so he resembles one of those round Russian dolls that looks like a metal bowling pin. And his teeth and fingers are bronze from the rolled cigarettes he smokes. He has a steel plate in his skull, a confusing reminder of Vietnam, like the yellow crazies that chase him in his dreams. So, the war, and Lazich, and the jungle prison camps sometime get all tangled up in his mind.

I sometimes spy on him through the small square glass window in the freezer door kneeling under the cold numbness of the light bulb. It is safe to spy; his eyes are closed; so he can't see me. Feeny often speaks in unknown Tongues. I can hear his muffled words through the thick freezer door.

His skin is blue when he leaves, and his teeth chatter. Maybe he purifies the children of Lazich with ice. When he leaves, he often mumbles, "No matter what you do, it ain't enough!"

Stella shakes her head; he makes her nervous. "People want what they can't have," she says.

But Feeny means no harm. He just don't have much chrome on him.

I don't know what he does at noon on Sundays; we usually close the store until one. If it is our freezer that moves him, on Sunday he's out of luck.

I HAVE MIXED FEELINGS ABOUT RETIRING. I JUST heard on the Memphis evening news they have put security cameras on school buses over in Tennessee to catch kids carrying guns and knives. But I'll miss it mostly. I have been getting up at four for too many years not to miss it. A man can't walk away from forty years of driving a school bus and not feel something. Still, I'll be seventy-two this fall. It's time.

In 1952 I walked to the white school in Lazich and asked the Superintendent if I could have a job driving a school bus, since he was in charge of hiring. That was the first year our black children would have their own buses. Before that, some black children had walked up to five miles to the school we had built for them out on the edge of Lazich.

His secretary made me wait outside the school under the shade of some chinaberry trees. The berries crunched wetly under my feet. He came out after about two hours and hired me on the spot. He also gave me a job as a custodian. He was impressed that I had been in the War. He wasn't, but he had lost a son in Belgium. Stella had said before I left the house that morning, "Don't you beg him for nothin'!" I waved her away. I knew how to handle him.

Anyhow, that's how this school bus driving got started.

WE ARE STILL A BIG SCHOOL DISTRICT, AND MY BUS run is sixty-four miles long. So I must get to the bus lot early. I'm always the first bus to leave. I have a key to the gate and let myself in. Still, I cut it close because I want the bus children to sleep as long as possible. See, I have a rule, 'You wait on the bus 'cause the bus don't wait on you.' They know I mean it, too.

I RUN INTO PATCHY FOG DOWN ALONG THE BAYOU. IT stretches across the land like an old man's cataracts. Slows me down some this morning. Funny—let two flakes of snow hit the road and we close school for a week. But let thick fog slip in off the River and the buses still roll.

I usually push the bus hard on the straight stretches. The governor is set at sixty-two miles per hour. But not today, because of the fog and planting. Farmers hog the road and run their equipment blind. I keep my window open so I can listen for their equipment on the road.

My first stop is seven miles out of town. Little Doc Odom gets on. His daddy is named Doc Odom. When Little Doc was born, Doc had them put on his certificate, "Little Doc." So it's pretty official. I don't know what cologne Little Doc wears, but he prefers it to bathing. Must cost one dollar a gallon up at Wal-Mart.

Little Doc seldom speaks. He grunts once in awhile. He always sits down right behind me. First window seat on the driver's side. It's a good place to see everything. One morning we saw a duck divebomb into ditch water beside the road. "Mister bus driver," Little Doc said, his

voice suddenly tainted by emotion, "That duck just committed suicide!" That's been his seat for since kindergarten; he's been stuck for three years in fifth grade.

Little Doc's momma died of cancer last year. He climbed on the bus one morning and said, "Momma died!" I didn't even know his momma was sick. She rode my bus once, too; her name was Judy. We talked about it some. How he felt. How sadness eats at you when your momma dies.

I START MY RUN TOWARDS POLK ISLAND AFTER crossing the railroad tracks. It is a seventeen mile run to the far side of Polk Island. Few children live along this road now. Used to be a house was perched on every forty acres. So many children lived out here, it took three buses to collect them all. Even then the children who climbed on last had to stand in the aisle. Now then the world stops at the end of this road.

I stop to pick up two brothers who live in a rusty yellow house trailer beside a shallow ditch. The trailer squats in heavy weeds under a peeling sycamore tree. Their high-butted mother stands barefooted in the dusty yard cursing them for some slight, but her angry words bounce off their wide backs like harmless grit. They climb aboard scowling darkly, unable to look me in the eye.

I am most happy on those days when these two stay at home. They are much older than the others, too grown to be in school. They are also mean and cannot be trusted. Last year they messed with the young girls in first and second grade. Running hands where they shouldn't. The courts put them on probation and sentenced them to finish school. They don't like me for it, but I make them sit up front in the "angel seat" across from Little Doc, where I can watch what they do.

My grandchildren once gave me a wooden plaque for Christmas that reads, "The man with all his problems behind him drives a school bus."

THE ENGINE GROANS OR HUMS TO TELL ME WHAT TO do: I down-shift through a curve, then brake to a quick stop at three shotgun houses slumped together near a tractor shed. Flowers bloom at the edges of their ragged, sloping porches; and in the yards the forsythia's long rooster tails salute us with their bright yellow bells.

Seven panting children climb aboard smelling of sausage, jelly, and buttered biscuits; there is something healing about fresh hot biscuits. They rush from their kitchen table when they see my school bus coming. In the winter, they smell of clinging wood smoke and Vicks salve.

A light wind sweeps the fog from the ditches into soft layers that hover some twenty feet above the road where I run safely under it. At the end of pavement, I turn onto a hard gravel road that winds through a freshly plowed cotton field toward Polk Island.

THE CHILDREN STIR WHEN WE TURN ONTO THE ISLAND at the end of the causeway. Deer, quick as rabbits, sometime sprint from the cover of the hedge and into a field, then spin upon their hind legs, like dancing bears, and dash back into the hedge when they spot our yellow bus. Come summer, Mink and otter will feed on the pale muscadine grapes draped in the hedges.

Once we clattered, like a swarm of angry locusts, upon a drowsy alligator sunning in the middle of the causeway;

His momma rode my bus once, too; her name was Judy. We talked about it some. How he felt. How sadness eats at you when your momma dies.

the Fish and Game Commission had brought them up from Louisiana to clean the ditches of beavers. It was young, about four feet long, and it ran heavily before us, then dove into the scummy water with a loud splash. The children were too paralyzed to speak. The Island is stringy and primitive, something untamed and lovely, and makes the children solemn, as if we have quietly entered an ancient cathedral.

Polk Island is a magical place. Osage oranges the size of softballs grow beside the hard gravel road. Old people still call them deer apples, and, in the fall, I stop the bus to let the children gather one or two for their science classes.

Only one family lives out on the Island now. Ever so often, in the early spring, after a heavy snowmelt up North among the spruce, firs, and tall pines, the River crawls out of its bank, and the Martinez family moves over the levee to safety, or remains on the Island, if the water doesn't rise too high. If they can stay, they bring David over to the levee and wait in a fifteen foot aluminum boat for my school bus to arrive at 7:05.

I don't envy David. He is a loner, an only child. I've asked him if he likes the Island and he says so; but it has changed him. Their house is built upon a Nodena ceremonial mound and rides high-and-dry most years, but it is bad luck and brings on visions to build on hallowed ground. I believe David has seen their ancient spirits. He wears a small dream catcher on multi-colored beads around his neck.

I hunted rabbits out here when I was David's age: I struggled through heavy snow along the River, following the rabbits' soft tracks to their tunnels under the thick rimy grasses, then broke their necks with a sharp blow

from a club. Then I ran a wire through the leaders on their back legs and carried so many of them slung across my back the sagging wire cut into the cords on my neck; it was easy to find them quivering under the snow.

Then, when the sun would break through the gray, rolling clouds to sparkle off the water and snow, I'd be snow-blinded by the light—eyes bright red and burning like rubies, like the rabbits' eyes—but happy, too, because I had enough fresh meat to last my family for a month.

AT NIGHT THE TUGS ON THE MISSISSIPPI SPRAY THEIR searchlights across the sky. The air feels damp then, like the wind blowing against a fog. The Island is a spooky place, deathly still, with owls mumbling inside the pale willow thickets crowding the riverbank. I've fished for eel and suckers and drum in the chutes by the achingly-white light of a gas lantern. At two in the morning, the hissing lantern sucks up bugs and snapping things which flutter against the tops of the trees, obscure things you feel more than you see, like the restless Indian spirits who visit David in his dreams.

People have been killed out here, falling out over a round-heeled woman or strong brown whiskey or a drug debt gone unpaid; at night it is not a good place to get excited or careless.

STELLA AND I WILL COME OUT HERE TO FISH NOW that I'm retiring. We will find more time together. We will close the store on Mondays. We will buy an aluminum boat and drift down the chutes that hug the islands. I will teach her how to wait patiently on the fish.

And I will show her the thick pink and white walls of wild rose mallows growing in soggy places and the cheerful blooms of the buttery tickseed and the bright orange trumpet-creepers. Come July we will pick the wild blackberries, as fragrant as new money, from the prickly vines drooped heavily over the water until our fingers and lips turn purple; and we will suck at their bitter seeds stuck between our teeth and spit our crystal froth like offering upon the water.

We will drift among the dried, cupped leaves and place our trotlines in the winding chutes, then listen to the beaver slap the water with his tail to ward off our dominion, and watch clouds of white egrets as they skim across the early, blushing sky.

When a hot afternoon boils up lazy clouds into yellow, then beige, then green and, finally, dark blue demons, we will tie up to a bank and stretch our tarpaulin over us. We will wait below the fragrant, rustling hedge, and watch the dainty waterstriders skate across the water, and listen to the distant dogs idly barking at only dogs know what.

After the rain has passed, we will wait patiently at the mouth of the chutes to snag the giant paddlefish that enters the shallows in search of food drug by the strong undertow along the slippery bottom. We will slice open her huge belly and dip up the warm dark eggs with our fingers. It will feel good out under the cool shade of the giant trees.

We still have things to learn, just like when we were young and couldn't keep our hands off each other.

But now we need not hurry.

HOLLIS DREW

Is the pen name of a 53 year old writer and retired school bus driver who lives near the banks of the Mississippi River. He had been writing unpublished novels and short stories for twenty-five years when InterText *published his short story "Shooting Stars" last year (*InterText *v6n5).*

The flange with the cam goes in the groove with the tube.