

4

Back and Forth

Answer the phone is my wake-up call next morning. At 7:15 on a Saturday—but I'm off the futon before the phone's fourth ring.

"Did I wake you?"

"No, no..."

"This is Judy, by the way. Judith, I mean. Judith Formi—"

"Yes, yes..."

"You're sure I didn't wake you?"

"No, no..."

"Well I've decided I want to do this. If you still want me to."

"Certainly, certainly... Er, would today—?"

"Um, sure. How soon—?"

"Anytime."

"Maybe about ten? Is that too early?"

"Not at all."

"Okay then. Do you need me to, um, wear anything in particular?"

"Whatever you like."

"Oh. All righty. I'll be there around ten. Bye now."

She hangs up the phone, gets out of bed, pulls a sheer lace nightie over her head—*—damn it.* She's going to take one look at your old-goatishness and run like a... whatever goats prey upon. Children's nannies in Tin Can Alley.

Now then. Less than three hours to get ready. I'm not in the habit of shaving on Saturday or splashing on Skin Bracer, but time enough to do both. And air out the place. And camouflage the futon with magazines, so it appears more like a large low coffee table.

By 9:30 I am down in the yard, searching for something floral to help put her at ease. Not from Mrs. Wilson's resurrected garden, but expendably wild—such as these small plum-colored items I find under a shrub, free for the picking.

Scrunch of tires on gravel. A car door opens and closes. I stay oblivious, Winston Smith among the bluebells.

“Are those supposed to be for me?”

“Oh hello. For your posing.” I rise as a younger man might, without an effort, and hand her the purplettes.

She is all by herself. Wearing a headscarf (though it's not windy) and sunglasses (though there's no glare). She buries her nose in the plumsprigs, then holds the bunch against her bosom. “Grape hyacinths—how'd you guess? I didn't throw this on till the last minute.”

Meaning her modestly V-necked top, which is grapish-colored. Throw it on, pull it off, go without—wrench my mind away.

“Didn't bring your roommate?”

“What?” she asks, glancing furtively around. “Oh! Sorry, I fibbed about that. I do have a cat, though... Would it be all right if we go on up?”

“After you,” I insist. She climbs my stairs; I follow. Never seen her in slacks before. They are black and becoming and could be called snugs.

Judith halts to peer over the balustrade. What does she see? No flayed skin suit on a hanger; no mummified Mrs. McRale in a chair. Just a studio/apartment. Two more steps, three, and she is inside it.

“You live here? On your own?”

“Me and my artwork. Make yourself comfortable.”

She twitters, removes the scarf and sunglasses, stuffs them in her purse—and halts again, taken aback by what's atop my “media center.” Oh shit! oh *shit!* doomed before we start! Hadn't even occurred to me to hide the damn things. Now she'll turn and dodge and

run downstairs like a—

“You did these?” She steps away from me... and closer to them. “What’re they called?”

“Er, this one’s *A Perfect Fit*, and that’s *Plue Velvet*. I didn’t make the little cowlmask it’s wearing. Contribution from the model.”

“She’s so cute,” says Judith. “Or maybe cute’s not the right word, but... These are yours too? She’s pretty,” to *Gatherin’ Stormin’*; “She’s scary,” to *Frieze-Frame*; and “Goodness!” at *Artificialities*. Or at all the racked knives and gouges below it. She spies the bathroom—raises brows at me for clearance—and excuses herself behind its door.

At least I got it minty-fresh for her. And she’ll have to come back sooner or later; there’s no window to elope through. I feed an instrumental into the CD player (Ahmad Jamal ought to be “smooth” enough) and adjust the blinds for improved lighting. Judith returns, one hand gripping her purse, the other her hyacinths. Marching up to announce: “In case you haven’t noticed I’m a bit nervous about, about...”

“About...?”

“Posing. For you. I mean, deliberately. I might be too jumpy to do well. Maybe you’ll wish you’d stuck to, um, ‘studying me from afar’—”

“Have a seat,” I tell her, presenting the model’s stool. “Can I take your bag?”

“Oh no I’ve got it. That is I’d like to hold onto it. If it won’t be in the way.”

“We’ll see. Glass of water? Seltzer? Juice?”

“Oh I’d love some orange juice if it’s no trouble and you have any.”

When I return with the juice I find her bag on the floor beside the stool, and both hands clutching the purplettes. I set the glass on a taboret at her elbow, with a paper towel for patting lips with. She thanks me but doesn’t touch the juice or even look at it.

“Do you feel ready to start?”

Rigidly vertical: “Oh sure. I hope so. Do I look okay?”

“Better than okay.”

“What... do I do?”

“Sit there and try not to move too much. Just like yesterday at the Malt Shoppe, but for longer. More detail.”

“Um, longer? I have a little trouble sitting still too long at a time.”

Ants in your pants? I don’t ask aloud. “You’re an active person?”

“Well I try to be. But I need to keep stretching pretty often. Will that be a—?”

“Are we talking every couple of minutes, or—?”

“Oh no, more like ten or fifteen.”

“Not a problem.” (Unexpected bonus: we get to watch her stretch.) “How do you manage on the bus?”

She looks disconcerted, then amused. “There’s lots of different stretches, you know. Some you can do without lunging all over.”

Lady-lunges. That figures. I take up the sketchboard, a sheet of Strathmore Rose Gray already clipped to it, and assume my position opposite Judith. Who offers a conventional smily expression. I see what she means about looking “glazed” in photos. The blame can’t all be laid on the camera lens.

Start outlining her overall ABC: attitude, bearing, contours. Using Conté crayons today, better than charcoal at approximating fleshtones and woodgrains. For a moment I wish I had skill with liquid media, could paint her on canvas in a full spectrum of hues. But my expertise is limited to shades of earth and ash. Sanguine, bistre, and white for highlights.

“Can we talk? While I pose?”

“Till I get to the mouth. I’ll tell you when.”

Her fingers emerge and remerge among the plumsprigs. “Oh. Well now. My name is Judith Formi, you know that already, but I was born a Dahl—”

“A—?”

“D.A.H.L. Like the *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* writer.”

Or the Dahls of Walse Falls, Minnesota, upstate from the Twin Cities and west of Duluth. Half the family’s German Catholics and half Scandinavian Lutherans, with sniping between the two at holiday get-togethers but no blood spilled. Dad manages sporting goods for Sears, Mom sells dream houses for Century 21, Judith is the youngest child and only girl, meaning she always got a bedroom of her own while her six brothers had to double up, a fact of life taken in stride by everyone except second-youngest Rudy who’s had it in for Judith since her birth which will be twenty-six years ago next month so you’d think Rudy

would've gotten over it by now but he hasn't changed a lick no matter what their mother might think—

“The mouth.”

“Oh,” she says, and closes it.

“Just for a minute,” I add. Actually I am nowhere near the mouth, but I could almost hear her heart pounding. Try as she might to drown it out.

I move around with the sketchboard, studying her from various perspectives while she catches her breath. And never takes her eyes off me. Their sockets begin to manifest themselves, yet I protract our first session till the sanguine basics are laid down. Best to test the lady's stamina right at the start. But a shame to make her succumb to the fidgets too soon; so I call our first break.

“*Whew!*” goes Judith. “I never thought sitting still could be so strenuous.” She stands and bends forward, arms extended toward the floor—yeedge! is she blacking out on me? No, she's rolling back up, vertebra by vertebra. Still holding the purplettes as she lifts her arms above her head. S-t-r-e-t-c-h-ing to the left, then to the right, then back to center with another long! deep! swelling inhalation, and concluding with an “Ahhhh...”

Thunka thunkity thunk pounds my heart.

“That one's called the full-body reach-up,” says Judith. Who seems to have shed a few jitters. She quaffs her glass of OJ, pats her lips and smiles: glistening rather than glazed.

How many times can I hope to have her sit for me? stand for me? stretch, curl, kneel, lie? She clearly wants (but does not ask) to see what I've done so far, but no time now; back to her pose. And, yes! she resumes it exactly—same headset, mouthset, flowerclasp.

I replace Ahmad Jamal in the CD player with Stan Getz and suggest Judith try concentrating on something “peaceable.”

“The cool-blue-ocean sort of thing?”

“Sure, why not?”

Bistre now, a darker overlay to strengthen and solidify our design. Reinforce dimensions: *stroke stroke stroke blend stroke stroke stroke blend*. Or rather: *skritch skritch skritch thpppp*. Either way it's a matter of bearing down with a steady hand, not too heavily, as we study her values. Explore her composition. Feel a sense of—what? Her Aliceness?

“Elegance” sounds too affected. “Refinement” is done to petroleum. Maybe “grace” is the word. Or “cool,” as in that blue ocean she’s concentrating on.

Crystal clear ocean.

Clear? Stan Getz counters with “Serenade in Blue.” Cool jazz, like a dip in a pool on a hot summer day. Immersed or ashore, we can *learn from the sea*. Straight-out, no surrealism; just *be true to the tide*.

(In a manner of speaking.)

I’ll never pass muster with the Thought Police. But I can, on occasion, tune in and tap into. If I bear down with a steady brain. Open up those inner ears. Underhear what goes unspoken. Even as the bistre flies across the paper, bringing subtle nuances along with full-body totality, so too can we catch:

Aye Calypso! so long and so well!

(Oh for crying out loud.)

John Denver and White Linen and “No fooling?” An old-fashioned girl, all righty.

I begin filling in her face—smaller strokes, slighter blends—and she focuses her midnight gaze upon me. Does this feel like I’m capturing more than her looks in more than a likeness?

“It Never Entered My Mind,” comments Mr. Getz’s cool sax.

Skritch skritch skritch thpppp.

Now she does begin to fidget and I leave off work almost at once. A few more strokes to the brow, till a furrow appears on her own; then I lay down my Conté.

CLANK goes something as Judith hops to her feet.

“What was that?”

“Nothing, that’s nothing,” she murmurs. Scooping a small object off the floor and hurrying into the bathroom.

Now what? Some sort of *day guard*?

Good guess as it turns out, Judith returning with reddened face and outstretched arm to aim a vial of pepper spray at me—

No, just to show it, before putting the vial in her purse. “Sorry. I didn’t know what to expect. In fact I still don’t, not really. Could I take a little peek—?”

“Not yet,” I tell her, turning the sketchboard away. “One more session and it ought to be done.”

“Is it going okay? Or shouldn’t I ask, is that bad luck? I concentrated the best I could. I was wondering something... is this supposed to be your, um, muse?”

She is staring unerringly at *A Perfect Fit*. My first sculpture in wood after abandoning clay. Part Marcello’s *Pythia* from the Paris Opera; part Bernini’s *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*; part Mel Ramos pop-art pin-up. A nearly nude girl frozen in midwrithe, couched on a Delphic tripod in the form of an open hand. Would you call it oracular? Or simply obscene, the girl barely in her teens (as was I at the time) with hair in a ponytail and “Friday” on her panties?

“That is the spirit of the first girl you ever kiss.”

Audible quiver from Judith. “What was she like?”

“She committed suicide seven years later. I don’t think as a direct result.”

Appalled stare from Judith. “You’re kidding!”

“They said she left a note so long it was more like a suicide novel.”

“Oh, that is so sad.” Reaching out to lay a cool hand on my arm. “I’m so sorry...”

“It’s because of her that I became a sculptor.” (More or less.)

Nod nod nod goes Judith, looking pensive. She lets go of my arm, returns to her stool. “Come on, finish me.”

I have her regroup the plumsprigs (minus the pepper spray) and move a foot or so to the left, following the sun. Now for the close work, the fine detail. Facial features. The mouth whose teeth she clenches in her sleep; the midnight blues in their remarkable sockets. White Conté now, for picking out highlights. Reflectivity. An image created by my hand in alignment with my eye, transcending its arrangement of laid-on tones and shades.

Good as the real thing? Irrelevant.

She is real; it is real. As it breathes, so does she.

I beckon Judith to the sketchboard. She comes by my side to see the finished work.

And the look she gives it, plus the one she gives me directly afterward, are two of the dozen or so things I intend taking with me to my coffin.

I give the sketch a sparse coating of matte fixative and think this is all I'm going to get today. But Judith has other ideas.

"I suppose you've seen a lot of backs—on your models—as an artist, I mean. Would you mind taking a look at mine?"

Wheeling around, she draws up the purple top as far as her *latissimi dorsi*. Exposing a long-waisted line of spine: now it's a cleft, now a row of little knobs as she darts a glance over her shoulder. Anxious, as if afraid I might produce a cat-o'-nine-tails. The top hikes up further, revealing a band of snow-white lycra with an innocent laundry tag near its clasp. Unlike the lowriding Vietnamesettes, there's no air of flirt or tease about this; Judith seems in deadly earnest.

"Er, it's a very nice back. Never seen a finer."

Judith stands there motionless. "You wouldn't be fooling me?"

"Well—what I can see of it, at least."

"Could you... could you make me look as good from the back as you did with my face?"

"If you'll allow me."

"Now? Will you do it now?"

"If you'll—" (I mime unsnapping and destrapping.)

"Oh," says Judith. "Um. I'm sorry, but I have to ask this. Promise you won't—grab me, or anything?"

"Honor bright," I say. "I'll just step into the other room. Call out when you're ready. Er, would you like the blinds lowered?"

"Won't you need the light to draw me by? Better than using lamps?"

"Probably."

"It's all right then," she twitters.

In the bathroom I stare at the mirror, yank at an earlobe: ow! Apparently awake. Make good use of the toilet, then; put yourself right.

"I'm ready... I think."

She faces away from me, astraddle a reversed chair. Her front is firmly covered with both arms folded over doffed V-neck and hidden cuppage. But her back—

Forty-eight hours ago she was selling me snappable brush markers, while I tried not to gape too openly up or down her powder blue ensemble. Two days later, here's Lady Alice: one-quarter naked in my studio/apartment. Must be a dream. A flashback reverie.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," she sighs.

If you'd rather back out, I nearly reply. "If you'd rather not—"

"Yes I would!... It's just that no one I know would believe it either. But I'm going through with it."

Not much in the way of tanlines; she must do her swimming indoors. The lycra's left faint pink stripes across her susceptible flesh. Photographers call such tracemarks unsightly. I find them humanizing—in a *good* way, if the flesh is good; and hers is Better Than Okay. A back laid bare from nape to waist: demurely muscular, tautly exquisite. With Judith waiting for me to validate it artistically.

"Have you started yet?"

"Look at me, please—"

"No I'm not turning around!—"

"Over your shoulder, like before."

She complies, ready to misinterpret whatever I might have in mind.

"More in profile. As if you're keeping half an eye on me."

The *oh really?* moue. Damn, yes! with her head at precisely the right angle, nose and chin and lashes finely displayed—

"Keep doing that!"

"What?"

"That! Hold it as long as you can!"

She does but it is useless; I haven't prepared the sketchboard or brought out fresh Contés. And so off-balance is this dream that I can only stumble and blunder and spill.

"Aitch...? I'm getting a bit—"

Tremulous with effort. I apologize, have her take a prolonged breather, or what passes for one in our mutual dizzy spell. *Merrily merrily merrily merrily...*

"Um—could we have some more music, please? I've got something to tell you."

Oddly put, in a voice sounding far from comfortable.

“Something hard to say?”

“Sort of, yes...”

Music to tell me something sort of hard to say by. That would be Miles Davis: *Kind of Blue*. Pop it into the player. Pick up the sketchboard. And as we ease into the first notes of “So What,” I start to draw and Judith starts to talk.

Youngest of seven, the only girl, the Little Princess of Walse Falls, not spoiled but admittedly indulged all through childhood. Born with a good face and just kept blossoming. Grew tall quickly but never gawky, never awkward; loved shooting hoops with her boisterous big brothers. Volleyball, racquetball, any sport that involved leaping and jumping. Meanwhile everyone said here was a future fashion model: look at that face, those eyes, those legs, that form. Don’t slump, dear. Stop slouching.

At thirteen she was diagnosed with scoliosis: curvature of the spine. Ordered to wear a back brace that would correct the crookedness... in three or four years.

Skritch skritch skritch thpppp.

That night in bed she turned her good face to the cold wall and cursed God, beseeching death to take her swiftly.

It wasn’t that she was vain or conceited; just an eighth-grade girl who had a horror of deformity. Her brother Rudy’d tricked her once into looking at pictures of circus freaks, and the memory still gives her teeth-grinding nightmares. Now at thirteen she was one of them, gooble-gabble! *one of them!* and thought she would crack up—HAD cracked up: become a gruesome misshapen basket case. Her mother said, “If only you hadn’t roughhoused so much...” Her father lost all patience with her constant fantods. And Rudy cut unspeakable capers behind and about her back.

Then Sister Genevieve at Holy Visitation School stepped in as guardian angel. Gave her Judy Blume’s book *Deenie*, which might’ve been written expressly to rescue her. See here: even with a crooked spine—*temporarily* crooked—you could be a regular teenager. Still be considered pretty, attractive, desirable; dance and party and even make out (to a proper degree) instead of being a warped sideshow wallflower.

“I wrote Judy Blume a four-page fan letter, but never mailed it ‘cause I was afraid she might *publicize* it somehow, she and I having the same first name and all—and then *everyone*

would know about my back.”

Instead she started collecting scoliotic celebrities: Daryl Hannah, Isabella Rossellini, Sarah Michelle Gellar, Olympic gold medalist Janet Evans. Swimming became her passion, with Janet Evans as role model and Sister Genevieve as coach.

“We called her ‘Sister Geronimo’—she could do a triple somersault in a tuck position from a handstand.”

Swimming’s done unbraced, allowing Judith a chance (Sister G. didn’t quite say aloud) to have a bod and show it off. But her father didn’t count swimming as a “real” sport, however many ribbons and trophies she might bring home from meets. Her mother was dead set against it, saying she would rack up her spine and wind up in a wheelchair. And Rudy held his nose and blew repugnant bubbles.

That hectic little laugh. Then:

“When my husband—boyfriend he was at the time—first came up to Walse Falls to meet my family, he kicked Rudy’s rear end. I mean, *hard*. Because he’d heard about how Rudy hassled me when we were kids. So, *POW!* Right on the rear. Didn’t make the best impression on my folks... but that’s when I fell for him, once and for all. ‘My hero.’”

Her wastrel.

By now we’ve gone through multiple breathers, from *Kind of Blue* to *Miles Smiles* with *Nefertiti* standing by. So absorbed has Judith been in what she’s relating that she takes no notice of my using a stepladder to study her from above. Her unhooked Maidenform straps have gradually crept into view, like timid woodland creatures wanting to hear Snow White sing:

*Someday my spine won’t twist
‘Cept when I want it kissed—*

“Till then I was always Judi with an ‘i’ and a circle over it. But after I got married I insisted on Judith. *He* always called me ‘Joo’ or ‘Joo-girl.’ His idea of a joke.”

“Rudy’s?”

“No! Marco’s.”

Her hero, Marco Formi. Mr. Bluff. Asskicker R.I.P.

“Finished,” I tell her.

“What??” she goes with a leap and a jump, almost losing hold of her Maidenform.

“What are you doing on that ladder??”

“Finishing you,” I say, stepping down.

“Oh! Turn it around, turn it around!” she demands, meaning the sketchboard. Then after a quick backward glance: “Now *you* turn around, *you* turn around!” I do; she throws back on her top, then hastens beside me for a longer, closer look.

I saw nothing imperfect in the length of Judith’s spine. Her scapulae might in fact be a trifle irregular, but asymmetry has its share of allure. Of beauty tempered by remembrance of pain. She has yet to tell me about Chad the Cad, her first serious boyfriend at Holy Visitation, who got off on the back brace and dumped her when she was at last able to discard it; but that’s here too, prefigured.

I *have* grabbed Judith, despite my honor-bright pledge. The angle of her head recalls its turn to the wall. The oh-really? cast of her half-seen eye introduces the Young Empress of the #104: her misgivings, disquietude, latent majesty. And elegance. And refinement, which isn’t limited to oil and sugar. Refined and resilient: the rounded shoulders, the provocative spinal groove, the finesse of flank and loin. She is neither lean nor spare but willowy, deft with supple grace.

It’s a very nice back. And recognizable as the original.

Judith touches her sanguine dorsals with the extreme tip of one finger.

Then turns to me and wraps her long strong arms around my neck.

*

I don’t know how long we stand here enfolded. It feels like quite a while. Her rehammocked bosom fits very neatly into the gap left by my own sunken chest. And in her haste to dress she’s neglected to tug down her shirttail, leaving a lumbar curve uncovered for my hand to find. And touch. And admire. No amount of sanding could make a surface as smooth as this. It is soft, it is warm, it is firm, it is cool. And it occurs to me that she isn’t recoiling as I press her flesh—

—till an AAAGH rips through the studio.

I savor the aftereffect of Judith's convulsive parting squeeze, and do not follow her to the window.

"What was that??"

"A jaybird," I say.

"Gosh! I nearly—"

She reaches back, smooths down her top, hiding her peachy postern from further view. Or touchy-feel.

I call her over to the drafting table, where I've laid out a model's release and contract. First check a week from today. She reads these through, asks to borrow a pen (this from the F-D sales rep) and signs them *Judith Formi*.

"Formi..." she murmurs. "I just remembered. Tomorrow's Mother's Day."

"Ah," I say. "I suppose you won't be available for another sitting, then?"

"Tomorrow? I'm afraid not. I mean I'd love to, but I have to go to Trey Hills. It's hard for Sophia, my mother-in-law. My husband was—he didn't have any brothers or sisters."

Evidently I'm expected to know about Marco and his damned accident. I nod as though I understand.

"I'm not in mourning!" she adds abruptly. "They all think I am. My in-laws. My friends at work... I don't suppose you're Catholic, Aitch? I'm not much of one either, anymore. But still—"

She pokes a finger inside her V-neck, snags a silvery chain, and fishes up a crucifix pendant from between her breasts. (Lucky old Redeemer!) Chain, pendant, and a small silver disk are twiddled wryly à la Oliver Hardy.

"And he called you 'Joo?'"

"Oh, he thought that was hilarious."

"What about the other syllable?"

"Dith?"

"Dee."

"As in *Deenie*?" Sudden piercing harp-giggle: "Dee and Aitch, pure cane sugar!" Then a reversion to the Young Empress: "Just don't EVER call me 'Dee Formi.' Okay?"

“I promise.”

We stand there a moment. “Well...” she says. “What happens now?”

“I’ll start turning these sketches into a relief panel. We’ll try some other poses when you can sit for me again.”

“Can I please have the sketches when you’re done? I’d like to hang them on a wall and stand next to them and point and tell everyone, *‘That’s me.’*”

“Would you like to go see your sculpture at my gallery? It’s open till five.”

“What, now? I was thinking, um, maybe we could... have a bite to eat?”

“That too,” I say. “Downtown.”

Since Judith doesn’t like driving on the Interstate, I offer to take the wheel. She puts back on her shades and scarf as we leave the garage and climb into the Honda. “Don’t laugh, but—could we please keep my modeling quiet? It’s just—I’d rather the Formis not get wind of it, before I’m ready to leave F-D.”

My lips, I tell her, are sealed. But for once in my life I want to keep talking. About the traffic heading south. Her Honda. My old Subaru. Mr. Wilson’s least favorite truck. The disk sharing the chain with her crucifix: what does that signify?

She reels it up again, looks at it. “It’s a holy medal. St. Judith the Anchorite. I was born on her feast day, June 29th. Sister Genevieve gave me this when I graduated from Visitation. Silver, you see.” Judith was the school’s perennial silver-medalist, always coming in second at swim meets. “*Big ones, statewide ones*—there’s no shame in winning the silver! But try telling that to my dad.”

To cheer her up I jabber about my Bronze Figleaf and the Cairney Academy FigFest, before stomping on the brake just before the familiar exit to Figure Eight Way. Must be baseball fans clogging the Interstate, en route to or from a Lucky Stiffs game.

On our right, to the west, we can glimpse the Cenotaph in Portal Park. Bringing to mind the Demortuis city anthem, “Empty Tomb Blues” by Boaz “Ruthless” Luther:

*They tell me that we’ll meet again, somewhere up there in the sky
They tell me that we’ll meet again, somewhere up there in the sky
All I know is that I didn’t get a chance to say goodbye...*

Oh hell—I hope those lyrics aren't running through Judith's head too. I tell her my rubber mourning dove anecdote, but she stares out at the Cenotaph.

"I had a really good time there once," she says.

We both fall silent for the rest of the trip.

There can be other good times. Let this day stay one of them.

Downtown. Jackdaw Square. Shoveler Street. Park and get out of the car.

Judith keeps starting to take my arm, then stopping herself—reaching for my elbow only to jerk her hand away. Nor does she remove her scarf or shades when we enter the gallery. Alice Incognita. Geraldine's not here, but silent Ralph bids us wordless welcome as I usher Judith over to where *The Mute Commute* is showcased. Above its four-figure price tag and red SOLD sticker.

"Ohhhh," she goes. "Ohhhh..."

Reaching all the way then. Taking my arm. Holding it tight with two cool hands.

*

Late that night back home, I have a few drinks to relish the events of the day. And savor the aftertaste of blackened spice.

I took my "suddenly ravenous" lady to Catfish Wharf on Strandline and we dined overlooking the river. Which sent breezes to ruffle Judith's de-scarfed hair as I made her laugh with my Tiff Terrific story.

Tiffany Schloss was a knockout and knew it, having been blessed with deep cleavage and diva hauteur. She wanted to commission me to sculpt her in the grand manner, very much to her rigorous specifications. "You understand these will be nooods," I was informed.

"You mean she wanted to pay *you* to—?" asked Judith.

"Yes, but then she'd own the finished pieces."

"Really? How much did she offer?"

Well, that was just it. Tiffany's offer was laughably small, approximately one-third of Geraldine's counteroffer. "But these will be *nooods!*" Tiff kept reminding me. Why wasn't I factoring in that singular privilege? I kept referring her back to Catapult Woman. Tiff was terrifically indignant, finally declaring that when her law student boyfriend passed the bar, our asses were going to be sued off.

(What I didn't tell Judith was why I asked Geraldine to be non-negotiable: Tiffany's confiding she was zaftig for two. And wanting her body commemorated before it blew up on her. I know pregnancy is supposed to make women "glow" and so forth, but I've seen only one definitely pregnant woman naked in my life and she did anything *but* glow—)

(—never mind.)

Harp-laughter from the trimbellied lady sitting with me at Catfish Wharf. A young widow, not in mourning, with no roommate except a cat. Which she tore herself away for: "I'd better get home. My kitty's waiting to be fed." And tomorrow was Mother's Day, and she was expected at Trey Hills.

So I drove us back to Zerfall, where Judith took the wheel to depart for Knotts. But not before telling me, "I had the most wonderful day."

Of her LIFE, perhaps?

Simmer down.

Yes, she enjoyed herself. But no more than if she'd been out with, say, a visiting uncle. One she decided didn't need to be pepper-sprayed. So have a last nightcap, then hit the solo sack—

The phone rings.

"Sorry I'm calling so late. But I couldn't get to sleep. Am I bothering you?"

"I don't think you could."

"Would you mind if maybe we talked a little?"

"Er, I'm not very articulate."

"You were fine this afternoon."

"Well, I could see who I was talking to."

"You're an artist," she says. "*Imagine* you can see me..."