

5

Take My Breath Away

So I do. That night and for the next seven weeks. Fifty days in all.

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My impulse is to call the new piece *Can You Read My Spine?*, but that doesn't jibe with the glint in the subject's half-seen eye. Which advises the viewer to *Watch Your Back*.

On Sunday I sort through my 18x24s. Walnut again? Mahogany? Red oak? What about that cherry block I didn't use for *The Mute Commute?*—no, this one's going to be a panel. Of pearwood: pinkish-brown tint, even-textured grain. Holds sharp detail and polishes to a high luster. "Incarnadine," in fact.

Right you are. Clamp the pear blank to the workbench. Transfer your design onto its face. Listen to Judith on the phone (sounding stressed) in the evening, home from visiting her in-laws. Listen to Judith on the bus (sounding keen) this morning and again (keener) in the afternoon: asking, coaxing, pleading to let her come watch me carve.

"You won't even know I'm there, I promise."

I express doubt about that. More likely I'll be looking at her instead of the panel, and chop my flesh instead of the wood.

"Oh, you," she pshaws. "Well then, I'll be right there to help patch you up."

I allow myself to be talked round. It is Monday the 13th of May, and the dream goes on. With us consuming two salads from Mina's before patting our lips, washing our hands, and heading for the workbench.

Actually what I *want* to do is have her pose again for me. Numerous times. But Geraldine's waiting for Another One, the 24th is less than two weeks off, and Saturday's sketch is perfectly applicable. So resist temptation, get this piece carved, and use it to induce more modeling. Lots more. Of more than just her spine.

Thus: Judith standing fully dressed in a pretty spring outfit, all agog at the end of the bench. And not distractingly, but as though she's always belonged there.

I take up the mallet and start to tap. Explaining how I outline the design with a V-trench to defend against splitting and chipping. Some would do this with a knife but I prefer the parting tool, which gives you greater control and just as clean an incision, so long as you keep its bevel-edges razor-sharp—

“—nnnnnnn—” goes Judith.

One hand not quite over her mouth. The other splayed where her navel would be if she weren't so fully dressed.

Damn that Mina's broccoli! But wait, her sockets are at it again, eyes widely riveted to the pearwood—I look down and see only the channel I'm cutting. Uniform as you could ask for. No blood oozing out of it or me.

“Dee...?”

She blanches. Flinches. Backs away. “I can't—I'm sorry—I'd better—I have to—”
Turn and flee and run downstairs. As I always suspected she might.
Should've had her pose more first, after all.

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I reach her at home on the third try. Judith sounding almost in tears, afraid I'll never want her to come back. Which I dismiss as absurd; but she continues to sniffle.

“It was as if... nnnn... as if I were... nnnn...”

Not everyone is cut out to watch things getting severed. Friends of Anne Boleyn or Marie Antoinette, for example.

This probably isn't the best time to describe how I'll set-in my stop-cuts with a firmer chisel, then waste—no, better say lower—the background by as much as half an inch, leaving the outlined design in proud relief.

At a loss for other words, I pick up a pencil and tap it against the phone.

“*What’s that?* ARE YOU WORKING ON IT??”

“No, no—”

“I, um, I, um—I’ll see you tomorrow. On the bus. Bye now!”

Click.

Good one, Huffman. Freak her out twice in less than two hours.

Return to the workbench. Delude yourself that her scent’s still there. Perhaps it comes from the drawing on the blank: a young lady clad in invisible White Linen. Seen from behind, as far down as her sacroiliac—no, say “dimples of Venus”—with her face in lofty profile.

Nice. Not to say heady. Out of respect to Anne and Marie.

All the more crude to intrude on her with a chisel. Begging your pardon, madame. It’s (*tap tap*) to protect you (*tap tap*) from splintering overruns (*tap tap*). Using a ½" No. 3 gouge to start the grounding, followed by a ¼" to level it. Make way there—give the lady room to breathe—steady as she goes. Small overlapping slices. No hurry, as the evening turns into night. Into which I work later than my habit.

(Not like I have more inviting alternatives.)

Enough. Put everything away, sweep the bench, pour a short snort and go to bed.

Tuesday on the P.M. bus I listen to Judith fret about field calls, Murray Burgher, and her apparent inability to endure woodcraft.

“When’ll you be finished?” she asks.

“Maybe a week.”

“No, I mean tonight.”

“Hard to say.”

“I know I said I wouldn’t distract you, and I won’t, but...”

“But...?”

“You could call me when you’re done for the night. Even if it’s late, I won’t mind.”

“Might be later than you think. Better you should sleep. I can fill you in tomorrow.”

She makes her moue; I pat her hand. (Even her knuckles are cool.)

I leave her at the Zerfall stop, hike home, eat another damn salad, play Thelonious Monk. Hone and strop the tools used yesterday. But leave the mallet on the rack: from here

on it's all handiwork. Right hand propels, left hand guides. Like... thus. And... so.

Tonight the artist does the modeling. Brings anatomy out of blankness. Separates not only chips from wood but the dextrous from the inept. Mistakes aren't as remediable at this stage, bad judgment is less forgivable; go far enough wrong and you can scrap the entire piece.

Again I work past my accustomed sacktime. Aiming to take a rest break every quarter-hour or so, give the gouge a top-up stroke with a slipstone. But too often thirty or forty minutes pass between breaks and strokes, with me not realizing it till the wood threatens to tear.

Third rule of thumb for a sculptor: quit when you get tired. Blunt tools in a slack grip endanger you *and* what you're sculpting. But I press on a few steps further, then a few beyond that. Here's where we separate the dabhanded from the fumblefists...

Next morning Judith regards me anxiously.

"If you'd like to take a catnap, I'll make sure you're awake before I leave the bus."

"What about *your* nap?"

"Oh, I always wake up right on time." Tiny smile: "I'd've thought you'd know that."

Which, of course, I do. So for the first time we sleep together. That is to say, simultaneously. That is, if I weren't acutely conscious of her discreet night guard placement, moderating respirations, unseen but palpable *nods*. *Nods*. *Nods*...

I plough through Selfsame on autopilot, and on the afternoon bus tell Judith I'll be calling in sick tomorrow—so I can detail *Watch Your Back*. With any luck, she'll see it ready for finishing by Friday.

"Just be sure you get some rest. I—I hope it works out. I miss posing for you."

(If that's not incentive, I should like to know what is.)

Thursday I use my spotlight to illuminate cuts and scrapes being made by smaller and smaller instruments. Culminating with a scalpel and dental pick, which can bring out niceties in damn near anything. Here they tend towards Titian, the first artist to recognize sensual appeal in a young woman's back. "*La contraria parte*," he called it, "*volta di schena*."

Not that I'm dismissing a young woman's front. (Titian never did.)

But see here: in *Watch Your Back* we find a different kind of seduction. Nothing forbidden is exposed by the lady with the slightly-uneven shoulder blades. Just her subtly voluptuous dorsum, from endearing nape to Venusian dimples (whose excavation occupies me for quite an hour).

Yes, yes.

Less laddering in this piece than most of mine. Perhaps a trace in her half-seen eye. That touch of moue worked into her profiled lips.

Oh really?

For all we know, madame.

I go to bed without a nightcap and saw logs for twelve hours by the kitchenette clock.

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“How do you feel about sandpaper?”

“What?” says Judith.

It is Friday, she is wearing her casual teal, has brought a fresh casserole for the weekly office potluck. Plus an additional portion in Tupperware as a surprise for my lunch. Which I’m sure must be delicious, though in fact I scarcely taste it.

At the Malt Shoppe after work I present Judith with her first week’s check (\$325 for 6½ hours) which she stuffs in her purse with a whispered “*Not here!*” To cover my gaffe I ask her opinion of abrasive materials and she says “What?” So I explain how some sculptors leave their work unsanded so every toolmark might stand out, but I finish my figures till they take on the smooth gloss of toned flesh. Does she think she’d be upset by watching me polish *Watch Your Back*?

“Um, no,” she murmurs. “That sounds... interesting.” Adding “GOSH!” in the Honda when she unfolds my check. “I really do need to pose more for you.”

Off to Green Creek Lane and the unveiling of the panel and Judith’s latest *Ohhhh* which I counter with *Ah-ah-ah*, staying her hand when it reaches with fingers I’m not saying aren’t immaculate but did just leave a Malt Shoppe. I wash my own in the kitchenette sink as Judith emerges from the bathroom asking about takeout, twittering “I feel like Chinese—”

—lurch—

—never mind—

—but before we order sweet ‘n’ sour whathaveyou, let’s do a little sanding of milady’s spine which I will leave off at once if the sight or sound bothers Judith in the slightest. She agrees and reclaims her place at the end of the bench, agog all over again except for a momentary Empressy “No thank you!” when I offer her a dust mask so I won’t wear one either, it’s not like I’m using a power sander on Western red cedar or an exotic beri-beri tree *rich itch itch itch*—

—glance up from this initial friction but “I’m fine” says Judith with a tingly smile so I fill her in about the whole sanding process *rich itch itch itch* medium to fine (which she is) to very fine (which she could be) to extra if not super fine (which can close the woodgrain if you’re not dab-handed) *rich itch itch itch* seldom have problems sanding to 320 grit or even 400 (which can give an illusion of depth that’s near to perfection) depending on lightness of touch sureness of direction *rich itch itch itch* knowing how long and how far you can burnish every curve until one very extra super fine day you might achieve something absolute as my tongue goes into BLATHERSKITE OVERDRIVE—

—what is it about this woman’s effect on me?—

—try to grab a gasp but can’t open wide enough try again yawn and gape wedge a fist in my solar plexus *rich itch itch* “Aitch?” she is saying to the bathroom I am flailing sandpaper slips through my fingers like I’ve forgotten what to do with my lungs suspended at the end of a rope down from a gibbet up from an anvil somewhere deep underwater...

...like the stuff being spritzed into my mouth...

—with a slightly bitter taste, *gyack!*

No, don’t gyack. Keep your tongue down. Breathe it in slowly, deep as you can. Hold for a count of ten. Then exhale through your nose.

Yeedge.

Here I am, a grown-ass man, sucking on a rescue inhaler like a goddamned pacifier. Grown-ass men ought to have whiskey bottles between their lips. Chugging Wild Turkey instead of albuterol.

My head, I find, is cradled on her arm. And not just her arm. Way to go, Huffman! All you had to do was wheeze yourself feeble. And freak out Judith for the third time this week. The poor girl’s sockets are so hollow it’s a wonder her eyeballs remain intact.

“Ummm,” she sighs. “Every time I come here, I end up with my arms around you.”

“Drop by anytime,” I croak. Bogart to Bacall.

With her non-cradling hand she smooths my hair, then gives my face the least possible slap. “You *scared* me. Half to death.”

“Sorry. Thanks, though.”

“I found the puffer in your medicine cabinet, I shook it up good first, that’s right isn’t it?” Highstrung harp-giggle. “Shook me up too. Oh gosh. You should’ve worn that dust mask. We’ll have to build up your wind. I tell you what—tomorrow if you’re feeling better, I’ll take you to my gym. There’s no better exercise for people with asthma than swimming.”

“I haven’t swum for years—”

“I’m a certified water safety instructor and have trained loads of people, so you’ll be in very good hands.” (This said as she removes her arm etc. from behind my neck.)

“Where’s that Black Wok menu? You’re getting soup. Oh, and Aitch? If I go wash up again, can I *please* touch the sculpture?”

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The dream accelerates.

Judith is not the first woman who’s jumped at the chance to go caretakey on me. But she’s the first to immerse me in chlorine.

At the Knotts Athletic Club she is more relaxed, more in her element than I’ve ever seen her. Probably doesn’t hurt that she’s the best-looking person here. Everyone greets the Young Empress, though none by name. She in turn acknowledges them with gracious *Hi’s*: her loyal courtiers, attendants, towel managers.

The men’s locker room is standard-issue industrial jock. Takes me back to happily forgotten phys ed classes taught by crewcut jutjaws with names like “Coach Beltz” or “Coach Sparger.” Their concept of treating asthma was to make me run laps nonstop.

My brand-new swimtrunks have already started to droop before I reach poolside. Then Judith appears, wearing a navy maillot that fits as close as what she doubtless calls her birthday suit. I see that decided curvature isn’t limited to her calves and spine (pre-brace) but extends from head to foot. Especially when you factor in the rhythmic flexes and clenches by her highset these and upswept those and outthrust t’others—

That'll do, pig.

I notice she's waited till now to tuck her hair into an unflattering rubber cap.

(Also that I've got my gut sucked in like any middle-aged idiot.)

"Okay," she is saying, "let's see what you can do."

This gym is her studio, the pool her workbench, and I'm the block she intends to mold. In we go. Damn, this stuff is wet. I demonstrate my timeworn dogpaddle and end up spluttering.

"Now watch me." I do, as do other men, as she travels to and fro: "This is the back crawl... this is the breaststroke... the sidestroke, with scissors kick... the butterfly stroke, with dolphin kick..."

I lead a round of splashy applause.

"Oh, you. Now *you* try. Let's start with the front crawl and flutter kick."

I rerun my dogpaddle. Spluttering when Judith lays personal trainer hands on me, fore and aft.

"No, silly, *this* way—"

(One HELL of an improvement over Coaches Beltz and Sparger.)

Blink and we're dressed and driving to Sycamore Terrace. "Garden apartments" they're called, minivillas plopped in a Knotts pasture by some developmental Trojan horse. Landscaped with so many cunning little sidepaths, hedgerows, and fenceposts that no Minotaur could find its way to the laundry room unaided.

Judith, glowing with endorphins, wants to feed me an authentic home-cooked meal. "My Grandma Audrey's *frikadeller*; that's Danish meatballs. Bet you thought they had to be Swedish."

Or Italian. As in Formis. Even unuttered, their name hangs in the air. Judith parks the Honda below a cunning little canopy and leads the way to apartment D9—hurrying a few steps ahead, casting oh-so-casual glances to left and right, as though her in-laws might be lurking in the underbrush.

Out of which a dark object bursts upon us.

Judith scoops it effortlessly into her arms. "This is my baaaaaaby," she croons, "this is my *sweetheart*. You're not allergic to cats?"

“Not really, no,” I say. Meaning this can’t really be a cat. More like an enormous shaggy panther cub.

“This is Uncle Aitch,” Judith informs the creature. “Tell him who *you* are, baby. Go on... go on, now... (he can do this, really...)”

I stand there trying to keep my face vacant. Till the beast opens its maw and gives me a silent but lethal hiss.

“*Noir!*” says Judith. She unlocks D9, sets the animal down, gives it a tap on the tail with a rolled-up magazine. “That’s his name, the bad boy. He’s not used to strangers,” she adds as the beast stalks off inside.

Noir the cat. They ought to name a film genre after it.

As anticipated, her place is very neat and tidy. Or would be if it weren’t for all the hair on the furniture—and hanging in the air, along with absent Italians. Black hair, not sugar maple.

“I’m sorry, it’s shedding season,” Judith murmurs. “Actually it’s *always* shedding season with this rascal.” She flicks personal parlormaid hands over a blue sofa, a violet armchair.

“What kind of...”

“Oh, he’s a Persian. He’s a little sheik, always demanding to be noticed—and here he is now,” as the creature bounds back in to take over the armchair. Judith lavishes more caresses on it, which does nothing to promote my appetite. Nor does her saying, “I’ll just leave you two to get acquainted,” as she sails into the kitchen to dish up *frikadeller*. “Don’t be afraid to pet him.”

“I won’t.” (Truest words I’ve spoken all day.)

I sit on the sofa. The animal hunkers on the chair. We glower at each other.

And I recognize those sour yellow eyes.

Back from damnation. Reincarnated as a Persian cat—can’t say I’m astonished. Intent on usurping the affections of another woman I want? Not *this* time, you bastard. Go find some other mouse to toy with.

When’s the adored not an adorer?

When he’s AJAHR.

I call the cat by that name. Its eyes widen, then narrow, as it hops down and slinks out of sight.

“Are you admiring my art collection?” calls Judith from the kitchen.

I look around for what this might be. Shelves of itsy-bitsy bric-a-brac: mermaids, porpoises, surfer girls. On the decorative fireplace’s ornamental mantelpiece: silver trophies, medals, cups. Plus my flipside Malt Shoppe sketch in “just the right frame.” Actually it’s not half-bad—Waning Gibbous, I see. Ever-loving silver leaf.

Blink again and it’s ever-floating cotton fluff. Floating all the hell over.

I am in the truck with the window rolled down and fluff is drifting, falling, blowing in to hitch a ride. Shedding season has spread to the cottonwoods on Green Creek Lane. Scattering my thoughts like these goosefeathers pursuing me along Mesher Road. And up the onramp. And into freeway traffic—

Tap tap rattle.

Another jumpcut: now Judith is sitting beside me, in her teal skirt and ruffled blouse and fresh White Linen. Rings and bracelets providing percussion as she pats the casserole on her lap.

Fluff settles. Gaps fill in. It’s another Friday morning and I am giving Judith a lift to work. She’s brought me a larger portion of potluck in bigger Tupperware. “You’ve got to eat better,” I’ve been told more than once during the past seven days.

With the underheard undertone: *I need you to keep making me feel beautiful.*

I am her magic mirror, assuring her she’s the fairest after all. And yet I am *not* giving Judith a lift—since she’s cottoned onto what’s bubblewrapped inside my portfolio and stowed behind the seat.

Watch Your Back. Sanded, oiled, and waxed. With the background patterned for greater contrast to the polished figure.

“You’re taking it to the gallery today, aren’t you?”

“Er, yes. Deadline time.”

Deep forlorn sigh. “I wish *I* could buy it.”

“You’re supposed to be saving your money.”

“I know that! I said, ‘I wish...’ It’s just that—I *hate* the idea of somebody taking it away from us! We might never see it again.”

“I’m giving you the sketch,” I remind her. “And there’ll be photos. Ralph takes good ones.”

Harp-snort. “‘We’ll always have photos.’ ‘Here’s looking at me, kid.’” (*Tap tap rattle.*) “It’s going to be like this every time, isn’t it? With every sculpture you do of me. How can you bear to let them go?”

“I don’t sell every piece I carve. This one might not sell.”

“Of course it will! Anybody’d be proud to buy it!... and isn’t that the point? Didn’t you tell me—”

“The point is to *create* it, as best you can. After that, you can try to sell it—or give it as a gift—or keep it for yourself. You’ve seen the ones I’ve kept.”

“Wish this could’ve been one of them.”

“There’ll be other sculptures... There *will* be, won’t there?”

Hands-on lady that she is, she takes a cool dry palm off her casserole and slides it around my elbow. Almost causing me to swerve the truck when she asks, “Are you going to WhooHoo?”

Close your eyes and open them and the sun has moved to the opposite side of the freeway. It’s gotten much hotter, a lot more humid, I’m sweating bullets and have been for some time. Judith’s still in the next seat but her skirt and blouse are gone, as is the casserole. In their place are minty shorts and a polo shirt screaming SUMMER KICKOFF!

Dig-dig-dig-dig go Judith’s fingernails in my elbow-crook as I twist the wheel—with no other result, since the truck’s idling in gridlock. Swervus interruptus.

Bring yourself up to date.

This is... what? Saturday. The 1st of June. Closing night of the Demortuis Whoopjamboreehoo. Originally called “Decoration Week” (to outclass cities that spent a mere day garlanding graves) it has morphed into the local equivalent of Mardi Gras or the Feast of Fools. Each year’s rowdier and bawdier than the last, with more letters to the editor seething about how WhooHoo spits on our glorious dead.

One thing never changes: it's always the muggiest week of the year. And the most congested trafficwise. I finally maneuver us into an unfilled parking spot on Indianfield Street, appropriately near the old Union Cemetery.

Judith is in no hurry to get out of the pickup.

Can't say I blame her. Last Sunday, Memorial Day, she had to pay a duty call on Wastrel's headstone and light candles for his whatnot. Which left her sounding ragged and torn on the phone to me that night.

"Do you ever have bad dreams?" she wanted to know.

"Sometimes. Not lately."

"Mine are awful. And now, besides wearing the night guard, I have to sleep with a night *light* on like a little kid. Good thing it doesn't bother Noir."

(That usurping bastard.)

One nightmare was of the Formis discovering "her" at the Crouching group show. Illogical, since her in-laws don't frequent Jackdaw galleries—Enzo's taste in art runs to fish on plaques, and Sophia's only interested in antique furniture. Her wedding present to Judith was an Italian rosewood wardrobe, seven feet high and five feet wide. "We barely got it through the door when I moved to Sycamore Terrace."

"Where...?"

"In my bedroom. It takes up almost as much space as the bed."

Didn't know she had a bed, or a room to put it in. I was guessing the sofa folded out. "I'd like to see it sometime—the wardrobe, I mean."

Oh really? went the phone. *Brush brush brush-off.*

The sound of Noir being groomed, Noir being cuddled, Noir shedding hair like black cottonfluff over bed and mistress and fanciful wardrobe...

Enough. That was Sunday; this is Saturday. Here we're parked and there sits Judith. I tell her we can forget Summer Kickoff and just return home, but she shakes her head. And exits the truck.

A gentleman should walk between a lady and the curb, but Judith places me between her and Union Cemetery. Or the shaggy peeling river birches behind its wrought-iron fence. She won't take my arm in public, but keeps close enough to bodily *nudge*. *Nudge*. *Nudge*...

Wink wink responds my saphead.

Thus we enter Portal Park. Judith with her jitters, I with an obelisk.

And WhooHoo with a horde of beasts. Lethal but not silent.

Surging, swarming, trampling the blossoms, abusing the statuary—we see one grisette spew her lunch over the marble shoes of Ulysses S. Grant. Barricades are up and helicopters whirl and a SWAT team's here on armored horseback, none of which daunts the bedlamites: it's closing night of Whoopjamboreehoo! squander all reserves! on chugging, on frothing, on screeching and howling, on demented demanding that chunks be blown and tits be shown! And here's Judith Formi in a thin polo shirt—

“Can we get out of here?” she shivers.

The way back is blocked by leering dim-eyed bloodshot faces. The way forward's full of outraged protesters brandishing “MATTHEW 8:22” signs. Both throngs are closing in, so I have no choice but to haul Judith ladderwise.

200-odd feet of limestone loom above us: the Demortuis Cenotaph. Its elevator doors have been jammed open, and the alarm blare competes with basslines and police sirens and squalling mob and umpteenth reprise of “Empty Tomb Blues”:

*Now my love lies deeply buried, somewhere I will never know
Now my love lies deeply buried, somewhere I will never know
Across the sea, beyond the clouds, or beneath the bitter snow...*

A green-lit sign: STAIRS. Steep ones, leading not up but down to an enclosed garage. Abrupt silence follows us into a cavernous space that's deserted except for fossil cars—Ramblers, Pintos, Corvairs. Much cooler here than topside.

If my bearings are right and we take this tunnel, it should lead us out to Lincoln Avenue and that's only a block from Indianfield. But no sooner do I decide this than Judith's shivering escalates into another case of the *nnnnnnns*. I draw her over by a shadowed wall, put a tentative arm around her.

“There was no need for that,” she says.

I start to remove my arm. She shifts with it and leans against me.

“That girl throwing up on the statue—*nnnn*... no need for that.”

“Maybe she had after-hours morning sickness.”

More shivers. “You know the only harsh thing my mother-in-law’s ever said to me? That we were wrong not to start a family right away. Have as many kids as we could... *nnnn*... and part of me would’ve loved to do that, one baby at least... but then he broke my heart and I’m GLAD we didn’t.”

She met Marco Formi when she was attending college in St. Paul and he was going to grad school in Minneapolis. For three years he pursued her through the Twin Cities: classy dates, swanky gifts, generous to a fault. He was 6’4" (by damn I *knew* it) and the life of every fratbash, yet gentle when he wanted to be. And capable of romance—proposing to her at a Vikings football game, via the Metrodome scoreboard.

But Judith held off marrying him till after graduation, not sure she wanted his surname on her permanent diploma. The Dahls disliked Marco at first sight, an impression he didn’t improve by kicking Rudy’s ass. Yet the Formis welcomed Judith wholeheartedly, saying she was exactly the sort of girl they’d always prayed would be Marco’s wife. Living near them in chic Trey Hills. With her big bluff heavy-chested hero.

Mr. Dahl, after walking the bride down the aisle, gave the groom a look that curdled the frosting on the wedding cake. And Marco, from the moment he mashed the first slice into Joo-girl’s face, proceeded to confirm everybody’s worst suspicions. Generosity turned to extravagance, gentleness to audacity, romance to boorishness.

“We were still practically newlyweds, married less than six months, but I was wondering if we—if *I* could make it to our first anniversary... *nnnn*... and then he took me here. To WhooHoo. And it was such a happy day. We went on all the rides, even the Ferris wheel and merry-go-round, and he won me a stuffed husky and said he’d give me another one every year till we had a whole sled team... and he was like he’d been when he was at his best. Oh, I had a really good time that day.”

Lapse into silence.

I start to navigate her toward the Lincoln Avenue tunnel.

But Judith holds back—physically, if not vocally.

“That was the last one, too. The last good time. I kept giving him second chances, but he never turned over a new leaf like he promised, like he *swore* he would... The things

he did to my poor stuffed Mushy-dog, just because I loved it... But I stuck out that marriage for two whole years before telling him I was leaving him. And then he broke my heart. And then he got killed. And I was thrown clear.”

That newspaper squib. “It was a... car?”

“Oh—yes,” says Judith. As if she thought everyone knew that. “He was driving. I just got some scrapes and bruises. They were worried about my spine, of course. Couldn’t believe it when they couldn’t find anything wrong with it—anything *new*, that is. The doctor said it was a miracle. *Nnnnnnn...*”

What do I do if she starts sobbing? Idiot!—put *both* arms around her. One’s there, add the other. She’s wearing sneakers, we are more of a height than usual, her forehead rests against mine. And then she does begin to cry, quite silently. Tears brimming, spilling, trickling down her diamond cheeks.

What do you say? Nothing is best. Hold her close, then; wholly enfolded.

I’m so sorry.

It’ll be all right.

Will it?

Sure, why not?

You hug good.

It’s all in the hands.

Yes, they’re very nice...

