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Depth Charge

To Judith's indignant joy, *Watch Your Back* is not snapped up at the Crouching group show. Nor is much else: WhooHoo did nothing to boost sales in Jackdaw Square, except at liquor stores.

Luckily, Double-Bag Eddie has paid Geraldine for *No I.D.* and *The Mute Commute*. Geraldine's obligated to give me my half within thirty (30) days, meaning I can expect it at the (23rd) hour of the (29th) day. Ask her for a swifter turnaround and she'll catapult you at length about her underfed overhead.

At any rate, money's on its way. And just in time: Judith's been clocking a good many modeling hours. Our current project's working title is *Trophy*, as in swimming, which I think ought to depict strokes in motion—say a relay-racer streaking past, baton in hand. But swimming relays (Judith informs me) don't use batons, and a *Trophy* (Judith argues) should be just what it says it is—representation of victory, triumph, achievement. Which *does* include coming in second, whatever Judith's dad might think.

So: no consensus.

Till two evenings after WhooHoo, when Judith enters my bathroom wearing her sales-rep get-up (mauve on summer Mondays) and emerges clad in glistening spandex.

"Wow."

"Oh, you've seen me in this before."

"I went *Wow* then too."

The edge is clearly hers and she maintains it while our ideas mingle. Okay then: a swimmer stretched at full length, reaching to seize a silver medallion just outside her grasp. Aspiration, determination, tenacity, mettle, pluck. Plus every ripple of skin and sinew, delineated punctiliously.

The session that follows is intense. We try Judith lying on her back, her side, her front; uncooperative gravity keeps tugging her firm poised flesh askew. WhooHoo's weather hasn't moderated, it's another heavy night outside and in, Judith perspires and I sweat like a goat. Then an idea: have her stand and hold onto a strap I loop round a ceiling hook. She still doesn't look like she's swimming, but the image is certainly commendable.

"I feel like I'm on the bus," she murmurs.

"Stop a lot of traffic like that," I say.

The Young Empress furrows her brow at me. What happened to the nervous girl hiding a vial of pepper spray? She's absorbed the pepper and it's risen to the surface:

"Aitch, we need a full-length mirror in here. I know a place we can get one wholesale. Prop it up against that pillar, and then I might be able to see what I'm doing."

It's Judith who suggests getting a leg up on the stepladder so she can dramatize swimkicks. Specifying that each kick match an appropriate stroke:

"If you want my leg *here*, I can't have my arms doing *this*—every swimmer in town would look at it and laugh!"

Stepping down from the ladder to lay personal authority hands on my pad and pencil. This is the way a scissors kick goes: gallop-a-trot! This is the way a frog kick goes: hobble-de-hoy! If her left leg's *here*, her right one's *there*, and her arms must be down or up or over like... thus. And... so.

Stick-figure diagrams drawn by a svelte-figured bathing beauty. And not just any babe in a maillot, but LADY ALICE—flushed and heated and thwarting gravity fore and aft. Oh, by damn! Pose any way you please! Stretch, curl, kneel, lie—just hold steady while I take you in and get you down, set you up and send you over, hook and ladder, nook and cranny, thus and so—

"*Ohhhh...*" she goes. Glistening from hairline to toenail at the end of the session. "Just you wait till we're back in the gym, Mr. H. Huffman! I won't let you out of the pool

till I work your glutes off!” Said with a smile and double-snap of leghole elastic across her own sleek buttocks. Followed by the *snick* of the bathroom door, the swoosh of the shower, and a voice raised in quavery song.

Aye Calypso! so long and so well!

Leave out the door and the song and you could live with this for a hell of a long time.

I get two weeks of it. We dine on takeout, we revisit her gym, I’m put through strict paces till I develop a respectable if unstimulating breaststroke. Fridays we go to the Malt Shoppe and I (discreetly) hand over sizable well-earned checks. Sizable enough that Judith tells Formi-Dable she wants a break from field sales.

“I’m paying my own way through grad school, every darn step of it. Not my parents. Not Enzo and Sophia. I’m doing it all on my own two feet.”

With the help of my hook and ladder. Though it’s Judith who decides the new piece shouldn’t be titled *Trophy*, but *Prized*.

We buy her full-length mirror and lug it up to my studio, but she spends less time looking in it at herself than at me while I draw her. Models don’t often do that; their attention wanders, they shift it inward or elsewhere. Judith’s stays centered, and again I feel that sense of grace in her presence: defusing carnality and suffusing it with “cool.”

Not that she can’t throw me for an occasional loop.

“Have you ever read this book?” she asks one morning on the bus. “I couldn’t make head nor tail of it when I was in college, but now I think I’m getting it more.”

Doesn’t sound like a Sneaky Pie mystery story. I glance at the cover. “*Ulysses?*”

“I skip over the disgusting parts. But look here, where Mr. Bloom’s feeding Pussens and she goes ‘Mrkgnao!’ at him. That’s exactly what a cat would say.”

I’ll take her word for it. Full of wonders, this one is.

She learns that June 16th is Bloomsday and announces we should go out to celebrate it. Not pubcrawling—too much like Whoopjamboreehoo—but there’s a little French restaurant in Fisherman’s Bend she’d like to try, and after all *Ulysses* was published in Paris.

“You do know the 16th’s a Sunday?” I ask. I never see her on Sundays, she spends them lighting wastrel candles with the Formis, then calling me at bedtime for phone solace. And to hear her groom her cat.

“I sent my own dad a card—I can send Enzo one too,” says Judith. Coolly.

The 16th’s not just a Sunday and Bloomsday, but Father’s Day as well.

And on it she wants to be with *me*.

Yeedge...

So what did you expect?

Yes, ever since that night under the Cenotaph she opens her arms for a parting hug when you walk her down to the Honda. Yes, Bogart found Bacall—or if you prefer, Buster Keaton found his lemon-meringue blonde Eleanor—when he was in his forties and she was in her twenties.

I could cope with a relationship if Judith could.

It wouldn’t be December-May—more like August-April. I’m not a kid this time around, as in Kansas. Nor a callow youth, as in Milwaukee. Nor subject to a shrink, as in Chicago. And this one’s unlike the three I knew there: she’s taller, stronger, more tempered.

But Father’s Day? Maybe she’ll present me with a necktie. Well, I’ve got news for her—I already *own* a necktie. Which I’m wearing Sunday evening when Judith arrives to pick me up. And which she unknots and reties, without invitation.

What next? *Be sure to wear your galoshes, Poppa.*

“You’d be really handsome if you smiled a bit more,” she remarks. For all the world as though she were the first female to spring that line on me.

“You’re beautiful whether you smile or not,” I retort. And then she *does*, of course.

North we drive, past Knotts and Rollinghitch to Fisherman’s Bend and La Maison du Pêcheur. We’re seated outdoors under a striped umbrella; I still get the sun in my eyes. Judith orders our food in impeccable French from a bewildered-looking waiter. Correctly or not, we’re served lobster bisque and poached salmon with a bottle of homemade (“Ipsissima Valley”) Beaujolais. Most of which gets poured into my glass; Judith allows herself only a few designated-driver sips.

“So,” she says after swallowing one, “have *you* ever been married?”

“No.”

“Lived with anybody?”

“Not really, no.”

“Ever been in love?”

I empty my glass, pour some more. “Of course.”

Twitter. “Did you, um, sculpt... them?”

“Yes I did.”

Silence, while she chews salmon. Then: “Are those the ones you’ve kept?”

“A couple.” This wine’s not bad, considering it got squeezed in the valley of the shadow of Big Greedy-Gut. We buy a jug and take it back with us to Sycamore Terrace. Judith has a full glass there; I have several. Sinking deeper into her sofa all the while. No sign of her cat tonight, which suits me dandy. Probably it prefers Pinot Noir.

“You understand, don’t you?”

I turn my head. Find her midnight blues upon me. “Hunh?”

“You’ve gone through it too. With that first girl you kissed, the one who...?”

“Hadn’t seen her for years, when she...”

“But somebody? Someone you loved?”

The spicy wine’s making my eyes water. Next thing you know I’ll start spilling beans. Better haul ass to her lavatory—and squat for this whiz; bad manners to aim it all over a lady’s powder room. Hey, maybe that’s why the “powder blue”...

Stand and flush. Zip and turn. Reel back and be collected, directed down. Are these her hands on my face?

Oh Aitch—you’re so—

That same unfinished sentence.

Thirty-two years I’ve wondered what I was so.

Blink and the room changes. Lights are off. Dawn is on. Still sitting on the sofa but my shoes and tie have vanished, my shirt’s unbuttoned, and Judith is curled around me. Head resting against mine. Tush pressed against my hip. Legs arched across my lap. Sunday dress replaced by a long purple tee with *WILDCATS* across the front in gold, slowly swelling and subsiding.

What the HELL??

Secular humanist I may have been raised, but my first thoughts are scriptural—about the beautiful widow who got the Assyrian drunk in order to behead him with his own sword.

Can't recall the Assyrian's name, other than *it started with an H*—

Quick doubletake. The head resting against hers is still attached to my shoulders. The *schweinhund's* saphead is likewise intact. Not a crime scene, then.

Still: here's a how-de-do. Somebody's been working their wiles overnight, and I don't think it was me or mine.

Her chest continues to swell and subside.

Never sleeps like this on the #104. There she's rigidly upright, jaws clamped shut. Now she's lax, slack—openmouthed, in fact. Her nice-girl slaver dribbling down my neck to pool inside my collarbone.

Wait a minute...

No night guard. No night light. Yet sound asleep, more or less in my arms.

Well, I'll be damned.

A romantic notion: awaken her with a kiss. Though not with this wine-dark breath. Pack of gum in my shirt pocket—dig out a stick, chomp hurriedly. Okay. No need to scale brambles around an enchanted castle; just brush away the latest drooldrop, take her chin and lift it slightly upward—

—JOLTING her awake. Lids popping open, eyes hollow-socketing—is she about to scream? Not quite. “OH MY FACE” she goes, leaping off the sofa into the bathroom and whumping the door shut after her.

“My” face, meaning hers. From which she didn't remove makeup last night. Meaning she woke up slightly smeary.

I was willing to overlook it.

Instead I'm left with morning wood, *and* a full bladder. So much for romantic notions. Creak to my feet, hobble on over, tap on the door.

“Just a minute!”

“Dee? I really have to go.”

“Oh don't, oh please stay!”

“I mean, *go*—in there—”

“Oh! Um... just a minute—”

Out she darts past me, muffled in a towel. I half-expect to find her face in an Eleanor Rigby jar by the door. Better that than the stubbly gray pallor staring back at me from too many reflective surfaces. Gah...

I manage to relieve myself without disaster. Twist the knob, open up—and find her standing immediately opposite. Face scrubbed cosmetic-free. Looking scared and brave, younger and older. Less finished, yet more timeless. Blanker, yet indelible.

“Do you still want to kiss me?” she asks.

Sometimes my mind is nimble. “More than ever,” I reply.

Thus: clinch.

So: dreaming.

Beneath the cotton T-shirt and surface pepper she is tense, taut, on edge. But her lips are like the Beaujolais, fresh and bright and berrylicious. (If a dream, what a dream.) I move my hands over her back, staying on top of the cotton, and she does not shrink away but comes closer. Wraps her arms around my neck as on that first Saturday a month ago. And I am Winston Smith among the bluebells, in the Golden Country, with the sunlight pouring in and her body turning softer, warmer, melting in my hands and against my mouth, taking my breath away all over again—except she isn’t, she’s giving me hers, she’s filling my lungs. Building up my wind. Resuscitating my life. I can feel the bristles on my chin turning back to black. And the same words keep throbbing through my mind:

Well, I’ll be damned—well, I’ll be damned—well, I’ll be damned—

Oh shut up and kiss me.

Yes dear.

I don’t know whether she took any liberties last night, or whether at 5’9” she weighs 120 or 130 or maybe more for all her willowiness, and if so whether I’ll be able to sweep her off her feet long enough to find which of these doors leads into her bedroom—

—when I get caught by her strong right hand in a downright intimate place. As in my ear she goes: “Hon—honey—do you have a thingee?”

What do you think you’ve got your hand on, Lady?

No no, you know—FOR it.

Oh. Er. No.

“Oh, Aitch,” she sighs aloud. With exasperated reproach, as though I’d been promising to pack one day and night. *Damn!* Poppa forgot his galoshes. I’m almost ready to propose marriage, if that’s what it’ll take; but then she’d expect me to produce a ring and I haven’t got one of those either—

A distant alarm clock goes off.

“Well,” she says, “I better get dressed.”

Disappearing behind what must be her bedroom door. Fat lot of good that discovery does me now.

I try to put myself right in her powder blue shrine to hygiene. Cursing my rotten luck, and wondering why we keep wasting so much time alone in each other’s crappers.

“Honey? I need to put my face back on.”

Oog. Guess she’s decided that’s what the H stands for. How very affectionate.

“Putting her face on” reminds me of another Judy, the one in *Vertigo* who’s willing to let Jimmy Stewart muss her a little. Which he doesn’t do because he realizes Judy’s in fact the False Madeleine—

—but who the hell cares? False or true or blonde or brunette or used as a tool in a murder plot, it’s *Kim Novak* for crying out loud: go ahead and muss her a little! Though not so much that she falls off a bell tower.

“Here we are,” says Judith. Crispy-clean in fresh makeup and Monday mauve.

Before we depart for the Park ‘n’ Ride, she lets Noir back into the apartment. The outraged creature won’t allow Judith to pet it; pretends it doesn’t know her. But as we head on out, the cat bounds up to glare balefully after us through the window.

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At Selfsame I am shaking my head at Schlitzzy’s attempt to dump a cartload of Gag orders on me, when the phone rings.

“...Aitch? I’ve been PINK-SLIPPED!”

Which ought to sound sexier than it does. Gone is the clear cool gliding voice; now it’s caught between a keck and a snuffle.

Two weeks notice. No forewarning. No answer when she called Trey Hills. Is it because she didn’t go there for Father’s Day? (Keck.) Or because they’ve found out about

us and think she's betraying Marco's memory? (Snuffle.) Or has F-D finally struck an iceberg and started to sink?

"What am I going to *do*? I'm not ready to leave yet!"

I try to reassure her. I've got contacts with many vendors; even in the current recession, one's bound to need an experienced sales rep. We'll finish *Prized* and carve other sculptures, Geraldine will sell them, I'll advance Judith the proceeds against her future modeling. We'll get by.

"Oh I love you," she says.

She wants to be loved. I do what I can. Call around town, but nobody's hiring. I know *we're* not—Thin Chick wasn't replaced when she left last month.

Then my luck changes. I'm not a high-dollar customer, but the LeThean Lumber Yard has never failed me yet; Sleepy LeThean appreciates those who value good wood. Forty years ago he was one of the original Cutthroats, playing for dime-store wages in the old AFL. A lot of aging fans seek Sleepy's autograph and stories about tackling the likes of Jack Kemp. He always obliges—after they buy some lumber. On them he unloads ordinary stock; me he steers toward a choicer selection. (For which he charges precisely what the market will bear.)

Judith and her sockets board the 4:42 like they've had lifelong insomnia. She can't lay her head on my shoulder without curling herself around me, but does the best she can on a public bus. I tell her a customer service position might be open at LeThean after July 1st.

"But I don't know anything about lumber."

"I can help you there. They sell other things too, paint and varnish and so forth."

"But Downy Owl Road's nowhere near town. We won't be riding the bus together anymore."

I was expecting a little relief here, if not active gratitude—picking up in Zerfall where we left off in Knotts. (To which end I stopped by a drugstore and loaded up on thingees.) Yet when we reach my place, Judith says: "Aren't you going to change?"

"How?"

"You're still wearing yesterday's..."

I am, though I didn't feel grungily malodorous till now.

Wash and shave and change into something more comfortable. Find Judith hanging up the phone after ordering from Black Wok.

“Honey?”

“Right here, dear.”

Still with her back to me: “I don’t think I can do this anymore.”

“Do WHAT?”

“*Tonight*, I mean tonight. I wanted—eek! What have you got *on*?”

“It’s called loungewear,” I try to say with dignity.

A smile comes and goes across her stricken face. She steps forward, starts to hug me, then pushes firmly away. “No. It wouldn’t be right. Too much has happened today.”

“Well... stay for the food, at least.”

“Oh. Yes. I was going to.”

In silence we brew a pot of tea, prep the eating table, open the delivered Black Wok boxes. Feeling like it’s last winter on the #104: me covertly observing, she off in abstraction. Even a few *nod-nods* as she eats her prawns and potstickers. Eventually meeting my eye—

“Oh don’t look at me like that! It’s not you, Aitch, it’s just—I mean—I *want* you to love me! I want to love you *back*! But...”

She wipes a sweet-and-sour dab from her chin. Then, slowly:

“You know something? I won’t have to be ‘Judith Formi’ anymore. Hey! What’s a week from Friday? The 28th? Oh my gosh—that’ll be my last day there—and then Saturday, the very next day, is my birthday!”

Bloop. Her sockets replenish and her eyes start to shine.

“I could go back to being a Dahl again! And when people ask, I could tell them I’m single! Oh gee! Oh Aitch! I was dreading my birthday, but now they’re going to stop!”

“What is?”

“My dreams! The bad ones! I’ll be free—and THAT’S why it didn’t feel right tonight! It’s too soon! Oh, I’m SO glad we haven’t done anything yet!” She grabs my hand, sending a forkful of chow mein clattering. “And *I* figured it out, didn’t I? I stood on my own two feet!” Half doing so, to lean over the table and kiss me full on the—cheek. Then, with sudden concern: “Oh honey! Can you *wait* another couple of weeks?”

Dare I claim a man can die from terminal blueballs?

“Er, some might say I’ve waited too long.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well... we’re not quite the same age.”

Harp-snort. “That doesn’t make any difference! It’d be like saying we can’t be together because I’m ‘too tall.’ Does *that* bother you?”

“No—”

“Do you wish I were *older*?”

“Well, no—”

“Well then! All that matters is how we feel about each other. Do you love me?”

“Sure,” I say. (Why not?)

“I wouldn’t want you the least little bit different than you are,” she says. In which rapturous mood she opens her fortune cookie.

Every journey starts with a single step.

“YES!” goes Judith, glistening and twinkling. “Now open yours, open yours!”

Only he that has traveled the road knows where the holes are deep.

No doubt. Here I am ready for a tactile liaison, and she puts me on a twelve-day kibosh. Thirteen, if you count last night.

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My blueballs and I start to carve *Prized*. For which I choose a panel of Honduras mahogany whose fiddleback figure suggests under-the-sea. To me, at least; Judith’s dubious.

“Don’t you have any green wood?”

I explain that isn’t so much green as wet, and liable to split or crack as it dries.

“Just like skin,” Judith shudders. “Well darn—you’d think *wet* wood would be perfect.”

She vows to be at benchside for the entire carving. Insists I wear a respirator mask and dons one herself. Until my V-tool bites into the blank; then she’s off to the kitchenette for an unmasked drink of water. After which she thinks her cellphone’s ringing in her

totebag, over by the futon. Finally she remains at the other end of the studio, exercising in front of the full-length mirror. Having put on a leotard the exact same color as my balls.

Which can only be pushed so far.

Lay down mallet and chisel. Go over and confront her.

“Oh—is the music too loud?” she asks in mid-lunge. Meaning her smooth jazz station on my boombox.

“What are you trying to DO to me?” I demand through the mask.

“*What??*” she goes, clutching her sweet bosom. Honestly unaware, for a moment. Then everything from bosom to brow turns vivid pink. Though only briefly; she’s posed too often over the past six weeks to be that bashful anymore. Pink reverts to pearly-peach, and her dark eyes grow mischievous. “Aw, poor baby.”

—yer jes tew easy t’tease—

“You,” I tell Judith, “are going to make me gouge myself yet!”

“It won’t be for very much longer. Till then I’m just trying to meet you halfway.”

“Come down in time,” agrees the boombox, “and I’ll meet you halfway-ay-ay...”

Harp-giggle from Judith, humming along as she resumes her lunges.

That night (alone on the futon) I have my first Calypso dream. We’re on the bus and it’s in the river, drifting merrily downstream. Except for a sailor cap, Judith is thoroughly nude. “No,” she says, “I’m in my birthday suit.” Yet perfectly safe, I having been fool enough to climb a bamboo limbo-ladder that lacks any downward rungs. “What are you doing up there?” asks Calypso Judith. “Trying not to break my neck,” I reply. “Hi-dee-ay-hee!” chime in John Denver and Jacques Cousteau.

Then we all chant Belafonte-style:

Judith the Anchorite, she be a saint

Suffer night terrors at the hands of haints

(Moonlight fall and me want to go home)

Scream so loud she bringing monks on the run

Find her fighting Devil off one-on-one

(Nightjars sing and me want to go home)

Six straight nights I have this dream. Each time knowing it's the same ladder I'm trapped on, but never able to come down in time before I awake.

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Her next insistence is that *I* get a cellphone, so she can be in touch with me twenty-four hours a day. Or how about a Personal Digital Assistant with e-mail capability, Internet access and a tiny keyboard—*plus* a wireless phone?

Before I know it, I'm \$500 deeper in debt and the owner of a so-called BlackBerry. Judith supervises every detail of its selection, nattering on about "dropped calls" and "roaming charges" and "SMS messages." I give in because there's nothing like letting a woman spend your money on something for *you* that benefits *her*, to get her feeling fervid. And right away Judith tells me to take the gadget to bed that night, so we can "test the network."

"Next best thing to being there?"

"Oh, you."

Oh, me. Alone again on the futon, in the darkness. With a clear cool whisper gliding through my headset.

A presence to be sensed, to be felt as though beside me, there aboard the Calypso bus as our dream goes gently down the stream, she feeding me bits of seedcake out of her BlackBerrylicious mouth. Singing me to sleep with wafting music, soulfully cerebral, like windblown feathers or flowers afloat in grottos, in hollows, in a hushed voice advising me to *never mind, never mind, never mind...*

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Birthday cards are arranged upon her trophy mantel. From her parents, from her brothers (Rudy excluded) and their wives, from her German Catholic grandparents and Scandinavian Lutheran grandparents and Sister Genevieve alias Geronimo—even from the truant Mr. and Mrs. Enzo Formi. *To our daughter*, that one says.

What do you give a girl when she turns twenty-six? In this case you can't go amiss with a bracelet. So I call on Nicolette Ningal, the spacy silversmith and reigning belle of Jackdaw Square: a meld of Sparkle Plenty and the Moon Maid (for those who remember *Dick Tracy* in the Sixties). Many a time I've tried persuading Nikki to pose for me, but she

distrusts wood as a medium. “If it splinters, I might too.”

I describe Judith to Nikki and she picks out a slender streamlined bangle, more oblong than round. Inside it I have *D & H* engraved.

“Depths & Heights?”

“Something like that.”

“Safe bind—safe find,” says Nikki with a sibylline grin. Enigmatic woman, but eminently sculptable.

Friday the 28th. Last potluck at F-D. For someone who’s just lost her job, Judith acts like she’s on cloud nine. Or a root beer high from the Black Cow Grandé she downs at the Malt Shoppe. Full of ice cream and her plans for tomorrow; unfazed by cloud nine’s combining with its eight neighbors to cast a pall overhead.

Saturday the 29th. The pall’s still there, now with rumbles and growls. Spoiling for a summer storm yet keeping it pent up, held back, repressed. Though not in my armpits.

Judith at least looks blithe and unstained in a new white party dress and sugar maple makeover. She hands me the Honda key; tonight I’m the designated driver. We’re returning to La Maison du Pêcheur, and Judith intends to have a couple of birthday drinks—both of them stronger than Black Cows.

En route to Fisherman’s Bend we rehash the future. She impressed Sleepy LeThean at her interview, but the lumber yard job won’t be available till August. Which allows her a month for vacation—and I just happen to spend three weeks every July at the Old McRale Place, Mrs. Wilson’s little timeshare on the prairie.

“I could drive you there,” Judith says. “Then I should go up to Walse Falls and mend a few fences. (See, I’m already talking like I’m in the lumber business.) Then I’ll come back to—where is it?—and pick you up. Unless maybe... you’d like to come with me to Walse Falls? It’s really scenic—”

“—yah sure, you betcha.”

“Hey now! I’ll make you eat lutefisk for saying that!”

“Believe I’ll order the trout instead.”

As we’re seated at La Maison she murmurs that if I have a present to give her, I mustn’t do it here. “Then they’d know it’s my birthday and bring out a cupcake and make

me blow out its candle in front of everybody. I would just *die*.”

Her couple of drinks translate into six frozen daiquiris, half of them peach and half banana. Her food she barely touches. The result is kittenish, at first; then increasingly antsy. That hectic little laugh. With a fidgety flourish she removes her wedding and engagement rings and throws them into her purse.

“Today I am no longer a Formi. As of right this very minute, I’m Judi Dahl again. Oh thank you—” to the waiter, serving daiquiri number five.

“I’ll still call you Dee,” I say.

“You better! Dee-e-e-ar. And never ‘Joo,’ no not ever.” Gulp of rummy banana purée. “I always declare inpeden—inpeh?—independence, on my birthday. Took off my back brace on my sweet seventeenth... and then that booger Chad *dumped* me.”

“He must’ve been an imbecile.”

“Well I showed him. Three other guys asked me out right away.”

“Good for them. Your fillet’s getting cold—”

“And then on my twenty-fourth, I did it again. Bigtime. Gave up giving him second chances.”

“Who? Marco?”

Another gulp. No pat of lips with napkin. Finger crooked at the waiter. “Just one more, please?... Yes—Marco. If I so much as *glanced* at another man, he’d yell like I was cheating on him. And I NEVER did. But the things he said... finally I couldn’t take it anymore. We were going out, I didn’t want to but it was my birthday and what he says goes, see, so there in the car I blurt that I’m leaving him. And he says... he tells me... if I do, if I leave him, I’m going to end up as a, a, a—”

“Dee—”

“—*crippled old hunchback*.”

Her face goes to pieces. She ups and turns, fumbling blindly for her purse—I hand it to her—get a garbled thanks—before she runs off to the Ladies.

Other diners eye me. So does the waiter, from whom I accept daiquiri number six. Which I’m too designated to drink, badly though it’s needed.

Judith returns, walking very straight and tall. I stand, half-embrace her, hold her chair; she sits.

“I’m so sorry.”

“No, no.”

“I shouldn’t have said anything—”

“No, no—”

“—to *him*. Not before I blew out the candles. Never tell your birthday wish.”

“Well...”

“He was driving. When he said that to me. And then we crashed. But I was thrown clear.”

I take her ringless hand. Seems like the right thing to do. She presses mine, rubbing her thumb over my palm-calluses, and says something I can’t quite hear.

“What?”

“Then he came back. A year later. A year ago. On my twenty-fifth. It was a really bad day and I went to bed early and lay there grinding my teeth. And I saw him. He came back and showed himself to me.”

Shrill giggle: brittle harpstrings.

“How—?”

“I wasn’t dreaming!—not at the time. But I’ve been dreaming about it ever since. Him. It. And now tonight...”

Down goes the sixth daiquiri. Better get her out of here. But then in the parking lot, Judith wants to get behind the wheel.

“I can drive. Give me the key. It’s my car!”

Lightning flashes, she gasps and jumps; I bundle her into the shotgun seat. Now to Sycamore Terrace as fast as possible. Let her just sulk quietly all the way...

“I’m not some dumb jockette, you know! I was an education major! *Je peux parler Français!* AND it’s my birthday!!” She grabs hold of my right arm, digs into it with her nails, starts sliding that hand up—

—*and it is two years ago and I am Marco and I have broken this lady’s heart at its most vulnerable point, so that she unbuckles her seatbelt to guarantee mortal-sin oblivion*

before reaching over and yanking the wheel, and I feel the car leave my control to veer and smash and throw Judith free, seeing this with my last sight before the final impact—

—and it is now and traffic’s light, coming and going, so I chance a direct look into her angry diamonds and go “DEE—”

She looks perplexed. As though another Oasis marker has snapped apart.

“It’s just me here, dear.”

“I know that,” she says. Sliding that hand back down to my elbow and squeezing it.

Hot and muggy and I am all ice. Get her safely home, then borrow the car and escape to Zerfall—

She looks away. “I’ll do anything you like if you’ll stay with me tonight. All night. With me. And not on the sofa.”

Icebreaker.

We make it to Sycamore Terrace. I park the Honda below its cunning little canopy.

“So will you? Please?”

I look at her. “Till you tell me to leave.”

She looks at me. “I love you so very much.”

“...you better have this, then.”

Gift box from NICOLETTE NINGAL / HANDCRAFED JEWELRY / BETWEEN THE MOON AND JACKDAW SQUARE. Judith perks up, opens it, goes “Ohhhh...” and extends her left wrist. I add my oblong *D & H* to the bangles already there. “Yes,” she says. “Oh, yes.”

I get out, go over, help her out and up and along. And to Rotwang I offer a bargain:

Look here. I am ready to love this lady. I want to make her happy. I want to share her pleasure. No more hurt should come to her, no more pain be felt. Spare us grief and I swear I will sculpt you the Absolute Woman.

“I knew it was you the whole time,” Judith murmurs.

“Well, don’t let that bother you.”

We enter D9 as the first drops of rain start to fall. Inside, so much black hair is floating around I think the cat must have blown itself up. A hope that’s dashed when Noir’s head pops out from beneath the sofa, making us both gasp and jump.

Judith bends precariously down to coo at the head, which looks terrified. With the same look in its rancid yellow eyes I like to think was in Johnny Ajahr's when they finished him off. Another rumble of thunder: the ears flatten, the maw opens, and the head retreats.

"My kitty doesn't love me anymore!" wails Judith. "But *you* do, don't you? Let's see how much—"

My only concern about being stripped in her living room is that the beast might leave its lair to deposit mementos in my shoes.

"Smile for me, honey."

I strain instead, my *schweinhund* now a purebred foxhound.

"And you've got a—?"

"Right here, yes ma'am." Roll it on and we're ready to rock.

Her boudoir: my first entrance. Narrow bed beside the window. Air redolent of girly potions, fabric softener, Lemon Pledge. Dominating the room is the antique rosewood armoire, whose immaculate finish and *trompe l'oeil* frieze I would admire at any other time. But Judith has shut the door behind us and started wrestling her dress over her head.

The armoire can wait.

"Need some help?"

"Yah sure, you betcha," from within the dress.

I get it off her and stand there holding it while Judith, tipsily twirling, removes layer upon layer of undergarments. Many a slip 'twixt the skirt and hip. An old-fashioned girl dancing a connubial ballet, piling my arms with white linen and nylon and lace.

Am I beautiful?

Too mild a word.

What am I, then?

You are transcendent.

Smile for me, so you'll be too.

I do.

And despite my foxhound's relentless lookit those! lookit them! lookit that!, I feel surprisingly at ease. As though this has always been our nightly ritual. She is neither a statue nor a robot but a living woman, graceful young intoxicated femininity. And what's

sauce for the goose—

Can I be on top? My spine, you know.

Anything you like. Just have mercy.

Outside the rain falls harder.

Double-snap of leghole elastic—

And then a CRACKLEPOP shakes the room, flickering the lamp. Judith leaps and gets her toes caught, trips over her panties and falls onto the bed, rolling onto her back, arms and legs spread wide—

She can be on top later.

Drop her duds and mount my charge—

“Oh,” she goes.

“My,” she adds.

THUD

THUD

THUD on the door—

“NO!!” she yells in my ear, “HE’S HERE!!”

—thrusting me away from her, altogether out and off and up to stagger back against the door, my hand instinctively turning its knob—

“—DOOOOOOON’T!!—”

—as in flies a dark blur landing between her splayed legs lunging up her front like a sex-starved ghoul intent on incubussing as it drives her clear up the wall knocking an Our Lady off its shrine empurpling her face as she expels every ounce of breath from powerful swimmer’s lungs in a godawful SCREAM completely drowned out by the

B-W-A-A-A-M-M-M

of a transformer exploding nearby to kill all the lights—

Blackness.

In which I stumble and blunder and spill, trying to find her, to hold onto the sound of her gibbering *HolyMaryMotherofGodprayforussinnersnowandatthehourofdeath*, but a roaring noise is rising in my ears and—

—curtains, their cord, wrench it off-balance but see no more than I could before—

“Dee? Judi? Judith?”

“GET OUT OF HERE!”

Not near the bed. Within the armoire. Hiding inside it? Search for a latch—

“GO AWAY! I HATE YOU!”

Sounding further away. And then, as if from some abysmal distance:

“LEAVE ME *ALOOOONE*—”

So I do. Though I can't be sure she's talking to me.