

10

*Trespassers Will*

UP—

—from a deep and heedless sleep—

—I'm jolted awake by a nervescape.

Bed's flanked by two fans, thrumming in the dark: no jolt there. What then? The so-called BlackBerry's muted for the night. Could it have gone haywire? Or maybe it was just digestive gripes, say from too many dried apricots—

—SKREEEK—

Whoa.

That wasn't intestinal.

Loose shutter, probably. Or the house itself, shifting its weight. Old wood can make a lot of noise: rafters complain, floorboards lament—

—SKRRREEEEEK—

Can't be the windmill, the Wilsons disabled it after they installed the standby generator, of course some gust or gale might've loosened the blades and caused them to—

—SKRRRRREEEEEEEK—

If I'm not out there prying off planks somebody else must be but who? the panther? a coyote, no longer faraway? an antelope seeking its head from the living room wall?—

—SKRRRRRRREEEEEEEE—CLUNK

goes the screen on the bedroom window that I propped open like an idiot deactivating the security system while my ¼" No. 6 straight gouge is buried in the toolbox at the other end of the house leaving me here in a room black as pitch if not silent as a tomb while something *climbs onto the foot of this bed—*

—out of which I leap—

—knocking over fans—

—lunging for the lamp—

—fumbling for the switch—

—snapping it on to be confronted by a cat—

A CAT??

Not a panther. Just a cat. That stares up at me with ears flattened, back arched, and dilated copper eyes demanding *HAVE YOU LOST YOUR MIND?—*

—for an instant. Then the back relaxes, the ears arise, the eyes half-close, and the creature curls up on my contour sheet.

I take a moment to use my rescue inhaler.

One thing's for certain: this can't be Noir. Much too small and shorthaired. Ears like a bat. Eyes like newly-minted pennies.

I edge over to the wall, not letting the thing out of my sight, till I turn to check the window. A corner of the screen's been snagged out of its frame. The corner is actually *bent*, and this isn't mosquito netting but stout steel wire. The little beast must be stronger than it looks. Which doesn't bode well for my chances of evicting it.

Slowly I reach out a hand—

—under which the creature thrusts its head, to go for my throat??—

—no. To press and rub and invite being scratched behind its bat-ears.

(Yeedge...)

With my other hand I pick the animal up. Heavier than it looks, too. No resistance is offered; just an unheard but palpable *r-r-r-r-r*. Okay. Careful now. Out we go. Past the bathroom, through the living room, to the front door where I take my hand off its head while I undo the bolt—

—as the cat jumps down to disappear in the darkness.

Damn it! Flip on lights, start hunting, start stubbing bare toes on immovable objects. *Son of a bitch!!* Say your pussy-prayers ‘cause I am going to see just how far this sore foot can kick your miserable bastardized ass—

—here it is in the kitchen. Sitting sedately in front of the refrigerator. Swiveling its head toward me, then back to gaze at the fridge.

I yank the animal off the floor, haul it through the dining room, toss it onto the front porch, shut the door quick and shoot the bolt home. And by the time I’ve doused the lights and washed my hands and returned to the bedroom, the cat has come back in through the window and laid itself across my pillow.

YEEDGE!!!

Close the window. Make it fast. *Then* yank, haul, toss, slam, lock. And turn on the central a/c, though normally I won’t sleep in air-conditioned rooms; they tend to give me congestion. Tonight, though, we’re under siege.

Retrieve my gouge. Re-key the alarm code. Change sheets and pillowcase. Pour another snort. And leave on one of the fans—already the room feels stuffy. Like I’m trying to sleep in a sarcophagus. With a nightshaded graverobber somewhere out there, determined to pry off the lid.

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Next morning I have a splendid case of postnasal drip. But in the hour between swallowing my meds and sitting down to breakfast, I’m able to unkink the window screen and fit it into its frame. Maybe rig a temporary barricade on the other side? I head out the back door and nearly break my neck on the mudporch, tripping over the nestled-down cat. Which hops up, dodges past and darts inside.

I follow more slowly. Find the thing waiting in front of the refrigerator. Foresee dealing with intrusions day and night for the next three weeks.

“You,” I inform the creature, “are not getting fed here.”

The head swivels. *Oh no?* it looks.

“Not by ME, cat!”

*Feed me and I’ll let you sleep.*

Wishful thinking. I fill two bowls with Shredded Wheat. Pour non-dairy creamer over both. Set one on the kitchen table, the other on faded blue linoleum.

“There. Go crazy.”

*You first*, looks the cat. Scowling at its bowl with wrinkled snout.

“You’ll eat what I eat if you want to eat here.”

It sniffs at the cereal. Samples a lap of creamer. Starts to eat with muted crunches.

I chew my Shredded Wheat more noisily, but just as grudgingly. This isn’t a savory chuckwagon platter of ham ‘n’ eggs. Higher in fiber, though, and that’s become a morning necessity. Speaking of which—

Find a carton of old newspapers under the sink. Tear one into coarse confetti, pile it in the carton’s lid, set that on the floor.

“Understand what this is for?”

Copper pennies turn my way. *Outlook good*, says the Magic 8-Ball.

“Hang around if you like, then. But get the hell out of my head.”

*Make me.*

I get the hell out of the kitchen, pausing only to mix a cup of instant coffee. Time to quit these shenanigans and buckle down to work. Twelve panels for our Screen of Three Doors. *Prized* to be the first; eleven more to design. Pick up the Bruynzeel, flip open the Strathmore, resume where we left off. What comes after mettle and pluck?

Well...

Er...

Fidgets and grace would lead us to...

A good solid dining room table, at any rate. Quarter-sawn white oak by the look of it. Tight grain, rich patina, medullary ray-fleck pattern—

—over which I spill the rest of my coffee as the cat vaults into the room. Scrambling up the buffet to perch in front of the empty china hutch, and strike what appears to be a pose.

*Draw me.*

You’ve got to be kidding.

As if I haven’t wasted enough time on this animal. Now including slop-moppage.

Still: I've heard cats have a knack for selecting effective backdrops. In this case, a white oak buffet. With north light gleaming off its fur or hide or whatever the term is.

I take up pad and pencil and start to sketch. "Trespassers Will" I could call it. In childhood I identified with Piglet's grandfather since he, like I, suffered from Shortness of Breath. The cat sits motionless till just before I complete the drawing, then proceeds to the Choplick, the Pawscrub, the Legspread with Prolonged Tonguewash—

"Blecch!" I go. "This isn't a photo shoot for kitty porn."

*Talking to a lady.*

"No, talking to myself."

*Says you.*

Half a day on the prairie and already I'm babbling to voices in my head. Not to mention squandering charcoal on this damnfool subject—

*Bombs away!*

Off the buffet it hurtles, landing in the living room with another CLUNK. I run after it and find the animal serenely hunkered below a shelf of picturebooks. One of which proves to be *All About Cats*. And falls open to an illustration identifying the creature on the floor, right down (or up) to its bat-ears.

*THE BOMBAY*, reads the caption.

Playful expression and affectionate behavior. (Cough.) Glossy coat with patent leather sheen. Less vocal than other breeds. Can get into trouble if left alone too long. (That one I do believe.) Action-seeking game-player, trick-doer, undercover-joiner—

"Oh HELL no," I tell the cat.

*Signs point to yes.*

Drop the book, back away, take a breather before this turns any weirder. Go outdoors and halfway to the stable before realizing the cat's been left inside the house, free to commit whatever territory-marking mayhem takes its fancy. Back I rush—

—to find *Trespassers Will* precisely where I left it.

*You again?*

Yank-haul-toss-slam-lock. Then into the truck solo and hit the road pronto, before the little beast seeks further gameplaying trickdoing action.

Where'd it come from? No collar round its neck (meaning fleas and ticks throughout the house). Belong to a neighbor? Abandoned by a motorist? Or introduced by some foolish earlier tenant of the Wilsons? That would account for its conversance with the Place.

Though not for its conversation.

I reach Route 65 before it occurs to me I have no idea where I'm headed. Not that there's a glut of choices. Turn south and drive all day through wasteland. North it is, then; make for Schraube Reservoir. Even though it'll be inundated with Saturday morning boaters and campers and anglers. Joggers and sunbathers and water skiers... maybe soccer players.

As in *Balls Away!*

Back when Miranda Parales left Demortuis, I was jaded but riding high. A dozen copies of her shapely *Espejo* had been sold; my first solo show was about to open; and a crowd of Cairney students applied to be my next model. One stood out, thanks to three things set in a tawny face framed by tawny hair. Two were eyes of an arresting blue-gray. The third was a picturesquely broken nose.

"Hi I'm Kirsten Tollhouse everybody calls me K.T. 'cept my grandma she calls me 'Periwinkle Blinkers' tee hee 'scuse the grass stains I just came from a soccer match and thought I'd have time to change but didn't sorry."

No one ever tried harder than K.T. on a track or field, or was more accident-prone on either. She once toted up for me all the various bones she'd chipped and muscles she'd pulled. "Hey that sounds kind of sexy you know when I say it like that tee hee doesn't it?" Too much of a klutzbutt (her term) to land an athletic scholarship, she aspired to be a video editor for ESPN. This was a field in which she could avoid hurting herself, since editors no longer had to cut film with razor blades.

K.T.'s body, despite its many injuries, was almost blemish-free; and like a good second-generation Bonnie or Stormin' she shucked jersey, shorts, and skivvies to show it tawnily off. But in my presence she would not remove her kneesocks. I guessed this was so she could assure her grandma that Periwinkle Blinkers never posed completely unclothed.

*Balls Away!* was a panel I carved of her wearing those kneesocks with cleated shoes as she punted merry hell out of a sack of soccer balls. It caused a hullabaloo at the Crouching Gallery, possibly because it appeared soon after Io MacEvelyn's "Shameful

Subject” essay. But Geraldine took no notice of the turmoil, since Double-Bag Eddie broke all records purchasing *Balls Away!*—speedwise, dollarwise, and demandwise for a complete “Cleats ‘n’ Teats” series. Which we duly produced, though I often had to use looped straps to keep K.T. from falling out of position and onto her klutzbutt.

The resulting sculptures always represented her as adroit and coordinated. As well as a yowzah poppet: “Hey if anyone came in right now and saw me sort of tied up tee hee with my leg in the air and hardly a stitch on I bet you’d have a bunch of explaining to do hunh?”

*Damn.* This type of reminiscence isn’t apt to ease my restlessness. Got half a mind to drive into Hubsker and find me a rancher’s daughter, one who doesn’t dip Skoal or object to being city-slickered.

No—I’m too middle-aged to try that anymore. Here’s the reservoir turnoff: take it.

And find the lake even more crowded than I expected. Barely enough leeway in the parking lot to squeeze myself out of the pickup and into the Schraube mob.

Not as muggy as at WhooHoo, but a lot more blistering as the sun beats down on a sugar sand beach peppered with noisemakers. Make that breathwasters: the Black Hole of Calcutta could spend a week exhaling what’s being dissipated here.

“Sure is hot.” “You call that bait?” “I’m at the lake... I’m at the *lake...*” ““Oh my my! oh my my! can you boogie? can you slide?” “They ain’t biting today.” “There any lotion left?” “Couple o’ big ole crappies.” “No, we parked near the dam.” “Get back in the pontoon!” “She just up an’ vamoosed on me.” “Can you hear me *now?*” “Don’t forget to bring a towel!” “Mommy I wanna go hoe-wummmmm—”

You and me both, kid.

Turn aside and trees beckon. Green and dark with the promise of cool.

A moment later I’m climbing away from the maddening throng, into a stand of ponderosas. Their material might be more suitable for spice racks than sculpture, but I can appreciate them as trees. The scent of vanilla’s in the air: byproduct of hot sun on pine bark. Taking me back to the Steak ‘n’ Shake in Columbia MO, where Our Gang went when beset by the munchies. (No more than five days out of any week.) Crystal would never order a shake, afraid it’d make her face break out; she invariably wanted “just a taste” of mine, cheeks hollowing as she addressed herself to the straw...

No. That was another set of lips in a different Malt Shoppe.

Now I'm feeling restless again. Thirsty, too. But don't want to reenter the mob quite yet—

—hello.

Three young women, gliding toward me up the slope. Bare-armed, bare-legged, in butterfly swimsuits. Two swing a wicker basket between them. The third tears at something held in one hand, letting bits of it float out of the other. Petals from a rose? Fragments of a note? Breadcrumbs from a loaf? They hover in the hot still air like slo-mo snowflakes.

Can this be my Vietnamesette quartet, minus Shorty Hottie?

Choral giggles. As if in response to an absent hiccup.

They gaze straight ahead, not at me; as each one passes I go *Ahhhh*. Three girls from Ipanema, via the Paktong Palace. Watch the rhythmic wench-clench of their garish spandex as they ascend into the shadow of the trees...

To go where? And do what? Have themselves a picnic—at Hanging Rock?

The Three Asian Graces. To get the full effect in a relief you'd lose the swimsuits, of course; *La Primavera* without drapery. Slim dark narrow-eyed curvy-assed pouty-papped plum blossoms... DAMN! Where's my Bruynzeel? Left behind at the McRale Place. Get back down to that wedged-in truck. Don't lose track of the image! Say it three times fast: *pouty-papped plum blossoms, pouty-papped plum blossoms, pouty-papped plum blossoms...*

Racing south on Route 65 I realize my postnasal drip's gone dry, thanks to the Three Asian Fates. No—Graces, young and lovely. Fates are old and grim. Says who? Every artist from Greco-Roman times till now. The first spins life's thread, the second metes it out, the third cuts it off. Meaning they're weavers: transcending duplicity to reach triplicity. Takes two to tangle, three to weave; one (the shortest and hottest) to go truant.

Chalk it up to fate.

Or to *Three Fatefulettes*. Panel number two for *The Absolute Woman*. As my Screen of Three Doors seems to have retitled itself. Ponder that as I park the truck, cross the yard, draw near the mudporch—and have Trespassers Will materialize round and round my ankles. Transmitting an inaudible *r-r-r-r-r* up my shins. Reminding me again of K.T., who'd wheedle with butterfingered massages when she wanted an advance on her modeling fees:

“Ooh you’re so tense oops did that pinch tee hee relax your shoulders now isn’t that better I only need a *little* extra this week oh c’mon pretty please you know I’m good for it.”

And she always was. Though miscast as a masseuse.

Odd what you’ll endure, to be touchy-feely’d by a yowzah poppet.

*Bombs away* from the glossy anklepresser planted between me and the door I’m trying to unlock. Not *Balls away*, though: this morning’s Prolonged Tonguewash left no doubt regarding this cat’s gender. Trespasser for sure, but if never a tom I suppose she can’t be a Will. So call her Willamene, after the slinky witch in the old *Hercules* cartoons.

Her? She?

Whatever.

\*

I make it explicitly clear that joining me undercover will result in Willamene’s getting skinned alive nine times over. She elects to sleep on an armchair by the chifforobe. This chair is upholstered with the stuff that bullfighter-paintings are made of, and when the cat curls up on it and closes her eyes, she effectively vanishes.

Besides bed, I’m left alone while sitting at the kitchen or dining room tables, or upon the throne in the john. But take a seat anywhere else and zoom-pow! there’s a cat on my lap. I’ve heard the best way to dislodge lap-hoggers is to stand and let them topple off. I try this with Willamene and she simply rotates ninety degrees, suspended there like a bat-eared codpiece. Which is so freakish I never attempt it again.

Days go by with no progress made on *The Three Fatefulettes*. Sketch after sketch is begun, goes wrong, gets a large X slashed through it. At times like this I wish I brought my clipping file, or had broader Internet access than provided by the BlackBerry’s 3” screen.

An imagination can be a terrible thing to fall back upon.

Late one night in the bentwood rocker, looking not at constellations but the middle distance, I wonder how to lure even a single Fatefulette out of her lair.

*Ask again later*, gleam two copper cents from the dark blob on my lap.

“Why don’t you prove all the old wives wrong and bring me some GOOD luck?”

*Thinking of rabbits.*

The hell I am. This is getting to be like one of those lunatic-ventriloquist movies—*Dead of Night* or *The Great Gabbo*. Or two separate episodes of *The Twilight Zone*, three if you count the one with “Talky Tina”—

*Dummy is as dummy does.*

“Excuse me?”

*Doctor Dolittle you ain’t.*

Grunt and squeak and squawk with an animal. I finish my bourbon, heave myself off the rocker and move indoors, Willamene shinnying up for a shoulder ride. And as we cross the threshold I blink—

—and it’s daylight. I’m seated at the dining room table. Strathmore’s open in front of me, Bruynzeel’s in hand. Full mug of coffee nearby, steaming hot. Music on the boombox: Bessie Smith imploring a judge to send her to the ‘lectric chair.

Ohhh-kayy...

I don’t budge so much as a hair, but Willamene plummets off my shoulder and onto the table. Where she grabs hold of a kneaded eraser before absconding with it out of sight.

I reach out. Grasp the mug. Taste the coffee. Good and piping.

That’s what I need; haven’t woke up properly is all.

Mug drained, I turn to take it to the kitchen—and there’s Willamene on the floor. Depositing the eraser at my feet. Copper eyes rolled upward, radiating what appears to be *mortification*. Then the creature extends a furry leg and nibbles nonchalantly at its paw-pad.

For crying out loud...

If I didn’t know better, I’d swear this cat’s doing what amounts to a nightclub act. Impersonating petty-klepto Amy-Kay.

Not to be confused with K.T., who’d graduated after two years of teehee modeling. She was succeeded by Amy-Kay O’Kallick, who resembled a young Michelle Pfeiffer with avian overtones: long-legged and long-necked like a heron or egret, wearing feather boas instead of scarves. Amy-Kay’s life plan had been to be a 4-H Princess in rural Tasselville, then Homecoming Queen, Miss Tassel County, Miss Nilnisi, Miss America, and Ultimate Supercelebrity. She achieved the first two steps but came in third runner-up at the county fair. Now she was a Cairney dramatics major, seeking stardom by alternate means.

Amy-Kay would've been ideal casting as a blind girl. Her wide pale eyes were always focused inwardly, making her look preoccupied even when upset. Such as when I capped our contract-signing with an offer to buy her lunch.

"Ew!" she recoiled (appearing lost in thought).

"Sorry—"

"Oh I'll spend time with you if you like. So long as we don't have lunch."

We went instead to see *To Die For*, during which she accepted eight kernels of my popcorn. Chewing each one into oblivion before starting on the next.

"Sure you don't want more?"

"Oh no thanks. I eat like a bird."

And did not want to compromise future stardom with present indiscretion. Posing nude wasn't a problem, but I was forbidden to spread any of her privates across my panels. The feather boas came in useful here, lending Amy-Kay a coquettish air that blended nicely with bemusement. Undercutting the feathers consumed a lot of time, though, and weeks would go by between our modeling sessions. I'd be startled by intervening changes—dyed hair, piercings, tattoos. The first tongue stud was the biggest bombshell, but it didn't impede her performing a new talent entry for me: reciting T. S. Eliot's "Rhapsody on a Windy Night." (While clipping her toenails.)

A few days later, sallow with chagrin, Amy-Kay confessed she'd pilfered the clippers from my medicine cabinet. Hell, I told her, consider them a bonus. But no, no, she didn't deserve them; she was bad, she was bad.

I went through the motions of forgiving her. She pressed my hands and kissed my lips and walked off with one of my slipstones hidden in her bra.

Even then I wasn't overly worried. Models, like artists, are entitled to eccentricities. It wasn't till Amy-Kay went from eating-like-a-bird to bingeing-and-then-purge that I suggested she might want to see somebody.

"As if," answered Amy-Kay (in a pensive manner). "Totally faux."

Fortunately she flunked out of Cairney and went home to Tasselville before giving up her gag reflex. Our contract having lapsed, I felt free to carve a "County Fair of Souls" series with fully-dressed O'Kallicks coming across stark-naked O'Kallicks in carnival

settings. *Search Me. Pick a Pocket. Nothing Up My Sleeve.* Every one of which came off the top of my head. Above, below, behind: all of yours will be mine, will be mine...

Yes.

Now that you mention it.

Amy-Kay would make a very good Fatefulette.

\*

Next morning somebody gets up on the wrong side of the chair. One moment she's a sourpuss, refusing her share of Shredded Wheat; then we get a moodswing to hectic brio.

"Feline PMS?" I ask.

Snort. Unheard but very apparent.

"I'm going into Town tomorrow for supplies. Could get you some Meow Mix if you like. Proper litter too."

The cat marches past me to thump the mudporch door. I let her out and Willamene makes a big show of sharpening her claws on a hackberry tree. At any rate she's not tearing up the McRale furniture or my sculpting materials.

Now for a day of *progress*. (And about time—I was beginning to think I'd have nothing to show for my first week here.) Six years since I last carved a "County Fair," but there's no difficulty reproducing the starker O'Kallicks on paper as spinners or cutters or meter maids. Making them excellers. Surpassers. Outshiners, even.

Take a scrawny plainjane like Sage Maltese: she could make you believe in her make-beliefs. That she lived in the Film Noir Forties and not her own fortysomethings. That there was more to her than met the skeptical eye or moved the cynical ear.

"Any truth at all in that yarn?" Bogart might inquire.

"Some... not very much," Brigid O'Shaughnessy might admit.

Yet Sage Maltese could transform her flimsy yarns into convincing silk stockings. A knack I could never convey in the reliefs I did of her: surrealized covers of vintage pulps like *Spicy Detective*. Bleak passion. Lurid suspense. Distressful dames in scraps of chiffon being menaced by hardboiled thugs. *Be—generous, Mr. Spade!*

My second Fatefulette. Gone astray like Amy-Kay in the exceedingly gray area between fantasy and reality. (Could K.T. complete the triumvirate? Or would she turn it

into banana-peel burlesque?)

Straight through the day I sketch, forgetting to break for lunch. Not till dusk falls does my stomach make its needs felt.

Slap together what's left in the fridge to create a Dagwood sandwich, country-style: even the lettuce is greasy. Snarf this down... and notice the cat doesn't zoom-pow through the cracked-open door to confiscate a portion. All the more for me, then.

Debate whether to have my couple of shots in a cooling bath, or out on the front porch as usual. Porch it is; save the bath for tomorrow. Traditional Saturday night activity round these parts. So pour a Friday night tumbler of Wild Turkey and head for the living room—

—where I find Willamene, poised against the davenport. Twitching from bat-ears to tail-tip. Prelude to a furball expulsion? I put down my drink, take a step forward—

The head swivels, drawing a bead on me. The body continues to twitch.

“Eat something you shouldn't have?”

(Silence.)

“Where've you been all day?”

(Silence.)

“Oh, cat got your tongue?”

(Twitch. Twitch. Twitch.)

This could start to unnerve a person. All the glass eyes in the heads on the walls seem to be observing us. I take another step forward—

—and the creature at my feet springs to life. Clambering up the fireplace and onto the mantel, from which I removed my four pieces the night she moved in. But put them back when I saw her leaving my possessions unmolested—

—until now. Twitching no more. Sauntering with tail in the air. Giving *Frieze-Frame* a brazen sniff—

“GET THE HELL AWAY FROM THAT!!”

I lunge at the mantel only to trip and fall, though not so low I don't see *A Perfect Fit* totter as the cat brushes past—

—and slides off the mantel’s other end. The cat, not my *Fit*. Dangling by one paw for an elongated second; then landing on the floor and dashing away.

I get to my feet. Go check for damage. Collect the four pieces and carry them into the bedroom; pack them away for safekeeping. By damn! Never should’ve allowed that stupid reckless varmint in the house! Got to deep-six the animal before this night is through, or next thing you know it might be me who’ll get bumped off—rubbed out—blown apart.

Last to go into the bag is *Plue Velvet*.

Or would be, if my eye weren’t snagged by the cowlmask it wears to conceal its features.

Probably the finest in-the-round I’ve ever carved. And the only one I’ve had to swear on my mother’s grave will never be revealed to a living soul.

\*

“*Moneys Lucky twansyoo*,” Vashti brusked.

I’d heard a lot of terse snippets over the years about her niece LaQuita, but was surprised she wanted to see me. Much less pose for me. Both thanks to the Mawulisa Exhibit, a major presentation of West African art at the Boaz “Ruthless” Luther Center. I’d gone to this myself, to admire the bas-reliefs from Benin, and was inspired to try my hand at something comparable: not just in ebony but exotica like wenge, iroko, zebrawood.

LaQuita Gibson was inspired to be immortalized. Thus she called on me at Green Creek Lane: a tall striking girl of twenty or so, very angular and very dark.

“That’s because we Gibsons are *pure*, see? Not like those Tortys—they got every color of the rainbow in their family tree, even Korean!”

GASP and (giggle) from LaQuita’s cherubic fifteen-year-old cousin/chaperone.

“Torty?” I said. “Like raspberry torte?”

“This girl’s too *brown* to be Raspberry Tart, or Strawberry Shortcake either!”

“KEEE-ta! (giggle)”

My first impression of Pluane Torty was a chocolate Easter bunny with the ears bitten off—or folded back into thick braids. She was shorter, lighter, and cuddly-plumper than LaQuita, with flawless teeth that her lips never closed over, and saucerlike eyes behind glasses the size of lima beans. LaQuita usually called her Plue—in two syllables, “like

gooey chop suey”—as she GASPed and (giggled), or went “KEEE-ta!” and (giggled), at most everything her older cousin said.

“You ever meet that mother of Plue, best watch out. She’s half Creole and half Haitian, and all mean as a snake!”

“KEEE-ta! (giggle)—you’re talking about my mama!”

“—as a *snake!* AND she’s a voodoo queen!”

“GASP (giggle)—she is not! My mama’s a deaconess in the Baptist church!”

“Just don’t let her near any chicken bones, I say. ‘Mambo Annie,’ they call her.”

According to LaQuita, Pluanne’s mother made a devil-doll of their great-grandfather Rodilard so she could reanimate his corpse and put it to work mowing the lawn.

“That’s not *true!* (giggle)—don’t believe her!” pleaded Pluanne.

I told them the pieces I carved weren’t likely to work as juju amulets, and invited LaQuita to assume any pose that made her feel comfortable. She assumed one that left her wearing only a thong, looking very dark but not nearly so angular.

“Sorry I got to keep my drawers on—Ahhnt Vashti’d kill me dead otherwise. Don’t know what she’d do to *you.*”

(“She did keep her drawers on,” I reported first thing next day at Selfsame.)

(“*Dwano parvit,*” brusked Vashti, shaking her drill-sergeant head.)

Sketching LaQuita took me back to life class at Liederkrantz and the unabashed Cheshire Mack, whose skintone I hadn’t encountered to such a living extent before. Since I’d just switched my sights from clay to wood, the effect was that much more mindblowing: Cheshire seemed like a dryad indeed, a walnut sapling made womanflesh. I damn near went broke hiring her for extra sessions.

Two dryadless decades had passed since then. The Cairney Academy has a sizable African-American attendance, but only a smattering’s ever responded to my model ads and none of them suitable. Now here was LaQuita Gibson in a wildchild thong, gabbling incessantly to her cellphone, to Pluanne, to me:

“So does being an artist make you a ‘mo, or do you like girls? Ever been with a black chick? True what they say, you know—do it once and” [double snaps] “never go back! ‘Cause the sistahs *got* back, even li’l Plue there—”

“GASP (giggle)—”

“—course she wouldn’t take so much as her *shoes* off in front of a man, which is a shame ‘cause under that big ol’ sweater ‘n’ skirt she’s got the most bodacious li’l booty—”

“KEEE-ta! (giggle)—”

“Go on, then! Show the man your li’l tootsies!”

Pluane demonstrated instead that she could blush as deeply and sweetly as any Caucasian. Cheeks, ears, brow, throat—all took on a raspberry glow.

Though only on her own behalf. No sign of embarrassment at her cousin’s extreme dishabille. So accustomed was Plue to LaQuita’s baring body and soul that she quickly got distracted by a glimpse of my derelict Commodore PC.

“This is even older than the ones we have at school!”

LaQuita interrupted her cellphone conversation to say I should have Plue look at it. “She’s real good at fixing video games and stuff.”

I handed Pluane a screwdriver, told her she had free rein to work miracles, and had scarcely returned to my sketch before she brought the Commodore back to life.

“Loose cable inside, that’s all. But you really ought to buy a new desktop.”

“Wouldn’t know what to look for.”

“Oh I could help you with that! I know exactly the one I’d get if I had the money!”

“Girl, let the man concentrate on designing my statue!” scolded LaQuita. “He can buy you a computer any old time!”

Dubious cough from me. But that very same week I found myself returning from Circuit City with a hyper Pluane and a Pentium Pro, plus a flatbed scanner and bubblejet printer. All of which she had out of their cartons in the time it took me to hang up my hat. All of which she started doing her homework on whenever I sketched LaQuita. “Just five more minutes!” became Plue’s battle cry at the close of each modeling session.

Which probably accelerated Keee-ta’s disenchantment with posing for me. She liked the first relief I did of her (*Woman in Drawers with Cellphone*) but thought the rest a bore.

One Saturday in November Pluane showed up by herself, via the bus. Saying LaQuita couldn’t make it but *she* had a couple of reports to finish for school, so would it be all right...? And would I mind if she popped round every Saturday morning for just an hour

or two, to borrow my computer and printer and scanner?

“Oh *pleeeeee*, Mr. H...”

Who could resist big brown saucer eyes behind lima-bean lenses? Not me, anyway. I told Plue she was welcome to pop round any Saturday she liked.

A week later I picked up the phone to hear her fighting back tears. Mama wouldn't let her come alone, was angry she'd done so without asking permission, and now both her parents wanted to “pay me a visit” tomorrow after church. Would it be all right...? And could I possibly be persuaded to put on a necktie?

The Tortys arrived early the next afternoon. Vashti's cousin Franklin towered over me, his forearms so vast Pluanne could've fit inside one of his shirtsleeves. But I'd taken her advice and tuned my radio to the Cutthroats pre-game program; this along with my dropping Sleepy LeThean's name satisfied Mr. Terty I was a trustworthy fellow.

“Mambo Annie” wasn't falling for that. She looked every inch a Baptist deaconess and more than capable of being mean as a snake.

“You own this place, Mr. Huffman?... Your landlady lives next door? I should like a word with her, if I may.”

“Mama...” murmured Plue.

“Yes?” (Like a shotgun being cocked.) “You'd best come with us, Pluanne. Be so kind as to take us over, Mr. Huffman. Franklin, you can wait in the car.”

Mrs. Wilson must have thought my necktie and I had joined the Jehovah's Witnesses. At any rate she vouched for my good name, and Mrs. Terty gave probationary consent to Plue's popping round on Saturday mornings to computerize her homework.

“Perhaps in return you could prepare Mr. Huffman a lunch, Pluanne.”

“Oh I'd be glad to! I don't think he takes near as good care of himself as he ought.”

“Don't make personal observations about folks, dear.”

“Yes, Mama.”

For my part I'd been straining not to personally observe Pluanne from the moment she unbuttoned her overcoat. Underneath she had on the type of wool dress any Nice Girl might wear to church in November, covering everything from collarbone to knee. But doing a lot more than big ol' sweaters and skirts to transform cuddly-plumpness into righteous

uplift. Accentuated by a waft of sandalwood that I've always been susceptible to—

*Oh-so-bo-da-cious* yowled my foxhound as Plue waved goodbye.

*Let's see how the little chiseler copes with THIS*, added Rotwang.

It started out fine. Plue was even allowed to come without a duenna, so long as she checked in with Mrs. Wilson upon arrival and departure. Her grades, already good, soared to straight A's; and her parents agreed our arrangement could continue till such time as they could afford a PC as good as mine or better.

At Green Creek Lane she swiftly took on proprietary airs. Every Saturday Pluane would strap on an apron and cook me a week's worth of dinners, telling me when each should be thawed, how long it should be reheated and at what temperature. "I want to see every bit of this eaten, too."

"Yes ma'am," I'd say, and invite her to stay for lunch. Listening to her chatter about her friends Janet and Shawnda and the snooty-conceited D'Enyce whom they all despised. It was agreeable to have her as a regular guest, a surrogate little-sistah or daughter-equivalent. Almost the same age another equivalent would have been...

...never mind.

All the more reason not to turn Pluane into a Shameful Subject. Difficult as that could be to resist. (She coyly called herself chubby; I said nonsense, she was Just Right.) You'd've thought boys of all races would be after her, but she never mentioned any. When I alluded to this, Plue blushed raspberry and said I never talked about any of my lady friends.

"No, not since you made such a fuss about them—"

"I did not!"

She'd squawked at my tossing Christmas cards on the sideboard, taking it upon herself to tape them to the fridge door. Tightening her smile when she saw who enclosed snapshots. K.T. and Stormin' Molly Brown each earned a loud sniff, and Miranda Paraless (from whom I received a publicity photo in décolleté minidress, floridly inscribed *XOXOXO besos y abrazos*) a zinging critique:

"Well I don't think she's pretty at all. Got on enough makeup for a whole beauty parlor, and look at that big ol' rump."

Swinging her equally proportionate li'l booty as she minced away.

I held my tongue. As it were.

In February Pluane turned sixteen and drove up to Zerfall, over the moon, in an elderly Skylark her dad had reanimated. I offered her a little mahogany “16” I’d quickwhittled as a knickknack, in case she wasn’t permitted to wear it as a pendant.

“Well of course I am! We’re not Amish, you know.” Proving it by giving me a big ol’ hug, while I thought hard about frosty showers.

That night my entire futon was suffused somehow with sandalwood. Bed’s not the best place to think about cold showers, or hot ones either for that matter. And when I finally did drop off, it was into a phantasm that embraced me till you’d’ve sworn I was not alone on that sack of straw.

Hearing her breathe.

Feeling her heartbeat.

Tasting the natural Kahlúa on those never-closing lips, the living Hershey’s Kisses on that swelling righteous uplift—

DAMN...

The intensity. The vehemence. As if I were sixteen myself and not thirty-nine. As I truly was at the time, for the next couple of months. Then snoopy Plue deduced my birthday and baked me a torte, dishing this up with a raspberry face to match.

*Sorry I can’t jump out of it.*

“What?”

“Sorry I can’t fit forty candles on it.”

She’d asked me to be the subject of her Social Studies term project, profiling a small businessman. Not, she hastened to burble, that I was small!—or short! Just that she wanted to learn all about the mercantile side of being an artist. So I escorted Plue to the Crouching Gallery, introduced her to Geraldine, and enabled Ben Szilnecky to dine out for weeks on “Ay-utch’s leetle shadder.”

For the project she wanted to document my sculpting a panel from blank to finish. “Can’t do anything too risqué,” I cautioned. “Not if it’s going to be shown in class.”

“Hey now! You’re not talking to a *child*, you know. I’m old enough to drive and get a job and be married.”

Do all Nice Girls know their state's age of consent? At any rate I carved a discreet LaQuita in iroko, knocking it off in less than a week.

"Like magic," said Pluanne. Heaving an awesome sigh, her uplift now contained in a crisp cotton blouse that quivered with every springtime pulse—

*Suppose I pose for you.*

"How's that?"

"Let's say I was your model. Would you want me to sit on that stool there, same as Keee-ta?"

*Oh, er, uh, well—*

Glowing like a parfait, she kicked off her shoes and wiggled her li'l tootsies at me.

"See? I *can* do it in front of a man." Sashaying into my bathroom with a frissony smile.

Old enough to be JAILBAIT.

Was *that* her game? Set off how? By some bigoted traffic cop pulling her over, the N-word flung at her undeserving head, till Plue vowed to avenge herself—on *me*? Sure, why not? Who else had played the sap for her these past six months? If she should drop her drawers and scream for help, not one person on the planet would believe me guiltless. And by law I *wouldn't* be—having known how old she was from the get-go, whittling her that "16" on the fine chain around her fine neck...

...above the slightly outgrown gymsuit she stepped out wearing.

Braids unbound and glasses left off, she sat in front of me. Do-re-mi, 1-2-3, A-B-C: attitude, bearing, contours. Especially contours. Above, below, behind...

"Will I do?"

"...fine..."

But then a sudden GASP. "Don't draw my face!!"

"Why not? You're so—"

"No, you can't, you mustn't! Use Keee-ta's! I just wanna find out what it feels like! This gotta be between you and me, just us two, no one else can know oh *pleeeeeease*—"

Entwining her left little finger with mine to enforce my compliance. Even then she made me sketch LaQuita's head from memory first, before she would contribute the body. And its palpitations, which were all I could overhear when I tried tuning in:

*Lubdub lubdub. Lubdub lubdub. LUBDUB LUBDUB...*

Her eyes met mine, gaze for gaze. Was she looking with shallow saucers? More like swirling maelstroms. Myopic maybe, but entrancing. Drawing me toward them, inside them, down into their whirling-dervish vortex-depths...

LUBDUB. LUBDUB. LUB... DUB...

“Oh, she’s beautiful! What’ll we call her?” Meaning my graft of curvaceous limbs and torso onto an angular head.

“Lubduba?” I tried to say, but it came out “Lubaba”—a name that would grace several experiments with ebony. Each born of a clandestine gymsuited session by day, and multiple undercover phantasms by night. Posing her Just Right self for me, this way and that way. Finding out what it feels like, this that and t’other way, until—

—a distinct rejoinder.

*I lay I MAKE you mine!*

As t’other took over and transported me to places I’d never seen but knew at a glance: her own chaste bed surrounded by stuffed animals, then the kingsize mattress belonging to her parents, then her Social Studies teacher’s desk with Janet and Shawnda and D’Enyce all looking on astounded, then the altar of the Baptist church while a choir boomed *We are—climbing—Jacob’s—ladder—soldiers—of the—*

NO!

Wrenching myself out of her arms, out of that dream, and off of the futon.

Heedless of the hour I staggered to the workbench. Laid hands on a well-seasoned block of black walnut. Took up a saw and cut away what wasn’t needed. Took up my mallet and roughed in the profiles of an in-the-round. Decidedly round. With no sketches and no maquette; no grafting and no concealment.

Started in haste, it was finished with care. Blending the nude, the maid, and the cat from Manet’s *Olympia* into a single odalisque that sprang to life in the carving. With a face intended to be recognizable.

(Trespassers will be violated.)

She popped round one last Saturday before taking off with her folks on summer vacation. Having insinuated with many coy glints that something special was in the works,

just you wait and see! Now here she was, looking oh-so-overinnocent as she caught a lower lip between flawless teeth and gave it the tiniest devastating bite.

“Back in a sec,” she said.

*Snick* went the bathroom door.

Prime rule of thumb: maintain your edge.

I got a grip on the dropcloth that hid my recourse if Sweet Sixteen turned curdly-sour.

Out she came, clad in a violet kimono, raspberrying from the roots of her hair to the Easter-bunny epidermis peeping between silken lapels—

—that she yanked apart and flung off with a (giggly) “*Surprise!*”—

—as I ripped away the dropcloth and went “*Surprise yourself!*”—

—realizing a moment too late that Pluane had on a cocoa-colored two-piece swimsuit, cute as could be—

—as her eyes and mouth kept widening, widening at the sight of her carven image on my swivel stand: every meticulous detail exposed except for the underfro her hand was either covering or playing with (depending on the viewer’s mindset) and all of it in living color, thanks to black walnut’s ultrasmooth grain and ultrawarm tone—

—while Plue’s own blush blanched to sickly café au lait before resurging to the fore with a *lubdub lubdub LUBDUB LUBDUB LUBDUB LUBDUB*—

“HAWWWW...” she went. Convulsively. Half-doubled over as though she were about to be sick—about to pass out—about to *drop dead* as I ran forward and caught her in my arms—she hopping astride my thigh, wrapping herself around, mashing herself against, distending her eyes an inch from mine as if the closer and tighter you clutch a live grenade the less its chance of going—

“*HAWWWW-awwww-awwww... awww... awww... awww...*”

Bumped off. Rubbed out. Blown apart.

The only dying Plue did that day was from spontaneous combustion. In front of me; on front of me. Blubbering on one shoulder while pummeling the other with a small feeble fist. Imploring me not to show her odalisque to another living soul, never to part with it ever EVER—was my mama alive? No? Then *swear* I won’t, swear on her *grave!!*

Sobs and darkness at the end.

I swore as she asked, holding and stroking and trying to soothe her. And beseech her pardon. Dissuade her from screaming. Convince her that a little frottage in the woods didn't nullify her virtue.

(And failing to mention that my mother *had* no grave, her urn traveling wherever Cassandra toted it.)

A week later in the mail I received a handmade cowlmask of turquoise velour. It fit the odalisque's head precisely. Enclosed was a note saying "So you can keep your promise," followed by a ♥ and a P.

I did keep it. Promise and piece. The latter titled *Plue Velvet*.

"Isn't that darling colored girl going to come anymore?" Mrs. Wilson mourned.

"*Strewify*," brusks Vashti when I ask after Pluanne. She's doing fine. In college now; too busy for boyfriends.

*Plue Velvet* ended up where it belonged, side by side with *A Perfect Fit* on top of my "media center." None of my few visitors have ever asked to see it unveiled. Even I've left the cowlmask untouched, other than the occasional dusting, from the day I first slid it on.

Until now.

Here at the Old McRale Place, late on a Friday night.

Pluck it off, then.

And there she is. Barefaced. Those coy glints in her eyes and smile: recognizable, if not entirely comprehensible. Thanks to sphinxiness and juju triplicity.

Fatefulette Number Three.

Tomorrow I'll integrate her (so to speak) with Sage and Amy-Kay. Right now it's time for that shot I poured what seems like hours ago. Find my tumbler in the living room, take it back to the kitchen, add ice from the freezer, give it a chance to chill.

Realize the velour cowlmask's still in my other hand. Toss it onto the drainboard.

Taste the bourbon. Here's mud in my eye. Pour another—no, the bottle's empty. Fetch a fresh one from the walk-in pantry. Wrestle with the goddamn wrapper they put on the goddamn cork, trying not to let it dig under my goddamn thumbnail as I peel it away—

*Please yourself.*

—what?—

*Forgot one, didn't you?*

—how's that?—

*Can you only count to three?*

—pay no attention—

*Come on down and see Shorty Hottie sometime.*

—just get the wrapper off the cork—

*Don't mind me hanging around.*

—and the cork out of the bottle—

*Even though the suspense could kill you.*

—turn my head slowly, s-l-o-w-l-y, and look—

—but nothing's there.

Nothing unexpected, at any rate. Antique handpump beside the sink. Greasy plate from my supper sandwich. Tumbler with a sliver of unmelted ice, awaiting the fresh slug.

*AND TWO COPPER EYES STARING AT ME THROUGH A VELOUR COWLMASK.*

I lose my grip on the unopened bottle.

It hits the floor at the exact angle to make it detonate.

No live grenade, no Molotov cocktail, no light bulb broken by Bram Taggart ever sounded like this dire Wild Turkey when it shatters. Christening the linoleum with a flood of amber liquor that turns purple against the faded blue.

I look up and find the cowlmask vacant, precisely where I left it on the drainboard.

I look down and find Willamene at my feet, backing away from the pool of booze.

If this is Willamene. A dozen other cats have come out of the woodwork to occupy every surface in the kitchen—table and chairs, stove and refrigerator, cabinets and countertops—all of them watching as the boozepool turns the engulfed breakage into glassy islets. Scintillas against the purpling floor. An overturned canopy of a starry night sky. With horizons spreading outward, opening up and flowing away at my vertiginous feet.

Thirteen black cats, and me descending a ladder. Clinging there encircled by a brood of tiny bagheeras with eyes like crows.