

11

Bruise from Nowhere

FLASH.

...hunh?...

Week and a half out of college. On a cot in a space of my own. A “loft” they called it, meaning a cell: 600 square feet beneath a twelve-foot ceiling. Exposed pipes. Exposed ducts. Three walls of exposed Cream City brick. Fourth dominated by a steel-sash casement, cranked open onto darkness.

FLASH, it went.

Something wrong?

And me not fully unpacked yet.

Digital clock plugged in, though. Dimly reading 11:44. Quarter-hour left of Wednesday the 13th, for all you children full of woe.

FLASH.

Up then. Over to look out at what they called a “light court.” Meaning an airshaft under a skydome, with my screenless window near one of the shaftcorners. Around which, not quite out of sight, I saw a flickering rhombus. Attached to it was an agape frame of glass, projecting opposite.

Presenting a midnight vision.

Very young it appeared. Very what in those days we called Oriental. Very if not extremely female.

A VYOF, suspended in midair.

Ivory hourglass with touches of jet. Holding in one hand what I guessed was a trigger plunger, connected to an unseen camera. Photographing herself wearing a magenta beret and nothing else.

Turning to the left (her right) and FLASH.

Twisting to the right (her left) and FLASH.

Stroboscopic from either angle.

Digital clock flipped over to twelve. A final FLASH and the floating frame went black. Ceased to be. Leaving me with my window open, but only the shaft to see.

*

By day I constructed models for Kurtzway Kollektibles, doing my part to maintain Milwaukee as America's Cultural Mecca. Kurtzway, famous for their bongos, was trying to bootleg *Laverne & Shirley's* coattails up to counterfeit groundlevel; so I carved endless imitation Lennys and Squiggys and Big Ragoos. That was the dayjob.

Home space was down on Washburn Street, the industrial south side of town. Where a foundry had been subdivided into cells and renamed the Strichleiter Lofts. Mine was #515, on the top floor. The one around the shaftcorner was #517. Between us was a freight elevator and iron galleries that clanged underfoot.

Thursday the 14th I returned from Kurtzway with a bratwurst on poppyseed and a six-pack of Pabst. Ate the first and drank most of the second (the evening being warm) while further unpacking. And waiting for dusk to fall on the year's almost-longest day. Gradually the airshaft darkened but stayed empty, with the rhombus around the corner a mere hole in the wall.

Had I been dreaming last night?

If so, could I arrange a rerun?

CRASH went the elevator gate. *CLANG-CLANG-clang* on the gallery. *Slam* from #517's door.

And the magic casement reappeared inside the light court.

Mirroring a spiral staircase. To its right was half a brass bedframe, the half-mattress draped with batik. To its left, by the casement hinge, was an ornate-looking highboy; over that hung Tutankhamen's metallic head.

Then off went the overhead and on came the candles: fat ones grouped in twos and threes, lit apparently *en masse*. Illuminating my VYOF in a deep dark gown, sitting in profile with a cello before her. (A cello? A cello.) Bow in one hand, neck in the other, she began to make music. Cadences I would soon associate with Siouxsie & the Banshees and their album *The Scream*—“Jigsaw Feeling,” “Nicotine Stain,” “Suburban Relapse.” Raw and snarling they struck me; eerie agitation mixed with insistent despair.

And as she played, as she gyrated and undulated to the tempo, her profile became elemental. Black slash for closed lashes. Red parenthesis for open lips. Hair like ink-dipped quills. Double scoop of vanilla surging against a sable vase.

While I stood by entranced, lost in her fervor and angst.

*

Friday the 15th I came home to find a frantic man walloping #517’s closed door. “CRAAAANK??” he shouted. “CRAAAANK!!”

No response from within, so I left him to it. Went on to my own cell around the corner. What kind of slur was “craaaank” supposed to be? A skank with crabs? Not *my* VYOF. Not the vision I’d gazed at two nights running (me standing, mind racing). What say tonight we make it three-for-three?

(The distant wallops ceased. Good: leave her to me.)

Wherever she might be. Twilight descended as I finished unpacking, groping in the murky gloom. No light came on that night and no music sounded, though I stayed up till well into the wee hours. Staring out my window at vacant space.

Then, come Saturday morning—

Awoke fairly late. Off the cot to stretch and scratch and search for breath. Damn it! Too much CO₂ in this cell. Grab my inhaler? Or rely on the window?

I boosted myself onto the sill and leaned forward as far as I dared, into a light court filled with screenless open casements. Wedging a fist into my solar plexus, willing the oxygen to reach my starved bronchioles, twisting and turning to help it along—

—and there she was. Perched upon her own sill in a black lace shortie nightie.

“Whutchew think YER gawpin’ at?”

Oh her legs. Oh her breasts. Oh her beautiful almond-cookie face. Oh her...

—*VOICE*, for crying out loud. Like Tanya Tucker on helium.

A delicate hand removed a thin brown cigarette from a petulant mouth that slowly curled into a smile. Dimples, even. As she inspected me in my tentpitching boxers, which upgraded from pup to pavilion as I drank in more of my neighbor.

“Way-ull,” she chirped. “Aintchew jes the kewtest thang.”

“Hey,” I respired.

“Hey yerself. Kimberly Wu.”

“Who?”

“Wu. Call me Cranky Lynnette.”

“Why?”

Away flew the dimpled smile. “Cuz that’s whut I’m *called*.”

“Then who’s—”

“M’*name*’s Kimberly Wu. I’m *called* Cranky Lynnette. Git it?”

To illustrate the point (and make my pavilion flap) she fondled the casement crank at her side. Everything behind her was reversed: half-brass bed on the left, highboy and Tut on the right, staircase spiraling antipodally.

“Squeaky Fromme’s real name,” she remarked.

“Is...?”

“Lynette—one N. Mine’s got two, so ‘Cranky Lynnette’ wouldn’t have thirteen letters. Y’wanna bawl?”

“Um. Sure. Should I...?”

“Naw, I’ll come over thar.” Flicking her thin brown cigarette, still alight and trailing smoke, down the airshaft. “Gimme a sec.”

“I’m in #515—”

“I know whar y’are, babe.” Twinkle of legs and lace and she was gone. Out of sight: no reflective visions at that time of day.

During her gimme’d sec I slapped on soap and water, toothpaste and mouthwash, then a shirt and jeans. Maybe I’d heard more than was meant. She could be coming over with a *bowl* of something—egg flower oatmeal, perhaps.

Rattle of knob. Escalating peevisly before I could get the door open. No bowl was in her delicate hand, but she'd stuck another thin brown cigarette between her lips. Freshly crimsoned, along with new lash-beading and lid-lining and socket-shading.

She had eyes like sloes. Fruit of the blackthorn, the spiny plum, *Prunus spinosa*; eyes the color of wine in a vault. Set obliquely in a head shaped like an old-fashioned spinning top—very wide brow tapering down to a very small chin above a very slim neck. Below that was the ivory hourglass, clad now in skintight raven singlet and fleshtaut raven shorts. Plus a pair of silver suspenders to emphasize her undeniable form. Up close she was actually diminutive, much shorter than myself—but oh the bosom-rack and oh the buttock-shelf and oh the waspy-waist swerving from the uppers to the latters. Oh the Shalimar dabbed on every vital spot, convex or concave. The only thing remotely flat about Cranky Lynnette was her stare.

Which I got leveled with as she entered my loftcell, as though I'd enticed her over with flimsy blandishments. CHING-A-LING-A-LING she dismissed them, brushing past on sandaled feet that sported the first toe rings I'd seen outside an Arabian Nights movie. Each ring bore a tiny bell, and each bell sent up a minuscule jangle as Lynnette scampered over to my workbench. Hopping atop it and yanking sharp objects out of the tool caddy.

"Kewl! Y'could cut up a body real good with these!" she trilled, testing a chisel bevel against her fragile thumb.

"Careful!"

"Aw, I'm tougher'n I look." Whistling forth a smoky plume (that smelled like tobacco cut with bubble gum) she wagged the thumb at me. Then turned her attention to a bracket above the bench, on which was set the first work I'd achieved in wood after abandoning clay. Practically new it was then; almost two years in the making.

"UH—"

"—I'm *bein'* careful," Lynnette quibbled. Grinding out her cigarette on my Cream City bricks before picking up the piece. The nearly nude girl frozen in midwrithe, couched upon the oversized hand.

"I'm a sculptor," I gargled.

"Yew made this?" she asked, gazing at *A Perfect Fit*.

“Yeah.”

(Silence. Then:)

“Will y’ make one o’ me?”

“Oh HELL yes!”

“Whoa-kay then,” she went. Replacing *A Perfect Fit* on its bracket (carefully) before ripping open my chest—

—no, just the safari shirt I’d bought at Kohl’s three days earlier. Followed by the rest of our clothing, discarded just as unsubtly. Cranky Lynnette left little in the way of doubt.

Certainly none concerning her own endowments. If you took the other night’s vanilla scoops and stuffed them with the other day’s bratwurst, they could not have been more exotically succulent; more torrid to the touch or nippy to the feel.

Not that I was permitted to touch or feel howsoever I pleased:

“Jes... lay... *still*... ‘kay? Lemme dew yew!”

“But... I want... to do... you too!”

“This ain’t about me, babe,” she said, giving my chin a love bite. (Some kind of bite, anyway.) So I lay... *still*... and let myself be galloped like a circus horse over hurdles and through a hoop of fire, all the way to Banbury Cross by a fine lady with rings *and* bells on her ten petite toes. CHING-A-LING-A-LING!

Did I want to bawl? Primal as John Lennon with the Plastic Ono Band.

Till we lolled together on the concrete floor, Lynnette’s mouth moving unhurriedly over my throat from ear to ear. Planting a row of crimson hickeys that would take years to subside. Surfacing at last to smirk down at me, her flat stare turned to sharp sparkle, and say:

“That wuz fun! Howdy, neighbor.”

I burned to kiss her then, full on those lips that had been pretty much everywhere except against mine. But when I tried, she reared her head away on its very slim neck till her very full yabbos hove into view.

“Gwan, he’p yerself... attaboy... now t’other one... good baby.”

Up she stood then to mosey into my bathroom. Asscheeks oscillating like nobody’s business.

I got to my feet more incrementally. Not to mention infuriatedly. By damn! *By damn!* Ought to grab her and haul her to the workbench, clamp her down and see how much SHE likes jes layin' still! Oh yes! Mercy will be begged for when I dew yew, my beauty, with a *schweinhund* reporting back for active service despite all it'd just been subjected to. (Such was its puissance at age twenty-two.)

Out came Lynnette to glance up at my face, then down at my hound. Heaving an exasperated little sigh, she laid a hand on me—went *wink wonk wunk*—and wiped it on my stomach. “THAR y’go,” she chirped magnanimously, oscillating over to the fridge and finding my medication collection atop it. “Whut’s this stuff?”

“Prednisone,” I mumbled.

“Whut’s that?” (Rummaging inside the fridge, extracting the last can of Pabst.)

“A steroid. Anti-inflammatory. For asthma.”

“Y’mean like not breathin’? Bummer.” Popping open beer-can and pill-vial, she sampled some of their contents in one swallow.

“*Hey!*”

“Hey yerself. Mebbe it’ll hep me git t’ sleep.”

“You’re supposed to take it with food—”

“Okey-doke.” Chomping a frozen waffle and washing it down with beer, she put on my now-buttonless safari shirt; tied it closed (more or less) with one of her suspenders; and yawned so expansively she nearly fell down. “Oh gawd! I’m dyin’ fer sleep. Gotta go catch me some Z’s.”

“It’s after *noon*—”

“I only jes got home ‘n’ wuz havin’ a bedtime smoke when yew poked yer nose in. Woke me all up agin.” Frowning crankily as she gathered sandals, singlet, shorts, the other suspender, her black lace undies and my box of frozen waffles en route to the door.

“Er—you could, uh, crash here—”

“On *that* thing? Them sheets silk? Didn’t think so! But say, y’gotta car? I’ll be needin’ a ride round’bout ‘leven. See y’then.”

Kissing an index finger, she drove its crimson nail into my bare chest and jangled on out. Leaving me free to write a letter to *Penthouse Forum* if I chose, or wonder how far she

might be needin' this round'bout ride. There was a gas crisis that June, truckers were striking, many stations had odd/even rationing...

...but odds were even if Lynnette said "Drive me to Shanghai," I would point my Subaru westward and floor the accelerator.

At the stroke of eleven I went knocking on #517's much-walloped door. It opened and a small mummy case was handed to me. No: a cello case, painted to resemble Nefertiti's coffin. With Pharaoh's daughter following it in a low-bosomed slit-skirted witching-hour gown. With a large silver ankh hanging from a jet chain into her vanilla cleavage.

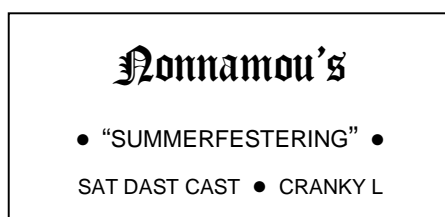
"So?" she asked.

"Fuhhhh," I replied.

"Whoa-kay then."

She tucked one of her thin brown cigarettes behind my ear. A *kretek* she called it, Indonesian cloves; bound to be better for asthma than "that nasty pezdaprone. It like t'give me hot flashes!"

I was directed to drive not to Shanghai but Brady Street on the East Side. A few years earlier this had been Milwaukee's counterculture habitat; now it was wilted and threadbare. Funky little taverns and coffeehouses and the boarded-up Astor Theater and a waterbed emporium that must have seen more buoyant times. Beside it was a stairwell leading down, and a sign that read (when you got up close)



We descended into a cellar full of fog and din. The fog was a mingling of nicotine, patchouli oil and surly perspiration, emanated by hoodish-types at bistro tables. Lynnette threaded me through these to a bar at the far side, where she kneeled on a stool to trade Continental salutes with the lady bartender.

"Tattoo Rula," I was told (barely audible over the heavy metal dirge in an adjoining room). To Rula: "M'new neighbor." To me: "Y' gotta name?"

“H. Huffman,” I coughed.

To Rula: “Whut he said.”

The barkeep inclined her gray mohawk. Looking like a Maori wisewoman who’d seen it all and had it engraved upon her person.

I was going to order a Guinness and whatever Lynnette wanted, when I found her jut-strutting into the next room past an enormous bouncer. “Theo,” Lynnette mouthed at me, and “Neighbor,” she mouthed at Theo, who gave me an ominous watch-your-step once-over.

In the next room were another couple dozen hoodish-types, additional smoke and oil and rancor, plus a sacksuited gargoyle and his backing band:

*What goes on in your dreeeeams
Is nothing like it seeeems
You think they’re falling leeeeeaves
They’re not what you perceeeeeive
What’s innocence at niiiight
‘S corrupted by the liiiiight
No soul can answer whyyyy
Your heartbeat tells a liiiee...*

A punk club, I thought. More Germanic than I’d imagined. Some were swaying to the gargoyle’s elegy and some were genuflecting, while a few danced the Metropolis Bop: part trudge, part taunt, part android folly.

The gargoyle’s requiem ended with a droning crescendo, and there was expressionist applause.

“Varney Otranto and Dastard Castle,” croaked the club’s spectral MC. Whom I’d later know to be Non Nonnamou himself: raccoon eyes, flaky complexion, omniscient grin. “And now, my friends, your own—your very *very* own—Cranky Lynnette.”

A blue spot came up. As did anticipatory ruckus. Both enshrouding my Girl Around the Corner, seated with Nefertiti’s cello between her fishnet knees. Raking the room with her horizontalfying glare.

Then she closed her lashes. Opened her lips. Took the bow in one hand, the neck in the other, and wrang resonance from catgut. A melancholy vibrato that rose and dove, soared and stooped, as her open lips formed red parentheses.

Out of which came twangfree song:

*Once upon a time I cried myself awake
While I wondered how much longer my tears would take
I heard the sound of fingers running through my hair
Which was strange because I knew I lay alone—
But I guess you had to be there
Yes you had to be there.*

*Harboring an enemy who shares the pain
Of windflowers fragmented by the pelting rain
Anemones with tarnished petals planted deep
In my heart to give interminable sleep—*

And you said:

No enemy

No enemy

Just seeking shelter from nevermore.

*Cry for sanctuary though there's no escape
From the shadows flooding through us like liquid crêpe
An inundated couple can't come up for air
Which is sad because I used to come alone—*

But I guess you had to be there

Yes you had to be there.

*However much you covet the life you choose
Keep breathing on your own and you are bound to lose
Give shelter so interminable you will be
Like the fragmentary tears that set you free—*

*And you said:
We were the dead
We were the dead
We're not gonna take it anymore.*

Finishing to a guttural “*Eh eh... eh eh... eh eh...*” from the audience, in the best EC horror comics tradition.

The blue spot yielded to basement lighting. Lynnette disappeared momentarily into the hoodish-mob, returning on the sacksleeved arm of Varney Otranto—to leave me behind with her mummy case.

“Be a babe ‘n’ tote this home fer me, ‘kay? See yew.”

“Whoooozat?” droned the departing gargoyle.

“M’ neighbor,” Lynnette told him. So offhandedly I wanted to shout *I HAD SEX ON THE FLOOR WITH THAT WOMAN TWELVE HOURS AGO!*

“How she plays,” said Tattoo Rula at the bar. “Not the cello only.”

“So what do I do?” I asked.

“You play back, Hoffmonn. Must be her game, her rules. Otherwise it is solo.”

I solo’d out of there and drove back to Washburn Street. With the scent of Shalimar drifting up from Nefertiti’s coffin in the shotgun seat. And a whiff of cloves from the Indonesian *kretek* still tucked behind my ear.

*

Sunday morning I was at the workbench, taking out my feelings on a hapless block of wood, when: *CRASH. CLANG-CLANG-clang. Slam.*

After a moment a paper airplane sailed through the window to land on my cot. Unfolding it, I was confronted by three pictographs:

CAR AGEN 8P?

“WHAT THE HELL DOES THIS MEAN??” I yelled out my window into #517’s. Which was rapidly filled by a Wrathful Lynnette wearing only my open safari shirt, plus a sleepmask propped above a face lathered with cold cream. Demanding to know whether I

could manage *just once* this weekend to let her slumber undisturbed, was she asking for the moon and stars here??

“Gawd SAKES, Huffman!”

“Sorry,” I mumbled. Averting my gaze from her cranky sloes till she clapped her untied wrapper shut.

“Yew ‘n’ yer gawpin’! Yer jes lucky yer so kewt!”

I didn’t feel lucky at that moment. I felt in thrall.

To La Belle Chinoise Sans Merci.

*

Rattle RATTLE RATTLE went my knob at quarter past eight.

Lynnette in a punkette sunsuit; elaborate camera case dangling off one shoulder; tripod and satchel of apparatus at her feet. “Well are we dewin’ this or whut?”

“What?”

“Goin’ out! C’mon, I ain’t got all night.”

“Where?” I asked, picking up the tripod and satchel and hurrying after her.

“Oconomowoc,” she went as we boarded the freight elevator.

“Scuse me?”

“That Varney Whutsit told me ‘bout a boneyard thar whar this chick-ghost comes outta a crypt-statue ‘n’ walks into Fowler Lake. Gotta git me a pitcher o’ *that*. Oh SHIT—” at the setting sun, smack in our faces as we left Strichleiter and climbed into my Subaru. Consulting a map, I was relieved to find Oconomowoc about halfway to Madison, not Manchuria.

“Which cemetery?”

“La Belle.”

That figured. “What if it’s closed when we get there?”

“Oh, dontchew worry ‘bout that.” She lit a *kretek* and blew a cloud in my direction. “Jes take a good look at that crypt-statue. I might be wantin’ yew t’make one zackly like it, o’ *me*.”

“Er, nude?...”

Brief bark of cloven laughter. “If y’ wanna be buck-nekkid when y’ make statues, that’s yer bizness.”

“I will if you will,” I replied, placing my right hand on her left thigh. Off which it was promptly swatted.

“Quit pawin’ me, Huffman! I don’t dew encores.”

Nor did La Belle’s chick-ghost put in an appearance that evening. Lynnette and I made other cemetery runs that summer, farther afield as the gas crisis eased. Though never so far as the Cimetière du Père-Lachaise in Paris, where everybody from Modigliani to Molière to Jim Morrison was interred. According to Lynnette, there was no finer resting place on the face of the earth—not least because it welcomed stray cats.

“They even got these li’l boxes fer ‘em t’ sleep in when it rains. That’s whut *I* call quality.” She herself fed strays on Washburn Street, but refused to confine any to her fifth-floor loftcell. “Lockin’ up kittycats is krewl! ‘Sides, I never let *nobody* in thar ‘ceptin’ me.”

“What about neighbors?”

“SPECIALLY not neighbors!”

I found meager consolation in her not bringing anyone home. I, at least, got to escort her from there and occasionally back, sometimes favored with a parting crotch-tweak (“Sweet dreams t’ grow on, babe”) outside the freight elevator.

Of course I wanted more than tweaks. Yearned for more; *ached* for more.

But I wasn’t even her exclusive chauffeur. Weekdays Lynnette got driven to her photolab dayjob by Erin/Aaron, a fellow employee and the least convincing transvestite ever to strap on a garter belt (his Nixonian jowls had five o’clock shadow at all hours). Twice a month Tattoo Rula drove her to a necromantic hairdresser in Oshkosh to get their ‘dos done and fortunes told. And on Saturday nights, more often than not, I transported only the cello home from Nonnamou’s.

Lynnette didn’t object to my ogling her floating frame in casement-reflections, so long as I spoke no word and broke no spell. She did a great deal of “ay-roebuck dancin’,” a brand-new activity which to me looked like Sixties go-go, except she didn’t wear boots (or much of anything else).

In exchange for this, Lynnette felt entitled to small neighborly favors. These she requested not by phone (she didn't have one—"The gummint kin pay fer their own wiretappin'") but via paper airplanes. They usually landed on my bed while I was in it, poking me in the nose or ear. One night I got jabbed awake to unfold a plane and find her demanding an

AMLETT?

I did know a hawk from a handsaw, but this one puzzled the will.

"An *ahhmm*-lett," explained Lynnette, having a wee-hour smoke on her sill.

"You want me to *make* you one?" I croaked out my window.

"Naw, jes gimme the eggs. I'm starvin' here."

I tossed her a full carton. She caught it by the lid, but the bottom dropped open and sent a dozen white ovoids down the airshaft. Nearly followed by Lynnette, as she began a giggle-jag that turned into highpitched hiccups.

"Try holding your breath," I suggested.

Flap flap flap went her aggravated hands.

Later that same Sunday she came over to #515 for a session of I Will If You Will. She posing buck-nekkid for my sketchpad; I doing likewise for her camera. Simultaneously but not interactively, as Lynnette let me know with a whack across the chops.

"Owwwwtch..."

"Y'want a knee in the nuts next? Cuz I kin supply it! This is *art*, Huffman, not a chance fer yew t'feel me up. So be a good guy 'n' go stand over thar in the light."

While she laid aside her camera and straddled the cello in a lover's clinch.

I don't know whether Pip ever had coarse common fantasies of Estella unlacing her stays, removing her chemise, and playing a musical instrument in his presence. Making Pip's foolish clumsy laboring-hound rear up on its hind legs and bay at the moon.

"Yer such an addylessent," Lynnette grumbled. "Why caintchew git *used* to it?"

"How can I get *used* to it when you never GIVE me any??"

"Hey, I give yew good 'n' plenty! Go ahead 'n' dew yerself, if y'gotta."

"Like hell I will! With you here taking pictures?"

“Aw, poor baby. Yer jes tew easy t’tease.”

Beckoning me to her side—for a *wink-wonk-wunk*-THAR-y’ go reenactment. Scraps for a stray; heartfelt as a hiccup.

I’ll show her (I vowed). Sending to Louisiana for a seasoned blank of sinker cypress, and on it carving my very first stand-alone panel. In *cavo-rilievo* or hollow relief, such as the ancient Egyptians used for decorating their tombs.

A recessed niche. A naked profile. A cello held but not hid behind, so that the fortunate viewer beholds her all. Willful beauty captured but not captive: “krewl” in its ageless Cleopatraness, its indifference to the effect wreaked upon poor sorry mortal us.

Title: *Frieze-Frame*.

It delighted her. Brought out the seldom-seen almond-cookie dimples. Brought over the seldom-felt hourglass to lean against me. And (when I tried to kiss her) brought her fingers inside my shirt to give me the purplest nurple ever perpetrated.

Before I could regain full consciousness, Lynnette had grabbed my hand and dragged me out of my cell. “C’mon c’mon!”—down the clanging gallery, around the corner past the elevator, and into her sacrosanct loft.

Hassenpfeffer Incorporated! We’re gonna do it!

Or so I thought. But pausing only to prop *Frieze-Frame* (carefully) atop the highboy below King Tut, she tugged me up the spiral staircase to an unlatched trapdoor, and through it, and onto the Strichleiter roof.

Where, like the song said, we could be closer to heaven.

It was a Friday, the last night of August, and uncounted stars were shining above as we ran across the pebbly aggregate. Past skydomes and vent pipes and a rust-choked cooling tower, Lynnette pulling me toward the edge—to the brink—swinging her legs over it and making me do the same, till I sat there on the parapet beside her silhouette. With the lights of Milwaukee before us to the north. Firefly traffic moving along the Hoan Bridge; a gleam on the horizon that was the Gas Building’s crowning neon flame.

(When it’s red, warm weather’s ahead—when it’s gold, watch out for cold.)

(From here the light looked green.)

I told her then that I loved her. Even if it were my misfortune and none of her own.

She held my hand, thumb-rubbing its palm-calluses. And sottoing, to me or herself or us both: *“In Flanders fields the poppies grow /between the crosses, row on row...”*

Was that all? No other response, even to be underheard? But my inner ears had been clogged by too many hash brownies; they could detect nothing more than a staticky r-o-a-r that proved to be a summery breeze off the lake.

Only the wind.

My dear.

Just seeking shelter from nevermore...

Almost as if to give me a second chance with her. Or, perhaps, so that she might take a second crack at me.

*

Saturday the 1st of September. Start of the Labor Day weekend—or “Stillborn Day” as it was called at Nonnamou’s. On this accursed evening we were seated at the bar, me sketching the clientele like Toulouse-Lautrec at a dimmer-lit Moulin Rouge, when Lynnette let out a squeak.

“Who he?”

She was looking over my head, so I turned toward the door. And saw an incongruity that even then, at the ass-end of the Seventies, pushed contemporary fashion beyond exaggeration.

He was too the hell tall and too the hell wide and too the hell tan. Travolta coif and Burt Reynolds moustache. Three-piece suit the color of bad salad dressing, with lapels wider than pterodactyl wings. Possibly a shirt beneath the jacket, but if so just to offset the gold medallions and pelt of Gucci chest hair.

“Aaaay,” went the incongruity. “What is this place, a morgue?”

Johnny Ajahr.

(May his sour yellow eyes kebab on the shish of the damned.)

Immediately he targeted Cranky Lynnette: “You look like you could use some smacking down, doll.” To Tattoo Rula: “Tequila. No salt. No lime. And same for the lady.” To Lynnette: “You bite the worm, right?” To Rula, with a twenty from a gold money clip: “What we don’t drink, you keep.” To me, or at any rate in my direction: “Move, pal.”

And bang off our barstool we were heavily jolted—charcoal, sketchbook, and me. Vivid reminder of the bad old Gullip days. As I ceased to exist insofar as Lynnette was concerned; she hanging soppily on Too The Hell’s every cough and grunt.

Then a *third* guy horned in. Dastard Castle’s jitterish guitarist Gilbert Blyght sidled over to tug at TTH’s sleeve. “Hey Johnny? Johnny, you selling tonight?”

Downing his shot: “Could be, pal.” Clamping a meathook on Lynnette’s slender wrist: “Not this, though.” Tipping tequila into her slackened mouth: “Drink up, doll.” (Gurgle and choke from Lynnette, who preferred Pernod.) To Gilbert: “Not here. Outside.” To Lynnette: “Let’s blow this worm farm.”

“Kay,” she sighed. Blissful-idiotic.

And away they all went, two of them propelled by the third’s meathooks. Leaving behind the smell of bad salad dressing, as though his suit produced its own spoor.

“What the hell just happened?” I wheezed at Tattoo Rula.

She mopped the bar and shook her doleful mohawk. “I think a different game now, Hoffmann.”

And it was. The One Night Short Of A Two-Week Affair. With Johnny Ajahr playing the role of Bentley Drummle (“such a mean brute, such a stupid brute”) in our newly-formed triangle. Except that my Estella, instead of regarding her Drummle with utter contempt, fell for him like a ton of Cream City bricks.

My paper airplane errands abruptly ended, as did my chauffeuring duties. Ajahr took her everywhere in a piss-tinted Corvette, the sort of bastarmobile you’d expect to be driven by a “promoter” plying his trade. Painting the town Persian Brown: spreading its reek till it permeated Washburn Street and the Strichleiter Lofts and the airshaft on which I couldn’t close my steel-sash casement.

Much as I wanted to.

Him she brought home.

Him she let into her brass bed, her silk sheets, her lace panties. Night after night. Time after time. Nothing could drown out the noises they made, not my radio or stereo or industrial-size exhaust fan. I heard it all: every grate of boxspring and rasp of mattress. Every thrust, every gush, every too the hell savage bray and gloat. Every malignant

abomination her fragile delicacy was subjected to—

—while I lay alone with my inhaler and fought to draw breath. Moving my cot as far from the window as possible. Hearing them was obscene enough; the only thing worse would've been catching a reflected glimpse with my own seared eyes.

Excruciating.

Unendurable.

For the first time in years I called upon Rotwang, asking for vengeance to be visited upon the Foe. Another UPS truck—a rival dealer with a grudge—a thousand freaked-out junkies dying for a fix. I even tried to hire Theo the bouncer to do a freelance dry-gulch, but he pretended not to know what I was talking about for the amount of money I could afford to pay.

So: nothing. Lynnette: screwed. Sense of the word: extreme.

I don't doubt that Ajahr's ultimate scheme was to break her in, break her down, and trick her out all over Wisconsin. But little did he (or I) reckon with the depths of Kimberly Wu—her stamina, tenacity, and willingness to bear anything Ajahr could dish up.

Just as long as she could bear his children. Nor was that expressed in jest.

Late at night on Thursday the 13th: a furious bellow and a screeching twang.

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN, YOU FLUSHED YOUR FUCKING PILLS?”

“DOWN THE TOILET A WEEK AGO! I WANNA HAVE YER BABY!”

“YOU FUCKING CRAZY BITCH! NOBODY FUCKS THAT WAY WITH JOHNNY AJAHR!”

“I DEW! ‘N’ DONTCHEW CALL ME A BITCH WHEN I’M OVEWLATIN’!”

“YOU’RE A CRAZY BITCH IS WHAT YOU ARE! I’M GETTING THE FUCK OUTTA HERE!”

“NO YEW AIN’T, YEW BASSURD! YER NOT LEAVIN’ THIS ROOM!”

“YOU GONNA STOP ME, BITCH? *ARRGH!!*—LEGGO, GODDAMMIT!!”

“I LOVE YEW, JOHNNY! I WANNA HAVE YER BAYYYY-BEEEEZ—”

“SHUT UP!! SHUT THE FUCK UP!! AND GET YOUR FUCKING CRAZY HANDS OFF ME—”

Blows: struck. Door: slammed. Gallery: clang-clang-clang. Elevator gate: crashed. Silence: brief.

She burst into sobs then, and wept half the night.

It was a terrible thing to have to listen to.

*

After leaving work on Friday the 14th I was in no hurry to go home. So I treated myself to fried clams at Howard Johnson's, then a boring showing of *The Amityville Horror* followed by a preview of the slightly better *When a Stranger Calls*. I wouldn't have minded finding Carol Kane back at the lofts, waif-faced and google-eyed and in need of personal assistance.

Near midnight when I returned to Washburn Street. Dark out and darker inside my cell, except for a glow in the window.

Guardedly I approached it; cautiously I scanned the magic casement. The echoed contents. *Frieze-Frame*, still propped under Tut's metallic nose. (A spot from which I would one day reclaim it for my own.) Bed shifted since last I'd seen it, into full view alongside the spiral staircase. Mass of candles grouped and lit around the brass frame, making it flash like Brynhild's ring of fire. And on the batik coverlet with folded arms lay—
“YEEDGE!”

An exclamation that must have shattered enchantment, since she jackknifed bolt upright. Spewing projectilely.

Blink and I was at #517. Door unlocked—her on the floor—Lynnette trailing puke as I hoisted her into the bathroom that doubled as darkroom—who the hell knew what she might've swallowed and was now disgorging over the bowl, me guiding the barf geyser till her stomach was empty and the rest of her sagged into stupor, flaccid on the tiles.

“Wu?” I said. “Wu!”

Most of what I did next was inspired by pulp fiction and, I've since learned, the opposite of what you're supposed to do; but fatality was before me and my imagination ran riot. Ripping off a lace nightie that resisted like chainmail. Slingshotting Lynnette into the shower stall and blasting her with cold water. Brewing a pot of pungent tarlike tea and ladling it down her throat. Standing her up and plodding her through the debris of last night's fight. Repeating this cycle again and again for miles upon miles—each time startled to spot myself here and there upon a wall covered floor to ceiling with photographs. Doppelgangers that chimed in as I chanted “*Why-no-phone why-no-phone why-no-phone?*” —not daring to leave her unattended even for the few minutes it would've taken to run back

to my place and summon an ambulance. Twice I did start to go; both times she slumped over with a heart-rattling shudder. I tried wrapping her in a dress, a towel, my old safari shirt—anything so I wouldn't have to carry her naked and insensible along the galleries. But if her nightie felt like chainmail, all other fabric was plate armor that refused to stay on.

So she remained in the raw. And not her usual vision-of-savory-opulence raw—more like a bedraggled dumpling. With a shiner under one sloe. Lurid new bruises on face, arms, flanks. Wet head rolling like a boulder on my shoulder; bare boobs quaking in a perpetual avalanche. Again and again I yanked her bungling legs away from the guttering candles. Miles upon miles she mewled like a sack of kittycats sinking underwater. Hour after hour I kept up the pace, needing all my strength not to topple like a hewn tree—or give her poor bruised ass an oscillating wallop as wake-up call and payback clout for these past few hours, these past two weeks, these past three months—all her grouching and kvetching and querulous complaining and *whut the hail did I think I wuz DEWIN'??*

Staring at me, ashiver with baffled dismay.

“S’okay. S’okay,” I told her, rubbing her briskly as the candles flickered. Now to get her into some clothes and off to St. Luke’s ER—

But then she turned up her tremulous mouth. Pressed it against mine, as she had never done before. Less swabbed-out than in my fondest fancies, but I wasn’t about to avert my lips. It was she who broke the kiss, to breathe in my ear:

“Please don’ go away... please don’ leave me... please stay hyar.”

So I did.

Though I couldn’t be sure she was talking to me.

*

Carol Kane turned out to be a garrulous lover. Lecturing nonstop in her quaint little bleat about national malaise; interrupting one orgasm in midclimax to take a call from the White House. And there on the phone was Jimmy Carter’s unmistakable twang, asking:

HAVE YOU CHECKED THE CHILDREN?

—waking me the hell up. In black silk sheets. On a brass bedframe. And all by myself: no caller, no Carol... no Cranky Lynnette. Not in the loft. Not in the bath—

—*the airshaft!* She’d gone out the window, off the sill, into the void—

...but no smashed-egg body seemed to be at the shaftbottom. Nor any sign of one having been there (at least not recently).

Relieved exhalation. Then a sharp pang of displacement. At the sight of my own casement open opposite, reflecting half the workbench and half the tool caddy and half the drafting stool. None of my cot, though, now on the far side of the room—

—*the roof!* Leaping into jockeys, hurtling up the spiral staircase, its treads and the roof's pebbles disagreeable under my bare feet but no time to lose, got to gallop round the parapet straining eyes and lungs—

—at the dawn of a perfectly ordinary Saturday morning in mid-September.

No broken almond cookie on the sidewalk. No chalk outline or police barricade or coroner's entourage. Nothing out of place except one rooftop tenderfoot in his undershorts. Who crept down through the trapdoor and tidied up #517 like an obedient houseboy—snuffing candles, changing sheets, mopping upchuck, plunging commode.

Wiping the place clean of fingerprints as I went.

Advantage had been taken: plain and simple. And a woman under the influence: I was in for it now. Would have to face the music, take my medicine, kowtow to bromides. So I holed up by my telephone the rest of that day and night, and all the next day and into the next night as well. Entire weekend spent awaiting fallout, consequences, repercussions.

Moving my cot back over to the window. Checking every few hours for signs of life. Again and again there was nothing to see but a deserted rhombus in the wall.

Sunday night I could wait no longer, had to hit the sack. Where I dreamt of chiseling my nose to splice my fate—and awoke to find that task begun by an airplane up my nostril.

In the re-electrified shaft was a re-illuminated frame, untenanted but bright enough to read by. Assuming I could unfold this origami jet and absorb the two words

LAWN DRY?

Pounding on her door. Which was opened by a Perfectly Ordinary Lynnette in bombazine pajamas. Sleepmask on brow; cold cream on face; toothbrush in mouth.

"*Ah dinmee yadda dewt rye nah,*" she said, before leaping back out of my arms. "*Ay! wuhyew hinker dewee? Gih omme, Hummuh!*"

“I was worried about you!!”

She took my hand, turned it palm upward, spat a mouthful of paste into it. “F’yer that worried, take this—” (heavy bag of hamper contents) “—‘n’ be sure the deli cuts git done on cold!”

Back in her mouth went the brush; back in my face closed the door; back in the jamb shot its bolt. Leaving me with a sudden hunger for sliced ham and turkey.

Thus we took up where she’d left me off.

I resumed my neighborly duties. Lynnette’s bruises and contusions retreated from view. As occasionally did the rest of her, in pursuit of Too The Hell and his sour yellow eyes. Rumor had it that he ran like a rabbit every time she drew near.

When’s the adored not an adorer?

When he’s AJAHR.

Who went so far as to get himself arrested, indicted, and sentenced to prison after a big October drug bust. Perhaps the bastard felt safer behind bars. If so, more fool he.

No word about Friday the 14th was ever exchanged between Lynnette and me. Until Halloween: a solemn night at Nonnamou’s, not least because this year it fell upon a Wednesday. (Children full of woe, the Addams Family’s daughter and so forth.)

I left Kurtzway that afternoon feeling ready for anything noir-ish—except what awaited me at the Strichleiter Lofts. Where my cot was heaped with airmail, each plane a variation on *C ME*. I strolled around the corner, carrying an empty trick-or-treat sack; and got dragged into the tang of fresh vomit.

Oh yeedge not again! Though Lynnette looked the opposite of nauseated, jumping and jiving and demanding I look at what I took to be a kid’s chemistry set. Diminutive test tube in a plastic holder with an angled mirror at the bottom, in which a reddish-brown ring appeared.

I suggested she might want to clean her tube.

“*NO*-ew!! That means it’s official—I’m PREGNANT—‘n’ now I’ll git him fer sure!” Dancing with glee, then freezing to the floor: “Cain’t jump—mustn’t jump!” (To her belly:) “Sorry sorry sorry.” (To me, through a new burst of tears:) “I’m so *happpeeeeeee!!*”

*

As Bogart told Bacall: those are harsh words to throw at a man, especially when he's walking out of your bedroom. Except in my case I, like Lynnette, was frozen to the floor.

"...how far?..."

"Oh—eight, nine weeks."

Calculating feverishly backward. Then a giant silent WHEW: even eight weeks would guarantee acquittal. But Lynnette began to chirp about why the first day of her last period was significant, and why she'd chalked up missing her next period a month later (a month ago) to stress, since the tube she'd filled then hadn't produced a reddish-brown ring but she must've taken *that* test too early 'cause she missed her *next* period too and took the same test again and this time SCORED, look! look!! at the Ring in the Tube in the Mirror that confirmed she had the joy-joy-joy-joy down in her heart, and on Halloween to boot.

Excusing herself to boot in the toilet.

(Morning sickness for Cranky Lynnette meant more like mid-afternoon.)

Never once did she entertain the slightest doubt as to whose seed had taken root in her flowerbox. For me, however, the next month and a half were too the hell dubious. The rest of the world might get preoccupied with the hostage-taking in Iran, but I had acuter worries.

As her neighbor I was compelled to help deal with fatigue and dizziness and food cravings and tender breasts and increased urination with possible leakage when laughing or sneezing. Not to mention kicking her *kretek* habit for the Baby's sake. I, of course, was assigned to hold her cloves and not let Lynnette have one no matter how she begged or pleaded. I, of course, was the handiest target for every resulting mood swing:

"YEW DON'T THINK I'LL MAKE A GOOD MOTHER, DEW YEW?? YEW THINK I'M GONNA BE A SHITTY ONE, DONTCHEW?? BEIN' MEAN T'ME JES CUZ I WANNA HAVE A LI'L BITTY PUFF T'GIT ME THROUGH THE NIGHT, *IZZAT ASKIN' FER THE MOON 'N' STARS HERE??*—"

Then there were her pilgrimages to Daddums in the slammer. Others drove her there but I, of course, couldn't escape hearing every detail of how Johnny wouldn't come see her in the visiting room, again, but Lynnette just knew how thrilled and proud he must be about his imminent fatherhood and how it was going to make all the difference between them the moment Johnny made parole, which was bound to be as soon as possible.

By mid-December I'd worked at Kurtzway for a full six months and was entitled to a few days off. And away. Out of town, without alerting Lynnette beforehand. Unless you counted cranking my casement window fully shut for the first time.

I drove down to Columbia MO, calling on my mystified father and taking part in a reunion of Stonehill High's Our Gang. Nancy Ghillie baked us a pan of her Green Springs brownies, so the time swam by as of old. Back to Milwaukee on Sunday the 23rd: crummy driving in crappy weather, but I had to cover Christmas week for more senior Kurtzwayites.

Up the elevator, along the gallery, into #515. Dropped my luggage, snapped on lamps, fired up the steam radiator. Unbuttoned my trenchcoat, unwound my scarf, and—
—*rattle RATTLE RATTLE* went the doorknob.

"Whar the hail have yew been??" demanded Lynnette.

Her head looked more like a spinning top than ever beneath its magenta beret. Body lost in a shapeless sweatsuit behind a tightly-clutched teddy bear.

I started to reply, but then she extended her arms sideways and let them hang in cruciform suspension, the bear dangling by one paw.

"Well go ahead," she sighed.

"And do what?"

"Hug me if y' gotta." As though submitting to an indignity. But her hands came unnailed and squeezed my ribs so hard they nearly cracked. Pushing away a second later—
"*Don't hurt the baby!*"—but seizing me by the elbows till I promised to stay put while she went and fetched her cello. And changed into her witching-hour gown (let out a tad) and moussed her hair into porcupine quills and applied fresh makeup and fresh Shalimar and freshly-polished silver ankh above/inside her amplifying cleavage.

"So?" she asked upon her return.

"Fuhhhh," I replied. Susceptible as always.

"Whoa-kay then."

She said I must be famished, and called in an order—the first time I'd seen her use a phone—for shrimp and prawns and snow peas and bok choy. She said I must be exhausted, and played me Saint-Saëns—the first time I'd heard her go classical—melodious snatches of *Carnival* and *Danse*, intended to soothe. When the food arrived she made no remarks about

my chopstick technique—the first time she'd been so forbearing.

Truth to tell, after my crappy drive from Missouri all I really wanted was a few beers and a hot bath. As the hour grew later I *had* to get some shuteye, *had* to go to work tomorrow; too many others would be sure to blow the day off, it being Christmas Eve. I swigged my beer but skipped the bath, making do with sink and soapy washcloth while Saint-Saëns yielded to Offenbach and threatened to become party time in hell.

Finally I marched over in my longjohns. Bussed Lynnette on her very wide brow, snapped off all the lamps but one, climbed under the covers and requested that my guest close the door on her way out.

“Door *is* closed,” she said softly.

Loosening the cello bow. Laying Nefertiti in its casket. Standing in the lamplight to unzip her low-bosomed slit-skirted gown, unstrap her black lace bra and step out of black lace briefs. Leaving her in only ankh and chain as she turned off the last lamp, climbed onto the cot beside me, and pulled the covers over our heads.

“Howdy, neighbor,” she whispered.

*

I thanked God. Literally. On my knees, even.

When I wasn't crooning *Wu, you is my woman now*.

Where once I'd burned for her kisses and caresses, I now found myself positively buffeted with both. Before she'd leave for the photolab; before she'd go see Poppaea the midwife; before she'd take the stage at Nonnamou's. And no running off afterward with cursory hoodish-types; now she always tried to keep a sloe on me in the audience. (I quickly learned not to wander off to the bar or the can, lest Lynnette outjitter even Gilbert Blyght.)

And suddenly I understood what Rubens, Rodin, and Renoir had appreciated about female abundance. Here was my own *Venus at a Mirror*, my own *Danaide*, my own *Bather Drying Her Leg*—increasingly zaftig, extravagant, plenitudinous, and lavished upon me as often as I could rise to the occasion. Thanking God for youthful puissance as we danced the Second Trimester Two-Step; as I was treated to the sounds and furor I'd had to overhear and suffer through before. Now they were mine, every heave, every whoop, every—

OH BABY OH BABY OH BABY *OHHHH*-WUHhh...

Constant cuddling was required every night. With both arms, too; if I drifted off using only one, a fingernail would poke me till I added the other. Nor was I allowed to fall asleep any way but on my right side, since Lynnette could only rest comfortably on her left and preferred missionary cuddling to spoonwise.

“Y’*know* it like t’gimme the willies when y’wheeze on the back o’ my neck. Whar I come from, that ain’t how y’chursh a woman.”

“Sorry,” I said, shifting to cherish her properly. “You’d rather I wheeze in your ear?”

“S’like hearin’ the ocean roar,” she said, nestling closer.

I played seashell awhile. “So, where *do* you come from?”

“Nowhar,” she replied, and we lay in silence for a moment. Then: “I wuz kidnapped outta my cradle by a band o’ gypsies tourin’ the Chitlin’ Circuit in an RV caravan. They made me practice whut they called ‘zee beeg-ass feedle’ when I wuz so bitsy I needed a stepladder t’reach the pegs.”

Thus commenced her series of bedtime talltales. Spinning me a new thread every night between our bouts of *ohhhh*-wuhhh.

She claimed she first became aware of herself in an orphanage outside Houston, Texas—the last place on earth for a VYOF, according to Lynnette. Not one pleasant memory till the age of ten, when she saw the Merry Pranksters swashbuckle past in their psychedelic school bus. Causing her to start coveting California: not surfin’ safaris but occult trippiness. And after eking out three more years in foster care, little Kimberly Wu staged her debut runaway—ending up in Los Angeles with a fake ID, along with many other little Kimberlys alleging to be you-know-what-I-mean seventeen.

Some of the threads she spun then had her joining the Manson Family. #517’s wall montages did include shots of Squeaky Fromme and other X’d-out girls holding vigil during the Tate-LaBianca trial. I couldn’t identify my Lynnette in any, or verify whether she’d taken those pictures or merely clipped them. But she boasted of many arrests at that time, for loitering and contempt of court and endangering public safety. “N’ all we wuz dewin’ wuz kneelin’ on the sidewalk.”

In other threads, she did or didn't get her GED; did or didn't learn camerawork at L.A. Trade-Tech. More certain was her presence in the Hollywood punk scene—pogoing at the Whiskey and the Masque, sharing spike-haired sex 'n' drugs with the Weirdos and Zeros and Germs. And escaping from the Hillside Stranglers: these two guys, see, who tried to drag her into their car one night, which wasn't unusual for Hollywood Boulevard except that the Strangler was dominating the news. So after Lynnette fought off the two guys and freaked out bigtime, she fled as far from California as you could possibly go—which had to be Milwaukee.

Sundays, Mondays, Happy Days; Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Happy Days...

And they were. Those winter days and nights spent cherishing her. Buried together under a mound of blankets, possessing and being possessed, till there ceased to be a point where dreams left off and reality set in.

It was the happiest time of my life.

Meaning it could not last, and didn't.

*

By March the freezing blasts off the lake had diminished to icy gusts, which native Wisconsinites interpreted as a sign of spring. With it came signs that Lynnette and I were no longer alone in bed.

She was swelling up like Violet Beauregard at the chocolate factory. As if a beach ball had inflated behind her bellybutton, converting that lower dimple into an extra nipple. ("Ain't two titties gonna be *enough*?") Add that to the backaches and bleeding gums and hemorrhoids and indigestion and constipation and bloated ankles and charley horses and varicose veins—none of which could be called a blessing for her, or a turn-on for me.

One night I awoke to find Lynnette conversing with her beach ball.

"Kick once for yayess..."

"...what the hell?"

"Poppaea sez she kin hear me now 'n' I should be talkin' tew her."

"To Poppaea?"

"No-ew—Baby! Tryin' t'figger out whut her name is... Hey babe? Babe! Hey!—"

(Nail-poke.)

“Ow! You talking to me?”

“Whut girl names go good with Ajahr?”

“Dora,” I said. Cementheadedly.

“*Dorita*—that’s it!” (To the beach ball:) “Lovely Dorita, meet yer maid; nuthin’ll come between us...” (To me:) “Dew y’mind? This is private talk.”

It was the last blast of windchill needed to cool off my libido. I told Lynnette I was afraid further boinkage might “harm the Baby,” and promptly got exempted from that particular chore. As by then it had become.

Her almonds and ivories turned ashen and pallid; baggy smudges encircled her sloes. She refused to believe that trees and flowers were in bloom—I’d be sent to check sidewalks for black frost before Lynnette would venture out, clinging to my arm as though Washburn Street were a skating rink and every step was treacherous.

“Don’t lemme slip! Don’t lemme fall! I’ll bust wide open, I’ll *explode*—”

In April she commandeered my dust mask, saying the air was choked with toxins and microbes and she couldn’t go unprotected. Yet insisting on being driven to Nonnamou’s for her Saturday gigs, even if it meant singing through the respirator. And being so afraid of the basement stairs that Theo had to carry her down them. And then up onto the stage, swathed in an uncanny muu-muu, evoking a Chinese fertility goddess with very bad joss.

“And now my friends,” Non would croak as the blue spot enshrouded my Venus of Willendorf. Cello wedged between unparalleled thighs, pressed against a phenomenal belly. (“Dorita loves the vahbrations.”) Raking the room with an aberrant glare above the mask.

Then she’d close her lashes. Tilt her head. Take the bow in one hand and neck in the other. And, once again, wring melancholy resonance from twangfree catgut.

*There came a bruise from nowhere
That seeps beneath the skin
And sleeps alone within
Like a perm’nent tattoo
Of a worm I’ve bitten through—
All you have left from pleasing yourself.*

*The bruise from nowhere lies
Beneath my lover's feeling
But like a bay-aby's cries
It sheds its grace on me—
Though the blood is all you see.*

*Please yourself was how I lived
No one's left for counting
Drinks I took from fountains
Now empty of shadows
That've vanished up ladders—
Blow the roof off of pleasing yourself.*

*The bruise from nowhere lies
Beneath my lover's feeling
It makes a baby survive—
The blood is the life
The blood is the life...*

“Cranky Lynnette, my friends,” Non Nonnamou would grin. Flakily omniscient.

*

May brought false labor and Poppaea's ordering moderate bedrest. Lynnette was permitted to do mild isometrics, waddle to and from the bathroom, even practice the cello if she didn't gyrate or undulate.

Erin/Aaron wanted to throw her a baby shower but Lynnette kept putting it off, saying the commotion would disturb Dorita. Any plans for the future, immediate or distant, were restricted to the letters she scrawled daily to Ajahr. (Which I, of course, had to post for her.) None received a reply or was returned to sender; possibly they got used as “wipes.” But Lynnette kept on scrawling, confiding, romanticizing—as though she expected Johnny Dearest to pop out along with the newborn, and provide for all their needs like a yellow-eyed genie from a piss-tinted lamp.

Presuming that failed to happen... what *about* the newborn?

Could I picture myself helping to rock it, burp it, clean up after it? Would the child display any traces of its—her—paternity? Would she be beautiful like her mother, yet purged of all peevishness? A well-behaved little girl, yet nobody's pushover; able from an early age to see through the sons of bitches of the world? Might she grow up to be a good student, a fine artist, a born connoisseur of music and sculpture and film? And might she love me—as a surrogate uncle, say—a passable stand-in parental unit, preferable to any other sperm donor in her mother's life?

No. She—it—was bound to be a sullen lumpish brat. A backtalker, refusing to do its chores, pilfering from groceries, sneering at my artwork. Too the hell precocious when it came to smoking and drinking and screwing and landing in detention and having to be picked up from juvenile hall—and Lynnette would think the moon and stars shone out of the kid's backside. Never hear a word said against her Baby; never allow the slightest discipline.

Sorry, Dorita. You better look to the yellow-eyed genie for your father figure.

Except that, very soon, doing so was out of the question.

Squib in the *Sentinel* on Friday the 23rd: Johnny Ajahr had been killed in prison. Unclear whether he was targeted as “one o’ them Eye-ranians,” or reaped comeuppance for some drug-related ripoff.

I didn't take the morning paper, but Tattoo Rula did. Her disembodied voice called me at Kurtzway to coordinate how we would keep Lynnette in the dark about this until the baby came. A conspiracy in which I, of course, was expected to take the lead.

“Not to forget, Hoffmann, you are rounding the corner from her.”

Chisels and gouges danced through my head as I sought to leave work asap. But it was Christmas Eve all over again—too many others had vamoosed already, turning the Memorial Day weekend into a four-day toot.

When I finally escaped, it was into the hottest afternoon and bitchmost traffic of the year. Got home no sooner than if I'd left at my usual time. Not waiting for the elevator, I ran upstairs and arrived at #517 short on wind, drenched with sweat, and stitched in both sides.

“Hey,” I respired.

“Hey yerself,” said Lynnette.

“Any... body... been... by?...”

“Like who?”

“Just... anybody...”

“I don’t let jes anybody in hyar.”

She was plumped on the brass bed against high-piled cushions. Legs stuck out at right angles with the teddy bear between them, holding a ball of yarn in its paws. Above her bloated bosom-rack, a few inches below her face, she wielded a pair of needles as busily as I’d seen her manipulate chopsticks.

“Didn’t know you could knit,” I panted.

Snort-sniff from Lynnette at my ignorance.

At least the radiator was off and the casement cranked open. As recently as Monday she’d been feeling “drafts” and “chills.” I poured us a couple of ice waters; she left hers untouched.

“No letter today?” I asked. Usually it was handed to me as soon as I entered.

“Been tidyin’,” said Lynnette. On the floor around the bed was every piece of equipment in her photographic arsenal, dusted and polished and neatly arranged.

“Didn’t tire yourself out, I hope.”

“*Tidyin’*, I said—not *tirin’*.”

“Sorry. So... what’s this thing you’re knitting?”

“Sash.”

“Kind of lengthy, isn’t it?” Serpentine over her bloat to writhe around the batik.

“That’s whut makes it a sash.”

“Oh. Er. Uh. Well...”

It was like being trapped inside a Poe story. Any minute now I expected a tell-tale heart or walled-up cat to make its presence loudly known. Leaving me no choice but to spill the beans, confess the truth, divulge the secret I’d barely started keeping from her. Then I suddenly feared she could READ IT IN MY FACE—yeedge! don’t let her look you in the eye! Pretend to examine these lenses and whatnot at your feet.

“Put that down! I jes tidied it!”

There spoke a mother-to-be. *Knit knit knit* went her needles; *writhe writhe writhe* went the sash; *twitch twitch twitch* went my guilty-feeling face.

“Yew,” said Lynnette, “are makin’ me nervous.”

“Sorry—sorry—it’s been a hard week.”

“Whut’s good fer Monday won’t do fer Friday,” she remarked. Adding that if getting on her nerves was the best I could do, I might as well get out of there. I objected; she insisted; so I got up to go.

She called me back, saying that when she finished the sash she might practice her cello, if I’d be so good as to bring it to the bed. No she wouldn’t overdo it. Yes she’d holler if anything obstetrical happened. Gawd sakes! Quit fussing, Huffman.

I fetched the cello, then bent and pecked her cheek. “Love you, Wu.”

“So yew keep sayin’. Night now.”

And with that I left her.

The Strichleiter Lofts were quiet that evening. I supped alone in mine, pausing in mid-chew or -gulp to hark at the silence. Waiting for the setting sun to give way to twilight, as it had that first Friday night almost a year ago.

Dusk at last.

Up lit the airshaft.

Candlepower at work, lending a vision to an agape frame of glass. Shimmering likeness of a VYOF in a deep dark muu-muu, making music. Playing all the tunes from Joy Division’s *Unknown Pleasures*, an album that some were calling “post-punk” and others “Gothic.” It sounded like one long song to me, one dark heartbeat subject to arrhythmia: tachying up and bradying down.

I remained by my window for quite a long time. Knowing I should chide her about staying up late and playing with angst. But our old arrangement still applied: observe all you like, so long as you speak no word and break no spell. Just look on and listen. Let the music tranquilize you into a doze...

Bugbite on my chin.

(Some kind of bite, anyway.)

I opened my eyes and glanced down at a paper airplane on my chest. Unfolding it to find, in bold black Magic Marker, the single monosyllable

BY

While at the same time in the airshaft there was a FLASH.

I glanced up and out, and what I saw there turned the world to vacuum. Null and void. Blue shadows through which I groped for something to inhale. And by the time I could breathe again, it was too late.

Three suspensions were reflected in the casement.

The first was Cranky Lynnette, wearing nothing but the sash. One end must have been tied to her ceiling trapdoor; the other end was knotted round her neck.

A second cord descended between her dangling legs to something that wasn't the teddy bear, though much the same size and just as immobile.

And the third cord hung from the trigger plunger caught in Lynnette's hand, leading over to the camera with which she'd recorded her—their—departure.

