

Sitting in the corner booth of the Old Town Diner, I've got today's paper spread out on the table and a yellow marker in hand – wanted, apartment for rent. I'm on my third cup of coffee when Terry walks in. He sidles up and places an arm around my shoulders. “Whatcha doin', Ruby, my jewel? You're just the person I've been wantin' to see.”

I heave a sigh in his direction. “Trying to find some place to live. I don't think I can take another minute with my mother.”

Terry gives my arm a squeeze and in with one dramatic sweep, chucks the paper off the table. “Well you've got Terry to the rescue. Remember my friend Mark who lives outside Noble? He's looking for another housemate and, believe it or not, he wants someone with kids. I think you'll dig it out there. And I'll be happy, cause you'll have to quit your bellyaching.”

I laugh. Terry's devotion is unwavering. He's the only good thing remaining from the Ragtime Survivor band days. Last January on the night of the final straw (when Niles' verbal abuse became physical), Terry was the one I called. And in the eight months since, he's cooked meals, watched the kids, packed boxes, hauled trash, and handed out Kleenex. I like his quirky humor and deep intelligence, and there are times I wish I could fall for him. But he doesn't set off any fire alarms – hairy like a grizzly, belly like a beer keg, shoulders like an ox. He's also way to good for me. I only seem to go for men who are lean and mean.

“I don't know, Terry. It's been a long time since I've been a roommate.”

“It won't hurt to talk. Man, you've got six kids between you. Makes sense to share the load.”

I meet with Mark and Stephen that afternoon. They're cordial, but somewhat aloof.

Good. No complications. And \$250 a month can't be argued with.

~

I pull to the left to avoid a cavern on the right hand side of the hard packed dirt road posing as a driveway.

Shit. New potholes.

“Sugaree,” the red, '73 Chevy wagon I'm driving, doesn't have much clearance in the best of situations, and especially not today when the back is loaded down with most of my belongings. She's a good, reliable girl, but a big boat, and I can barely afford the gas since it's gotten over a dollar. But beggars can't be choosers, as my mother would say, and she's all I've got to drive, and there's another year of monthly car payments. When me and Niles bought her in '79, a big car seemed like a capital idea – what with one baby in hand and another on the way – but that was a lifetime ago, before everything turned to shit.

My destination is a farmhouse set off the main road by the length of a football field. When I pull even with the back porch, I park, get out of the car, and walk around to the passenger side door. The August sun is a cotton candy web, and I stand transfixed for a moment in its brilliance.

My shoulder-length hair, dishwater blonde, is lightened by a perm, and the sun's rays float through my crimped curls. A passing stranger might think I'm wearing a halo. Dark clouds hover in the south. The air is as thick as the chocolate pudding my two children love for dessert, and everything seems coated with that wafer thin pudding skin.

Even in cut-offs, a tank top, and flip-flops, I'm dripping wet – perspiration runs down my neck, under my arms, between my thighs. I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and smell my sweat mixing with the approaching onslaught of late summer rain.

This is my third trip to the farm. The first visit was almost two years ago when I was five months pregnant with Seth and already as big as a barn. The tenants, Mark and Susan, hosted an Oktoberfest party, and Niles' band, Ragtime Survivor, played their rowdy mixture of country rockabilly bluegrass blues for almost a hundred guests. It was one of those gorgeous Indian summer days with air so hard and crisp you could bite it like a green apple.

Terry, Niles' best friend and unpaid roadie, got the band this farm gig. Like their engagements at The Library Bar and Doulin's there was no real money to be made – just a few bills tossed into an open guitar case. But the band would've played for free. In the back yard, three tables sagged from the weight of the spread. There was tabouli and mushroom carrot loaf for the hard-core vegetarian hippies among the guests, and BBQ and baked beans and potato salad for the hard-core meat-loving, artery-clogged Okies. I baked my favorite cake – three-layer Red Velvet with butter cream frosting. A couple of kegs of Lone Star beer kept laughter and conversation flowing. Ragtime Survivor covered Gram Parsons and Dylan and a Merle Haggard song or two, and some nickel bags of Panama Red kept everyone dancing. Most everyone at the party was a fan of the band, so they played the much requested originals, including “Prairie Moon Song,” a hymn of love Niles had written when we found out I was pregnant with April.

At the time of the party, April was almost fourteen months old, and as she toddled around in and among the guests, we discovered she had quite the taste for chips and salsa. Salsa ranchera, pico de gallo, salsa verde – it could've had half a dozen jalapenos, it didn't matter; she couldn't get enough.

The storm clouds move swiftly to the north.

I better get this stuff in quick.

I hear a bleating near the barn, and in the dusk, I can barely make out the two goats who share the space along with one horse, Tracy, and nameless free-roaming chickens and rabbits in pens. Beyond the barn there is an open field and a small, spring-fed pond. About twenty feet away stands a wooden structure that reminds me of an outhouse. It was built last winter more than a year after my first visit, and I haven't been in there yet, but I've been told it's a Finnish sauna.

But who in their right mind needs a sauna in Oklahoma?

I glance back at the house. There's mewing from one of several feral cats that feast on the host of mice in the field, and then I jump with a start at dark eyes peering through the screen door.

“Sorry, I. Didn't mean to scare you. Need a hand?” Stephen leans down and places a rock the size of a football on the top step of the porch to hold the screen door ajar.

Stephen works outdoors in construction, and his face and forearms are the color of cinnamon. I first met him five years ago when I worked at Rivendale Day Care and his oldest daughter, Hannah, was in my classroom of three-year olds.

“Yeah, thanks, Stephen. This is the last of it. I don’t own a lot; it won’t take long to clear out the car.”

I reach in the rolled down window and pull out a fifth of Johnnie Walker that has been occupying a place of honor on the front passenger seat.

“Look. I bought a bottle of scotch. I thought you guys might like it.” I hesitate, anxious to please. “Black Label. The guy at the liquor store said it was good.”

“Black Label! It's better than good. A great sipping whiskey. I can’t remember the last time I had any. Let’s get you settled so we can break it open. Mark is dropping his kids off at Susan’s, but he’ll be home shortly.”

I hand the bottle to Stephen who disappears briefly into the dimly lit kitchen. Wary of the approaching summer shower, I open the passenger side door and roll up the window. I close the door, walk to the back of Sugaree and open the rear door. The two back passenger seats have been folded down to accommodate my possessions on this thirty-mile move. I pull out two boxes marked “kitchen,” along with several boxes with other words scrawled along the top and sides in a tentative hand, and I set them on the ground next to the car. One faux leather suitcase holds my clothes. The only pieces of furniture are an antique floor lamp and an oak rocking chair. Cans of soup, spaghetti boxes, and half-empty jars of peanut butter are visible in open milk crates.

Stephen returns from the kitchen. “Let’s get this in the house before it starts to rain.”

Stephen grabs a milk crate and carries it up the three wooden steps to the side porch. He sets it down on the kitchen floor, and turns to face me as I struggle with a box of kitchen stuff.

“You can set that down here, Ruby. Why don’t you start unpacking, and I’ll bring in the rest of your boxes. Later we’ll go check out the garden and find something for dinner to go with that scotch.”

I open the pantry and find a shelf for the boxes of spaghetti and elbow macaroni. This kitchen is one of the main reasons I decided to live here, even though the move to Blanchard adds another hour to my work commute every day. I love the way the kitchen smells – like a batch of oatmeal raisin cookies fresh from the oven. It’s by far the largest room in the house, taking up more than half of the downstairs floor space. The west wall holds cabinets, counter tops and a deep, porcelain sink underneath a large picture window. I move to stand at the sink, and again take in the lay of the land – the barn, the field, the clothesline, the sauna.

It will be a nice change to live in the country. Fresh eggs from the chickens. Milk from the goats.

I turn to examine the rest of the room. It’s hard to determine the color of the walls. They’re moody and take on the color of the sun and sky. Right now the sun rests in the kitchen sink, seeping through the drain, leaving the walls the color of dying cherry blossoms I once saw on the mall in Washington D.C.

On the south side of the room, the pantry is next to the refrigerator. Then there's the door to the side porch, which does double duty as a mudroom and storage shed. The north wall holds a four burner gas stove, more counter tops, cabinets, the door to Mark’s small bedroom and a small bathroom. A tall butcher-block table in the middle of the room provides additional work and storage space and separates the kitchen from the large dining table that can easily seat eight. The table could be one of those nice heavy oak

ones pictured in *Country Home Magazine*, but it's impossible to tell since every surface inch is covered with Elmer's Glue, Popsicle sticks, piles of ripped-up magazines and construction paper. A wine cork bulletin board on the east wall overflows with collages, children's drawings and prized art projects.

The abundance of children is another reason I chose to live here. Stephen and Mark each have two children between the ages of four and ten, and both share joint custody with their ex-wives. My children are a little younger; Seth is not yet two and April will turn three in September, but I'm confident the kids will get along and I'll no longer be April's only source for entertainment. Ever since Niles and I separated last March, April sticks to me like socks with static cling. Now, after nine months of perfect toilet training, bed wetting's an every night occurrence.

I continue unpacking the groceries. When I've finished, I open one of the kitchen boxes. I set plates, mixing bowls and drinking glasses on top of the counter. At the bottom of the box I find a magnet in the shape of a rooster along with a photograph of Seth and April taken just before Niles moved out. I place them on the refrigerator at what I believe is April's eye level.

Now maybe she'll feel at home.

After a few more trips to and from Sugaree, Stephen has all the boxes, the suitcase and the furniture safely inside the house.

"I'll take everything not marked "kitchen" and leave it in your bedroom. But there's room for your books and records in the living room if you're not worried about getting them mixed up."

“I don’t mind a little commingling.” I smile. I like to drop what my father calls “five-dollar words” into conversation. “Besides I don’t have a stereo of my own, and I want my albums to get played. You might not like my taste though – I love Lionel Ritchie.”

Stephen squinches his nose and purses his lips like he’s eating a sour cherry jawbreaker.

My grin widens. “I’m kidding. When I was in college in New York I collected a lot of jazz – Miles, Coltrain, Mingus – that sort of thing. And before that I hung out with some typical good ole boys, so I’ve got Willie and Waylon and Jerry Jeff. And what chick collection is complete without Jackson Browne and Judy Collins? If you hear me playing “The Moon is a Harsh Mistress,” you’ve got fair warning it’s that time of the month.”

Now Stephen smiles. “Forewarned is forearmed. After six years of living with Leah, you need say no more.”

Stephen moves the boxes, the suitcase, the rocking chair and the floor lamp from the kitchen to their respective new homes around the house. I hear his footsteps going up and down the stairs that lead to the bedrooms on the second floor. I pause and look out the window again. The sky is grey ash, and hard rain clatters on the roof.

Was it just two weeks ago that Terry told me about this place?

I hear a sound behind me and jump, my mind brought back to the mixing bowl in my hand. I turn and see Stephen standing near the kitchen table.

“That’s the second time I’ve startled you today. You’re lost in thought.”

I smile. “I was just thinking how glad I am to be here.”

Stephen steps to the fridge and pulls out a Lone Star longneck. “Wow. The rain is really coming down. Looks like we got you unloaded just in time.” He leans against the butcher-block table and holds the beer bottle up to his mouth. “I guess this will hold me till we break open the scotch. Mark better show up soon, or he’s gonna miss out.”

“Stephen, how do you manage meals around here? I work in Pauls Valley till four, so I’m not back in Norman until after five. By the time I pick up the kids from day care, it could be almost six before I’m back here.”

“We don’t eat before six anyway. On the weeks I have my girls, I usually get home around five. And if Mark is engrossed in a project, we never know when he’ll emerge from his cave. Don’t worry about anything. You’re not going to starve.”

“I’m not worried about eating. With a backside like mine, I can skip a few meals. I just want to carry my own weight – you know, contribute to the house.”

“Relax, Ruby. It all works itself out.” Stephen picks up one of the cups sitting to the left of the sink. “Great coffee mugs. All we have are Mark’s castoffs.”

“They were a wedding gift from my sister. Store bought. I’m sure Mark’s cups have more character.”

“They do – lots of character. But they break pretty easy, so it’s nice to have some a little more reliable. When is your divorce final?”

“It was final this month. A week ago last Thursday. We separated right after Christmas, and I moved into an apartment complex just north of Norman on the old highway. Just past Robinson. I was there about a month, and then we decided to make another go at it. We moved into a house on the southeast side, a couple of miles from the

University. But that didn't last too long either, and Niles hooked up with Angela and moved into her place."

I pull a blue enamel colander out of a kitchen box. "Where does this go?"

Stephen opens the lower cabinet to the left side of the sink. "Put it here."

I lean over and place the colander inside a large metal bowl.

"That's a nice big one," Stephen says as he closes the cabinet door.

Is he talking about the colander or my ass?

The frayed edges of my cut-offs ride up my thighs, and the hair on my neck prickles.

"Not that I was any angel. I had a short-lived affair with this guy I met in graduate school last fall before Niles and I split the first time. So when Niles moved out, Garvan gladly moved in. That was a disaster in the making."

Stephen hands me a mess of cooking utensils to sort through. "What was wrong with Garvan?"

"Well, to begin with, he's a recovering alcoholic – extremely careful about going to meetings, but with the personality traits of any drunk. Loving one minute, a tyrant the next. Older than me by about fifteen years."

I wave a spatula like I'm ready to flip Garvan off the grill. "Do you know, he made me eat hamburger and green beans every night for dinner? No bread. And bacon and eggs every morning. Some kind of shitty high protein diet. But I lost more than thirty pounds, so I guess he did one good thing for me."

I open another box looking for a white crock. It's from my grandmother's kitchen, and was once used for making dill pickles and sauerkraut. I've carried it around for the

past ten years and now it holds wooden spoons, spearing forks, a rolling pin, whisks and tongs. I find it and place it on the counter next to the stove. “Can I leave this here? I like to have it handy when I’m cooking.”

Stephen nods. “Sure, Ruby, I like the sound of you cooking. So he made you eat hamburger. What else did he do to tick you off?”

I start filling the crock with kitchenware.

“He came from some wealthy family back in Boston. Liked to talk about the yacht and polo ponies he used to own. Huge gun nut. Took me to the firing range every weekend. Wanted to make sure I could shoot. He gave me a Smith & Wesson .44 magnum for Mother’s Day, but he took it back when we broke up a few weeks later. He was jealous and obsessive, hyper critical of everything I said and did, how I looked, what I wore.”

“The last straw was when he wet the bed one night and then set it on fire the next with a dropped cigarette. I didn’t wait around to see what he’d do on the third day. I started moving my things out, and then it was like I was in some Buñuel movie. The whole house got infested with cockroaches – thousands of them – coming up through the drain in the bathroom and the kitchen sink, carpeting the garage floor – you couldn’t walk with out stepping on one.”

Stephen takes a last swig of beer, his eyes narrow, and his brows furrow.

I sense his concern. “Don’t worry. No roaches here, except maybe in my nightmares. I moved in with my mother after the Garvan fiasco. I hosed us all down with a bug killer. Fumigated everything. I’ve washed our clothes a few dozen times since then, and I can still smell it.”

“I wasn’t worried. I just didn’t realize you’d had such a shitty year.”

“That’s not the half of it. You don’t even want to get me started on work.”

“Why don’t you tell me over dinner. What sounds good? Spaghetti?”

Before I can answer, we hear Mark’s truck in the driveway. He comes in through the side porch stomping mud off his boots. Rain drips from his shoulder length black hair. I’ve never seen his hair down before; usually he keeps it pulled back in a ponytail. He’s over six feet with a willowy frame like a woman’s, and he has long, sensitive fingers perfectly suited to a potter. Mark’s blue eyes sparkle like the sequins on a never worn pair of platform shoes. They belie the Creek blood so apparent in his demeanor and skin tone.

“Man, it’s really pouring. You get moved in all right, Ruby?”

“Yeah, thanks. We’re just fixin’ to start dinner. You hungry?”

Stephen appears short next to Mark. He pulls out the bottle of Black Label he’d pushed to a back corner, and raises it in the air. “Ruby brought some fucking awesome whiskey. We’re gonna celebrate her first night here in style.”

~

Dinner is full and satisfying. Everything in the spaghetti sauce comes from the garden – tomatoes, onion, garlic, peppers, zucchini. Fresh red leaf lettuce and carrots and radishes and cucumber make up the salad. Mark brings out a loaf of bread baked on Thursday, and we lather it with homemade garlic butter and toast it in the oven. A bottle of inexpensive Chianti completes the table now bereft of its burgeoning art project.

I showered before setting the table and changed into a long flowing Indian madras skirt and a soft pink halter-top that reveals my shoulders. I’ve always considered them one of my finer physical attributes, but with no bra and my nipples pressing against the

fabric, I doubt my shoulders will garner much attention. I sop up some of the sauce with my bread. “Mark, this bread is heavenly. Do you bake often?”

“Usually two or three times a week. Since I don’t have a 9 to 5 gig, it’s a little easier for me to do more around the house. I keep a jar filled with homemade granola, and I make cheese and yogurt from goat milk.”

“Man, I’d give anything to have that kind of time.” I belt out a few lines from the Dolly Parton song that blasts from every radio station on the dial. “Working 9 to 5. How does it go? It’s all taking and no giving.”

Stephen pours more wine into each of the glasses. “That’s right. Ruby was going to tell me about the rest of her shitty year and her shitty job. We’re all ears.”

I take another sip of wine. “Mark, I’ll catch you up on my nightmare lover from Boston a little later. This evening’s story is being brought to you by Reed Harrington State School.” I set the glass back on the table and reach up and fiddle with the halter-top knot at the base of my neck. “I graduated from OU last year with a B.A. My degree is in communications with an emphasis in speech and hearing. What I really want to do is research – linguistics or child language development. Eventually I’d like to teach. But you have to get a master’s degree to get anywhere, even to get started.”

Stephen holds up an empty plate. “More spaghetti, please. Man, it sure tastes good. You gonna cook like this every night, Ruby?”

I take Stephen’s plate, then dish out some spaghetti and two large spoonfuls of sauce onto it. “As much as I’m able. Glad you like it.”

“Thanks,” Stephen says, taking his plate. “Couldn’t you get into graduate school?”

I shake my head. “I applied to some of the best speech-path schools in the country, and got accepted at Kansas and Wisconsin. But Niles decided I had wait until he finished his Bachelor’s degree, and then he switched his major on me. He was nine credits away from getting a BFA, and he dumped it all to enroll in Home Ec. HOME EC!! In college they refer to it as 'Family and Consumer Sciences.' What a fucking asshole.”

Mark reaches across the table for more garlic bread. “So why didn’t you leave him then?”

“I don’t know. Fear mostly. I was afraid to raise the kids on my own. I was afraid of the little things. Grocery shopping, doing laundry. And I figured it was best if they had their father. So I put off graduate school and went looking for work.”

I push my plate back, take the napkin from my lap and lay it on the table. “I’m gonna make an apple crisp. It’ll just take a minute. I’ll use Mark’s granola instead of oatmeal.”

I stand up, take my dishes from the table, and place them in the sink. I turn on the hot water faucet, squeeze a drop of soap from the bottle of bright green Palmolive dishwashing liquid next to the sink, and rub my hands together under the running water. One of my own tea towels, hand embroidered by my grandmother, hangs from a small rack on the front of a lower cupboard. I pick it up and dry my hands.

Now I’m beginning to feel at home.

I collect four apples, brown sugar, butter from the fridge, and the jar of granola and place them on the butcher-block table. I lean over to look in the bottom cupboard for a CorningWare casserole dish.

I wonder if Stephen and Mark can see my ass.

I stand up, and the blood rushes from my head.

“Oh, my. That wine is starting to get to me.” I laugh, soft and deep throated.

“Refill, please.”

Mark fills my glass with the last of the Chianti, and brings it to me. “It’s an old fashioned oven. You’ve got to start it with a match. I’ll do it for you.”

“Thanks, Mark. Set it at 350.” I pick up the stick of butter and begin to smear it along the bottom and sides of the casserole dish. Mark brushes up against my thighs as he bends down to light the stove.

I feel flushed, but take another sip of wine. “When a job opened up as a Speech and Hearing Assistant at the state school, I jumped at the chance. I get to do what I’m trained to do, and the pay’s good; I can’t complain about that. But the atmosphere is kind of deadening. We work in a basement – no windows, no light, no air. Judy, my boss, has got to be nearly fifty and still lives with her mother. Personally, I think she’s a closeted lesbian. There’s not been a single day when she hasn’t come to work soused in one way or another.”

I wipe my hands on the tea towel and begin to peel, core, and slice the apples. “I have three co-workers. First there’s Joel who’s an unabashed flamer. He sits in his office and jerks off – I don’t mean he goofs off – he jerks off. Kids come over from the main house for therapy, and he completely ignores them while he’s reading *Bob on Bob*.”

I drop the apple slices into the casserole dish. “Francis is married to one of the physical therapists. He’s a hunk, a womanizer, and she’s always in crisis about who he’s

fucking. Connie's gorgeous, but insecure, and spends all her time primping and preening, on the prowl for a mate."

"Believe me, I'm no goody-two-shoes." I turn and grab a small bowl from one of the upper cupboards. My halter-top dips to the small of my back. "There was one day last summer, I was so crazy mad with jealousy at the thought of Niles with Angela, that in between therapy sessions, I locked the door to my room and laid down and masturbated. That's the only time it happened. It didn't make me feel any better; just seemed to fuel my sexual frustration. Usually I'm a professional. I like doing therapy and I think I'm pretty good at it." I assume my best Norma Desmond impersonation. "But I'm absolutely reviled because I try to do the work I'm paid to do."

I pour some granola into the bowl and add a big spoonful of butter. "Mark, did you add much sweetener to the granola? I was wondering how much brown sugar to add to the crisp."

Mark collects the remaining dishes from the table, and brings them to the sink. He stands behind me, presses against my back, and encircles my waist with his right arm. "It's about as sweet as you are, Ruby. I don't think you need to add more than a half a cup."

My breasts feel inflamed.

Oh, my God. I'm forgetting to breathe.

Mark steps away, and turns on the faucet for dishwater, and I take a quick, sharp intake of air. Stephen sits motionless at the table. He's still intent on my story. I pour brown sugar into the palm of my hand, and then dump it into the bowl with the granola and butter.

“Now there’s the big brouhaha over my phone call to the papers. About a month ago I was going to the nursery to do some stimulation therapy with a five-year old Downs Syndrome girl. She’s been kept in a crib since birth. She’s still in diapers, she can’t talk, walk, or feed herself.”

Stephen gets up from the table and drops the empty Chianti bottle into the garbage bin. “Oh, wait, I guess we could use this as a candle holder.” He pulls the bottle out of the trash, and rummages in the junk drawer to the right of the sink. He finds a ten-inch purple taper, and fits it into the neck of the wine bottle.

Now it's Stephen's turn to stand behind me. He presses his chin into the hollow of my shoulder. “It seems criminal to treat a child like that.”

I break up the lumps of granola and work in the butter and brown sugar with my hands. “That’s not the worst of it. I walked in on one of the aides slapping this girl over and over again around the face and head. I made a stink, but no one would listen.”

Shit. I’ve stopped breathing again.

I talk faster. “So I called up the *Oklahoman*. They sent some investigative journalists out to the school. No one had any time to clean up their act. The paper published a huge exposé, and now there’s talk of shutting down the school or having some major reorganization. Nobody on campus will speak to me except the three psychologists in my carpool.”

I take a deep breath, and feel a buzz in my head. “So, yeah, this has been one crazy fucking year.” I spread the granola mixture on top of the sliced apples and add a few more pats of butter. Stephen’s chin remains on my shoulder until I turn and place the

apple crisp in the oven. “All the shit that’s gone down at work, moving four times, a nightmare lover, the divorce. It’s no wonder I feel like I’m having a nervous breakdown.”

I stand up and turn to face Mark and Stephen. “It should be done in about a half an hour. Is there any heavy cream? I could whip it up.”

Mark is on my right side and he leans his lanky body towards me. He wraps one long arm around my shoulder and kisses me gently on the cheek. “Whipped cream would be nice. Thanks for making the crisp.”

Stephen leans in from the left and kisses my other cheek. “Maybe this is the start of something new. Let’s drink to that.”

~

Mark and I bring three shot glasses and the bottle of Black Label into the living room. Stephen carries in the purple candle stuck in the Chianti bottle, lights it and places it on the small side table between the couch and the front door.

“That’s a nice touch, Stephen,” I say. “Everything looks better in candle light.”

The small room, less than half the size of the kitchen, is sparsely furnished with a blue-green couch that looks like it could have come from my grandmother’s house, one tattered armchair, and a wood-burning stove.

We sit on the rug in front of the sofa. The front door is slightly ajar to encourage a cross breeze through the house, but the night air is warm despite the continued rain. The flickering candlelight flings ghostly apparitions to dance along the walls.

Stephen pours us each a shot glass of whiskey. The liquor scalds my throat, and I like the fire in my belly. Mark and Stephen open up one box of record albums and stack them against the wall next to the couch. Stephen puts *Double Fantasy* on the stereo. “Did

you hear they sentenced that fucking asshole Chapman to life? Too bad he can't fry. Want me to roll a joint?"

"Sure, roll a joint." Mark examines the picture of Lennon and Ono on the album cover. "Shit. What a fucking loss, man. He killed him just a couple of weeks after this album came out."

I lift my glass. "To Lennon." The liquor is molten copper, and my tongue feels thicker by an inch. "Sometimes I sing "Beautiful Boy" to Seth at bedtime. Lennon was fucking astute. The best laid plans, right, and then life happens."

I take another swig of scotch. "The day he was shot, we skipped work early. Went over to Joel's house. Francis, Connie – we were all there. Listening to *Goats Head Soup*. You know how it starts out with "Dancing with Mr. D?" Down in the graveyard ...the air smells, I don't know, smells sweet, smells like I want to puke?" I laugh. "The TV was on, and then there was this news flash that Lennon had been shot."

Stephen finishes rolling the joint on top of the cover of *Cheap Thrills*. "Man, that's kind of freaky."

Stephen passes me the joint and I take a big hit. "Yeah, it was freaky. Will you put on some Big Brother next? You think Janice is fucking Lennon up in Rock & Roll Heaven?"

Mark puts his arm behind my shoulders. "Knowing how much they liked to fuck, I imagine so."

I raise my arms over my head, the joint in one hand and the whiskey glass in the other. "Here's to Janice."

I hand the joint to Mark. He sucks on it until the end glows amber. From between his teeth a hazy, blue cloud appears. “And here’s to you, Ruby. Welcome home.”

I lean over and place my shot glass on the brick floor underneath the wood-burning stove sitting across from us. “Does this thing really work?”

Mark nods. “Sure it works. I made it myself out of an old water heater. Learned how from *Mother Earth News*. Keeps the house nice and toasty in the winter.”

I struggle to stand, and my feet get tangled in my long skirt. I pull the folds of material up around my thighs, and push myself up from the floor using the couch for balance. The room smells of rain and sweat and pot and whiskey.

“What time is it? I gotta get up in the morning – church at eleven.”

Mark takes another drag on the spliff, and speaks through clenched teeth. “Shit, I wouldn’t take you for the church going type.”

Joplin belts out “Another Piece of My Heart.” “*I want you to...*” I sway my hips to the left and sing with the music. “*come on, come on, come...* I’m not the church going type. At least I wasn’t. I hadn’t been to church in ten years. Stephen, you know I was telling you about Garvan? Well, one Sunday he took me to an Episcopal church – St. Andrew’s in south Norman.”

I sway my hips to the right. “It felt really strange at first, I was raised Southern Baptist, and St. Andrew’s is what I’d heard a Catholic church would be like – an altar, incense, candles, a fucking crucifix on the wall. And at the end of the service they had Holy Communion with real bread and real wine. I wasn’t going to move out of the pew, but Garvan kept nudging me in the ribs, “go on, go up.” And the usher at the end of the aisle made a beckoning motion with her hand. So I followed the rest of the people in the

row and I went up to the front and knelt down in front of this rail. The priest came by and stood in front of me. I watched what the others were doing and I stretched out my hands. He put a tiny piece of bread in them, and then whispered the words, “the Body of Christ, the Bread of Heaven.”

I start choking on my words. “I didn’t know what the fuck was happening. I started crying. I couldn’t get up off my knees. It was like I’d come in out of the cold, and I was wet and shivering, and God wrapped me up in a blanket. This sounds crazy, I know, but I felt loved for the first time in many, many years. When I got back home, my head kept saying, “you’re insane, Ruby, you’ve gone over to the dark side.” But when I’m there, in that sanctuary, somehow I feel OK. Sometimes the feeling only lasts until I get home, but sometimes if I’m really lucky, the feeling lasts all week until I can get to church again. I don’t know what it is, but when I’m there I think I can see and taste God. So I keep coming back – week after week.”

Mark offers me the joint. I lean over and take it in my right hand. I take a puff and pass it to Stephen. I sing again. “Break another little piece...you know, I can’t explain what God is any more than a butterfly can explain me. I hate organized religion. I got church shoved down my throat day and night when I was growing up. Everything was a ‘don’t.’” But now I’m all about the ‘do’s.’ Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly.” I pause. “I gotta find the bathroom.” I turn and walk back towards the kitchen.

Within moments I stagger back into the room. Stephen sorts through my albums, and pulls out *Strange Days* by the Doors. I sit on the floor between them and lean over and pick up my shot glass. “Any whiskey left?” Stephen grabs the Black Label, and pours out the last. I take a swig. “I don’t believe the stuff about the devil. I don’t believe in hell.

That's just some bogeyman stories to scare little children. But I do believe in love, cause love is all you need, right?"

I giggle and start singing again. "All you need is love."

Mark puts his arm around my shoulders. "You bet, baby. It's all you need."

I sigh and lean my head back into Mark's arm. I close my eyes and a ring of fire races down the length of my body.

We stretch out our legs. None of us wear shoes, and soon toes stroke toes and bare legs and worn blue jeans. As if following a well rehearsed script, I turn to my left and kiss Stephen. Mark's long thin artist hands fumble with the knot of my halter-top, and when it's undone he pulls the straps down releasing my heavy breasts.

"I'm still nursing, so don't be surprised if there's milk." I turn back to Stephen's mouth, while Mark takes a breast in each of his hands, and then leans over and places a hard, brown nipple in his mouth. I moan. Stephen's hand finds its way to the bottom of my skirt. He pulls it up past my knees, beyond my thighs. His fingers slip under moist panties.

We begin a slow, choreographed dance. We remove our clothes. My bare skin is pale, almost translucent. Blue veins are visible in my hands and chest. A river of stretch marks extends from my pubic bone to above my belly button. Both Stephen and Mark have farmer's tans – their necks and arms clearly showing the lines of t-shirts. Soon the room is full of hands – caressing, probing, searching hands. The room is full of tongues and lips and mouths – hungry, licking, sucking mouths. The room is full of cries, whimpers, laughter, and barely whispered words intended for no one's ears. Mark fucks with long, slow determined strokes. Stephen's thrusts are quick and furtive. I break open,

rising and falling with each orgasm – spreading, arching, giving, obliging, fully and utterly compliant.

~

I wake to silence. The purple candle has burned down; wax covers the small table, and has dripped onto the wooden floor. The storm has passed over; there is no breeze.

The air hangs heavy like a wet sheet.

I am wedged between Mark and Stephen, my head on Mark's chest and Stephen pressed against my back. I smell burnt oatmeal and apples.

Fuck. Oven. Crisp. Forgot.

I extricate myself from the molded bodies. My head feels heavy and I'm overcome by a wave of nausea.

Still drunk. Drink water.

I pad into the kitchen on bare feet. The room is drenched with light from a full moon, which sits in the porcelain sink and colors the wall with honey. I turn off the oven and look inside.

Big mess. Too tired. Tomorrow.

I close the oven door, and turn on the cold-water faucet. I splash water on my face and neck, make a bowl out of my hands and sip water from them like a cat. The water is cool and drips down my chin, between my breasts and onto my belly. Moonlight caresses my shoulders.

I stare transfixed by a shimmer of silver in the field.

Pond. No fence. Dangerous. Watch kids.

Clarity is starting to return. I turn and gaze at the sleeping figures on the floor in the living room. Stephen has turned over onto his back, and his cock looks small and vulnerable. Mark lies on his side, curled in a fetal position. I reach down and touch the dampness between my thighs. I tremble.

Whatcha got yourself into now, Ruby? Shit. New potholes.