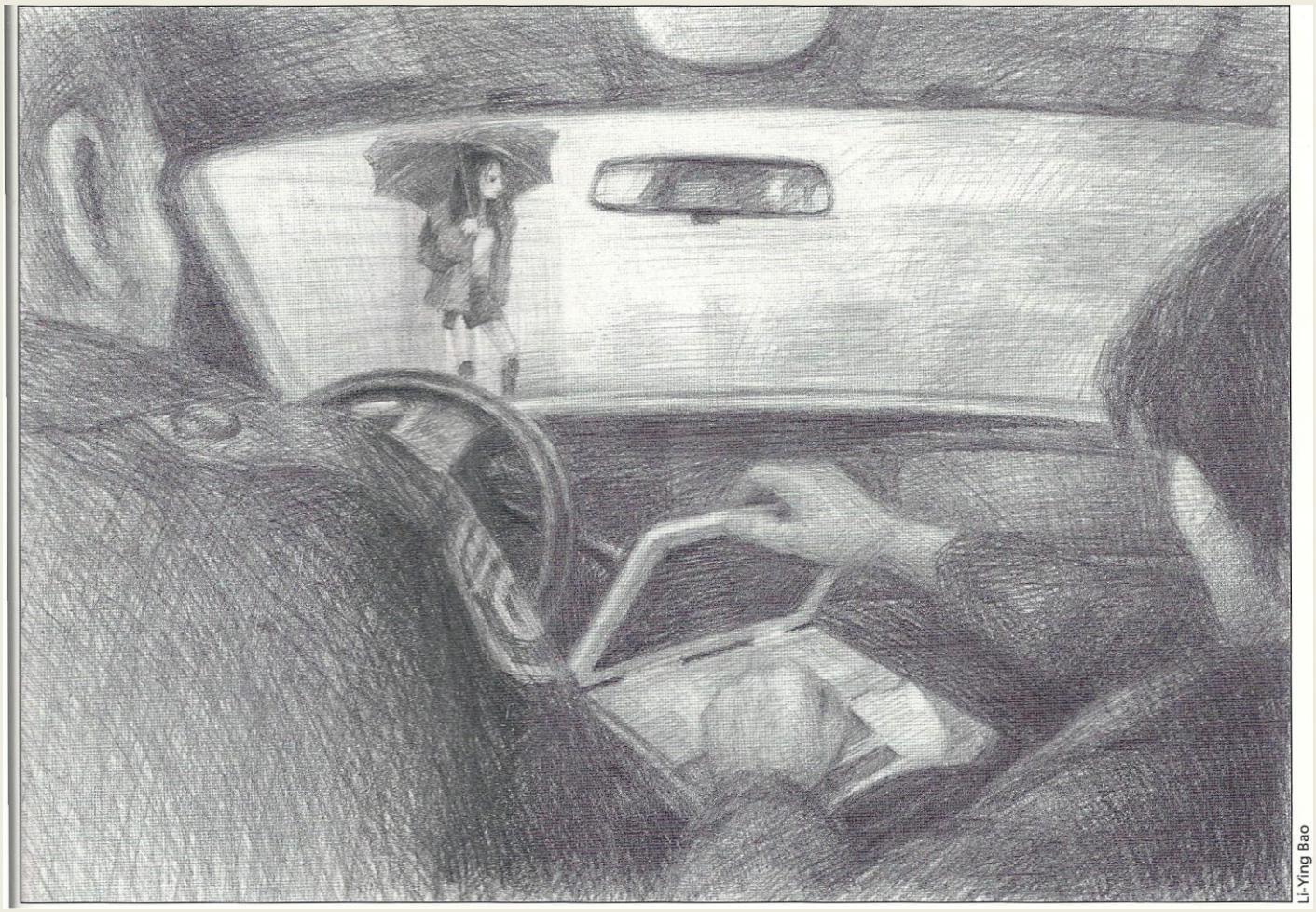
The Cop, the Hooker and the Ridealong

A **STORY BY JULIE BRICKMAN**



At 7 a.m. Sunday morning, a police cruiser settles in front of our house. CIU is painted on the side in large blue letters and black vertical bars rib the back windows. I can make out the silhouette of a portly officer in the driver's seat, his neck swiveled to watch a house across the street.

My husband and I live on a quiet, residential street near the summit of a hill, far from the center of town. Broad and spacious in one direction, our road is cramped in the other, a harrowing drive around elbow turns where a micro moment of inattention could afflict or derange an existence. The back side of our house looks out on a canyon. We can stand at the window and gaze down at soaring birds, redtailed hawks, crows, mockingbirds. In the distance, on a clear day, we can see the Pacific ocean, a deep teal color in yesterday's sun.

This is the second time I've seen a police cruiser parked here. Last time, they investigated the neighbor kitty-corner across the street. Fred Wilson. Tall and thin and silver haired, Fred's a friendly man, always tinkering in his garage late into the night, the fluorescent lights glowing into the black pitch of the air. He and his wife used to spend the summers back east, in Connecticut people said, though I've never seen his wife. Zerine, next door, says she's a recluse, but someone else suggested she was ill. Because I saw a large woman go into the house one day last month, I imagine Fred's wife as obese, though in a cozy way, zaftig like an aunt from the old country who was comfortable in a vast, homey body, not possible here in California where fat is an indignity and aging rude.

Out back, a couple of deer are grazing on the brush, which almost makes me forget the sadness. At night, I roll pictures through my mind of all the beautiful sights and colors of each day. The deer, their tawny necks bent to feed, raise them still as steel, so I can see the flare of their moist black noses, arched and velvety at the end of tapered snouts.

Their ears cock to gather vibrations, silent to me, and the round swell of their eyes look startled and soft, sorrowful I think. Some nights there are no pictures.

CIU stands for Criminal Investigation Unit I discover when I go out for the newspaper. On impulse, I walk over to the cruiser. A bloated, sweaty officer is taking notes on the computer screen mounted on the dash.

"Would you like a cup of coffee?" Awkward, I forget to say, in a little to go cup, out here.

"No, ma'am:' he says, twisting his sloping bulk in an attempt to shield the screen from what he assumes are snooping eyes.

"I just brewed some," I say, turning.

When he sees me start to leave without asking what's going on, he adds, "Just had a big cup. Thank you, though."

I realize, back in the kitchen, that he didn't just think I was prying. He thought I was inviting him in.

I used to work with police, teach them things they didn't want to know ....

Years ago, when I was still a psychologist, I used to work with police, teach them things they didn't want to know about stress and human emotions. I rode in the patrol cars with them to find out what it was like. "Come on welfare night:' they'd snigger. The night welfare checks were distributed it was showtime on the streets, welfare and the full moon.

The first night I went out, a big burly cop tapped me for his car. Unusual: police don't like to have strangers in their cars, especially social science types, muddled by theory and too soft in the heart. But Max's partner was down with a flu, which later became pneumonia, and he wanted someone to work the radio in case of an emergency.

We cruised the downtown pedestrian mall where only black and whites and buses could drive. Pierced, tattooed, spiky-haired teenagers milled in front of glitzy shops, their music pouring into the crowds from loudspeakers and boom boxes. In the shadows, in recessed crannies where police eyes roamed long before mine, the shady deals went on. Folded into the darkness lurked the petty thieves, the pickpockets, the drug dealers, the methed-up, junked-down, ecstasied freaks on their fast descent into brutality, chicanery and death. In the incandescent brilliance of the station, Max introduced me to a haggard, sniveling woman, ashen behind the thick strokes of black eyeliner encircling bloodshot eyes. How old, he asked. I shrugged, thirty, maybe forty; who could tell. Eighteen, he said. Six months on the streets.

In the seedy part of town, where vagrants and drunks staggered through the streets and flophouses abounded, Max drove me through hooker territory. They each have their corner, he explained, and they don't mooch on each other's turf. Beside the Italian pool hall and cappuccino bar, where I sometimes hung out by day, he pulled up next to a woman, shivering in a white fur jacket and stiletto boots.

" ew meat on the street?"

She leaned into the car, nodded.

"Well, don't go down a block from here. You could get yourself hurt."

She wouldn't, thanks.

"There's some real nasty pimps hang out down there. Stay away from them." He looked her up and down, real slow. "You look like a nice girl. What d'you do by day?"

"I'm a nurse:' she acknowledged, with an embarrassed laugh. "But I have a child, a daughter. You just can't get by on what nurses make."

He nodded, serious like. "Times are tough. You protected?"

"My mum was a hooker. She taught me the ropes."

"Well, good luck to you, sweet pea. And if you get in trouble, don't be afraid to call. The cops you see out here, they're after the johns. We got a new program going. But ask for me, Max. Ya got that?"

"Max:' she said. "I'm Jeanne. J E ANN E."

Harlow, I thought. Because I associated cherry lips, wet with mystery, with harlot and figured it was brave to place one's future so near a concept that meant ruin.

We pulled away and I asked about the program. "Wuss whackers," he said. "We take their ID, write down their names, ask if their wives know they're out here. Or their bosses. How would they like it if we published their names. Tell them we keep a list, for health reasons. List all the diseases they could get. Describe how their balls'll rot. By the time we're done, they're most of 'em are just glad to go home."

"Do you arrest any of them?"

"Nah."

I can hear my husband creep around the house, his hands squealing along on the two banisters we've installed, as he steers himself down the stairs. It's been almost three years since the first symptom of his disease appeared, an inability to run on the mini-trampoline. Six months after that, he said, "There's something weird going on."

It was early in the morning on a Sunday like this one. I was lolling in bed, luxuriating in the topaz light jewelling the canyon, in the sight of him lissome as the mountain lion he always looked for when we hiked. Now there was a bewildered look in his pond blue eyes. "My left leg won't do what my brain tells it."

Outside, the sea is gray today, the sky pale. The fishing boat is gone; in its place is the triangular white sail of a yacht, bobbing cheerfully on the small waves. Every night at dusk, a fishing boat chugs across the cove and, as the sun falls, a luminous spotlight shines from its side, as if a full moon has dropped right onto the deck to beam a path across the sea. A giant omniscient eye of light glows across the water and dispenses safety to that dark dark harbor. Shrimping, my husband explained, who had fished for a year up in the north part of the state. In bed, I hold fast to that

●

image of a beacon in the dark, let the roll of the dream-sea soothe me, until I drop at last into the tomb of sleep.

I suspect Fred Wilson is a batterer. It's the only reason I can conjure for the police to visit his house so regularly. Fred is too charming, I reflect, and his friendliness acquires an undercurrent of brooding anger. There is a story there, I feel sure. His wife hides in the house to staunch his jealous rages. He hoards all the money, dribbles Georges and Abes, a few Andies, out for groceries; come to think of it, I never see her shop. Or drive; both cars belong to him. Nor does she walk, though everyone around here walks. The streets are hilly, steep, great for aerobics; the weather is always mild; even the men walk, pumping small weights in their going-to-flab arms, breathing in heavy puffs like they're toning up for a marathon. Even when Zerine had a party for the neighbors, Fred came alone. I wonder if his wife is broken. Bruised on her face, or god help her, in her soul, like Jeanne would be now, if she'd made the wrong decision in the conundrum she faced when last I saw her.

Every time we rode together, Max took me to see Jeanne. Always she was standing there, on the corner beside the coffee bar and pool hall, tall and shivering in her fox fur, her hair piled in a brazen display of loops and curls, totemic in stature and pizzazz. Her skirts were short, her boots tall, and whenever she spotted us she strode over to the car.

"How's it goin'?"

"Got my girl in the Fraser," she said, shy-proud like a runaway who made it through her first day back at school. *"My* girl in the Fraser."

Max let out a hoot so prolonged it turned into a howl. "I'd better put myoId lady on the streets;' he joshed. "You're doin' well, girl. Watch yer back."

The Fraser, he groused when we pulled away. The fuckin' Fraser. He was happy for her all the same.

The disobedient foot seemed to be benign, Shane's primary care physician announced, but just to be sure he sent Shane to a neurologist, a specialist in Parkinson's. Parkinson's: all Shane's life he's dreaded the disease. His father had it, and once he tumbled on the steps of the Botanical Gardens and Shane, fourteen and immobilized, let him struggle to his feet on his own. A year ago, Shane's older brother, a rancher in Wyoming, had developed it. The look on Shane's face when he told me! Long and slack and inutterably sad. But nowhere near as unsettling as the look he gets now: the well of vulnerability in the half-open eyes, the drooping curve of his no longer mobile mouth, the sad downward slope of his thin shoulders, the flash of fear and sharpened awareness. I want to take him in my arms and rock him, but his balance is so chancy, I could tip him into a fall. Rocking has become too violent a movement. "You've got The Look;' I say.

The Parkinson's doctor diagnosed neuropathy, and Shane came away reassured. He could do physical therapy or not; it wouldn't make the neuropathy disappear faster, though it might strengthen the foot.

Art is supposed to transform tragedy, but I have come to guess it's the other way around. Tragedy transforms art.

I get a peek into Fred Wilson's garage one day when he's on a tinker. Stacked against the far wall, impossible to see when both cars are tucked safely in their slots, is canvas after canvas of stunning acrylics. Three of them are facing outward, the most recent in the thick stacks of ten, maybe twelve paintings. I fetch the binoculars I use to watch wildlife in the canyon and train them on the pictures.

We live in a town of artists, profuse with galleries, festivals, and a summer pageant of *tableaux vivants* in which people are costumed and posed as famous sculptures and paintings each night. In our neighborhood, Zerine paints in brash sweeping watercolors and down the street Elaine Frick weaves textured wall hangings. The couple who rent have a life-sized figure standing on his hands poised in their window; in his bright blue coveralls, he looks zany in the daylight, apocalyptic at night. There is nothing extraordinary about paintings in a garage. I catch a glimpse of monochromes of aqua and green, tangerines and golds, liquid as emotion.

Fred closes the garage door, and its mechanical whir floats across the street to where I'm standing in our sunken patio, straining this way and that to try to find a decent angle. Eye level from the pit where I'm craning, our garden blazes into a palette of wild colors, chaotic and disorderly and insanely beautiful. Behind the padlocked iron gate to his yard, Fred Wilson's plants are ordered neatly into lines of pots, ending with a wheelbarrow of red geraniums. The faded brown shingles on his house are soft with rot.

Fred walks across the street. "Livia?"

I let the binoculars slide onto the slate and walk out to the mailbox.

"How's the work going," he asks. Our house lay somewhere between fixer-upper and total-teardown when we bought it, the balconies so decayed you could put your foot through the planks, and we've been remodeling since the day we moved.

"Great," I say, though we're going to have to sell it, it has too many steps. "We're almost finished the exterior."

"Those balconies look larger than the ones you had before. You get a permit?"

"They're the same, exactly."

His nod is sympathetic. "That Design Board's a bear, I hear. Backed up over a year just to get window permits. Tom, down the street, they turned him down, you know; he's been fighting with them ever since. He'll never get a thing done. They can make it so you can't stay in this town." He gives me a warm smile. Strands of his silvery hair, ruffled by the breeze, drop across his eyes, shadowing a frown onto his brow, which he shakes off with the abrupt upward movement that means *no* in some countries and *don't mess with me* in others.

In the summer, Shane and I traveled up to the north coast of Oregon to meet his brother and family for a weekend. Shane's brother, Earl, trudged slowly down the beach, his motionless right arm thrust into the pocket of his jeans. Shane slowed down to walk with him in the quiet way he would when we hiked together. "It gives me the chance to look," he'd say, strolling behind me, gazing at every vista, explaining to his New Jersey girl the California plants, the saucy yellow monkey flowers, the twisted branches of manzanitas, and the tree-tall spires of the yucca whose time to flower is right before it dies. I can see him now, beside his brother, two six-foot figures, one thin and lanky, blond hair feathering in the breeze, the other thick and sturdy, black billed cap covering his thatch of deer-brown hair. Their talk looked intense, but I know Shane was doing most of the listening. He probably drew up a list of questions to ask his brother before we even started on the journey.

She snuggled back in her chair. She had someth i ng I didn't and it made being here bearable.

Shane walks up and down the hall, the Parkinson's doctor watching him. The onset of weakness in his hand has escalated concern; you don't get two neuropathies unless the brain or the spinal cord is involved. Shane's left leg swings in a little arc with each step, lending a slight jerky motion to his gait. The doctor shakes his head. "It's not Parkinson's," he says. "Definitely not Parkinson's." I ask how he can tell.

"The Parkinson's gait is stiff, not plastic like this one. Small, rigid steps. Usually a shortened arm swing too, if there's any swing at all."

"And Shane's gait?"

"Spastic," he says. "The muscles aren't following through. They stop partway, pull back, instigate that little jerking motion." He points towards Shane's foot. The front is sloped towards the floor, as if gravity is exerting more force on the toe than the heel. Smooth and bantam, the arc reminds me of the undulating motion of a pendulum.

"You need a neuromuscular specialist," the doctor says.

The police cruiser is parked in front of our house again. It is late in the evening. Vestiges of salmon-colored twilight smear the charcoaling summer sky. The men in the cruiser dally for awhile, conferring I assume, though it takes a very long time.

Once when Max and I had gone to answer a domestic, he'd pounded on the door then leapt aside, shouting, "Police. Open up." When I hadn't followed suit, he grabbed my arm and yanked me over beside him. "It's a domestic," he hissed. "You never stand in front of the door in case they answer with a gun." The two cops ply open the front gate and bound to Fred's front door, where they scatter, one to each side.

Fred's house is obscured by layers of fence and garden. Darkness consumes the threshold and the two officers and the wash of yellow light are quickly swallowed behind the thick, closed door. The cantaloupe streaks in the sky have dimmed and faraway streetlights are visible in the coal of night. I can see headlights moving along the Coast Highway, but, unlike the lantern eye in the harbor, they don't look friendly; they look lost and unsteady, weaving down a road far from home, popping in and out of view. Cold has descended with the dark, and a shivery feeling races across my skin.

The shivery feeling reminds me of the day Jeanne called my office.

"I have to see you," she announced. "Right away."

It took a while to find out who was calling, but when I did I said to come right over.

"Tonight," she replied. "Before my shift." She meant street, not nursing, shift. She meant after her daughter had been tucked safely into her expensive bed and an elderly babysitter had been installed in the living room, but before she hit the streets.

I was used to this kind of call. I got a lot of referrals from police, sexual assault centers, agencies that took in street kids. For reasons I never could identify, I'd gotten a reputation that I could be trusted. I think it was simply because I didn't equate bad luck or bad judgment with bad character, didn't confuse the result with the cause. Back then, to understand women's lives was radical; it gave me a reputation for being a tough babe, a feminist when to be a feminist meant something strong and edgy.

Plus I let people lie. I understood that the truth was too diminishing to bear except in glimpses, that they needed to make fictions from their experience just to get to sleep at night and back up in the morning. *Storying,* they called it, when they invented dreams about circumstances other than their own. Once they'd harvested enough resources to put the truthugly in spite of all the artistic claims about it - in a landscape vast enough to make it small, they would tell it. Truth had to be cut down to size or it would assault you again.

Jeanne came in at 9:30, a half hour later than we'd agreed. She was wearing jeans, tattered at the knee, and a ribbed black tee shirt. Her dusty hair was clipped short around her face, which made me realize the heap of black curls was a wig. Without the heavy makeup, her lips looked meaty but not as wide as I remembered, and the ginger of her eyes faded into her face, lightly spattered with freckles and shaped like a spade. Her lashes were short, her pale eyebrows plucked into inverted vees as though permanently lifted in shock. Her buttocks barely grazed the rim of the chair and she hunched forward, hands splayed on her thighs, so her weight rested mainly on her tensed legs. Undecided she was, in spite of the urgency of her call.

The chairs in my office were soft brown leather armchairs, vaguely Scandinavian in design. A marble side

●

table, shaped like a half moon, rested flush against the wall; the tiny lamp on top emitted low light. I kept the therapy chairs angled slightly toward the windows, so my visitors could look out or at me, as they chose. Jeanne opted to seize my attention with her eyes before she started.

"I'm really fine," she said. "I don't know why I called you." "It's always hard to figure that out."

"Really? Other people don't know?"

"If they do, they're usually just making something up."

"Lying?" She made the word sound casual, musical, though her torso tensed.

"Motivating themselves. Giving themselves a reason to get here."

She sat back a little. "I can make a hundred thousand dollars," she said. "For a few hours of mega work. Maybe ten grand an hour."

"Oh?"

"Bet that's more than you make."

I laughed. "For sure, I don't make that in an hour." "In a month?"

"No. Not in a year."

She snuggled back in her chair. She had something I didn't and it made being here bearable. Relaxed, she began to cry. At first it was just moisture running from her eyes and her open mouth and nostrils, but then it seemed to gather steam, because it escalated into a gasping wail, and all her body went into participating, her heaving shoulders and abdomen, her jiggling shaking anxious legs.

It was not the kind of sob that needed Kleenex; the very act of handing her a tissue would inhibit the flow, so I sat and looked out the window, trying to give her the quiet acceptance she needed. The night was tar dark, and a watery light fell from the street lamp, making everything in its corona look blurry. I realized then that it was raining, a daily event in this northwestern city of tall boreal trees and profuse flora. It had been misty all day, the sky leaking a dampness that clung to the skin in a clammy film, but now a light rain slanted outside the window, one of those spacious rains in which every drop glides slowly along its own trajectory, mirroring for brief seconds the entire world on tiny rotating cylinders, reflecting birch bark and spruce boles and pine needles, the bright light of a window, the bowing fronds of a willow, a floppy-brimmed hat, the glint of a lost trinket, all of which seemed to be sliding and falling, as though the raindrops were motionless and the world topsy turvy, and suddenly I saw the two of us, Jeanne and me, in brown leather chairs, toppling and somersaulting, the lamp and the half-moon of the marble table tumbling with us, all strangely stuck in precise arrangement to each other while we rotated and swirled, and I turned back to look at Jeanne whose sobs were subsiding.

"Mwaah mwah fyah mwaaah." She looked up at me as though she were saying words, so I nodded.

Her eyes closed again and when she opened them, she gave her head a shake, stretched her arms in front of her, and said. "Can't believe I fell asleep like that. How much time do we have?"

"Enough," I replied, though we were already running over. First sessions often flitted around the fiery center of a problem. I reeled my mind backwards through the rain to retrieve what she'd been saying before she'd started to cry and realized it was money. The hundred grand.

"I was twelve," she said, "when my mom first introduced me to the life. I was early to develop, had my period for two years already. I felt, like, crazed with this Colossal Lust. Everywhere, suddenly, all I saw was boys. I couldn't think, I couldn't talk, I could barely see. But every night, I had my chance. Down would go my hands, rubbing, cuddling, fingering, until I found everywhere that felt good, the sweet satiny place behind and the little bud in front. Five, six times a night, and still it wasn't enough. I was at a Catholic school, you know, 'cause my mom knew. She'd been the same, and she said it would never go away. It was a talent, sex, the same as being gifted in athletics, and it needed mega attention. I was fourth generation, she told me, proud as all get-out; my great great whatever grandmother had been a good time girl in the Yukon gold rush. She promised to oversee my training when I was old enough, and she did."

"How was that?" I asked.

"She started me off herself. She stripped me naked and stood me in front of a mirror, showing me all my parts, front and back, using a hand mirror to let me see everything between my legs. Then she took me to bed and taught me every sexy part of my anatomy."

"And?"

"Then she brought in men. Small ones at first, not the guys, but the pricks:'

I smiled at the explanation. Not that she needed encouragement. This was a story she wanted to tell.

She seemed to relish every detail. The first man had been Pierre, a French Canadian. In her mother's day, the French had been renown as lovers, and Pierre was skilled but small; perfect to start with. That moment of entry! Never had she known such sweetness! But that was not what her mother had in mind by training. Once she had learned the ecstasy part of the trade, the love of pleasure that kept a whore at the top of the game, her mother taught her the skills, like how to clean up a man before you touched him or roll on a condom without his missing a beat; how to use your tongue to craze him or deep throat him or take him round the world.

Jeanne's face had a look of bliss that made me wonder what Eve had really known, and I sensed her reluctance to move on. "So what's troubling you?" I asked.

She bucked in her seat and glanced down at her watch. "Omigod," she cried. "Gotta go. I've got a regular, twenty minutes ago." She looked up at me and gave me a sly, sexy smile, cunning as a ray of sun as it fanned from behind a storm cloud. "You're just like me. You get a client going and they don't want to leave."

The spell of the session lingered between us, even as I explained confidentiality rules and where they ended: threats of violence to herself or others. Rising to leave, she cocked her head at me and cooed in her girlish voice of memory, "God, I feel better," and we set another time.

People think you get stories when you do psychotherapy but you don't. No one ever tells you about the floral bedspread that lay lightly over them as they listened to the summer crickets, or how they laughed on the Ferris wheel when they discovered they weren't scared at the top. I never found out anything about Jeanne's second profession, not how many tricks she turned in a week, nor what she actually did with them, nor whether women made offers. She worked three nights, short shifts, and the money was all hers; she didn't have an old man, aka a pimp, which was why she'd chosen a peripheral corner. I did find out, when we talked about fees - she always paid cash and never wanted a receipt - that she also had a sliding scale. And when it became relevant, she confided that the best relationship of her life had been with her mother, in a bungalow full of laughter and kindness on the endowment properties out on the peninsula. Her mother had died of Hodgkin's lymphoma, thirty-seven years, four months, and three days into her life, six months before Jeanne finished nursing college, eleven months before she gave birth to her own daughter.

The halls are dim and grimy, too narrow for two people to pass without brushing.

Whenever anyone talks about assisted suicide as an act of mercy, they say, *But what if you get Lou Gehrig's disease?* While Shane was still certain he had atypical Parkinson's, I was madly reading about other neurological conditions that started with a dropped foot and progressed laterally to weakness in the hand.

The second entry on the Mayo Clinic website was Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis. The signs could be subtle, the doctors wrote, like "difficulty lifting the front part of your foot (footdrop)" or a weak, clumsy hand. Typically, the disease began in the limbs and then spread as weakness to all parts of the body, eventually affecting chewing, swallowing, speaking, breathing, and ending in general paralysis of all voluntary systems. Death usually occurred three to five years after symptom onset. That night, I slept on the pullout sofa so I could toss and weep in fear. In our bedroom, Shane, still innocent (could I keep him that way?), slumbered in his illusions, perhaps dream-building the plan for world peace he yearned to generate, perhaps dream-visiting the island off the coast of Turkey where he'd taught rebellious French children in an experimental school. Was it possible my next years were going to be spent, not going to Norway to study an evolved culture or to Israel to hesitantly explore my roots, but watching the person I loved most in the universe go through cruel agonies? Be robbed of every function while his crystal mind understood every step? Yet even then, my imagination failed to generate the horror of it, which lay in its very dailyness, the relentless decimation of every human power. There is no adjusting to ALS. It changes everything, nerve by nerve, day by day. A Biblical word suits it. Affliction.

Monday morning, I called the Parkinson's doctor and left a message. "Tell me, I said, "how did you eliminate ALS?" Neither the doctor nor his nurse called me back.

At the harbor, my husband and I spy an odd little bird, strutting along on thin orange stilts. His little gams take him faster than the three-foot-plus shanks of my spastic husband. Shaped like a heron, the bird has the rickety gait of a sandpiper and the long pointed beak of a fishing bird. His small but not insubstantial body is a mottled buff and brown, and iridescent tufts plume his crown and striate his stubby neck. On little spindles, he goose steps over to the side of the pier, making my husband and me laugh out loud at the silliness of his stride. Dockside, he peeks over the edge and then draws himself erect to elongate his neck. Stretch, stretch, stretch, he extends his wattled neck until it looks as long and graceful as the curve of a swan or even a great blue heron, which turns out to be his relative. And then this American bittern, this solitary creature of the coastal bays and marshes, steps delicately onto a mooring rope and tilts the rondure of his neck all the way to the water, closing his beak over something which we can only see as he steps backwards to safety, a silvery minnow curled in his mouth. Fluffing his feathers, he tosses off droplets and struts forth to another mooring rope to repeat the process. Cloud Chaser asserts the name on the prow of the yacht and I glance up to see the gossamer shapes of my favorite fantasies scud out to sea.

Max and I are out again, his partner's pneumonia having taken a turn for the worse. Just as we head towards Jeanne's corner, an urgent call comes in from the dispatcher. By now, I have run training sessions for dispatchers and complainttakers, know they assess danger on several scales at once, including threats to life, risk to personnel, and crimes currently in progress. This one involves a belligerent drunk in a crime-infested hotel; it's hard to assess the danger level but so far it's victimless.

Max whips down a side street away from Jeanne's post and flicks on the lights and the siren. It surprises me how few drivers pull over, even when we zoom right up their tails, red and blue lights atwirl in their rear view mirrors. The sirens, I understand, can't be heard over the blare of music and talk radio. Max loops around a Toyota and a surprised Asian face looks out the window.

In front of a dingy red brick building, Max double parks and hands me the mobile radio. "Call if you think I'm in

●

trouble;' he orders, motioning me to follow him. Not another patrol car is in sight, though if it were a robbery in progress, Max would sit tight until at least one or more backups converged on the scene.

The halls are dim and grimy, too narrow for two people to pass without brushing. The stench of boiled vegetables and human excrement mingles in the damp, suffocating air. The smell of piss could be booze, it occurs to me, as I inhale the pungent smokiness of tobacco or marijuana and try not to wheeze or choke. Max strides forward, not bothering to assess the sounds bleeding through the doors, voices underscored with music that might be TV sets left to play or arguments in progress. It is after one a.m.

On the second floor of the walkup is the flat we are looking for. Max pounds on the door and shouts, but doesn't wait long before he places his big meaty hand on the knob. It is unlocked and he goes right in, keeping his gun holstered, though I know he is mentally prepared to draw it in a flash. In the corner of the room, an old man, surrounded by pools of vomit, groans and shivers in a rocking chair.

"Hey, buddy." Max kneels next to him. "You ok, there?" The old man moans and starts to gag, and Max leans away from the potential trajectory. When the puking sounds stop, he wraps his arms around the bony quivering torso and pulls the limp body into his own bulky frame. "Okay, buddy, let's get you to a hospital. You're too sick to stay here."

The old man is wearing a threadbare kimono that was a green and burgundy plaid before it faded. It is covered with wet patches of puke and body wastes that have slipped out his flaccid sphincter or slavered from some other failing muscles, and the odor of his unwashed flesh and clothing is sour and pungent. His unshaved whiskers grow white and patchy, and hair the color of wet rocks lies in a matted tangle against his skull. The veins at his temples throb like plucked guitar strings, and I feel sure they bong a drone into the ache of his brain.

Max wraps his big arms around the dying wino and halfdrags, half-carries him to the door. "We'll take him ourselves, if the medics don't get here;' he announces. Cued, I call in the request to dispatch, while Max bear hugs the grimy old thug and marches him to the street. No one in the building notices; used to it, I guess.

Outside, an ambulance is waiting, and I can hear the paramedics grumble how the ER staff will hate this one. They flop the old man onto a gurney and pull the straps too tight, making as if to hold clips to their noses.

Back in the patrol car, Max says, "Old meat on the street. Carve that in your brain."

I nod, though that wasn't what I learned. I learned that cops like Max go into places no one else will go and touch people no one else will touch. It made them mean and bitter or it gave them a compassion so deep they hid it away. And it never ever turned up in their war stories.

Fred Wilson catches me as I'm starting out on a ramble around the neighborhood slopes. "Zerine says your husband can hardly walk any more. You need anything, honey, you be sure to call me." He matches his pace to mine.

I can feel the blade of his presence, just inside the margin of space I need to be comfortable and I angle my stride to get away. He steps into my space again, but this time it feels tranquilizing.

Fred's not a walker; he's a gardener and a putterer and a motorer, but he doesn't hike the local streets. His breathing is coming out in short puffs, and thin and elegant as he is, I wonder about the strength of his heart. His polished loafers clatter against the blacktop; not even shod in rubber soles, he didn't intend to go for a walk.

We walk along in silence, uneasy as choppy water. My mind races unpleasantly over things to say and objections to saying them as we pass the homes I know so well: Louey's dilapidated mansion rising from the nurtured blooms of her desert garden; the life-size stuffed jester of the renters cavorting upside down in the window; the cedar-tinted craftsman of Nosy Alice and Big Walt.

In front of the slope that's underpinned with steel girders strong enough to hold up a suspension bridge, Fred almost leaps in front of me, and I crash into him as he bids wait, stop, in a forbidding tone. The two of us teeter back and forth and it reminds me of the last time I walked with Shane. Shane was using a cane then, and I traipsed slowly alongside him, careful not to speak, for if I startled him, he could topple. When a car rumbled in the distance, I would zag to the center of the road to be sure, seeing me, they'd leave a wide margin. One day, as I was zigging back, our shoes brushed against each other, his to mine or mine to his, I don't remember. All I know is he teetered, teetered, teetered, and then plummeted full tilt to the ground. "Don't," he snapped, when I went to help him, as he hunkered in the brush near the curb, making plans for how he would get to his feet, gathering his courage to do so. It was the last time we walked the neighborhood together.

"Don't take another step," Fred warns, and creeps gingerly forward towards a cluster of rocks, where he bends over and peers at what appears to be a stick.

I go over, in spite of the hand he flaps behind him to warn me off, and the stick slithers towards us. I can see by its markings, it's a baby rattler.

"Watch it." Fred yanks me away from the curb. "They don't have the sense not to strike. And their venom is lethal."

He leaves his hand on my elbow, and I can feel the venom race through my imagination. I shudder him off and he removes his arm, as if stung.

"My wife was bit by one of those," he says.

I stare without meaning to. I'm wondering if he led her to it and ridiculing the thought at the same time. The baby rattler stretches its diamond-backed body, pale green like the branch of a sapling, down the steep side of the curb, and it reminds me of the bittern Shane and I saw, dipping his neck into the harbor. The rattler slithers gracefully across the street.

"What happened?" 1 ask, but Fred is looking around. "Kids," he says. "We can't let kids near it."

"Dogs either," 1 agree.

"I'll watch over it, and you warn anybody who's out."

1 stride up and down the street, warning people. There aren't any kids, but several people are out with their dogs. Only one is off leash, and the rear of his thick body squirms as his tail thrashes out a happy rhythm. 1 grab his collar and the owner snaps the leash onto it, giving me a grateful smile. They both turn and 1 watch them wiggle waggle together up the slope.

"All clear," Fred calls. The rattler has climbed the other curb and disappeared into the chaparral.

That was what sex did; it opened up the abundance of experience.

Jeanne came for a half dozen more sessions, each one following roughly the same pattern. 1 learned a lot from those sessions, not the least to celebrate lust, starting with my own gentle hands.

Once Jeanne said that she'd discovered something her mother had never taught her.

"What was that:' 1 asked, by now way too eager for her stories.

"I can hit the moon by fantasy alone."

"No:' 1 said, knowing the challenge would provoke her.

"Absolutely. There's a secret to it." Her voice tailed off and hesitation suffused her face with a blend of defiance and wanness.

I looked at her, my expression serious and still.

"You're gonna laugh at me."

"Have 1 ever laughed at you?"

She laughed herself, a peal of joy. "I could do it right now, with you."

"Here we use words:' 1 instructed, as much to myself as her.

"Meditation:' she said. "You have to focus so hard you are your cunt."

1 could feel myself imagining it. All of me became two soft upright curving lips, pink as oysters, perfumed as roses and mulch, and there in the center the well of life, tunneling to the core, the very essence of me. It wasn't hard to envision. As a therapist I believed most people thought with their genitals half the time.

"Ok," I said. "Then what."

"Then you add the action."

And there it was. The pulse; the very beat of life. The opening up to the world.

"You can do it!" Jeanne could see sensuality like I could ee emotion.

"Probably," I said, drawing back.

After that, you become the prick. The great swelling vulnerable sensitive sponge that you pretend is a club, a volcano, a gun, a torpedo."

I laughed. This is what you shared with your mother, I thought. Intimacy and joy.

She went on to describe how she mingled the two images into action, enabling herself to hit the moon anytime, anyplace. Later, she'd step back like a voyeur, examine it from a distance, invent whole scenarios she'd play out with clients, if they agreed to her prices. She could get up to a thousand dollars a trick for one of these, but it spoiled them as private fantasies, so she only sold them when they stopped enchanting her.

It was time to stop. Jeanne had mentioned money again, and I knew next time we'd circle back to the question that had brought her.

The appointment with the neuromuscular specialist was at a university medical center hospital, about a half hour ride from our house. An easy drive, the route took us along wide campus boulevards, where tall palms formed spiky mops of green against the sunny blue of the sky, past the university theater where we used to watch foreign films, when we still went out. The medical center was a large unassuming structure set back along a winding drive. Shane spotted the silvery coat of a coyote moving along a path in the dry grasses of a distant bluff.

It was early and the neurology waiting room was empty except for a man of about seventy who walked perfectly well. A nurse in beige scrubs beckoned Shane into a cubbyhole, where an inlaid platform scale, big enough to roll a wheelchair onto, let her chart his height, 6 feet, and weight, which had fallen to 152. At the rump of a crooked corridor, she installed us in a dingy, corner room. Angled like a hypotenuse across the center, the examining table looked exposed and vulnerable. The nurse guided Shane onto it, handed him a crumpled hospital gown, and left. Tiny orange guppies wriggled across the fabric, making Shane, swinging his thin bare legs against the side of the gurney, look frail and diminished. Chrome carts, unplugged machines, and rolling tray tables were stashed in corners, and the grimy mishmash reminded me of the old wino's lodgings, though for some reason what offended me was a vacant bookcase that sagged against wall.

Clipboard in hand, a neurology resident bustled in to take a history. "What was your first symptom?"

"A neuropathy in my left foot."

"When did you notice it?"

"Nine months ago, in January." Shane looked at me. "No:' I said. "The first symptom was earlier, last August, over a year ago. When you couldn't lift your feet on the rebounder."

We summarized all the developments through the Parkinson's doctor, the MRIs and CT scans, all of which had been forwarded. The resident tapped Shane's knee and ankle, looking for jumpy reflexes, and then slid a door key along

●

the bottom of Shane's foot. Clinically, the response to this is a sure way to identify motor neuron disease, as are bilateral fasciculations or contractions of the tongue. Shane evidenced neither, though his reflexes were hyperactive, and he kicked the rookie neurologist several times. Clonus, the resident muttered, embarrassed that he'd forgotten to get out of the way. Shane's startle response was immense.

The senior neurologist was younger than I expected, in his thirties, with a pouchy, pockmarked face. He wore a dark suit as somber as his sad, hanging expression, and I found it all infinitely depressing. The ugliness denigrated the two of us and whole implicit trajectory of love, disease and death.

It was then I discovered Shane had all kinds of symptoms he hadn't mentioned.

"Are you having trouble with your speech?" "I can't sing any more."

Three years and thirteen weeks earlier, in a small wilderness church that looked out on the trails of Baldy Mountain, Shane had sung to me from the balcony. At the altar soared a huppah, its posts entwined in roses. Together, by the side, stood the rabbi-emeritus from Israel and the United Church minister from Shane's childhood, who'd agreed to officiate the shared ceremony. I walked down the aisle on the arm of my mother and, under the canopy at the altar, turned around and looked up at the balcony. There stood Shane, in his black tuxedo and royal blue shirt, open at the collar, gazing down at me. A capella, he sang, *"You fill up my senses, light a light in a forest, like the mountains in springtime, like a walk in the rain. . ..*

"Come let me love you. Let me give my life to you. Let me drown in your laughter. Let me die in your arms." It was the last line that repeated now.

"What about secretions," the doctor asked. "I have a phlegm buildup I can't get rid of."

"Have you fallen?"

"Three times," Shane said.

I remembered each fall vividly. On the first, he had been racing down the stairs to say goodbye before he charged off to work, and bam! he collapsed in a heap.

Walking has become frightening, he admitted. His balance was so bad he felt he could fall anytime.

ALS can be overwhelming, the neurologist acknowledged. He seemed unaware we didn't have a diagnosis, nor know that a neuromuscular specialist meant an expert in motor neuron disease. Shane didn't even know what ALS was.

Late that night, Shane opened my office door. His face had the look it had when he told me about his brother, long and slack and inutterably sad. Behind his half-closed eyelids was a dark, dark tunnel whose end I couldn't see. "You've been reading:' I said.

"Yes."

I held out my arms and he stepped into them. "I'm so scared, Liv."

I wrapped my arms around him tighter. The suffering of this disease would terrify a general.

"I don't think I can do this, Liv."

Arms around each other, the two of us cry.

In Jeanne's next session, the money issue returned.

"It's the hundred grand," she said.

"There's a problem with it?"

"It's so much money." Her whisper had the awed quality money seems to evoke.

"Are you worried about the money?"

Not at all. Her patron was a fat cat from up on Duck Mountain across the bay, where the speculators lived. A regular, he paid her in envelopes thick with cash or with money orders signed by an officer of a bank she didn't know. He'd already showed her fifty thousand smackeroonies: he had it all right, it was nothing to him, no more than a bottle of champagne or a limo ride to a poor dude. His tastes could get a little weird, but not very. He liked her to dress in a pleated plaid skirt or navy jumper and to shave her pubes and cream 'em soft as baby skin; sometimes he asked her to shout with pain and then stifle the volume to whimpery sounds, like a mewling alley cat, only softer and scared-er, which made him whacko, big as a snake, and long too, like he could thump right up to her heart and out her throat. Anything extra added money by the C-note.

"Violence, then?"

She shook her head. S & M was not his game. He never had the rape'n'kill look she'd come to know before she even hit the streets.

I couldn't fathom what the problem was.

"He wants my daughter."

All along, I'd had this uneasy feeling that I knew something I wasn't supposed to know, and now I knew what it was. Jeanne was training her daughter for the life. In my world, this was child abuse and if I didn't report it to the authorities, I could lose my license. Not a word of Jeanne's subjective world would be worth a damn in court, no matter which one of us swore to it. Retrospectively, I think this was the moment I decided to leave the practice of psychotherapy, when I understood that if my interpretation of reality didn't jibe with convention, I had to jettison what I knew. The end of subjectivity was the end of the only kind of truth that could steer a life, truth rooted in self-discovery, the stark naked truth generated by the guts.

Don't tell me what you're doing with your daughter unless you want your ass in the slammer and your kid raised in a foster home, I ranted to myself. Up until then, I would have warned her off or even reported her, if her story had contained any explicit sexual contact. Now all I said was, "What's the problem."

"She's too young:' Jeanne whispered. "She's only nine, she hasn't come of age. I haven't even started to teach her."

"Can't you tell him to wait?"

"He wants her like this. He keeps upping the price."

"Beyond a hundred grand?"

"He could set me up for life."

"God." "Both of us."

"But something bothers you."

She rocked back and forth. Clad in a sheathe of shimmering silk, her foot jiggled a frantic rhythm. She was trancing out. I could see it in her eyes. The conflict was unbearable.

"I could never work another day of my life." Reverence infused her voice.

I thought you liked the life, I wanted to fling, but that was my issue. What she needed was to articulate her doubt. "Something bothers you," I repeated.

"My little peaches pie."

"Your peaches."

"She's only ten."

"Nine, I thought you said."

"Ten next month."

"Her age. It bothers you."

"I haven't trained her." She was gasping for breath. It was hard to birthe the words.

One more sentence, I thought, desperate to find the trigger. "And if she's not trained and you agree to the deal ... " I let my voice trail off.

"She'll be ruined. Her whole life, gone, in one instant." Jeanne started to cry, the same desolate wail she'd begun with. I realized I was sitting with that rare person who accepted the full strength of her emotions. That was what sex did; it opened up the abundance of experience. And that's what Jeanne was contemplating taking away from her daughter. For money. For the empty specter of material existence. I said as much, though in a murmur.

"It'd be horrible. She'd view sex as a degradation. She'd turn into a common street slut, the kind your Max thinks we all are." She spat out the victim word. "And if she ever got married, all that godgiven lust would back up in her, and she'd lie there, passive as a plank, angry with her husband's clumsy loving, unable to do a thing about it. Horrible. Oh, I don't care if she picks the life, fifth generation or not. If some other life turns her crank, that's fine, but I want her to have all the crazy wells of passion that's passed down the female side of our family, the one thing that can drive her to the tippy peak of adventure in everything she does."

"Does that answer your question, then?"

"I don't know," she said, the awe of fortune in her whisper. "We could never have to work again."

The last time I rode along with Max we passed Jeanne's corner and no one was there. Down the street, in the busy zone, where the tired old hookers peddled their cheap wares, I thought I saw a silhouette piled high with dark curls and a slender young girl, shivering in a fox fur jacket, clutching the curve of her elbow. "Go back!" I screamed to Max. "Go 'round the block." When we got back, there was nothing but the shadow of two saplings, planted as part of the city's effort to gentrify the area.

The ridealongs with Max drew to a close. Max's partner came back, hot to hit the streets, and I left my job at the Institute of Justice to take a job in another city.

Coming back from a walk, the contemplative kind I take since my husband relinquished the attempt to labor up and down the uneven slopes of our neighborhood, a battered brown Mercedes pulls alongside of me. Seated at the wheel is Fred Wilson, his charming smile a little anxious, tremulous around the lower lip. Across from him, in the passenger seat, is an Asian woman, beautiful and aging, sixty-ish I would guess, around the same age as Fred.

"Have you met my wife?" Fred asks.

I step over to the car and can't see into the window, squeezing my eyes to blink away the sun.

"Mikki," Fred says. "Mikayo."

"I'm Livia;' I say, smiling on top of my surprise. "Pleased to meet you at last."

Mikki's face is puffy and tired. Under skillful layers of makeup, her skin is the bruised brown of an Asian pear. Her wide lips seem a little swollen beneath the bronzy crimson lipstick, though her eyelids are painted as blue as a screensaver. "I love your garden," she says, revealing a set of slightly crooked teeth that could explain the swollen look of her lips.

"Me too;' I grin. Her eyes meet mine then dart away, and something about the upswing, when the deep brown iris almost disappears, reminds me of Jeanne.

"Well, good luck to you," Fred calls. "Sure hope you get those boys to finish soon."

As they pull away, I have an enormous sensation of distance and I realize I don't feel responsible for either the brutality or the love between them. A gulf has fallen open between me and caring, and it feels very different from the way I felt about Jeanne and the daughter I wanted desperately to save. Compassion takes energy and I am tired, so very tired.

From nowhere, the image of the spacious rain that was falling the night Jeanne came to talk to me returns, and makes me think of Shane's tears, rolling and sliding down his long, sad face the night the neurologist said the words ALS. And life feels like that slow slanted rain that carries on its downward spiral towards the absorbent earth so many images: a fjord on the coast of Jeanne's British Columbia, the cedar-scented trail up Tahquitz Mountain, the deer harvesting sound in their cocked ears, the translucent feathers of a red-tailed hawk soaring circles above the canyon, the dark, polished gleam of Shane's abandoned office furniture, the puffy bruised skin of Fred's wife Mikki, the blubbery pink face of the officer in his patrol car, the omniscient eye of the boat in the harbor, Shane singing love to me from the church balcony, all of it dropping in wet, spinning dreamlets toward the thirsty ground. And I search my heart for the acceptance I've read about, but it doesn't come. O