

Fine and Shimmering

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I

One day she clasped her hands together and they felt strange, somehow. Thick and rubbery. Distinctly foreign.

It was a curious feeling, so she held her hands stretched out in front of her, palms down, to better view them. Everything seemed normal, each finger distinct, well-defined. Knuckles small and even, freckles light and lightly sprinkled. And yet she felt uneasy. As if the backs did not matter so much. It was the moist center, the hidden palms, she must not see.

Slowly, perversely, she turned her hands over. But just then her vision blurred and, clearly, there was nothing there to see. After a while she forgot about her hands. She was never one to clasp them anyway.

II

Sheri watched Al from the front window of their small home where he was pushing the lawn mower up and down, up and down. She watched the muscles straining beneath the thin white t-shirt, the leg kicking out impatiently at Herman whenever the dog got in the way. His dark head was bent and he was mumbling beneath his breath as he plowed right through that blanket of leaves he hadn't bothered to rake up.

She didn't blame his ill humor. He seemed too young to be pushing a lawn mower on a Saturday afternoon. He ought to be out playing pool with his friends or riding a motorcycle. Yet here he was, at home with her.

She was carrying a load of laundry out to the garage to wash when a blue van came tearing up the driveway. Al cut loose a long, loud whoop, and before she knew it, two men and a dog were rolling together on the front lawn, turning green in grass shavings.

Sheri stood there with the laundry basket propped on one hip watching the two men, one dark, one light. Except for their coloring, it was difficult to tell them apart. Both were small and wiry, wearing faded jeans and white t-shirts. Yet it was Al she felt. Sheri could not lay her eyes upon him without the feel of his flesh growing beneath hers. As if he waited there just beneath her skin

"Hey, girl, get over here," Al called, pulling himself to his feet. "You've never met Danny-boy here, have you?" He draped an arm around Sheri's shoulders. "He was my main man, back before dad got transferred out this way. Haven't seen you since . . . what? Two years now?"

"Sounds 'bout right," Danny said, giving Sheri a good eye swipe. "I'd heard you shackled up with a good looker! They didn't tell the half of it."

“Ain’t she something?” Al pulled her in for loud wet smooch that landed somewhere between her nose and eyeball. “Why don’t you two get acquainted and I’ll go get us something to celebrate with.” Al loped off toward the back door, Herman at his heels.

Slowly Danny pulled himself up from the ground, shaking the grass from his hair and clothes. He wasn’t so much like Al after all, Sheri decided. He seemed slighter—a paler, less substantial Al, as if you might want to fold him up and put him in your pocket in a strong blow. Wide, bushy sideburns curved out onto thin cheeks, emphasizing the too-small, too-red mouth that twisted now into an appreciative grin.

“So-o-o, I take it you’re Al’s new girl.”

“Naw, I’m Sheri. His wife.”

“His wife! Hot damn! I never thought he’d go and get married on me!”

“Well, he did.”

“Yeah, well, I reckon you’re right about that. So-o-o-o, what’s it like?”

“What’s what like?”

“Being married to Al, that’s what!” Danny laughed.

But Sheri never got a chance to tell him. Al came banging out the back door with a six pack of Dos XX beneath one arm. Grabbing Danny, he led him to a shady spot in the side yard. The two men settled down cross-legged on the lawn to catch up on old times, and Sheri went back to her laundry. She was hanging the last of the clothes on a line out back when Al came up behind her and grabbed her around the waist.

“Hey, Sugar. How’d you like a second honeymoon?” he growled into her ear, his breath warm and sour with beer.

Since they’d never had the first, Sheri told him she’d like that just fine. “Where we going?”

Just then Danny rounded the corner of the house pushing Al’s lawn mower ahead of him, his head thrown back, singing loudly.

“Andale, chicos! Vamanos a Mexico!”

“Mexico!”

“You heard the man,” Al told her.

Sheri sat in the front seat of the van squeezed between the two men and barely said a word as they wound their way down the coast and across the border. Yet the conversation never faltered. It flashed back and forth across her, over her, through her, welding them together. A hot dry wind poured through the windows catching Sheri on all sides, pushing against her eyes, her nose, her mouth, stealing her breath and lifting her hair into a cloud about her face. She had never felt so alive as she did then, soaring down the road between these two men as if they were wings spread out beside her and she was flying on their high. The road reeled out dizzily beneath them, taking them farther and farther, higher and higher, like the string let out on a gigantic blue kite.

When they arrived in Ensenada it was race day. The Baja 500 was a raw, brutal race across a wild, unpaved desert and the atmosphere in the otherwise placid village reflected this. Al and Danny wove their way through the crowds, past lines of make-shift stalls selling spicy burritos and cold Corona, colorful blankets spread along the curbs laden with ironwood carvings and onyx statues. Bright banners flapped across the dusty streets and loud-speakers blurted out the line-up in staccato bursts of Spanish and English. Off-road race cars, impatient beneath the hot desert sun, revved up their motors and spewed smoke, while motorcycles reared up like wild stallions.

Everywhere Sheri turned, the colors and sounds of the streets sprang up to startle her. Sweet, pungent scents of boiling lard and gas fumes rose with the dust to clot her nose and throat. While Al and Danny seemed to draw energy from the confusion and excitement as they darted through the crowds, Sheri could feel herself reeling and rising. She wrapped two fingers through Al's back belt loop and held on tight.

It was curious, this sense of separation she felt whenever she tried to blend in with a crowd, of always rising to the surface, alien and exposed, the way oil will when mixed with water. All her life Sheri had struggled with this lack of gravity and the need to be grounded in something more substantial than herself. Even in high school simple things eluded her, set her apart. How to walk, how to talk, how to laugh out loud. Always feeling awkward and artificial.

Books helped. Sheri was a voracious reader. She read not for pleasure but as a necessity, as if words were weight, something to fill her, lend her ballast and stability. But she never read fiction. It was her one taboo. She could never bear the thought of reading about people with thoughts and dreams, yearnings and fears, depth and substance—who existed only between the pages of a book. Paper lives. Lives to toss or blow away. It was too spooky.

Sometimes Sheri tried to share these thoughts, the only things that didn't feel fake, that rang true upon her tongue.

"Why Sheri Lynn!" her mother would say. "If you must be thinking all the time, why don't you think about something useful, like how to get that pot there you're scrubbing nice and shiny. Then you won't have time for such nonsense. Thoughts like that won't help you in the real world, girl!" And her mother was right. Thoughts like that never did help her, but they continued spinning uselessly in her mind nonetheless, uprooting all else.

As far as Sheri could figure, she had but one small advantage in life, one small hook by which to attach herself to others, make herself known and felt. She was pretty, or so people told her, and the mirror seemed to agree. Her face was a small valentine lightly etched with tiny delicate features. Her hair was full and light and surrounded her face like a soft, nebulous cloud. It was a peculiar color. Strawberry blond, some said. The color of dawn, Al told her. Her eyes were peculiar too, so pale a blue they startled people. Ghost eyes, they said. Yet all this startling prettiness combined with her cool, reticent ways made an odd contrast, accentuating her strangeness rather than diminishing it. Still the contrast was an attraction to some. It was the prettiness that drew them, the oddness that piqued their interest, made her seem a mystery worth unraveling. But only to the bold.

Like Al, Sheri thought now, her fingers securely wrapped through his back belt loop as they wound their way through the dust and melee around them.

When the last of the motorcycles had rolled down the ramp and disappeared into the desert, Al and Danny headed off toward the main plaza with Sheri in tow, her grip on Al's belt loop gradually loosening as they bullied their way through the crowds along the narrow, crumbling sidewalks, until her fingers finally gave way altogether. She watched the men carefully as they made their careless way through the throng, their arms and legs loose, cuffing and shoving at each other as they pointed out this or laughed at that, looking like two teenagers out for a good time and finding it. She hung back further and further, letting the crowds course around her or shove her aside at will. Soon the two men were swallowed up in the crowded streets and Sheri found herself alone, shoved into an open doorway. She stepped inside.

The tiny shop was narrow, long and dark, the light from the doorway seeming to disappear into a black hole behind her. Sheri stood at the small display window beside the door, clutching at the railing, hands pale as ghosts. Rows of shining crucifixes and small golden icons blinked at her in the dust-diffused light, but Sheri paid them no mind. The wings of her shoulders and the long root of her spine held her eyes, and all of her awareness was drawn toward the darkness that yawned and whispered and pulled at her back as if to pry her fingers loose and suck her backward through a black and timeless void.

Just then something like the wing of a bat brushed against her shoulder and a soft, indecipherable cooing sighed in her ear. She did not turn to see the dark, expectant face of the proprietor behind her, but fled at the touch, darting mindlessly through the crowded streets until caught up by a sharp jerk on her arm.

"Where the hell you been!" Al said, clutching her elbow. "You trying to get yourself raped, or what? If you can't keep up with us, maybe you better wait in the van next time, ya hear?"

"Hey, man, take it easy . . ." Danny said nervously, eyeing the crowds. He offered Sheri a small, apologetic smile, and gave her shoulder a soft squeeze.

"Yeah, well, it makes me mad, ya know? This isn't Disneyland! We're in a fuckin' foreign country, and she better not be forgetting it. They ain't never seen the likes of her down here!"

They turned and started on down the street again, Sheri leashed by Al's angry grip about her wrist. Sheri let herself rise, watching the three of them as if from a great height, the two men, one dark, one light, and that bit of effervescent color trailing out blindly behind them like a balloon, light and tight, subject to bursting. She knew too well the precariousness of her plight, the tenuousness of the string, the fickleness of the hand that held her. Knowing it might let go just to see how high she would drift without him.

III

"Say, Sheri, what's up?" said one of the men leaning against the counter as Sheri entered

the kitchen.

Nearly every night they came--Al's friends from work. Some still wore their work clothes, denim shirts tucked carelessly into grimy jeans, heavy leather lace-up boots, paint splattered. Others were freshly showered, hair shiny-wet, slicked back behind pink ears. They settled in the kitchen by mutual consent, closer to the fridge and the beer. A few sat around the small dinette table, but the spill-over sorted themselves around the room, lean hips leaning casually against kitchen counters and walls, feet crossed out before them in the middle of the cramped room. It was a real nuisance when Sheri was still trying to clear away the dinner dishes. She would make herself small, dodging feet and chairs and probing eyes, quickly stacking dishes in a sink full of soapy water before retreating to the living room.

"Time to subject that dog of yours to another walk?" another friend asked, laughing as Sheri knelt to clip the leash to Herman's collar where he lay sleeping beneath the table at Al's feet.

"Yeah? Well, that's cool." Al's voice was mellow and blurred with beer. 'C'mon, Hermey ol' boy," he said, nudging the dog with his foot. "The ol' lady wants to take you for a lil' walk."

Slowly Herman found his feet and stretched sleepily as Sheri tugged at the leash and pulled him out from under the table, his paws, stiffened in resistance, skidding across the worn linoleum.

"I got to hand it to you, Sheri," one of the men said, winking at the others. "You sure have a way with animals!"

"That dog sure do love his daily walk!" hooted another as Sheri pulled Herman unmercifully out the back door. The laughter followed her down the driveway.

"Hey, Sheri!" Al poked his head out an open window. "Pick up some more beer while you're out, hear?"

"Sheri? Sh-e-r-i -i . . ." he called as she faded from sight.

IV

Herman always seemed to like his walks once he was outside and away from Al. His ears pricked up and nose got busy searching out the sidewalk and curbs. His rump quivered, wriggling with delight at each new smell. He was Al's dog and preferred Al to Sheri, but Sheri was the one who took him for walks.

"If you're so all-fired sure he needs a walk, you take him," Al would tell her, and so she did.

There was something so reassuringly anonymous about walking at dusk in that half-light when everything was in a state of transition. It's where Sheri felt most at home. As the light faded from the earth, taking sight with it, sound emerged. It seemed to waken, expand, take shape, finding an edge and clarity, a reality that, once submerged in sight, now rang out distinctly in the light-diffused air.

Sheri walked letting sound, like waves, break over her. Car doors slammed, bikes whirled by, evening papers shot out whistling and plopped on porches, rustled in bushes.

Women sang out shrill and off-key, calling children home. Windows banged open or shut, babies whimpered, television voices sifting through screen doors leaked out onto the damp lawns. All was in a state of flux as daily routines shifted into low gear and the earth itself shunted back heavy opaque curtains to reveal a stage-full of still-sounding stars.

No one seemed to notice then a young woman being pulled along the sidewalk with only one small dog and a thin leather strap tethering her to the earth.

Sheri walked two blocks up George Street and turned left on Butler. She had lived in this neighborhood all her life. Only two blocks away was the house where she'd grown up--empty now, her parents having moved into a trailer in Foxen Canyon. Straight ahead was Butler High where Sheri had met Al. She paused there now, looking up at the worn gray stone building, its tired, dusty windows staring down at her. She remembered crossing this very lawn, not all that long ago, holding hands with Al.

Sheri had noticed him long before he had noticed her. Al was one of those brash, noisy boys that were hard to miss, the kind that liked to stir up trouble in the classroom with their antics and antagonism. Sheri liked the hard compactness of his body, the way it made a definite impression on the air around him. And when she felt his cool eyes upon her as she walked down the hall, she did not feel awkward and exposed as other eyes made her feel—she felt transformed. When he watched her, her body suddenly became alive, flowing, sensual, seeming to find a life of its own. When he watched her, she felt real.

Al liked Sheri's exotic prettiness, her cool, still ways, but mostly liked the fact that she was hard to get. She did not mean to be. When Al first asked Sheri out, she said "No," and was as startled by the word as he was. Yet Al saw in the spreading pinkness of her skin that she was not as indifferent to him as she pretended.

Al respected that "no." He liked girls who played hard to get. He could play that way too. When a girl played hard to get, she was telling him, "I'm fine and I know I'm fine, and if you want me, you better be very fine yourself." If a girl accepted his advances too easily, how could he tell if she was fine? How could he be fine himself?

During their first few weeks together, Al did not touch Sheri. He would lean toward her, breath on her neck, whisper in her ear, and look at her as if he knew more of her than she knew herself, but he would not touch her. It was all Sheri could do to keep from touching him first. She wanted to feel his cool flesh beneath her fingers, knead it until it became hot and elastic in her hands, plunder the bones buried beneath, plunge her thirsting face into the dark shallows of his neck and taste salt.

So when one evening as they lay together on the floor watching television, Al finally rolled on top of Sheri and she felt for the first time the full force of his body bearing down upon her, she clung to him so tightly as to never let go.

"Whoa, girl! Easy now," Al laughed softly and gently unwound her arms, scooping her up and carrying her off to his bedroom. He laid her on his crumpled bed and piled on top of her. The fact that she lay there still as stone beneath him did not matter. Al soon came to see that Sheri's obsession with closeness and cuddling, the way she clutched and clawed at him so

fiercely was not a sexual thing at all. Sex left her cold. The root of him never seemed to touch her and she was miles away, above, beyond. Still, she was young. Al had heard that a woman's sexuality peaked long after a man's, and he was willing to wait for that. He sensed in Sheri such a strange intensity that when it did peak it would be something wild and dangerous, and he wanted to be there when it happened.

In those days, Al liked to talk to Sheri about herself. "God, you got the loveliest, whitest skin, Sheri. Like milk poured out of a jar. All those tiny freckles, they never touch the whiteness at all. They float above it like they don't belong there. They make it whiter, somehow. Purer. Without the freckles you wouldn't know how perfect it all was."

She liked that--hearing herself remade in his words, his images, recreated in his mind. Afterwards, she would run her hands over her skin, feeling all that creamy whiteness beneath all those freckles. She would wrap her arms around her knees, hugging herself, swaying, rocking like a baby. If only she could hold on to it all. If it would all just hold true.

V

The sky was nearly pitch black now as Sheri paused in her walk to let Herman hunker down in an empty lot. To the west only a few glowing coals smoldered on the horizon. When he was done, Sheri crossed the street to where a 7-11 store was lit up like a solitary beacon in the dark night. She wrapped Herman's leash around a bicycle rack where he let his head sink onto his paws and slipped into instant slumber.

Sheri wound her way through the bright, empty aisles, taking the route farthest from the clerk who stood fortified within his stall in the middle of the store. She opened the cooler and pulled out two six-packs of beer. While the clerk rang up the total, she stole quick glances at the tired, vacant eyes, the heavy cheeks beginning to jowl.

"That'll be seven twenty-three," he said, bagging the beer. His fingers strummed impatiently across the counter while Sheri groped for the correct change. His hands were huge and pale. Coarse, black hairs, curved like claws, protruded from his soft skin. She watched him while he counted the ones with a wet thumb, but by the time he handed her the receipt, she was staring absently out the front door. During the whole exchange, their eyes never met. It was like an elaborate dance, a modern minuet, the way two people could come so close, exchanging goods, money, polite words, staggered stares, and yet never make contact, never touch. Sheri was good at it, but felt more comfortable on the other, more protective, side of the counter.

She worked as a cashier in a local supermarket. She had been hired as a temp while the bookkeeper was on maternity leave, but when the woman returned, Jeffrey, the store manager, asked Sheri to fill in for them as a cashier. At first she refused.

"I'm no good with people. I never know what to say."

"That's good! Perfect! Don't say anything. Just keep the line moving. Too many of our girls let everything get bogged down while they make chit-chat with the customers." Jeffrey leaned toward her, "Frankly, my dear, I think people would appreciate a quick, clean run through

the check-out without all the chatter. They'll love you!"

Sheri was not convinced, but she liked Jeffrey. She liked the way he looked at her. He didn't seem to see her as others did, as merely pretty or peculiar. He saw her as an object, a worker, something solid he could use and move around and build upon.

Soon she found out that Jeffrey was right. Most people didn't want to talk to her any more than she wanted to talk to them. They were as content to see her as an extension of the cash register as she was to blend thankfully and anonymously into the background. She was good at looking around faces and through them. She knew foreheads and noses and mouths intimately. But eyes were her nemesis. Only when she was sure that their eyes would never meet hers did she look into another's --furtively, like a Peeping Tom, and with as much fervor. As if she was probing into private, forbidden parts. As if she was unraveling a mystery, or catching a glimpse of eternity. But to actually meet someone's eyes made her heart stop. It was like dying, what dying must surely be. For she was so deathly afraid that if their eyes met, they would see right through her, and they would know--*know*--that there was nothing there to see.

In spite of this, Sheri liked her job. She liked the cool efficiency of it. She liked standing safely behind the counter while streams of groceries and people passed marked and unmarked before her. She liked ringing up the total, the way her fingers flew across the keys so lightly they barely seemed to touch at all. But mostly she liked the fact that everyone seemed as well rehearsed as she in what steps to take to avoid touching.

One old man in particular was a trial. He was always probing at her eyes, trying to fix them with his own, making little jokes, trying to get her to smile. He was a little man, no taller than Sheri, with a tanned bald pate and a few grey wisps of hair above his ears. He had a twinkle in his blue eyes. Sheri had heard of twinkles, but she had never seen one before, and it fascinated her as she caught it out of the corner of her eye--like a butterfly that flitted in and out of view. She liked this old man. He tried so hard to reach her, harder than anyone. It broke her heart, he tried so hard. She felt she was failing him, depriving him of something he ought to have by right. But how could she? Open herself up like that? The thought made her turn cold.

One day he was especially persistent. "There! I saw it now. A smile. I swear I saw the beginning of a smile. Now, tell me I'm right. Come on, 'fess up! Did you or did you not almost smile just then?"

Sheri avoided his eyes, her fingers flying over the cash register keys. "You certainly are the tease," she said.

"Yes, that I am," he agreed, head bobbing. "But you like it. I can tell you like it."

"I've got to admit, though," he added when there was no response, "You're my toughest case. It would make my day if I could see a real smile just once!" And he looked so entreating, so like a little boy begging for a kiss, that Sheri knew she had to take a chance. For his sake and her sake. For the sake of every fragile, futile thing that longs to be.

Shakily, and yet with a determination she did not know she owned, Sheri took a deep breath and looked up at him, full in the face, and smiled.

"But that wasn't a *real* smile, my dear," the man chided gently. "That wasn't a real smile

at all!”

VI

The light from the windowpanes fell in four perfect rectangles across the dark driveway. Sheri stood at the edge of the light, watching the shifting motions and colors wash against the glass. She stood outside the light, straining toward it, as if she was a moth trying to penetrate the secret of glass, as if to hear the word that might shatter the spell.

“Well, how’s it going with Conchita, Al?” Sheri heard someone say. “I hear she’s got a little something in the oven for you.”

“Sh--sh! You crazy? You want the wife to hear?”

“She ain’t here, man. She’s out walking that dumb mutt of yours.”

“Yeah? Well, he isn’t so dumb. He’s one goddam good dog, I tell you. Anyway, you never know when Sheri’s likely to turn up. She’s spooky that way, ya know? Always slinking around, quiet-like, not saying much. Like a goddam ghost, she is!”

“Well, she’s got some fine looking legs for a ghost, Al. You ever wanna cut her loose, you just give her a shove my way, hear?”

“Hey, watch your mouth! She’s still my fuckin’ wife! Besides, what’s a pair of legs when she don’t got no *feel* to her. No feel! Now, Conchita! There’s some lady. There’s a woman you can get a real *hold* of.

VII

Sheri lay still on the cool, clean sheets. It was her favorite time of night, waiting for Al to come to her.

Sheri loved to wrap herself around him at night, to spread her breasts and press the hollow of her chest so tightly against him that it created the moist suck of a vacuum. She curved her legs around his butt, pressing her round knees into the backs of his, her arms wound like vines. But even then she wasn’t close enough. She wanted to get inside him, to penetrate that hot, moist flesh, get beneath it and live there within the pulsing richness of those veins, the thumping wildness of that heart, immersed in that streaming, throbbing aliveness.

“Jee-sus, Sheri! Let loose! How can a guy sleep like this?” Al would tell her, kicking himself free. And Sheri would let him loose and lie there quietly until she could hear the deep sound of his sleep. Then she would inch forward, ever so softly, and wrap herself around him again, lightly this time so as not to wake him, gently and loosely, but close enough to feel the faint touch of his fur, the rise of his heat. So close, and yet not quite touching. Still they touched all the same. For Sheri could feel the life of him sparking and flowing like electrons between them, welding them together in a hot, spontaneous flash.

Around midnight, Sheri heard the last of the men bang out the back door and drive away. The house became suddenly, alarmingly, still. Sheri slipped out of bed and tiptoed barefoot through the dark. The house was empty. There was no one home.

Sheri was walking down a long corridor, past endless rows of rooms, toward a narrow doorway ahead, emitting light, laughter, familiar voices. She walked toward it as if she belonged there, as if all the people in that distant room were awaiting her arrival. As she entered, they turned expectantly toward her. But when she opened her mouth to speak, she found to her horror there was no sound. There was less than no sound--there was no word. There was nothing she knew to say. They all stared at her for a moment, then turned away to talk among themselves. Soon they were streaming out past her, back down the narrow corridor, where they dispersed into various rooms, taking all of the light, the laughter, the voices, and even the doorway with them. Sheri stood alone in a vacuum of inarticulate horror, then woke.

Always, afterward, the dream remained long in her mind. She prodded it as if it was a puzzle whose meaning is all too clear except for that one vital missing piece. What was the word? The word waiting, unspoken?

The next morning as Sheri dressed and went about her work, she felt unusually lightheaded, as if she and her body, always out of sync, had reached some new height of disjunction. Once Sheri had read a book on astral-projection, and she was startled to learn of that shimmering silver cord that supposedly tied the astral body to the solid one. What startled her was the awful realization that all her life she had been attached to reality by a similar, tenuous thread, let out so far that she seemed to float above experience, never in it. She had always to be so careful, to move so still, so as not to break that fine thread.

Sometimes Sheri tried to get closer. Gently gathering up huge armfuls of the shimmering thread, she would draw herself downward, back toward that more immediate self. Sometimes she would get so close! She would actually feel something like a spontaneous giggle rising in her throat at the helplessness of her own plight. For there she would be--so close, and yet with all of that bothersome ethereal thread heaped up between her and the real. And she knew--oh, how she knew, she knew!--that it was thoughts just like these that kept her apart and would keep her apart forever.

VIII

Sheri sat quietly on the couch, hunched slightly forward, her hands pressed between her knees. Al paced back and forth in front of her, spilling it all out.

His life was a real mess, he told her. He'd gotten this girl pregnant, and now he was going to have to marry her. Sheri could see that, couldn't she? How could he be such a bastard as to leave this girl to raise a kid all by herself. His own kid! Leave it fatherless and all. They needed him. It was as simple as that. And Sheri never seemed to need anyone.

All the while, Al kept glancing at Sheri, nervously, curiously. He had expected something more. He had thought that maybe he'd finally see Sheri unleashed, that if he couldn't see her peak sexually, maybe he'd see her come in a torrent of rage and tears. But once again she disappointed him.

“Say something!” he demanded, then turned away in disgust.

Sheri watched him from the bedroom doorway while he packed a few things, her eyes wide, face pale with that bright halo of hair. Now when Al looked at Sheri, she appeared to him in three separate dimensions: first that sprinkling of freckles, then her still creamy body, then that other Sheri, the one he never could get a hold on, hidden somewhere beneath that. It’s what spooked him about her--that hidden dimension. Even when she made him so mad that he wanted to lash out, he never did. Who knew what lay behind such unearthly silence? And yet now, as she stood there unmoved while he tore himself from her life, the urge was irresistible.

“You cold, cold, bitch,” he flung out with his hand and watched while her freckles, her creamy body, and that still self went crashing together against the wall. He stood there, transfixed, waiting to see what she would do—what blood, if any, might flow.

There was none. She sat there, crumpled against the wall like a broken doll, her mute eyes fixed upon him, unmoved.

Al shook his head wearily and walked out the door. “Wha’d you expect, dumbshit?” he muttered to himself.

IX

Sometimes Sheri still went walking at dusk, her right hand thrust deeply into her coat pocket, clenching the empty leash. She missed Herman more than anything. The weight of him pulling her along.

One day a dusty blue van pulled up in front of the house, and Danny came bouncing up the walkway with his lean hips and his too-small, too-red mouth. Sheri watched him from behind the screen door. But when he learned what had happened, he began backing away.

“Gee, Sheri, I’m sorry. I didn’t know, honest. Look, if there’s anything I can do, anything at all, you just say the word. Hear?”

Sheri leaned forward then, toward him, and the door swung open. There was nothing between them now but the sun-softened air. Danny gave her one last apologetic look before turning away. Sheri watched as he jumped back into the van and sped off, rising through the treetops, through the leaves and the light, growing smaller and smaller, fainter and fainter, until he finally disappeared altogether.

X

There was day. There was night. Sheri saw it as a play of light upon the wall. Light like long fingers, reaching through the window, searching, touching everything in sight, and yet, touching nothing at all, really, and taking everything with it when it left.

Like her hands, the boney backs folding over the soft unseen centers, as if there was something there to hold onto. When all that’s wanted is to let go. To take that fine and shimmering thread between sharp teeth and snip it clean through. To drift aimlessly, like the merest wisp of cloud, a lingering trace of dawn, upon an otherwise immaculate sky. Awaiting that final dispersal, into the blue.