

Daisy and the Kid

She didn't know what to expect. If the door was bolted from the inside her key wouldn't work. If she knocked the Kid might not answer. Or he might answer her in that childish voice, at once sullen and coy, and refuse to come to the door. If he did let her in, there was no telling what sort of mood he'd be in, or what damage he might have done to her apartment this time. He might have scrawled the lyrics to a new song on the Marimekko wallpaper, or smashed the glass top of the Noguchi coffee table. Maybe he'd gotten into her underwear drawer again, cut through the crotches of panties with that big knife he was always sharpening in front of her. One New Year's Eve he had touched the point of it to her throat, then cut the string of her necklace and watched the rose Sulu pearls ski down her breasts.

There was no telling with him. She found herself in a state of constant expectation, exhilaration, and, yes, fear when she was near him. Maybe he'd finished off the vodka and was lying face down on the carpet, or sitting at the kitchen table in his boxers, using the knife to scarify patterns on his chest. Maybe he'd grabbed his guitar and laptop and left forever.

She turned the key, the door opened, and she stepped into the stench of stale licorice that announced the Kid's breathing presence.

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She set the bottle at the center of the table, next to the pile of gold coins, and nodded respectfully to the poker players. "It's on the house, gentlemen." As she turned to leave, a long-fingered, bony hand reached over from another table and took hold of her arm. She

knew immediately who it was, though she hadn't seen him come in. She quickly glanced over to the bar and caught Al's eye, telling him with a minute head-shake and sisterly smile that she didn't need any help with this one. Then she spun round and looked into the Kid's eyes.

The fragile features of his face still glowed through all his efforts to bury them. He was still impossibly young, still innocent, in spite of the busted nose and red-rimmed eyes, the wispy hair on the sun-baked skin of his cheeks. The defiance in his smile was that same stupid youthful arrogance. His hand felt warm on the cool flab of her upper arm; she removed it, placed it palm down on the table in front of him, as though she were offering him a pet tortoise. He spoke in that high, unmelodious whine of his.

"I want a woman."

"We have lots of women."

"You. I want you."

"Sorry honey, but I retired from that end of the trade."

"You was my first, Daisy. I ain't found nobody like you."

"Well I'm flattered Sweet Eyes, I truly am. And I have some fond memories of you, besides."

"You could come with me. I'm headed north this time. There's opportunity there, honest opportunity. There's land for the taking. We could make us a life. I could take you away from all this red dust and whoredom."

"Kid, I pretty well had to sell my soul to get this saloon, but it's mine, there isn't a preacher mayor or sheriff can take it away. This is where I'm staying."

"I love you Daisy, I loved you ever since I first set eyes on you, there's nobody but you for me. Come with me."

She smiled, stroked his cheek, shook her head sadly.

The Kid turned away, and she could see the redness in his cheeks and ears, and a slight drunken sway in his upper body. "Only you, Daisy. Only you." The words sounded remote and a little mechanical now. "Only you," he repeated, shaking himself as if from an uninvited memory. He scratched at

the lice in his scalp. A sloppy grin spilled over his mouth, and he leaned back in his chair and gaped around the room, fixing his gaze on each of the harlots standing at the bar or around the card tables, flirting with the ranchers and cowboys. “So which one of these fillies do you recommend for a good time? Which one really likes it?”

“My girls are all jalapeños, guaranteed for the time of your life.”

“What about that cute young thing there?”

He was looking at Molly, the new girl, an Irish beauty who stood a head taller than any of the others, who walked around the place with such a haughty air that none of the other girls would talk to her. Daisy suddenly felt a wave of jealousy that surprised her. “That there is the biggest mistake you could make, Kid.”

“Looks like a mistake worth making.” He got up and staggered over to where Molly stood, alone at the end of the bar. Daisy watched as the two of them spoke, the Kid looking intently at the young whore and speaking rapidly, seriously; the girl looking away with that mysterious, superior little smile, punctuating his talk with short answers. Molly suddenly turned and walked quickly through the curtain in the back, and he followed. As they disappeared into the labyrinth of back rooms, Daisy felt a shrinking in her belly and a dryness in her throat.

She walked up to the bar and asked Al for a double shot of gin. Then she slumped down on a stool and wondered why she bothered with this noisy, smelly place. She was tired of the predictable excitement, the bad piano music and cigar smoke and drunken shouts, the parade of lonely cowboys spending their week’s booty on the measured thrills of the saloon. She never used the money she made, not on herself—it simply went into her little empire, expanded her presence in this community of men. She wanted a change: a clean, quiet life, a family, friends who would treat her with tenderness, rather than the respect and wariness she felt from those around her. She wanted to feel as fragile and tender as the Kid had felt to her when he first came as a customer to her little room in the back. She wondered how the Kid had

learned so young to roll with life's punches, to adjust his strategy and expectations as new cards were dealt—while she continued to embrace some empty husk of an ideal of her own power and independence.

Tossing back the gin, she stormed through the back curtain and went straight for Molly's room, the very room she had been assigned to when she had first come to this place. Flinging open the door, she glared into the two surprised and annoyed faces that greeted her in the candlelight. The Kid sat at the edge of the bed, his pants at his ankles. The girl knelt in front of him, washing his genitals with a wet cloth.

"I want you both out of here now! Get out! You will never set foot in my saloon again." She stood in the doorway and stared with a frozen, ruthless anger. The Kid fumbled his pants back up, groaning drunken protestations. Molly said nothing, simply gathered her few belongings into a carpetbag and followed the Kid out.

Daisy walked to the bed, sat; she was exhausted. Picking up the wash rag that Molly had used on the Kid, she lay back on the bed and placed the wet cloth over her eyes. It was warm and soothing. She felt herself breathe with the shallowest of inhalations, as though a deep breath might fill her with her own pain, choke her like the smoke from burning coal. She tried to stuff her mind with the images of her ambition—the expansion of the saloon into the building next door, stage shows with dancers from Santa Fe and Durango, the possibility of a larger gambling operation—but all she could see in the darkness was her own aging face. She uncovered her eyes and stared into the candlelight. She must hold single-mindedly to her plans: she could not weather many more emotional interludes like this. She threw the cloth on the floor, stood, straightened her dress, then stepped through the door and into the last chapter of her life.

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The surgeon put the last of the interrupted stitches in the trachea, but didn't bother with the long gash in the skin of the young man's neck.

With his customary arrogance, he turned away and told her to close without saying her name or looking in her direction.

While the surgeon was in the room she had behaved as though she didn't know who the Kid was, but as soon as he left she began to sob. Her hands shook and she could barely concentrate on pushing the needle through. The Kid's eyes opened and he seemed to know where he was. He opened his mouth to speak, but all that came forth were splatterings of blood and a wet croaking, like the muffled call of a raven. He tried to move his arms, but felt the straps and began to panic, twisting and squirming under the restraints. She could not continue with the sutures when he was moving like this; she would need help to properly restrain or sedate him. But she wanted to be alone with him. And so she simply stopped stitching, letting the needle and thread dangle and placing the needle holder on his bare, blood-smeared chest.

Blood oozed slowly from the wound, which was sewn tight at one end but gaped at the other like the crooked grin of a stroke victim. His eyes were still wild, and she could see the muscles of his arms and shoulders straining against the straps. Somehow she began speaking without knowing what she would say; it was as if she opened her mouth and another self inside her woke up and began talking.

“You don't know me, but I've seen you before. You come to me in my sleep. I always know when I'm going to see you. Just before I fall asleep a feeling comes to me, a cold chill that's more in the room than inside me, and I get scared. I tell myself to stay awake. I say it over and over, and the drone of the words makes me drowsy, and I nod off. I feel myself falling then. At first it's just dream falling, as much through time as through space, until my seeing wakes up and there I am, sitting behind you, my arms hugging your belly on your big noisy motorcycle that has flown out of control from some impossible precipice and is plummeting whoop-de-do through rain and birds, floating down until we hit the muddy earth, and then we're sliding through the mud, orange, slimy mud, and we slide and slide to a halt. Now I'm lying there half dead, covered with blood, but it's not so unpleasant. And even

though I'm content to lie there, you lift me up and carry me somewhere sunny and near water. And you take off my clothes, bless your heart, and go and fill up your helmet with water and begin washing off the mud and blood. You return with one helmetful after another, washing me with cold stream water until my skin is white and soft as a baby's.

"And then you start in kissing me. You kiss my face and hair, my ears and eyes and my nose and neck. What kisses! I can feel each one long after your lips have moved on to stir up new territory—every kiss sticks to my skin and stings and burns with its little thrill, and I think these are the finest kisses, that don't ever go away. You begin kissing my chest and my breasts, and holy shit I think I'm gonna die from the agony of pleasure and expectation. As your move down to my belly, I raise up my head and shoulders to watch you in action.

"All I can see of you is your shoulders covered with the red and blue leather jacket and your long brown hair dancing on my tummy and I think, this is not such a bad dream after all. And I'm watching you slowly move down my body, and then I finally notice. I see where you've been. I look at my chest and breasts and belly, and I can *see* all the kisses you have left there, the kisses I still feel. They have become wrinkles and spots and moles. Your kisses have aged my skin, disfigured my breasts. And now you've moved below my belly and I can see that the skin there, on my lower belly, has become loose and mottled, scarred even. You are kissing my thighs, covering them with intense pleasure and discolored, fatty ripples. My entire body is teeming with pleasure, as though I were being devoured by insects, licking and nuzzling and chewing and scratching until I can hardly stand it.

"And then I wake up. I don't have to look at my body to know that it has grown older, that you have gotten to me again. Every one of your dream visits pushes me a step closer to the grave."

She had been caressing his chest as she spoke, looking at him without seeing him in her reverie. Now she looked into his face and let out a girlish, self-conscious giggle, relieved at her unburdening. He again tried to talk,

opening his mouth and croaking with that guttural, raven sound. Obviously upset with his loss of speech, he drew deeper breaths into his chest, pushed harder at the sounds in his throat. Suddenly the stitches in his trachea burst and a terrible sound came out. It was a laugh, but it wasn't coming from his mouth: the wound itself was laughing at her. Whatever he was trying to say with his mouth was being stopped at the throat and transformed into a hideous, inhuman laugh. She put her hand over the throat to stifle the noise, then picked up the needle and forceps and began sewing up the wound with jagged, sloppy stitches. Slowly she stitched the laugh shut, until it was only a smug, uneven smile. What sounded like hoarse, distant echoes of the laugh, wet and muted, rumbled under the crooked smiling wound on the skin of his neck: she had left the trachea open underneath the stitched incision at the skin of his throat.

She opened the door and called down to the nurses' station. Jeffries, a fat, cranky little man in what looked like green pajamas, rushed into the room to help.

"Bag this one and take him to the morgue."

Jeffries looked as much annoyed as surprised. "But he's not dead."

"I don't care, bag him!" she yelled, running out into the hall before the horrible laughing could break out and taunt her again.

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She gazed up and tried to will his eyes to look into hers. They were closed, moved jerkily under the lids like butterflies struggling in their cocoons. She was scared. She knew their lovemaking could draw her closer to him, or it could hurl her into some desolate corner of the universe. She pleaded tenderly. "*Look* at me." His eyes opened; they were paler than she remembered. Younger. They scanned her own face with a slight annoyance, and with a vague and stupid expectation. Obviously he didn't understand her plea. She thought, He really is only a kid. I can't find in him any real reflection of myself. Too much of me is left alone for this to be real love. I'm being foolish, I'm wasting time, and time is turning against me.

Then a flash of cruelty crossed his face, and suddenly she didn't know him at all, his youth itself was somehow ancient and terrible and inscrutable, as a shark is, or a riptide. And some part of her heart—a part she always forgot until it was once again reawakened—responded. Now she was herself a child, naughty and sullen, and she was about to be loved and punished all at once by this stranger she had been waiting for, this tall and fearful daddy who had been away at sea since before she could talk.

Her fingers dug into his shoulders. “Yes,” she whispered. “I deserve this, I do.”

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The old Land Cruiser, an hour out of Derby, rattled east into the Kimberley. The sun was high and behind, lighting the orange landscape dotted with scrub acacia and clumps of fountain-like hummock grass with such harsh clarity that it seemed like there could be nothing hidden, nothing new to uncover in the plants and creatures that lived here. But this is where he'd chosen to dig around in the ground the past year-and-a-half, trying to figure out what was going on in the subterranean world of bugs—his first solo research project.

She sat quietly in the passenger seat, exhausted from the long flight but also pensive, maybe a little uncomfortable—disoriented even—to be alone with him. When she'd married his father, just twelve years ago, the Kid had been the one who was all confusion. She was not just beautiful, but in the most sensuous way, with dark eyes and full lips and heavy breasts and hips that he couldn't stop staring at. She was not quite forty then, and he'd calculated that her age fell exactly between his and his father's. On the weeks that he stayed with his father, he'd drink beer with them, though he wasn't even old enough to drive. Then he'd lie on the sofa in the living room and listen intently to their lovemaking in the next room.

A boab tree appeared on the flat orange ground in the distance like a great squid emerging from the ocean, its fat, bulbous trunk and crown of scraggly branches offering a kind of greeting. It was surrounded by more of

the triodia grass, that the locals called spinifex, and those extraordinary, skinny mounds, of the same orange earth but darker, that had become the center of his working life. He had, in fact, for the past twenty minutes been talking non-stop about the astounding and complex social system of the inhabitants of those fragile towers of moist dirt, showing off his erudition, filling the Toyota with it, as though that might somehow console or distract the broken-hearted widow sitting next to him. And so he rambled on about soldiers and workers and winged swarms and castes and tunnels and mounds, talking almost compulsively, though he knew he must be boring her. “In a sense, the queen truly does live forever,” he was saying, “not in just in the millions of eggs that she produces to be fertilized by the king, but in what we now know to be clones, created through parthenogenesis and genetically identical to the queen herself.”

He felt his voice dropping to a weak monotone, and decided that she must not be listening. He glanced over and saw that she had indeed drifted off, her head leaning at an uncomfortable angle, back and to the right.

“Daisy,” he said gently, then again, “*Daisy*.”

She stirred, looked over at him and smiled dreamily. She spoke as if she was in mid-conversation with him. “It’s just that, well, I haven’t slept, not really. It’s been nearly a month since he passed. Only now, being with you—it’s the first time I’ve relaxed.” She sat up a little. “What were you saying?”

He chuckled quietly. “Nothing. Termites. They’re all I know lately. Go ahead and sleep.” Her eyes were shut before he finished the last sentence. On the horizon was the cattle station where he rented the little outbuilding that was his home, office, and lab. He’d give her the bedroom and sleep in the workroom on the air mattress he used in the field. She’d flown across an ocean and over the equator to see him, spending money that would have been his if his father hadn’t remarried. She was the only family he had left, as he was to her. But who were they to each other? His father had always mediated their relationship, defined it merely by being there. Now here they were, together for the first time in this way, in these circumstances, amicable

but awkward. Who were they now? How long would she stay?

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When he asked her to marry him she became physically ill, had to run to the bathroom and sit there, on the side of the tub, her knees touching the rim of the toilet, until the convulsions and dizziness subsided. Her stomach churned with a wild despair. This was it, the end of it. What sick cosmic justice is it that insists that when we get what we desperately want, something has to die?

She had been drawn to him since the first day he walked into her classroom. Even before she became aware of his uncommon intellect, she had begun pointing her lectures towards him. Each day's lesson was, secretly, a performance for this dark, lanky, grubby, beautiful boy in the back row. When she came to realize that the wide, intense gaze that he fixed on her during her talks was not an act or a drug-induced stupor, but a look of hungry, rapt attention, her attraction turned to fascination. And when she learned through the papers he handed in (pounded out on a manual typewriter with a broken *e* that he corrected by hand) that he was far and away her best pupil, she felt herself accelerate into a kind of dream terrain each time she walked into the classroom.

She would ache with jealousy if he so much as spoke to one of the girls in the class. A couple months into the semester he seemed to take an interest in one of her better students, a bright, enthusiastic, somewhat ironic girl with an auburn braid that hung like a thick coarse rope against her back. She had always appreciated this student's comments in class discussions, but now she found herself deriding everything the poor girl had to say. She would deflate some innocent, uncontroversial statement that the young woman made, then realize later, at home, that the discussion had ended abruptly as the other students clammed up with perturbation and some fear. It occurred to her that she should feel some embarrassment over her own shabby behavior, but she couldn't shake the more primal emotions of attraction and jealously long enough to feel the red sting of remorse.

They never spoke privately until the end of that first semester, when he came to her office to ask if he could enroll in her advanced class. Then she felt a jolt in her body, an undeniably physical thrill that told her something odd and unexpected about the nature of her passion. It was an entirely new feeling for her. She knew she wanted to be alone with him, here, in her office, among the books and papers and shelves of students' theses with their uniform blue bindings—this place that was an extension of her body and her power, was the material manifestation of all she was and did in the classroom. As they spoke, she improvised reasons for him to come back to her office: he was an exceptional student, and should do independent writing projects, meet with her privately for tutorials; he clearly had an academic future, and must begin coming in regularly for instruction in teaching; she would put together a special reading list, and meet with him periodically to discuss his progress.

Their private meetings became the highlight and heart of her working day. Now when she saw him in the classroom, it was only a kind of appetizer for their rendezvous in her office, where they would argue and agree passionately about the books and papers he carried in. She was fully alive only when she was alone with him. She lived for those hours they spent together. In the afternoons she would offer him tea, but when he started coming in the evenings, they began sipping vermouth together. They laughed more, shared opinions about other things—politics, movies, the little restaurants near the campus. They smiled conspiratorially, even giggled, when he showed up at her door. They sat very close, knee to knee. They never touched.

She knew she was in love. And she knew it was the one great love of her life, that such a meeting of minds, such a mixture of carnal desire and spiritual passion could only happen once. She loved him the way martyrs love God. She loved him so fiercely she was certain she could kill anyone who might hurt him. She would kill herself if she thought the act would deliver him into God's kingdom. She had dreams of saving him from burning houses, car accidents, mad attackers, collapsing bridges. She woke in a fever, her neck and chest burning, a wetness in her crotch.

One day during class the girl with the auburn braid began to speak about the theatre in France during the Revolution. The Kid groaned disparagingly, rolling his eyes and shaking his head in a rude and ugly demonstration. The girl seemed devastated, faltered, was unable to go on. Daisy had to pick up the line of thought herself, expanding on the ascendancy of Republican art at the end of the eighteenth century. She suddenly realized that the two of them had been sitting several rows apart for some time.

But it was her own reaction to this turn of events that truly shocked her. She felt no sense of triumph, or even relief. Rather, she felt threatened, as if this meant something dark and deadly and inevitable was approaching—as Louis XVI must have felt when his coach was stopped during his flight from Paris. All at once she could see the future, she could predict events that were to come. She saw her own state of grace slip away from her as she spoke. The exquisite mixture of desire and intense intellectual stimulation that had driven her for nearly a year seemed to drain from the classroom like a soul leaving a body.

She stared at the yellow curtain in the window above the toilet. He was in the next room, eagerly inspecting her apartment for the first and last time. She would compose herself, and walk out and tell him what she had to tell him. He would be crushed. She envisioned a scene, threats of murder or suicide, abandonment, her own remorse and loneliness. Yet she knew what she had to do, and strangely, felt no fear. Her body filled with alertness, expectation, and then a perverse joy took hold. She realized she had arrived at a new height of emotional intensity and personal power. She envisioned him in the other room, all nervous exaltation, waiting for her answer: it was a sublime picture. This was how she wanted things to be always, this moment of knowledge and terrible expectation. She felt she couldn't let go of it, couldn't move, almost couldn't breathe. She would wait a while longer, enjoy this perfect moment. Then that ghost of desire would mysteriously and abruptly leave this room, and she would have to follow.

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There's a song about them. It started going around not long after their Cessna Bird Dog went down in the South Pacific. It's one of those jumbled folk songs that seem to have been written by several different people with different intentions. There's a mean-spirited verse that tells of their meeting when he was still in the cradle, and she was his wet nurse. Another verse tells of their working together with the underground during the war. And another of their secret romance while he was still in the seminary, and she was the bishop's seamstress. All these stories are apocryphal. But there is something about the image of two lovers trapped in a small plane at the bottom of the sea—rocking with the current, forever entwined, slowly opening themselves to the insistent swarm of time—that makes any story of their love possible and therefore true.

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He parked his Packard on the street and walked the hundred yards up the driveway, through the overwhelming perfume of the rose garden to the great oval lawn that the drive circled in front of a pillared veranda. She sat there, on the veranda near the doorway, at a metal and glass table, wearing a white tulle dress and white picture hat with an orange plume, and holding a tea cup. At the far end of the veranda a carpenter, a tiny Mexican man with white hair, was repairing the lattice below the railing with a hammer much too big for such delicate work.

She looked as if she'd been expecting him, so whatever advantage he'd hoped to gain by stealth and surprise was lost. She seemed to him beautiful, though of another generation and another world. Millard had been right about her face and neck and bony hands—they were white and thin and oddly elongated, seemed to have been pulled like taffy from the collar and sleeves, making her look out of focus and slightly sinister. He knew she had much to hide. Their encounter would be a subtle but unrelenting stalk, a chess game.

He'd been studying Millard for months now, and felt he'd learned some of the master's guile and charm. As he climbed the four steps to the

veranda, he determined to speak with his boss's ease and hardboiled humor—self-mocking and accusatory, friendly and exasperating—that somehow always managed to provoke a suspect's unintended candor. But the instant he opened his mouth it seemed bent on betraying him; his old schoolboy mumble emerged in an improvident blurt. "Millard says I gotta be careful around you. Says you're dangerous."

"Please sit down. We all know Mr. Millard has a very active imagination." There was a redness around her eyes and also around her throat, and she looked sad to the Kid. Clearly she was older than she wanted to be. But she also seemed to be someone she didn't wish to be, as though circumstances had forced her into one compromising role after another, until she'd finally given in to this life of ill-got gains and elaborate boredom.

"Well you gotta admit you've sure been in the right place at the wrong time a lot lately."

"That could happen to anyone, no? It certainly happens in your line of work. It's happened to Mr. Millard—we read about it in the Times every now and then." There was an odd tone there, that he could only identify as pity. She touched his cheek with a single finger. "Young man, you've been in love once or twice, I suppose." A raised eyebrow put a question mark on the sentence. Then she seemed to read some secret writing on his face. "Perhaps only once."

"So what."

"Yes, well, and were you sure from the start—that it was what they call true love?"

He shrugged.

"Yes, I believe you were. Dead sure. And maybe you found out later you were dead wrong. No matter. When you're in love, you do things, strange things, sometimes bad things. Let me tell you a secret. Come close." He leaned in, and the long, skeletal fingers touched the back of his neck. She brought her lips close to his ear, he could feel the moist warmth of her breathing. "I am in love with Crowther Middlefield. And here is the tragic reality of it: I

would do anything for him. *Anything?*”

Then he heard an awful *thunk* at the back of his head, and all that whiteness around him, all the brightness and light, came at him at once, engulfed him, swallowed him whole.

* *

Her white pumps slid on the steep trail, and she had to catch herself with one hand against the muddy earth in order not to fall forward. If she'd known she would end up here today, she'd have dressed differently. She certainly wouldn't have worn the white sweater and shoes, now splattered with orange greasy mud.

The Kid had been hiking well in front of her all day, and had just pulled out of sight. She knew he did it to taunt her—to flout her age and her frailty. Somewhere up the trail he was stepping lightly, singing corny country songs quietly to himself, outfitted (at her expense) in spiffy climber's boots and khaki trousers, with that ridiculous pith helmet pushing down on his clownish ears. Yet it was not the out-of-tune ramblings of his voice that rolled down the trail to her, but something like a distant applause, a complete and pleasurable sound that filled the air around her like the light drizzle that had swarmed onto her hair and clothing. She seemed to be ascending into a cloud—the drizzle got heavier and a puffy whiteness closed in on her. She came over a rise and the trail took a slight dip, and suddenly the sound moved in very close: it was the sound of a raging river, or perhaps a waterfall. A second mist wove itself obliquely through the drizzle, and she decided she must be close to the falling water.

The heavy mist became rain, and the mud thickened. She walked slowly, fearing that she might step off a cliff and into the churning river gorge. Each step became more difficult. Pulling a foot out of the mud was like pulling up a rooted plant, and was accompanied by a wet farting sound. She was afraid of losing her balance and falling into the muck, being held there as on flypaper. Now she moved with too quick a step, and the mud sucked the loose pump off her right foot. She looked back in time to see the

top of the shoe heal over with orange mortar. Feeling a brief chill of fear and defeat, she stood still a moment, wondering what to do. Would the Kid hear her if she called out now, begging him to backtrack and rescue her? He couldn't be too far away. Shouldn't she call out to him now, before some disaster struck?

But she knew that was what he wanted, and was unable to relinquish whatever vanity or pride or perverse demon had taken hold of her. So she clamped her mouth shut and pushed forward.

The rain lightened, and she came around a bend and into a narrow stretch of the path that had been cut through the high chaparral like a corridor through dense library stacks. The din of moving water had dwindled, and now the trail widened into a stand of redwoods. She stopped at a fork, where the wide trail she was on continued ahead at a downward angle, while another narrower path led left and upward, back into the climb she and the Kid had originally set out on. She figured the Kid had veered left and kept heading up the mountain, but couldn't know for sure. To her deliberation she added the possibility of turning around and retreating to the trailhead.

As she stood there in one shoe, the other foot covered with a muddy sock, her shins and turquoise knee pants splattered with more of the orange mud, she heard the quick, regular step of a young man coming up from the bottom. The footsteps softened as his feet moved into the gently crackling cushion of old redwood leaves, and now he appeared in front of her, a military man in full uniform, a marine, she thought—don't they wear white belts and hats?—his clear pink face smiling earnestly, his legs muddy from the knees down. He looked even younger, fresher, *newer* than the Kid.

He glanced down at her foot, then held up the missing shoe, the mud on it thick as cake frosting. "I tripped up on it, nearly fell smack over," he said in a lilting southern accent from low in the throat—South Carolina, maybe Georgia. "That foot of yours is either pretty tough or pretty sore."

In fact she hadn't noticed until now that her foot was battered and throbbing. She smiled, held out her hand. He wiped most of the mud onto a

pant leg and gave her the shoe. She held it with a vague feeling that she didn't fully grasp what it was.

"I can help you put it on," he said without innuendo or irony.

"That's all right," she said.

"You okay then?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Okay then." He raised his eyebrows and hesitated momentarily, his eyes—wide, blue, confident—still holding out the offer. "Well I gotta move pretty quick to get to the top and then get back in time. Staff sergeant'll use any excuse to chew my butt. You take care, ma'am." He looked ahead and, seeing the fork, chose the uphill trail and marched quickly out of view.

She found a fallen, rotting redwood log and sat down to get the shoe back on. In the quiet of the forest she could hear a smattering of birds, scrub jays and towhees, making unmusical but reassuring sounds. It was one of those moments that seem to step out of time, where what went before and what's coming next don't seem to have anything to do with each other. She rested, feeling safe and unhurried. Then, when she knew that the moment was over, she stood, stretched, and set out, taking the uphill path.