

I've taken to padding around in the middle of the night. The joints and muscles nag. The parts are wearing thin in places and sagging in others. The kidneys have bloated to the size of watermelons, while the bladder has shrunk to the dimensions of a walnut. My Grandma Jen hardly slept at all. I must have seized the gene. It's important that you know this fact, so you don't assume that one deeply destructive incident drove me over the edge and rubbed me raw to madness, like some senile Lady Macbeth trying to cough up a clot of evil.

Not that I don't have regrets. I've done some things I'd rather undo, and there are moments I'd like to retrieve and redo, but I haven't discovered the magic for that. At least I thought I hadn't.

It was so simple as a child. All of the losses were trivial. A quarter dropped in the sand, at the beach, meant to buy a wildly anticipated Sugar Daddy; that big blob of caramel on a cardboard stick. There was nothing quite so devastating as the taste of caramel washing through your brain, rather than over your tongue.

In adolescence, the missed opportunities were magnified. Magnified, mostly, in proportion to the penis, recently discovered. Kisses that slipped your grasp, sweeter than caramel. Kisses embracing imagined futures. But none were sweeter than Butterfly's. I really do want to get on and tell you what happened the other night, but it's crucial that you have this detail.

How could I ever refer to Butterfly as a detail? One bright day in March, years ago and in a farmer's field, my amorous advances had been rebuked by a young girl. I sat on a large, warm rock and sulked. Suddenly, a butterfly as big as a kite settled alongside me. I was shocked at first, but we struck up a conversation. Actually, I struck up a conversation. But her large licorice eyes fed my thoughts. She touched my lips with her tongue and her kisses were of rose and hollyhock and tiger lily, which tasted of the color orange, if that can be imagined. I asked her to marry me and we lived in bliss until, one day, she died. Butterflies simply don't live very long.

I came back year after year to that same field in hopes that she would return. One year a girl, with pale yellow hair, appeared out of the woods that surrounded the farmer's field, right at the spot where I'd buried Butterfly. We spoke, actually talked, to one another. We fell in love as well, and I married that girl, whom I called Kornsilks. Her hair was pale yellow and her kisses tasted of tiger lilies too. But I dared not ask her how this was possible, for fear of losing her. I didn't want her to know I'd loved another as much as I loved her.

Now that she's gone I wander around in the middle of the night, trying to wash away old sins, trying to deal with regrets over missed opportunities and foolish mistakes. And trying to satisfy the demands of my collapsing constitution. Most of all, though, I search for Kornsilks. She's gone, though I have to be clear, I do not believe she is dead. I simply awoke one morning to find the space she had occupied beside me empty. So I ramble around, searching the house, as if I'd misplaced her.

Why had she left? Was it simply her time, as it had been Butterfly's? Was she bored? Had she been annoyed with me? Certainly I'd made mistakes, even with her. Or had she simply decided it was time for each of us to follow a different, Frostian, path? She had a mind of her own, as had Butterfly. Which, of course, is why I loved her so. Loved them so. Should I have done something differently? Perhaps. No, probably. But we don't get over. At least I hadn't thought so.

Autumn in the Rockies is short. Isn't she, though, just about everywhere? A gorgeous whore who steals your heart, picks your pocket, and has happy feet. Consider. You could wander the planet and most likely enjoy perpetual Spring or Summer or Winter. But Fall is ephemeral. Wherever you seek it, it will dazzle you, force you to fall in love, then die. Like Butterfly. Vanish. Like Kornsilck.

But it is especially short here in the Rocky Mountains. Mostly it's yellows. An explosion of canaries settled on every branch of every tree. There are no warm, wet smells. Just dust and dry flint.

But this year Autumn was different. The canaries had been chased off of their perches by all the exotic birds that must have flown their cages at the zoo. Only a few flecks of yellow remained on the odd bush. Reds dripped from the ninebark and the mountain mahogany. Peaches poured softly from the aspens.

Even the Gamble Oak got into the act. A scruffy, low, miserly sort of tree, it is the last to leaf out and the first to haul down its flag for the season. In fact, it does not even turn color all at once, but rather by degrees. By the time it's finished dyeing itself saffron at one end, it has begun to brown at the other. Scrub oak simply is not a showman.

But this year it flamed abundant orange, each bush, from top to bottom, side to side and all at once, apparently resolved to remain brilliant and beautiful. It filled the pinched hills around my home. Anticline followed by syncline followed by anticline, a blanket of orange broken only by stands of vanilla scented Ponderosa.

Autumn's air is usually clear and brittle at night at this elevation, tossed through open windows like shards of glass. But this year she huffed in, her breath warm and wet, caressing the interior spaces, slithering across the floor and snaking up walls. Settling in corners. Like a ghost. Ghosts, of course, were exactly what I was inviting in. Butterfly. And Kornsilck. And, as it turned out, my own Frostian doppelganger.

Some nights I would wander about, and sometimes I would simply sit on a sofa in the dark, inhale the fragrance and let Autumn's moisture envelope me, as if she had grabbed my hair and drawn my head downward into that space between her flowing, rounded thighs. But this one particular night I was curious to see whether or not she strips off her makeup before stretching out across the foothills. So I threw on a light jacket and stepped out onto my porch. At once, I lost my breath; my eyes crossed; my ears rang.

High in the southern sky, the moon pressed its plump, hunched back up against the purple night. The effort of it all seemed to drive a soft pulse in the moonglow that imparted a gentle motion to a landscape I knew to be motionless. The low ridges and valleys around my house began to flow and swell, mirroring the waves of the ancient sea that once filled the Great Basin of the West.

Directly beneath the porch rail of my deck, a branch of Gamble Oak, buffeted by a slight breeze and stroked, perhaps, by the moonglow, beckoned my gaze with its fat hands, sweeping its leaves down from my vantage, into a shallow swale, and back up to the next ridge. My eyes fed on a flood of foliage that rippled and flowed, brilliant orange, like fluorescent mercury. Here and there the deep green Ponderosas bent their needles in deference to a tepid wind that blew from the West. The pines looked like islands in the midst of bright magma. My eyes began to water badly. I blinked hard, but

that only smeared my vision. The landscape swam through hot tears, driven as well, I'm sure, by the pulsing, swelling light of the gibbous moon.

I wiped my eyes with the sleeve of my coat and focused, instead, on the brilliant hunchback throbbing overhead. Directly behind her Orion rode the vault of the sky, as if in pursuit of a prize; an ancient warrior sacking the heavens, intent on hauling their bright beauty off to his tent.

Betelgeuse blazed, a red-orange fist, ready to unclench and draw a sweep of pendant pearls, the Hunter's sword dangling from his starry-buckled belt. Or perhaps to grab the sweet moon by the comb of white light streaming from her dusty cheeks.

Orion, winter warrior, and bright Betelgeuse, his fearsome fist, juxtaposed in my mind to tickle out a memory that made me smile. I prepared to wrap my mind around it, when a sudden movement startled me. The moon began to move, gently at first, then accelerate across the small arc of sky that had captured my fancy.

At once, Orion bolted in pursuit. By degrees, but ever more swiftly, the chase gathered speed, until the moon streaked out of its orbit and raced madly earthward and away from him. I gripped the railing of my deck, fastened my fingers to it, transfixed by the beauty of the chase and the terror of it. Betelgeuse whirled and latched a fiery fist onto the weapon dangling from the Hunter's belt and raised it high. But She did not scream, nor did Orion raise a war cry; everything unfolded in the deepest silence.

In a gleaming burst of argentine, She plunged into the orange stream and broke the thick silence. What had seemed to me, only minutes before, to be Gamble Oak, raced past now in a shining course, while small eddies swirled and lapped against the sides of my deck. A loud hissing followed a second splash, as if hot, glowing steel had been plunged into a cold pool. No longer a moon and a cluster of stars, but two figures swam toward me, pulsing platinum.

The Moon, or whatever She was, churned in the direction of a stand of dark Ponderosa pine. She was quickly losing separation. My legs pulled strongly in the direction of my own indoors, the safety of my house. I should have run like hell but, instead, tore off my jacket and dove into the raging, brushy river. Maybe my former lives, with Butterfly and Kornsilks, had shaped my mind, informed it, allowing it to be more receptive to realities that lay barely hidden behind, perhaps enlaced in, everyday experience.

No matter. My eyes locked onto the shining white shape pulling itself through the churning, orange broth. Although my eyes told me I was swimming against the current, my arms pulled me along effortlessly. The reality that lay beneath the surface of the stream moved in a direction opposite the reality my eyes absorbed.

The Ponderosas formed an island now, a narrow beach of flinty sand. Struggling to put as much energy as possible into my stroke, but keeping my eyes focused on Her, I pulled harder and began to kick wildly. My shoulders ached, my quads burned, but I could see that She had pulled herself from the leafy current, dragging her plump, silver shape across the sandy strip and settling herself against the broad, russet scales that formed the bark of the biggest pine.

Gasping, I pressed on with more urgency, almost desperation. I could see that I maintained a slight advantage over the Hunter, since he pulled himself with only one starry arm, the other raised, his blue-white weapon clenched in fingers of flame. I barely reached the bank ahead of him and scrambled to a spot between the pine and the pursuer.

Then, as the stars rolled off the orange surface of the stream, lit now by the silver radiance of the Moon, I felt my guts grip my heart, which actually stopped for an instant, clambering up inside my chest and grabbing hold of my throat. The starlight that sketched his shape started to spread and smear, filling in the dark gaps in his familiar form.

He stood not twenty feet away, fearsome, but beautiful and delicate, as if my breath might scatter his starry skin across the surface of the orange stream. His face, hacked by a rough hand and bathed in the scarlet glow of Betelgeuse, masked a tiny head set on massive shoulders. Rude, ruddy cheeks surrounded a yawning depression where lips should have been.

“Stand back!” his deep voice rolled across my mind, though in my ears the only sound was the stream smacking its orange lips, gnawing the narrow beach greedily.

The hair on my arms, which were, oddly, quite dry, stood straight up and off the surface of my skin. “What the fuck am I doing?” I thought, in panic.

“What indeed?” he answered. The Hunter could read my thoughts. If I were to stand and fight, he could anticipate ____

“Yes, I can. And will. So move aside or my sword will scatter your soul across the bright band of the Milky Way,” he growled in the space between my ears.

“And seed more good than ill,” a voice behind me cried, a deep contralto rumbling around in my head like the shot of a distant cannon.

I hadn’t even glanced at her when I’d scrambled onshore, so focused had I been on her aggressor. Anthropomorphized, like Orion, She leaned languidly against a tall pine, her face handsome and her frame athletic. Her breasts were small and her hips narrow. Every part of her pulsed silver but the hair on her fine head, which tumbled, dusky like the moon’s Mare, onto her splendid shoulders. Darker grey still were her eyes. “I’m sure you expected my sister. Certainly more to your taste,” She spoke aloud.

I thought to speak but held myself for a moment, glancing at Orion who stood strangely motionless. Perhaps he couldn’t hear thoughts shaped as sounds.

“I know you,” I said to Her. Grey eyes grabbed me and held me fast. My brain turned to cool Jell-O, my thoughts swimming inside my skull, coursing through my mind like slick eels. “I’ve always loved you,” I said.

She let one leg fall, casually, to the ground and I averted my gaze. “No, not like that. I never loved you like that.”

She drew her knees up to her chest. “Your heart would freeze, anyway.”

I stared into her shining face. Maybe it would be worth it, I thought.

“I doubt that,” the Hunter said, softly inside my head. “But that’s what I’m here to discover.” He lowered his fist to his thigh, and his weapon morphed into a magnificent phallus, Betelgeuse pulsing angrily at its tip. He charged Her.

“Run!” I screamed, and dove for his ankles, hunching myself into a ball, tripping him.

When he hit the sand, the whole earth shook. Slowly he rose, while I scrambled to place myself between him and my goddess. “Run, please!” I pleaded, but She sat quietly, her grey eyes wrapped, I felt, around my thoughts.

I drew myself up and faced the Hunter. His head spun like a crimson nebula. Was his mind a stellar nursery, pregnant with iron and nickel, hydrogen and lithium, laced with gold? Pregnant with possibilities. Perhaps all he wanted, needed, was the

spark of intelligence to light futures ablaze. She would seed *him*, not the other way around.

“You understand, then,” he whispered. “Stand aside.”

I turned to the grey-eyed goddess. “Well, are you going to protect me or not?” She asked, flatly. While her lips lifted, her face did not suffer a smile.

Now I understood. But I had a question. “The moon. I mean, I thought Artemis__”

“Is a little cunt. I take whatever form I please.”

“Another contest, then.” Athena nodded. “This time, though, it’s about my courage, not your beauty.”

“Am I not beautiful?”

I laughed aloud. “The most. Beauty’s a package deal.” She cocked her head. Had I actually made *her* think? “Well, I’ll stand between you as long as I can, not because I’m brave but because I’m grateful.”

“Don’t you want to know the prize?” She asked.

“Which was poison to Paris. Though he was a fool. No. You’ve already given me the greatest of gifts.” I tapped my forehead. This time her face framed a genuine smile.

Orion lifted a fiery finger, flashing blue-white, to his own temple. “It is time__”

“When I say it is time,” She said.

Though her phrases were short and simple, my head hurt. Unuttered, I could physically feel all of the allusions hidden behind the words. The emotions. Their histories and futures.

The warrior roared inside my skull and charged. For an instant, I wobbled, knees unhinged by the cosmic roar. I blinked, steadied, then crouched. Only yards separated us, but he moved deliberately. The sand hissed beneath his feet, and I saw it turn to glass where he’d walked. At last he stopped, towering over me, his face a swirling ruddy mass, lit from within by thousands of baby stars.

Betelgeuse lolled languidly on his thigh, then rose at the end of a starry shaft. Did he have other designs? I swallowed hard. “No,” his voice echoed, flatly in my brain. “I’ll simply send you back where you came from.”

My heart slowed to a stop, then began to beat rapidly. “Another chance?” I whispered. Then, more loudly, “Overs!”

His face swirled in what seemed to be a smile. “More than She’s given you,” he boomed, this time aloud, in a voice I didn’t recognize but was, nonetheless, familiar. The words, the idea of it sizzled bright white, but on a plate of cast iron, fired by hot stars. His thoughts crackled in a bath of radiation, songs sung by a trillion spheres.

Glancing at the filmy, delicate scrim of the Milky Way, I felt my guts hauled toward it. If only I could change a just a few things. I’d made mistakes, but not that many. Still, they’d__

“Led to futures full of holes, draining tomorrow’s presents of all fulfillment,” he whispered, this time gently, urging me.

“No! I owe her this.”

The warrior shrugged, sending a spray of luminous dust swirling into that soft night. Raising his arm in a blue-white sweep and clenching a crimson fist, he bellowed. I crouched and raised my arms above my head, waiting for the end, waiting to be

pounded into the beach. Waiting for an empty future, rather than a second past. But as his blazing arm began to fall, to fry me on the spot, She threw me aside.

“No,” he said softly, almost a question.

“No, not now,” She answered simply, and grabbing red-eyed Betelgeuse in one hand, tore it from its anchor; then grabbing the starry shaft, whirled him above her head and flung him back up and against the vault of the sky. Pasted once again against the inky blackness, he hung incomplete. Athena bounced Betelgeuse in her palm.

“I’m sorry. I tried,” I said, my voice shaking, more from confusion than from fear.

“That’s all I wished.”

“But why did you lure us here, when you knew how this would end?” I said.

“Because I didn’t know how you would choose. I wanted to listen to your thoughts.”

“And I chose you. But…” I glanced at the Hunter.

She stood up, her breasts bouncing lightly, and raised her hand to my to my face. Two pale fingers touched my lips, a cool wash pouring from their tips. The more I drank, the more I craved.

Suddenly, She pulled her hand away. “No, please, more!”

“There would never be enough for you,” She said. “Reason and knowledge. Cool and solid. My sister’s gift is warm and wet. And dangerous.”

“I know,” I said, lowering my eyes, which locked onto the dark wedge between her waxy thighs. I jerked my head up. “I’m so sorry.”

“Males,” She remarked, simply. She laughed then, the sound snapping like an icicle.

I smiled. “But other passions can shatter reason. Anger, frustration. Things said, and done, that drain futures.”

“Pride,” She said. “Troy,” she whispered softly, almost an exhalation.

“Pandarus’ arrow?”

“Fired at flaming haired Menelaus, drawn from his quiver by a thought which I insinuated into his prideful heart. It broke the truce and sent so many…” Her eyes swirled like dark water. “My own false pride.”

“I almost let the Hunter scatter me across the stars to have a second shot. Is it really possible?” She nodded. “Then why haven’t you___”

“Set things right? We may get ‘overs’, but we can’t choose which.” I must have appeared puzzled, and disappointed, for She regarded me with a gentle look. “What made you smile when you looked at his hand?”

“Betelgeuse? A silly thought. A memory.”

“A past. A missed opportunity?”

“Sure, but if I’d kissed the girl, what difference would it have made?” I asked.

“A butterfly beats its wings…” She said. “Futures conditional.”

“Butterfly,” I said softly. “Is that possible?”

“Perhaps. But you chose Betelgeuse.”

“But how was I to know?” I said, almost pleading.

“Do we ever know where our choices will lead, even ‘overs’? Besides, our choices are never just about ourselves,” She said, sadly. “So many hurled down to Hades.”

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“But...” I began, knowing I wouldn’t finish the plea, knowing She wouldn’t let me, finding myself standing in deep silence along a stretch of road beneath a blob of pale yellow light that poured from the top of a tall pole.

Asphalt slithered by, it’s back striped bright, dangerous yellow. Bitter cold chewed my cheeks, a nasty trade for the soft stroke of Autumn’s hand. A pair of corduroys flapped in the wind, as tiny gusts slapped the cuffs of my parka. Over my shoulder hung a pair of skates, like a brace of rabbits. I swayed in the wind to keep warm and, as I did, old snow crunched, like dry bones, beneath my boots.

A figure jogged toward me, popping out of the night from between black blocks, the houses that lined the highway. “Ken?” I called, the high tenor pitch splitting his name into two squeaky syllables. But I knew it wasn’t nerves that had caused the cracking. ‘Overs’. I had lived not a half mile away from the spot. Now I remembered. My buddy, Ken, and I must be meeting some friends from school at the town park skating pond, a winter ritual performed as often as we could get away with it on a school night.

“You’re early, man,” Ken said.

“Well, I finished my homework.” I was groping for a handhold in time. I knew where I was, but not precisely *when*. “The English was pretty easy.”

“Yeah, boy, it beats the hell out of all that diagramming we did last year.”

“No shit”, I said, feeling a rush of recognition. Okay, I was in the eighth grade and I was thirteen. *Jesus*. The memory that had tickled my brain just a few minutes before, and decades hence, made me smile again. *Betelgeuse!* But why had She chosen this night, and not the ‘overs’ I had wanted?

“And anyway,” Ken was saying, “we won’t have to worry about homework tomorrow. Maybe we can all meet a little earlier. Like six.” Washington’s birthday? Lincoln’s? I wondered. Ken’s breath bounced off the frozen air, punching it with soft white fists.

A solitary car passed. “A fucking Malibu!” I cried, actually drooling as it roared by. I could feel the spit begin to freeze at the corners of my mouth. A bit of an overreaction, I thought. Then again, I was thirteen, wasn’t I?

“Chevys suck,” Ken said. The road was deserted now. The serpent slept again. Dead silence soaked up the yellow light from the anemic incandescents overhead. I checked my watch. Seven o’clock. The factories had let out two hours ago.

Suddenly, I was aware of music filling the black sky, echoing off the low hills that embraced the small pond in the park below. “Let’s go, man!” Ken shouted.

We jogged across the road and raced down a side street. We called it the Elevator Shaft. A blast to fly down in the summer, on a bike. But it was winter and it was slick. Ken hit a patch of snow, but kept his balance. Hanging a right, I saw the Park road, and the Pond lit up like Stalag 17! Bright floods hung from two-by-fours on the warming hut. Shack was more like it. The Beach Boys poured out of the frigid air, into our ears and straight down through my guts to my feet. We both picked up our pace.

“Friggin’ Beach Boys in February. How about that shit!” Ken cried.

“Friggin’ Beach Boys are okay with me anytime.” Yeah, any old time. I wasn’t sixty, or even sixteen. I had another shot. I couldn’t remember any momentous fuck up or opportunity missed. Just a lost kiss. What *would* I do?

Bolting out of the red warming hut, we hit the ice at a dead run and I went right down on my face. I felt my front tooth quake, as it smacked into the ice. Shock waves rippled across my face. Bright sparklers lit the backs of my eyelids, squeezed shut to the pain. So I’d done it again. Was I caught in a temporal do-loop, forced to watch the same old show again?

Pulling myself off of the ice, I heard laughter raking across me like a wire brush. Bobby was flicking a hockey stick. “Maybe you should get a pair of figure skates, faggot,” he said, in falsetto.

I checked my tooth, giving it a delicate shake, then brushed off my jacket. “Speaking of faggots, why don’t you just blow me, Bobby.”

Bobby clenched his teeth and dropped his goalie stick. “Jesus, you mean you’d do it? Right here?” I squeaked.

“You...” Bobby made a move, but an arm shot out, knocking him on his ass.

“Hey,” Ken said, “why don’t you go over to the deep end and play frogman. We got serious business here, Jaq and me.”

Bobby struggled to his feet, sliding around, but deftly, to maintain his balance. “Oh, yeah?” he mumbled. Bobby wasn’t going to screw around with Ken. “Like what?”

“Coppin’ a feel, that’s what. It’s like...” Ken flexed his fingers, and a look of sweet satisfaction softened his face.

“I know what it’s like,” Bobby snapped.

“Bullshit,” Ken said, chuckling.

“Yeah, bullshit,” I said, feeling a bit braver than I should have. Bobby had a full head on me. He glared menacingly. “How many hairs you got now anyway, Bob-by?” Bobby lunged and we both went down. The other boys and Ken watched us grapple and slide around for a minute. It’s hard to do much damage with parkas and gloves. And it’s even tougher on the ice.

“All right. Ding! Round’s over,” Ken shouted. He and the rest of the guys peeled us apart, as we hurled F-bombs and S-bombs and A-bombs at each other. “Hey, cool it! The monitor’s looking this way.” We didn’t want to get thrown off the ice, but it was Mr. K. He was our math teacher and picked up a few bucks keeping the pond safe and orderly for the Park. He gave us that ‘cut the crap’ stare, but that was it. He was a good guy. Bobby and I forced out a couple of fake laughs and chucked each other on the arm. Mr. K turned away.

“You little fuck,” Bobby began.

Ken grabbed him by the scarf. “Do like I said, Bob.” Bob, not Bobby. Ken was pissed. “Go over there and play hockey, or dick-dick fuck-fuck, or whatever the shit you want to do or I’ll take that hockey stick and shove it up your ass sideways. We got important stuff going on.” Bobby turned away and snarled something. “What?!” Ken shouted. Bobby simply picked up his pace.

“Thanks,” I said.

“Look, man, you’re only five feet tall and ___” I looked down at my skates in a state of profound self-pity. “C’mon. You’ll grow this summer. Or maybe the next. Besides, you could grab a full crop down there.”

“I grabbed more than that,” I answered, grimly.
“You didn’t!”
“Yup, I did.”
“When?”
“Last August.”
“Shit. You were only twelve,” Ken said, almost reverently.
“Almost thirteen. But it scared the shit out of me. Thought I’d go sterile. I read at least ten encyclopedias to find out if I would.”
“And?”
I shrugged. “They don’t talk about it. Say, haven’t you___”
“Nope. I’m scared, too. But I don’t think it’ll make any difference much longer.”
“Well, there’s nothing to be scared about,” I said.
“Like riding a bike?” Ken laughed nervously.
“Not even. On a bike, you fall off the first few times.” I skated a couple of small circles. It was getting really cold just hanging there. “So what’s the plan?”
Ken glanced over at a gaggle of giggling girls. A couple of them locked onto us, grinned and whispered to one another behind their mittens. As if we could hear them.
“Maryanne?” I squeaked.
“Shit, no. I mean, maybe next month.” In the eighth grade we’d change girlfriends about as often as we’d change socks. Not every day, but we’d change them.
“So...”
“So just have a skate with Bette and bullshit a little. You’re good at that. And she’s pretty sophisticated and___”
“Soften her up,” I summarized. Ken gave me an odd look. “Metaphorically.”
“Metaphorically?”
I realized that I was in a different vocabulary Zip Code. “It’s like a comparison, but not the real thing.” Ken seemed skeptical. “I won’t___”
“Forget it. If you get lucky, I’ll just move her out on the calendar.” We laughed.
“Don’t worry, buddy,” I said. “She’s tuff. Real tuff, but... You know.”
“So who’s making you hard these days?” Ken asked.
“Nobody, really. I’m between hardons.” I bent over and tightened my skates.
“Here goes. Cruise by in a couple, okay?”
“Okay. Say,” Ken said, as I started to skate toward Bette, “who’d you think about when you, you know, when...”
I waved him off. “Bette,” I answered. His mouth dropped, his eyes flared, his whole face exploded in shock, looking as if he might be able to drape his cheeks over his ears. “Don’t flip out. She just happened to be the one who popped into my head. It happens like that. You’ll see.”
“Hi, Maryanne. Hi, Diane. Hi, Margo,” I said, as I hockey stopped in front of the girls, shooting up a fine spray of shaved ice. Margo. Why had I broken up with Margo? I couldn’t remember. Diane was the maven, the matchmaker, and the leader of any and every ring. Pretty cool entrance, I thought. Actually, I’d never been able to execute the trick at thirteen. Shows what fifty years of practice will do for you. Maryanne seemed impressed, her wide blue eyes opening just a little wider, as if they might smack into her impossibly blonde hair.
“What was all that with Bobby?” she asked.

“He said you were a real skank. So I jumped him.” The girls giggled some more.

“Oh, sure!” Ruthie said. “She’s only the most beautiful girl in the whole school.” Which Ruthie was not.

“Actually, Bobby thinks you’re pretty tuff, Ruthie” I lied. Her dark skin purpled a shade in the glare of the floods. Her huge brown eyes turned inward, viewing a special dream, no doubt, and then lowered slowly, seeming to settle on the thick rims of her big, black glasses. Why had I lied, I wondered.

I looked Ruthie over. She had a cute, trim figure. Her eyes were lovely, with lashes like long fingers, trying to tap her forehead. Too bad about the schnoz.

I felt my heart send a tsunami roaring through my chest. Did her parents have the money to pay for her braces? And had I sent her heart sailing off in the direction of a landfall it would not make? Had I been fair? Her hopes would be dashed against the rocks of impossible expectations. Now there was a real purple metaphor, I thought. But didn’t she already lack any real expectations? Which was worse, false hope or no hope at all? Anyway, her nose wasn’t really all that big.

“Hey, Bette, wanna skate?” I asked. Looks like lasers crossed the empty circle inside the ring of chicks.

Bette sensed the confusion. We’d never been within a parsec of being an item. What was going on, they all wondered, flexing all of those newly discovered social muscles that sprouted so much later in those days. Bette was reveling in the disarray. Being at the center of it. “Yeah,” she said softly, but with an even softer smile. A smile that spread like whipped cream.

I glanced behind me as we glided across the pond and saw mittens fly up, herding a hundred questions, a flock of secrets.

Bette slipped and she clutched my arm. Too quickly, I thought. She regained her balance but continued to hold onto me, and then she guided me ever so subtly away from the lights and the crowd.

We slowed, then stopped, in a dim corner of the pond. In the distance, the ice glowed fuzzy white under the incandescent floods, then morphed, yellow-white to silver to ashen grey, in chiaroscuro, as the darkness advanced toward us and the light faded, then failed. Bodies skated and sailed and wobbled through that light in an immense bubble of squeals and shouts. ‘Sweet Talkin’ Guy’ thrummed through it all, pouring from a pair of speakers that sat atop the red, wooden, warming hut, its roof a rumpled hat sagging from the weight of a dozen winters. For an instant, I felt uneasy about being a shill.

Bette and I, we, all of us, floated in a capsule of sound. *My God!* I began to truly understand that I’d been given a second chance. Or was it merely a second look?

The Chiffons were the beating heart of the moment. I glanced around the irregular ellipse of frozen water. Tall maples and locusts and ash stretched their bony branches skyward, like a big, black rib cage wrapped around the pond, and the people and the percussion. Twiggy fingers tickled the gelid air, scratched the surface of the sky. To tear its tender skin away and reveal a secret? Or maybe to simply scratch an itch.

An itch that was decades old tickled my nose. I rubbed it hard, but the itch simply sped away to a spot deep inside.

I turned to Bette and found her staring at the sky. I regarded her closely. Either she was inviting my examination or was unaware of my attention. She continued to stare at the low hills of the Berkshires, black and bulky, bounding this snippet of space and time. A golden gibbous moon (was it the same one?) rocked gently along a ridgeline that limned the blue-black sky. It was too low in the West now to cast much light, but all of its power was focused, at that moment, on Bette's face. What was She up to?

I bit my cheek. How impossibly smooth, the surface of Bette's skin. A white-gold mask under the moonlight, stretched tightly over a thin layer of fat; her face, her figure ready to burst through her skin as a butterfly splits its chrysalis.

Butterfly? Where *was* she? Was this she? I felt aroused than ashamed. *Jesus, I'm a dirty old man!* I looked away from Bette's face. *She's a kid!* But, then, I was also. Sort of.

"You okay?" I heard a voice ask.

"Um, yup," I answered, swallowing hard. A small drop of sweat trickled across my ribs, despite the biting cold.

"Good!" she said, in a husky voice, and skated toward the barriers at the edge of the pond where the river filled it.

"Say, be careful, Bette," I shouted, as I raced toward the white sawhorses lined up in a corner, screaming "Do Not Cross!" in red.

Breathing heavily, I caught her by the arm. She was fast! "Be careful!" I repeated, loudly.

She laughed. "Oh, look," she said, pointing.

"Look and see," I answered, feeling silly as soon as I said it.

"Look and see, Jaq," she whispered. I thought about that night last August and hoped my parka was long enough.

I looked away from her and turned my face to the murky blackness, speckled brightly, though, by a billion stars. The moon had made her exit, and there was no city glow, back then.

She gasped subtly, drawing in a small draught of air. As she spoke her breath caressed her words. "What is that big red star?" My guts ran. "Did it move?" she asked.

"I don't think... Um, it's Betelgeuse. It is big... A giant. A red giant." My Jockeys were strangling me. *I'm wearing Jockeys?!* I was frightened and I was horny.

"Hey, guys! Whatcha doin'?" I had been standing very close to Bette with my back to all of the action on the pond. Ken must have thought I'd done the deed. Mission accomplished.

"Oh, Jaq's just showing me the stars," Bette said, in a teasing tone.

"I'll bet," Ken said, in a low sulky tone, and began to skate off. It wasn't like Ken to sulk.

"No, wait," Bette cried. We didn't *do* anything." Had she taken the bait? "Don't you go telling everybody!" But her subtle smile belied her words.

"Oh, I wouldn't tell anybody," he answered, a grin splitting his face, as he turned and raced for the warming hut. Bette was squealing, "Wait!" 'Da Doo Ron Ron' seemed to fill their skates with power. The game was on and I hadn't even had to kiss her. Then again...

'Da Doo Ron Ron'. My skates exploded, too, at the sound of the music, then I slowed and wheeled around to face the Hunter. Blue-white, his right fist seemed to shake

slightly, and move subtly for this weapon. I turned and raced off in the direction of the Crystals, as fast as I could.

Ken and I chugged the last of our hot chocolate, as Mrs. K packed up her little stand on the tailgate of her station wagon. She taught third grade. Teachers didn't make much in those days. We threw our skate laces over our shoulders and bolted. There was always a feeling of power, having skates slung over a shoulder like an ancient weapon. I glanced nervously again at Orion. He was drifting, calmly now, toward Berkshires.

As Ken and I climbed the 'Elevator Shaft', slipping on patches of crunchy, dry snow, I ripped off my wool cap and let the wind, gusting and punching my face with a frozen fist, fly up and across the top of my head. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply. I'd been given another chance to kiss Bette. And failed. But this had simply been a small, remembered incident with no great consequences. Hadn't it?

"Hey, man, watch it!" Ken cried. I felt a strong tug on my jacket and a big, old Caddy lumbered by, thumping its tailpipe on the asphalt, throwing up a spray of sparks. "Jesus Christ, what is wrong with you tonight?"

"Whadda ya mean?" I shot back. *What if he knew? Holy shit.*

"What do I mean? You finish your homework when tomorrow's a day off, *and* a Friday, you start a fight with Bobby and ___"

"I didn't start it! He ___"

"Shut up. And now you almost stroll in front of a Caddy. I've been talking to you for two minutes man, and it's like you're in Sputnikville!" He dragged his hand in a big arc across the sky.

"More like six hundred light years away," I said.

"Huh? Man you're weird."

"I'm weird? Sputnikville?"

"Fuck you. Anyway, did you kiss her?"

"Nope."

"No? But the plan ___"

"Was screwed when you skated right into the middle of it -- Daddy-O," I said, sarcastically.

Ken scuffed at the dirty snow on the roadside. "Anyway, it seemed like she was trying to make me jealous. Didn't it?"

"Yup. And it seemed as if you were jealous," I said. "Good job, man. But maybe we should try again tomorrow night to confirm."

Ken eyed me suspiciously, as we hurried across the road under the yellow wash of the streetlight. "Seriously, man, why'd you do your homework tonight? You've got all weekend." I fiddled with my skates. "Look, if you're a brain, don't advertise it. The chicks'll think you're a dip. I mean, you were! Now they think you're cool, so don't screw it up."

I nodded my head, as if I were absorbing, deeply, what he was telling me. Actually, I was. I had been sort of a dipshit. No. Not even sort of. "Say! Why don't we cruise over to my house and you can stay over! Tomorrow's a holiday." *Which one?* "We can switch on the tube and catch Zachary on Chiller Theater." I hoped.

"What about your parents?" Ken said.

"They'll probably be in bed, and we'll keep it down. Besides, they won't mind," I said.

“Can I call my Mom?” he asked. “Geez, I hope she’s not asleep. Boy, if she is, she’ll be bent out of shape... But I better, anyway.”

“Okay, let’s hurry up so we can catch her before she hits the sack.” We ran like hell. “Hey, what about your dad?” If his dad was home, he’d be loaded *and* pissed!

“That’s a skate, man. It’s only nine, so you can bet your ass he’s still at the Top Hat.” A local dive.

“Cool!” I shouted.

Ken caught his mom in a good mood. “She sounded happy,” I said. “Your pop get run over or something?”

Ken laughed. “No luck, man. But he hasn’t shown up, and if he ain’t home by nine, he ain’t comin’ home.”

My parents called down from the upstairs. I filled them in and asked if Ken could stay. They were copacetic.

We grabbed a few fistfuls of Cokes and settled down in front of the TV.

Raymond Massey was splitting rails in the snow.

Lincoln’s Birthday, then. “Guess we’ll have to watch Abe until Creature Feature’s on,” I said. On a side table was a small electronic device. *Holy shit!* I pressed a button. It stopped snowing in Illinois and Abe droned on.

“That’s cool!” Ken said. “Where’s the motor?”

“There’s a little box, connected to the antenna, under the roof in the attic. I helped my dad put it in last July. Fuck, it’s hot up there in July!”

Abe finally stopped giving speeches. Funny, I had to get up out of my chair to switch channels. Zachary stared at us with a look of benign malevolence, straight from the grave.

“The Abominable Snowman!” Ken cried.

“Basil Rathbone,” I said. “One of the best!” I’d only seen it ten or eleven times.

“Man, it felt like the Himalayas out there tonight,” Ken said.

“It always chaps me, though, that you don’t see the monster ‘til the end.”

“Chaps?” Ken said, clearly pondering the word.

Another temporal inconsistency. I shrunk into my chair and tugged on my Coke.

For over an hour Basil Rathbone trudged through the mountains. The movie was old. Real old. And the sound track popped and hissed when it was quiet. That made it creepier. The hair on my arms shot up. *Wait a minute!* I remembered the flick. It was never that scary.

Ken yawned. “Hey, man, want to throw on our PJs?” I asked. “I mean, this is a real sleepover. You can borrow a pair of mine.” We changed in a flash and settled back in front of Basil.

A howl made us jump. “Whoa!” Ken cried.

“Keep it down,” I whispered.

“They’re getting close. They’ve left the monastery,” Ken said.

Basil Rathbone and his crew trudged around a while longer. I yawned. Then I heard Ken breathing heavily.

Now they *were* close. Sherlock was in a cave and this pair of eyes stared out at him. *Oh, fuck! No! At me.*

Just a pair of eyes, but instead of dissolving back into the blackness of the cave, they advanced. I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe. Ken started snoring gently. I tried to call out to him, but my voice box was locked down.

It was the Abominable Fucking Snowman! Sasquatch! Yeti! It was big and hairy and had very human eyes. Then I thought my heart would shut down.

The Snowman's head and chest filled the screen. He had a sort of Orangutan mouth with no upper lip. He was smiling, kind of. His hair was long and shaggy, exactly as you would expect. Which made me suspicious. Was She fucking with me? I relaxed. Sure, that's what was happening.

"Fuck!" I shouted, but the cry descended rather than rose. Ken was breathing heavily now.

The Abominable Snowman leaned out through the TV screen and draped an arm, casually, over the bottom of the big, blonde cabinet.

I can't say I actually heard him speak. But a thought echoed inside of my skull, pouring, perhaps, out of his immense, soft, brown eyes. "Kiss the girl," he 'said'.

Kiss the girl. Kiss the girl? Which girl? Bette, of course. I turned, at last, to Ken and was able to blurt out his name.

"What?" He stretched and yawned.

"The Snowman..." What was I going to tell him? He already thought I was a little nuts. Which I definitely was. He'd think I'd lost it. Which I probably had.

"Um, you're missing the Snowman." What else could I say? Yeti's sad eyes stared at us out of the darkness, and Basil droned on about leaving the ancient intelligence alone.

Horns blared.

The End.

#

"What a kickass day," Ken cried, as we cruised Main Street.

I nodded, grinning. We'd walked downtown. It was 1964 and you could actually *walk* downtown. The day was brilliant. The sky crisp and clean like a new set of sheets tucked in tightly at the horizon. There had been a bite to the wind but it blew, only occasionally, in small savage gusts. It made me feel stronger to stand up to it, but then a feeling stole through my mind like a cloud passing in front of the sun. I shook it off.

On the way downtown, we had passed the Top Hat. It was only noon, but Ken's dad was there already. The factories were on half-day for the holiday. He'd had only one beer, maybe two, so he was in a good mood. He gave us each a couple of bucks to go to the movies.

Our plan had been to get some lunch, then hit the library. We were both in upper tracks in school and had term papers due before the winter break. But we decided that could wait until after the movie.

'Doctor No' was playing at the Empress. It did reruns for 50 cents. We'd both seen Doctor No a hundred times, so we figured a hundred and one wouldn't hurt. Besides, I hadn't seen it in twenty years.

We decided to substitute sundaes for a burger and popped balloons at Woolworth's. I paid top figure, 39 cents, but Ken got his for the penny grand prize. "Maybe this is going to be your day, after all!" I said.

As we walked down the long carpeted hallway into the bowels of the Empress, I smiled to myself, the memories as thick as the smell of popcorn. The carpet was a dizzying design of golden arabesques on a worn, maroon background. I inhaled deeply. Memories now clamored for attention. Motes of ancient dust, from a thousand soles, rose off the rug and filled my nostrils. Mixed in were hints of popcorn and a soupcon of aging leather and upholstery, like an *old* car smell that grew stronger with every step.

My memory wasn't playing tricks! The rotunda was still magnificent. The candy counter attracted most of the traffic, but the real attraction was the figure of some goddess or other on a pedestal, hair streaming, arms of grey-white outstretched to an audience unseen by her flat, blind eyes. Were they really blind? Was She staring at me? I thought so and turned away.

Balusters of the same cracked and chipped marble ringed the balcony level. The balcony possessed a mystique that was almost painful. It was forbidden, attendance having dropped after the War, making it hardly worth maintaining.

But wait! There were people milling about upstairs. It was 1964. It hadn't closed. At least not in this 1964.

"Let's go up to the balcony," I said.

"You nuts? They'll think we're faggots or something," Ken said.

After an hour and a half of guns, jets and beautiful women on tropical beaches, we emerged, blinded by the cold, bright light of a February afternoon. We cruised over to the library, which was guarded by a knot of kids. The whole gang.

The library was a magnificent, old American Gothic structure. Three stories of brick, exposed in places by intention, faced in others with red sandstone of intricate detail. Absurdly eclectic, it was completed by incongruous marble columns at the head of the front steps. The walls were inset with palladium windows, and it was capped by a tower, offset, and filled with a thousand screeching starlings.

We all milled around awhile. It seemed that most of the kids were going to the pond again. We decided to meet earlier (actually, Diane decided for us), around six, since it was a Friday, and planned a party afterwards. We'd play 45s, dim the lights, dance close and spin the bottle. We'd give the bottle a rest as the night wore on and wing it, free style.

Ken and I trudged to the second floor on stairs smoothed and bellied in spots by time and ten thousand footsteps. The sun diffused through the imperfect plates of glass in the palladium windows, then ricocheted back in broad beams off the shellac on the worn, wavy, blonde wood floors. It had been quite a day. So far. I drifted among the stacks, my eyes grazing for hours on the ancient books; my senses feasting on the yellow-white light and the smells of printing ink, exhaled off of fragile pages.

#

"Okay. You set?" Ken asked, excitedly.

"Yes."

“You got the plan?”

“Yes!”

“So if you kiss her when I skate up and she kisses you back, then she’s either trying to make me jealous *or* she really likes you. In that case, we can go from item to pending item.”

“I *got* it!”

“And remember we read that guy Freud?”

“Sigmund Freud. Yes.”

“I think she’s got an Electra complex, so talk about shaving or something,” Ken said.

“How about jerking off?”

Ken considered the idea for a moment. “Too way out, man.”

I grinned. It was kind of fun being thirteen, although I was in the bizarre state of acting like, and experiencing life as, a thirteen year old, but observing myself with a sixty year old brain. What *was* She up to?

Having cinched up our laces, we blew out the door of the warming hut and wobbled down the wooden runway, then catapulted onto the ice. The sun had set, but there was a narrow, russet band along the ridgeline of the Berkshire hills huddled around the park, fading into pale blue, then lavender, then deeper purple. The Beach Boys were ‘round round getting around’, and so were we.

At last the globe grunted and, rolling eastward as ever, doused the lights. The guys were showing off and the girls stood in a tight knot. I did a neat hockey stop and threw up a fine spray of shaved ice.

“Say, Bette. What’s up?” I asked. The girls buzzed. Ken was skating in a lazy ellipse just behind me. Bette eyed him. He smiled, but she didn’t return the gesture. Ken might get lucky, I thought.

“You didn’t finish the astronomy lesson. Teach me tonight?” Bette said.

“Wow! You listen to Perry Como?” Ken said, sarcastically.

Bette sniffed. “Andrews Sisters. And no, my parents like them. Jerk.” This could be serious and very good for Ken, I thought. “C’mon, Jaq,” she said.

We skated lazily toward the barricades, with Bette holding, lightly, onto my arm. Suddenly, she let go and raced past the white sawhorses and toward the inlet stream.

“Bette! For cryin’ out loud!” I shouted. But she kept skating, disappearing around a corner, past a clump of low willows and into the blackness. I knew that the ice was thin beyond that point, and she must have known it, too. What in Hades was up?

I glanced over my shoulder and I thought I saw Orion beginning to move at an alarmingly quick pace.

The hairs on the back of my neck prickled. Then, in the East the leading edge of a bone-white moon began to climb above the black tips of the bare maples, shivering in the breeze.

Betelgeuse dropped precipitously in the sky. “Oh, fuck!” I raced ahead and heard a small squeal. She must have gone through the ice! But I hadn’t heard a splash.

“Bette!” I cried again, as I raced into the dark corner of the pond. Then I fell.

Or was it the Earth that was falling away beneath me? I was falling UP! The bright floods and the white circle of ice and the little red hut were receding. ‘I get around’, the Beach Boys riffed away. *No shit!* But quickly the notes of the song fell off

the staff and drifted away like motes of dust into a deathly, cosmic silence. I could not breathe, but I understood that I didn't have to.

Experience. Experiences. The memories steadied me. I'd kissed a Butterfly, done battle with the stars, saved a goddess. Well, sort of saved a goddess. I shivered.

I glanced up and around, searching methodically, but with urgency, for Bette. She was tumbling, flailing. She didn't know. The Earth, a blue pea, receded farther. Then, in an instant, I understood, instinctively, what I needed to do. I oriented myself in the direction of Polaris, which was still where it was supposed to be. With a gentle push, I glided across the void, feeling a thin film of what I believed to be cosmic dust beneath the blades of my skates.

Bette was still tumbling. I could hear her calling to me, inside of my head. I pushed harder and found the distance between us closing fast. At last, I grabbed her by the arm and righted her. Polaris disappeared into an unfamiliar background of blue-white flecks, flashing like sparks from a welder's rod; and there were tiny, fiery red-orange tongues, licking the slick, sweet dust that flowed beneath our feet; and throbbing yellow blobs, like drops of pure lemon honey, dripped onto the cosmic canvas.

Bette looked me in the face. "Thanks," she 'said', her lips moving, as her words echoed in my mind. An expression of exquisite fear flashed across her features.

I understood. "Space is a vacuum," I 'said'; which really didn't explain anything. But she nodded anyway, and the tension in her cheeks, and at the corners of her eyes, faded. "I want to go home," she 'said', the seven year old inside of her, inside of all of us, always, speaking.

I glanced around trying to find a way back. I thought I felt a tug from a distant, modest, yellow-white splat of light. "Okay," I 'said', smiling a very sixty-year-old smile, which is not inside of any of us until we are sixty-one. I had no fucking idea which direction was precisely the right one. But I was able to make her understand that everything would turn out all right.

I held her hand and made for the yellow star. I could feel the tension in her fingers and arms flow out of her and into me. I let the energy course through me and into my skates. We began to glide rhythmically, matching strides. We forgot about the yellow star. Now, bunches of stars, stellar bouquets, grew in size and then shrank, as we raced through the vacuum. A thrill shock zapped me for an instant, when I realized how fast we were probably going.

One sun was circled by at least a half-dozen spheres of rock and gas. But it was red-orange and not our own.

Off to one side rose towers of gas and dust, lit from within, as if a billion forests were on fire. "Careful," I 'said', "not too close." Snakes of flame hissed within the smoky cloud, a trillion miles high. Hot tongues, within the stellar nursery, licked the walls of the cosmic egg.

Skating around and above it, we sensed ourselves leveling off, sinking even, as if on a thin sheet of rubber. We had reached some lower limit of density that would no longer support us, if we kept climbing. So we raced ahead on a slick surface of stardust.

"Look!" I 'cried', pointing over her shoulder. We slowed and marveled. We were actually on top of the stuff that fashioned a spiral arm of the Milky Way. The hot hub of the galaxy blazed and buzzed and spun like a bloated disco ball, with a billion

facets. I kept the metaphor to myself, since it would have been meaningless to her, and simply stood, holding her hand, as we watched the brilliant dance.

We stayed there for what seemed like a very long time. The sky above our heads was even darker now. A deep purple drape hung above us, dappled with galaxies whirling like brilliant pinwheels. Andromeda, our giant sister, spun like a buzz saw of flame and sparks.

Bette let her hand slip from mine and began to move toward our galaxy's core. "No!" I 'cried', driven by instinct. "We'd die," I 'said', knowing I was right but not understanding why.

"But___" she 'began'.

"This way," I 'said', simply, gesturing down and away from the core. Bette gave me a fierce, questioning stare. Of course, she was right. I had no reason to believe that I could get us back. I needed to find a pinprick of light in a spiral tracing out a circumference of 200,000 light years. But we hadn't been gone that long. Or had we? Einstein wrapped his fingers around my throat. Perhaps our sun was already a red giant. Or a dead dwarf.

I shrugged. I grinned to myself and then at Bette, took her hand, and we skated down and away, always kissing the slick surface of cosmic dust with our bright blades. And for a time we abandoned the future and the past. We glided in a perfect present. We sprinted; we crossed arms and moved, gracefully, to a private tune we seemed to share. We executed pirouettes, skated circles and tumbled together.

At last, a familiar sight stopped us dead. The Bear's tail hung limply and his shoulder pointed at Polaris. Beneath us Jupiter hummed, its bands of ochre and vermilion vibrating like the skin of a venomous snake, curled about itself in a tight ball.

"Look," Bette 'said', pointing at the brim of Saturn's sombrero.

"Look and see," I 'replied', with a smile. She returned it. We forgot, again, for a very long time, that we were trying to get home. Did we even want to get home?

Home. The thought echoed in our heads, drowning out the symphony of sounds that flowed between and through us. Twisting on the tips of our skates, we faced the Sun, thrumming and belching fire. Circling it were the rocky planets, grey and ivory and red and blue. Home. Whatever that meant for me.

Negotiating up and over the smashed bones of the inner planets' wrecked sister, we paused above the god of War, his face stained red with the blood of all the victims of all wars. Another crimson smear flashed across my line of sight. Betelgeuse glowed like a hot coal. Mars began to spin. Where was his stronger sister? Where was She?

I glanced at a placid blue ball. Its companion sat there like a perfect pearl. I was on my own. I knew it. Why had She done this?

A rude hideous bellowing made my guts run. Bette's eyes, sparkling cerulean, spread wide, filled with tears that poured over their lids and flowed down her cheeks, like two tiny streams in deep winter, then froze. "Did you do this?" she 'asked'.

"No. I mean, I didn't intend to." She smiled. And while I wasn't certain I could turn to face the Hunter, I was her only hope. I breathed deeply.

I was breathing! But my lungs filled with the waste of a billion years. I felt the grip of time around my heart and wanted to weep at the depth and age of it all. The present vanished, as soon as it came into being, and filled the bottomless well of the past.

Orion roared, as if in triumph, balancing himself on the broad belt of asteroids, stretched his starry arms, then lifted Mars from its orbit, placing the planet on his wide shoulders. I understood. She had always thought her brother a coward. She had decapitated him in some dim past, but now he had fitted himself back together, and she wanted me to silence the blood mad bully. *Why me?* Mars was a coward, for sure, but a dangerous coward.

His frame, a starry tower, sparkled. I laughed. Bette looked at me, as if I'd gone raving mad.

"Bling," I 'said' simply. She cocked her head. "Sequins," I 'said'. "He looks like a goddamned whore, wearing a fistful of sequins."

"He's going to kill us," she 'said', her mind shaking. I could actually feel her brain shiver with fear.

"No, he won't," I 'said'. But how...

Mars circled. He leaped across the void, laying his starry sandals firmly on Pluto, then Uranus and Neptune. Balancing his bulk on Jove, he roared, tossing his bloody skull back, up and away from the plane of the system, then screwing his mad, ruby eye to my own. Betelgeuse morphing again, having forsaken first the fist, then the phallus.

Red, a color, could actually laugh. It was a laugh without mirth, without joy, but it conveyed a certain satisfaction at the outcome of a contest that had already been decided.

I made my decision. Placing myself between Bette and the beast, facing him with as fierce a look as I could manage, I 'told' her to skate like hell.

Around the edge of the heavenly quarry of asteroids we raced. He crossed the stony belt, like a man picking his way across a stream. Leaping from planitessimal to planitessimal, he took great care, as if he might fall. But where would he fall *to*, I wondered in a split instant?

We had reached Home. It whirled beneath us like a pregnant tear.

The Hunter of men hurled himself at us, then veered suddenly, his eye dimming. Perhaps he was frightened of Her. But where was She then? Sailing overhead, he landed his fiery feet on Mercury and Venus. *Like a man crossing a river, hopping from boulder to boulder. No. A stream filled with flat rocks that blocked a watercourse, which made a sweet, gurgling sound as it stroked the stones. Like the stream where I'd buried the body of my Butterfly.*

I was looking neither at Mars nor Bette, but lost in a remembrance. A fiery finger raked across my cheek, searing my skin. I saw the hot, hot blue-white stars sweep upward, the blade of his celestial sword. Too far away, he had just missed me with the full force of his attack.

"Bette," I 'whispered'. The soft sound of her name seemed to calm us both. "You can't reach Home. He won't let you. Skate down and behind the shining face of the moon." She nodded again but shot me a puzzled look. "Shining face?" she 'whispered'. I shrugged. Bette squeezed my hand and sprinted like hell.

The Hunter stood on tiptoe, balancing his bulk delicately, in an almost touching posture, on the disk of Venus. I found I could move quickly, as well, but not in the direction of Earth.

Taunting, I raced past him. He flailed madly, but missed wide as I flew toward Mercury and around the Sun. He roared but failed to follow, as wary of the Sun, it

seemed, as he had been of the Earth and Moon. I balanced on the tips of my skates and then raced directly at him. His red eye flared.

Speeding toward a precise spot directly between his unsteady feet, I saw his sword fall in an arc that would split me in two. I was too damned slow. Too damned bad. But then, beneath my blades, I felt what must have been the solar wind give me a gentle push. Just enough force to propel me past the hungry blue giants that defined the curve of his blade.

I skated around to face him, but at a safe distance. Cocky, but not cocksure. He tottered. I taunted. "Twice in one night you've tried and failed," I screamed, realizing that it was a pretty weak line. But it was the best I could do at that moment. Then I bolted for the thick, churning ring of rock that used to shave his bloody cheeks.

With an enormous leap, he jumped the gap that separated us, trying to plant his feet firmly on top of two huge, celestial boulders. *What if?* Perhaps the cosmic dust was as slick, for him, as the ice on the pond was for me. I drove all the energy I could command into my skates and raced to intercept him, as he hurtled across space. Then, with an enormous effort, I executed a perfect hockey stop, throwing up a towering spray of stardust. He slipped and tumbled, bellowing, through the plane of our system. But just as he was about to disappear beneath the band of rock and rubble, he latched a single, fiery finger onto one of the tiny planetessimals; then he pulled himself up and onto the two rocks that had been his goal. It seemed that the interstellar dust could support him no better than the thinner, intergalactic stuff had been able to support us.

Screaming, he pounded across the distance that separated us. Whirling balls of fiery gas and light, his starry sandals pulverized hunks of rock, leaving pebbles in their wake. I skated down and across, upward and back, barely avoiding each murderous swipe. At last I huddled behind two of the most massive asteroids. Were they large enough to block his blows, or would their nickel and iron sizzle and melt? And me along with them.

He circled cautiously, still placing his feet delicately, incongruously, on the little islands of rock, sizzling as his sandals kissed the stones. Circling to gain advantage. Circling to find an opening in my bulky, iron armor. A small chink.

He moved slowly, on his toes now. White dwarfs. What was he afraid of? He'd crossed filmy parsecs, but here he could only move on denser stuff. Had he surfed the cosmic dust, riding crests and troughs, as its mass compressed and thinned? Or had She simply packed him here like a crate of oranges? What *had* She done?

I crouched. He feinted. Cautiously. What, whom did he fear? Stone to stone he stepped across the void. So like the stream where I'd buried my Butterfly, on a raft of Popsicle stocks, her body, tiny in death, twirling on top of the water, as the raft was tossed about by the gentle current. I'd set the raft on fire with a match, and as her body burned, sparks of purple and gold, the colors in her wings, rose on warm drafts of air. Deep green branches of ash and maple had waved gently, like fans, spawning subtle currents that lifted what remained of her above the treetops and tossed the flecks of light about like so many ripe fireflies.

Perhaps.

I was knocked backward against one of my two stony sentinels, as the other exploded in front of me. I covered my eyes and gasped, as bits of molten metal seared my skin.

Mars stood quite still for a long instant, savoring his victory. Betelgeuse blazed, he blew out his bloody cheeks; his fiery fingers regripped his starry sword.

I searched frantically for Bette. She was drifting alongside the moon. Athena was nowhere to be seen. I had to reach Bette, but I found my foot bound to the hunk of rock and metal that sat at my back. The Hunter had soldered my skate blade to the miserable little planetesimal like a shackle.

Gripping the hilt of his weapon with both hoary, hot hands, he raised it high.

“Dammit” I ‘whispered’. It had been an interesting evening, anyway. I laughed ‘aloud’ at the emptiness of the adjective, which seemed to enrage him further, as his red eye flickered more brightly.

Time stopped. How I do not know. Perhaps we were riding the expansion of space itself, faster than light. Then out of the corner of my eye, above and behind the Hunter’s head, a thousand golden stars began to move and swirl, to arrange themselves, or to be arranged by an unseen hand. The void, studded with yellow light, began to thrum deep purple, then wave like a large bolt of cloth. No. Like a pair of wings!

Butterfly beat her way across the emptiness, and the bloody Hunter, sensing, perhaps, the gentle push of her approach, paused, or simply stopped along with time. She drew closer, until the span of her sweet wings covered the entire spinning mass of our system. Swooping down, she merely flicked their tips, deep amethyst, scattering flecks of golden fire all about.

I felt the gentle push of the cosmic dust we swam in. But it was too much for Mars; like a tsunami for him, as delicate as it was for me. He toppled into empty space, but slowly. Butterfly soared and then swooped down toward Saturn, and with a furious beating of her wings lifted its crown, an argent ring now, and hurtled it across the plane of the planets.

As the Hunter fell through the swirling mass of rock and metal, at last only his head, the red planet, stuck above the Belt and, cleanly, Saturn’s rings severed it. Slowly, erratically, it bounced then tumbled back into its natural orbit. His body splintered, scattering his stars. Gradually, they drifted back into the space where they belonged.

Butterfly passed me, and as she did, the tip of her wing severed my shackle. She rose, then dove and glided slowly and gracefully past. A long white plume, like the tail of a tiny comet, unfurled from her mouth and brushed my lips. She kissed me, as she had always done, but instead of the taste of tiger lily, I tasted forever.

She exploded out and away from me and then vanished. But I licked my lips and sucked at the taste of time, which had started to tick again. Where had she gone? I ached.

Bette! I tore myself free from my self-absorption. I raced to a spot behind the moon where I thought she might be hiding. I found her shaking terribly, and crying, and then laughing when she saw me, all at once. I touched her lightly on the arm, and then she grabbed mine.

We turned toward Home and I gave my skates a tentative push. They slid effortlessly along the slick surface of the sky. I exhaled. Exhaled the dust of eternity. Then I checked myself for fear of losing Butterfly’s precious breath. But I shouldn’t have bothered. The taste of time lingered, stuck fast, a beautiful idea really, that I’ve never let go.

“Come on,” I said, “let’s go home.” She locked her fingers in mine and we plummeted Earthward; toward the beautiful brown cookie of North America, toward the white, snowy nipple of New England. Downward. Racing!

At last we spied the bright lights dancing off the surface of the Park pond, the Beatles pleading for us to hold hands, which, of course, we did. Our grips tightened.

Suddenly, I realized that our speed was frighteningly fast. I grabbed her arms and tried my hockey stop, throwing up tiny flames off my blades, as they sliced through the thicker atmosphere. I wrapped my arms around Bette and tried to protect her. We hit the surface of the pond with a dull thud. The force of the fall knocked the wind out of me, and everything went black. But just for a moment, I think. After what seemed only seconds, I sprang off the ice. Bette must have rolled off of me. She lay alongside, breathing softly. I could smell her sweet breath, when I pressed my cheek close to hers. I spoke her name. She stirred. Her eyes fluttered and the floods danced on bright bits of sapphire that stared back at me.

“I must have fallen,” she said. “It was a stupid thing to do. Skating back here alone. In the dark.”

“Yes, it was stupid,” I said. “And just to make Ken jealous.”

She feigned denial, but then smiled. I guessed we’d been through enough that it made no sense for her to lie to me. So I’d succeeded for my buddy after all.

I helped her up and we glided, too carefully I thought, past the barricades. All of the kids were racing toward us. She regarded me with a puzzled look, and then her eyes flared.

“I had the strangest dream, while I was passed out,” she whispered.

“I know,” I said. She knew that I had shared that dream.

“But how...”

I shrugged. “We like each other. Umm. We’re alike, a bit. We’re curious. You wanted to know about Betelgeuse.”

“Maybe not quite that much!”

I smiled and swept my hand in an arc across the night sky. “You wanted to know what’s out there. We shared that, I guess. We’re friends.”

“Hey, what’s up?” Ken was yelling. “You guys all right?”

“Yeah, we thought you’d drowned,” Maryanne said.

“We almost did,” Bette said. “Sort of.” She smiled. The kids looked at her suspiciously.

“Drowned in what?” Bobby sneered. “Spit?”

I made a move, but Bette checked me and smiled back at Bobby. She stared up at Betelgeuse for a minute. Then she kissed me. The kids oohed and aahed. I was surprised. She could tell, obviously.

I began to say something, though I had no clue what was going to come out of my mouth. She placed a gloved finger over my lips. The wool was prickly.

She took her hand away. “For real?” I croaked.

Bette glanced up at Orion. “For real, but not forever. Just like the dream.”

I noticed, out of the corner of my eye, Ken skating away slowly. “Hey,” I said to Bette, tossing my head in Ken’s direction. “Kiss the boy.” A bright smile ignited her face. She raced off. The rest of the gang followed, anxious to see what would happen.

Everyone except Ruthie. “So you guys don’t___”

“Nope. We’re just friends.”

Ruthie looked at me with limpid, brown eyes; her black hair shone, lacquered by the light of the floods. “What was Bette... What were you and Bette looking at up there?”

She was actually curious. All of a sudden little, scrawny Ruthie looked very attractive. Attractive, you see, isn’t just the box, it’s the whole package, as I’ve said.

Then I remembered that Ruthie had died in a car crash, in what would have been just a few years later. Hardly a ‘future perfect’ for her. Had my visit changed her world line? I hoped so.

I put my arm around her and pointed at Orion. I explained the positions of the stars. All of a sudden I was gripped by a need to kiss the girl. I rested my finger under chin and turned her face toward mine. She closed her eyes and I closed mine.

Her lips burned! But cold, like ice. I gasped in panic. Had I kissed a corpse, long dead? I stared at the spot where she’d been. She was gone. The ice pond, the red hut, the gang, all gone. The Beach Boys and the Beatles. Gone.

Athena was staring at me intently, her eyes tossing about like a great, grey sea. “Did you enjoy that?”

“Enjoy that? All of that?” Athena nodded her head. “Sure,” I said, sullenly, “until my lips ran into a glacier.”

“So you have a sweet tooth?” I gave her a puzzled look. “You fancied a bar of baby Ruth? Or maybe just a piece?”

“Oh, stop it!” I growled, turning away from her and stalking to the edge of my deck, where the orange stream seemed to be churning more violently than ever; and sparkling, as well, reflecting the light of a million stars and a plump gibbous moon, back in its proper place. “We were thirteen,” I said, my back to the goddess.

“So?”

“And it was nineteen sixty-four!”

“Did you pity her?”

I whirled to face her. “I found her attractive. At that particular moment in time,” I said, making a series of small fiddling movements with my fingers.

“She’s not very pretty,” Athena said.

“I’ve told you! That’s not the same as *attractive*.”

She seemed to smile. A pale shaft of sunlight shooting through an icy brume. “So my sister would not have stood a chance with you?”

“Not a fucking chance.” I breathed deeply, and the air was heavy with the scent of vanilla dripping from the Ponderosas. I stared at my feet. The skates were gone.

“Say, does she still die?”

Athena shrugged. “I can’t tell futures, I can only recreate pasts. The other Ruthie is dead, but I do not know, truly, what happens to this Ruthie. Or to that you, for that matter.”

I nodded gravely. “Worldlines are like that, I guess. Too many possibilities, even for you.”

“Are you happy?” she asked, suddenly. She surprised me.

“No, of course I’m not happy.” Then I thought of Ken and Bette, of the Battle in the Belt. I thought of the Abominable Snowman and Dr. No. I smiled. “Not exactly.”

I looked up at the purple curtain draped above our heads. I thought of Butterfly.

Something was bobbing on the surface of the stream that caught my attention. The orange river smelled of Tiger Lily. I jumped off the deck and ran along the edge of the water and watched, as the small raft of Popsicle sticks I'd built as Butterfly's funeral pyre bumped along in the chop. Frantically, I followed the tiny boat's course as it swept past, in the middle of the flood. It was empty. Maybe She would help me. I turned, but She was gone.

The flow of the stream slowed and the roar softened to a throaty gurgle. A breath of air, sweet scented, laden with pinesap, snaked up my nose. The entire bulk of the atmosphere around me rippled. I felt the beat of wings against my body and in my brain. I felt the brush of being against my lips. The beat dropped to a flutter. Then a suggestion, before stillness seized the warm air. But it wasn't really still. The calm and the quiet were sparkling and alive.

Athena was gone and I found myself beneath a stand of pine, surrounded by pumpkin colored oak. I made my way through the thicket, down into the syncline, and back up again, then hauled myself onto my deck and went inside.

The house was quiet, except for the large clock that ticked above the mantle. But what time was it? Which time was it? Whose time? Mine? The me of now, or... I didn't look at the clock.

Ghosts whispered through the windows. Who had kissed me? Had it been She? Or Butterfly? Or had it been Kornsilks? But they were all gone. Dead. Or missing in action in the battle of life.

I walked back outside. The moon hung in the western sky above the ridgeline of the foothills. The wind freshened, as the sun began to claw its way up to the horizon in the East. The peach tongues of the aspen twirled on their petioles, as the dawn breeze buffeted their delicate branches. The tops of the trees swayed against a background that had brightened from purple to lavender.

Something displaced the space behind me. But it was not the beating of Butterfly's wings, for I heard a voice. "Kiss the girl," a sweet voice said, on breath the scent of Tiger Lily. I spun around and my feet melted. Kornsilks took my hands.

"But why did you ___" She shook her thick, blonde hair and placed a thin finger across my lips. At once, my smile caressed it.

"For real?" I whispered.

"And forever," she said.

