

Collected Short Stories: Volume III
by
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107 Degrees Fahrenheit

Kissing his sister goodbye in the lobby of the Bonanza Bus Terminal, Nicholas Holyfield was blind-sided by a wave of emotions. He hadn't seen the tears coming, didn't even have time to avert his puckered, soggy face. "Sorry."

Mary Beth only smiled and wiped the wetness away with the heel of her hand. The visit to Providence lasted two days. The bus to Boston was boarding now. She pulled him close for a final hug and said half-jokingly, "If you meet a pretty coed at college, bring her along next time." She nuzzled his cheek with her lips, turned and limped away, swinging her crippled, left leg in a sweeping arc as though the errant limb had a mind of its own.

Nicholas boarded the bus and sat next to a fat black woman, poorly dressed and smelling of body odor laced with Jean Naté. As he slumped down, the woman, who had been reading, looked up and smiled. One of the front teeth was capped in gold. Nicholas leaned slightly forward and peered out the window. Mary Beth was a good two hundred feet down the road headed in the direction of the East Side, her body bobbing up and down like a cork on rough, tidal water. The way she moved gave the false impression she was careening at a diagonal when, in fact, her forward progress was straight ahead.

More tears came and, this time, Nicholas couldn't shut the spigot. Like a toddler bereft of its mother, he was sitting on a Boston-bound bus crying inconsolably. His shoulders heaved, the breath caught in jagged spasms. The black woman glanced up curiously, opened her mouth but then closed it without saying anything. She turned her attention back to a pamphlet printed on cheap, grainy stock. The driver shut the door and threw the shift into reverse. Moments later, they were leaving Providence, Rhode Island, heading north in the direction of the interstate. Nicholas felt something soft and fluffy rubbing insistently against his wrist. The black woman pressed a Kleenex into his hand and discreetly turned away.

The bus passed the statehouse exit; the ivory dome of the capitol building materialized and was gone in a blur. They entered Pawtucket with its grimy factories and mills. The mayor had been indicted for extortion and racketeering the previous year and was now somewhere out of state at a country club prison for white-collar criminals. His biggest regret wasn't betraying the public trust but being careless enough to get caught. "My sister was hit by a car." Nicholas spoke, not so much from a need to unburden himself, but to justify his lack of restraint.

"Dear God!" The black woman threw the pamphlet aside and stared at him. Her sympathy, though slightly theatrical, was genuine, not driven by idle curiosity. "She isn't in a coma or on life support?"

Nicholas frowned and felt the skin on his cheek draw tight where the salty moistness had evaporated away. "No. The accident occurred last winter while jogging. A car skidded on black ice. Broke her leg in three places."

"Driver drunk?"

Nicholas shook his head. "Not hardly. Just an old lady returning from church at twenty miles an hour in a residential area. The car skidded on the frozen road. No one was at fault."

The black woman directed her eyes at her hands which were large and formless, devoid of jewelry except for a simple, gold band on the third finger of her left hand. "Why was your sister jogging in the middle of winter?"

Nicholas reached into his breast pocket and located a wallet from which he removed a newspaper clipping. Underneath a picture of Mary Beth dressed in a sweat suit with a medal hanging from her neck, the caption read: Collegiate track star places in first, NCCA professional meet. "That's my sister."

The black woman took the tattered paper and held it to the light. For a woman with hands like Stillson wrenches, she was remarkably gentle with the parchment-thin clipping. "I'm trying to recall," she chuckled, "last time I was that thin, but my mind don't travel quite that far back." She handed the article back to him. "Where'd she run?"

"The track meet was in New Jersey - East Rutherford. Fifteen hundred meters."

Nicholas had been to East Rutherford in February of 1990. He was twelve years old but still remembered the competition vividly. The athletes, especially the runners with their unwieldy, long legs - calves hewn from rock maple, bulging, muscular thighs. Glistening, sexless, sinewy bodies primed for one task: outpace the echo of the starter's pistol from the sprinter's block to finish line. Mary Beth's curly brown hair was tied back with a single strand of blue ribbon, a matter of convenience rather than aesthetics. Her tanned, lightly freckled face pivoted to one side as the women settled into their respective lanes. On your mark! Get set!

"Mary Beth didn't actually win. She came in third behind the Romanian, Doina Melinte, and Mary Slaney. The Romanian ran the 1500 meters in four minutes, seventeen seconds and set a new world record. My sister was only 8 seconds off the winning time."

"Eight blinks of an eye!" The black woman said with a earthy grin. "Since the accident, she don't race no more?"

"No," Nicholas said softly, "she can hardly walk much less run."

"My nephew, Delroy, got a club foot." She held her paw of a hand up with the fingers skewed stiffly at an odd angle. "Like this."

Looking at the stubby fingers made Nicholas slightly nauseous, and he regretted sitting next to the garrulous woman. "The bum leg taken aside," the black woman rushed on, oblivious to Nicholas' distress, "Delroy done good with his life. Works in an upholstery shop. Got married

a few years back and has two healthy children.” She smoothed the front of her dress with the massive hands. “What does your sister do now she ain’t racing?”

“With the money from the insurance settlement she doesn’t have to work.”

Mary Beth turned professional in January, three months before the accident. Negotiating the size of the financial settlement, her lawyer estimated potential earnings (including commercial endorsements) at half a million dollars. The insurance company balked, arguing that, in her short-lived career, she hadn’t won any major races, and it was unclear whether the young woman would fulfill her athletic promise. For every Doina Melinte, there were half a hundred also-rans. Mary Beth’s lawyer threatened to push for a jury trial.

Check. Checkmate.

Despite all the legal maneuvering, the final settlement proved rather modest. Mary Beth paid her lawyer and invested the remainder in stocks. A month later, she moved to Providence, Rhode Island and took a studio apartment on the East Side.

“I meant,” the black woman clarified, “what does your sister do with her free time now that she can’t run anymore.”

“She makes custom wedding albums from fabrics and lace and also takes small orders for decorative brochures.”

When Nicholas arrived at the bus terminal on Friday, his sister was there to greet him. He hadn’t seen her in six months, since the fall when she moved south. Mary Beth had aged. Nothing dramatic. It wasn’t the smattering of gray hair or crow’s-feet dimpling the eyes. Rather, her wiry body had gone soft and sedentary. The hard-edged posturing was gone; she no longer looked like a competitive athlete. Worse yet, she didn’t care.

“Little brother!” she hugged him close and lead the way out of the bus terminal in the direction of her 89 Nova. Turning onto North Main Street, she shot up College Hill. Though the temperature was hovering in the low nineties, Mary Beth wore dungarees. She always wore pants or long dresses to hide the scars and ravaged muscles on her left leg. When she was leaving the hospital, an orthopedic doctor suggested further ‘cosmetic’ surgery, but she nixed the idea. “Leave well enough alone.”

A group of college students with backpacks and tanned faces passed in front of the car. “That deep sea diver remark,” Nicholas said, directing his words at the dirt-streaked windshield, “hurt Mom’s feelings. She cried for half an hour.”

The previous month, Mary Beth’s mother visited Providence. It had been six months since they had seen each other. Mrs. Holyfield was a short, round woman with close-cropped, dark hair. The short hair made her look heavier; to compensate, she wore loose-fitting shifts and baggy dresses which only compounded the problem. “Why do you cloister yourself away, avoiding family and friends?”

“Think of me as a deep sea diver coming up for air as slowly as possible so I don’t go get the bends or go crazy,” Mary Beth replied cryptically. Taking her mother’s hand, she squeezed it gently. “Don’t know how else to explain it.”

Mrs. Holyfield saw no connection between the question asked and the answer proffered. The remark frightened her. It was the first thing she talked about, returning home after the visit. “If your father were alive,” she confided petulantly to Nicholas, “he’d make Mary Beth go see a

counselor.” “A psychiatrist!” she added just in case her son failed to grasp the magnitude of the problem.

In late March of the previous year, Mary Beth returned home from the rehabilitation center. Having run the 1500 meters in just over four minutes, it took half as much time to hobble sideways, one riser at a time, up a short flight of stairs to the second floor landing. She refused to answer the phone, would not go outdoors except to sit in the back yard staring morosely at the empty bird feeders. If neighbors appeared, she retreated back into the house.

A week passed. Mrs. Holyfield took Nicholas to the K-Mart near Beacon Circle and bought bird food - a mixture of black sunflower seeds, cracked corn and millet for the jays and cardinals, thistle for the finches plus blocks of greasy suet for the woodpeckers and other, insect feeders. “Hard to believe,” she said, letting the feathery-light thistle sift through her fingers, “there’s nourishment in such tiny seeds.”

Mrs. Holyfield stuffed the feeders to overflowing and placed a wedge of peanut butter suet in a rectangular, wire cage. “Except for the most common varieties, people don’t know their birds; the hard part is learning the differences among species - the downy woodpecker, let’s say, from its close relative, the ladder-back.” Mrs. Holyfield launched into an unsolicited and rather long-winded description of each bird’s physical attributes, distinctive markings, size and habits. She picked up a single thistle seed - an eighth of an inch long and the thickness of several sheaves of papers - and let it roll off the tip of her finger. “Or a goldfinch from a pine siskin. That’s a bit harder. But still, where’s the pleasure of bird watching if you don’t know what to look for? It’s like giving a house party and not bothering to remember your guests’ names.”

“I think,” Nicholas said warily, “your analogy’s a bit thin.”

“Yes, but you understand what I’m trying to say.”

Nicholas shook his head. He did, up to a point, understand the implicit message.

The next day when Mary Beth went to sit in the yard, her mother joined her. It was forty degrees, the ground muddy and lifeless. “A pair of cardinals were here earlier. A male and his brown mate. They only stayed a short time. I think the jays scared them off.” Mary Beth shrugged noncommittally. “And all the goldfinches have lost their color. The bright, lemony yellows have faded to greenish brown. It may be a seasonal thing - like deer molting in the spring.”

“Yes, probably,” Mary Beth said dully.

“Don’t stay out too long or you might catch a chill.” Mrs. Holyfield went back in the house, sat down at the kitchen table and began to cry. Upstairs in his bedroom, Nicholas placed a pillow over his head to drown out the sounds of his mother’s private anguish.

After supper he went to his sister’s room, knocked and let himself in. Mary Beth was lying on the bed with her hands wedged between her thighs in a modified fetal position. She didn’t bother to look up. The color was bleeding out of the evening sky, causing familiar objects to blend and blur. “Tell me what to do?” he whispered.

In the kitchen Mrs. Holyfield was drying the last of the supper dishes and humming a melody from the church hymnal:

Lamb of God, You take away
the sins of the world.
Have mercy on me.

“Tell me what to do to make your pain go away.”

Mary Beth continued to lie quietly on her side. A half hour later the spongy, gray light congealed into total darkness and Nicholas trudged quietly back to his own room.

After Mary Beth relocated to Providence, Mrs. Holyfield began talking in code. She would say peculiar things like, “I talked to *Providence*,...” when she could have just as easily said, “I spoke to your sister, Mary Beth, earlier and ...” Was she trying to transform the infirmity into an abstraction? To restore her daughter through linguistic alchemy?

The night before Nicholas went to see his sister, Mrs. Holyfield came into the room and sat quietly on the edge of the bed. The latest issue of The Audubon Society magazine nested in her ample lap. Nicholas was packing. Not that there was much in the overnight bag - a change of underwear, socks, a disposable razor, toothbrush and Sony Walkman. He pulled the zipper shut and placed the bag on the floor.

“What’re you wearing?” Mrs. Holyfield asked. Nicholas pointed to a pair of cotton slacks and a navy shirt draped over a chair. “Yes, that will do nicely.” She drifted to the open window and looked out into the back yard. The bird feeders were empty. She never filled them after the middle of April. “Did you know,” she tapped the magazine lightly against the window sill, “that in winter, a black-capped chickadee can raise its body temperature to 107° Fahrenheit?”

Mrs. Holyfield was constantly collecting fragments of incidental trivia from the various birding magazines and newsletters she subscribed to. Familiar to her melodramatic pronouncements, Nicholas stared at his mother with a dumb expression. “Their bodies become feathery furnaces, internal combustion systems to ward off the extreme cold.” She came away from the window and sat down again on the bed. “At night while they’re resting, their temperature can drop as much as thirty degrees - a survival mechanism to preserve energy for daytime foraging.” Mrs. Holyfield smoothed Nicholas’ navy blue shirt with the palm of her hand. “When you’re in Providence, don’t say anything that might stir up bad memories.” She waved a finger preemptively. “Not that I doubt your good judgment in all such matters.”

All such matters. Nicholas had no idea what his mother meant by the odd remark and strongly doubted that she did either. “No, Mother, I won’t say anything that might upset Mary Beth.”

The previous winter on the third of February, two feet of snow fell through the day; a wicked, bone-chilling nor’easter sent the wind chill plunging to fifteen below zero. Nicholas, at his mother’s insistence, dug a path out to the bird feeder and filled the trough with fresh seeds. Only the chickadees - apparently, hunger took precedence over fear - were brazen enough to feed while he was standing there adjusting his gloves. With Nicholas a mere twenty feet away, they flew up to the lip of the feeder and pecked away at the ice-covered corn and sunflower seeds.

But where were the larger, normally more aggressive birds? The red-winged blackbirds? The crows with their lacquered, silver-green necks? The bedraggled mourning doves, the woodpeckers, jays and cardinals? Nicholas took a step closer. Several chickadees flitted away but were quickly replaced by a fresh batch of voracious birds. He moved closer still. The diminutive birds never flinched. Another two steps nearer; he was ten, perhaps only eight, feet from the feeder and, with the powdery snow swirling up around their black heads, Nicholas could see the birds in fine detail. The patch of white stretching from the eye around the side of the face; the narrow, gray edging on the wing feathers.

Nicholas turned and stared at the house. In the upstairs bedroom window Mrs. Holyfield was gesturing frantically, imploring him to come in from the cold. For a fleeting instant,

Nicholas had the impulse to hunker down in the soft, insular snow and, if only for an hour or so until the light seeped totally out of the western sky, renounce humanity. But by then the birds would be gone. Even the chickadees had better sense than to remain exposed through the bitter night. A blast of frigid air caught Nicholas under the rib cage, knifing through his parka and flannel shirt. He picked up the shovel and empty seed pail and trudged back to the house.

Mary Beth pulled up at a traffic light, reached out with a free hand and tousled his hair. A wistful melancholy swept over her face only to be replaced by a good-natured grin. "About the deep sea diver remark - it was meant as an allegory. I didn't get the bends or go crazy." Turning onto a side street, she pulled over to the curb in front of a three-story, wooden structure and got out of the car dragging her foot stiffly. "How do you feel about sleeping on an inflatable mattress?"

Nicholas shrugged. He wasn't quite sure what to say - or feel. "All that money in mutual funds and you can't afford a sleep sofa?"

"It's a studio apartment," Mary Beth quipped. "Where the hell am I going to put a sleep sofa? On the goddamn fire escape?" All bitterness dissipated; the spell was broken. They went into the building.

The apartment was, indeed, quite small. A room with a bay window that fronted on a gentrified, tree-lined street served as a combination living room-bedroom. A tidy kitchenette and bathroom were connected at the far end. The furnishings were meager - a twin bed with a maple headboard, two end tables and a cheap stereo - vintage, Salvation Army decor. Despite the monkish austerity, the apartment had a cozy, lived-in feel. Nicholas went into the bathroom and threw cold water on his face. When he came out of the bathroom, Mary Beth said, "We'll get something to eat and then feed Elliot."

"Who's Elliot?"

"She grabbed her keys and headed for the door. "You'll find out soon enough."

Most of the artsy college types had cleared out for the summer leaving a mishmash of locals and diehard, summer students. A saxophonist with a goatee and dark sunglasses was playing *Up Jumped Spring* in a breathy legato at the corner of Thayer Street; a hat with dollar bills lay at his feet. In his sister's presence, Nicholas had always felt a sense of reverence bordering on the mystical. At first, he associated the feeling with her athletic success, but, following the injury, realized that he had always felt that way. He experienced it now sitting opposite her in the restaurant. "Do you miss running?" As soon as he spoke, Nicholas realized the blunt foolishness of his remark.

Mary Beth's head was cocked to one side. She was still listening to the saxophonist in the street. The player ran a series of dissonant, polytonal progressions then deftly modulated into another bebop tune. "I still compete, after a fashion. At night, in my dreams, I run a mean quarter mile. And that's without the rigors of daily training!" Glancing up, she saw that Nicholas was flustered, his lips moving inaudibly. "The best kept secret in track and field," she continued impassively. "is that East Rutherford was my high water mark. It was a fluke; nothing more. I peaked and was already past my prime."

"You had some good races after that," Nicholas protested.

Mary Beth's features dissolved in a dark smile. "Half the races I never even placed, and in the few that I did, I was too far off the winning time to be considered competitive." She put

her hand under his chin and lifted his face so their eyes met. "It's over, Nicky. Except in my dreams, I don't run anymore."

Walking back to the apartment, Mary Beth detoured through a park. She knelt down beside a scruffy plant with a thick stem and wide oval leaves. Withdrawing a jackknife from her pocket, she cut the stem, and a viscous, opalescent liquid resembling Elmer's Glue bubbled out, staining her fingertips white. "Milkweed," Mary Beth replied in response to Nicholas' probing eyes. She put the jackknife away and they retraced their steps.

On the porch in the rear of the apartment, was a cardboard box. The sides had been cut away and replaced with a screen mesh. Inside was a caterpillar, its bulbous body ringed with yellow and black stripes. "You raise caterpillars?"

"Butterflies," Mary Beth clarified, lifting the top of the box. "Monarchs. The caterpillars are just a means to an end." She removed a wilted stem - most of the leaves had been chewed away to nothing - and lowered the fresh offering into a container of water wedged at the bottom of the box. She pivoted the plant so several leaves from an adjacent stem were touching - a bridge from one diminished food source to the next. Replacing the cover, they went back into the apartment.

"Where did you find your little friend?" Nicholas asked.

"In the same park where we got the milkweed. Two, white eggs, no bigger than a grain of salt, were stuck to the underside of a leaf." She went into the bathroom. When she emerged, Mary Beth was wearing pajamas and a bathrobe. "There's a second caterpillar; it's already in a cocoon and should be emerging soon. Perhaps you'll get to see it before you go."

She handed him the air mattress and Nicholas began inflating it with a bicycle pump. The sun having gone down, the heat in the cramped apartment was finally beginning to abate. Only now when she removed the cotton bathrobe, could Nicholas see his sister's left leg. The deformity wasn't as bad as he feared. Some tissue missing, the lower portion below the knee twisted, ever-so-slightly, out of alignment. "What's the purpose," he asked "of raising butterflies?"

Mary Beth was smoothing her brown hair with a rather expensive-looking, ivory-handled brush. The brush and butterflies appeared the only extravagances she allowed herself. "Marauding insects and harsh weather often destroy the eggs. Raising them in captivity helps even the odds they'll survive to adulthood and reproduce." She pulled the brush through her hair, the bristles tugging the tight curls to full length before springing back to hug her scalp. "There's even a wasp that bores tiny holes in the monarch cocoons, injecting her own eggs in the growing host. The eggs eventually hatched and devoured the half-formed butterfly. When the cocoon split apart, the wrong insect, depending on your point of view, emerges."

The mattress fully inflated, Nicholas laid it on the floor next to his sister's bed. She got some sheets and a light blanket. "I doubt you'll need that," she said pointing to the blanket.

"No, I shouldn't think so." Nicholas went into the bathroom, showered and changed into his pajamas.

"Anything else I can get you?"

He lay down on the thin mattress. It was surprisingly comfortable. "No I'm fine."

Mary Beth flicked out the light and rolled over on her side away from him.

Despite the muggy, midsummer weather, the tiny apartment was reasonably airy. An occasional car passed in the street, accompanied by the incessant drone of crickets. The studio apartment felt infinitely comfortable; it offered safe passage through the predicament of present

uncertainties. Stripped of all worldly luxuries and material excesses, except for an ivory-handled brush, it helped 'even the odds'. "A mausoleum," Nicholas said without prefacing the remark, as though in response to a conversation already in progress. "Mom made a goddamn shrine of your bedroom."

Mary Beth groaned and lay flat on her back. "She put all your medals and trophies on a shelf," Nicholas confided. "Even had the snapshot of you with Doina Melinte blown up and hung on the wall. It's so God-awful morbid!"

Mary Beth stretched her hand over the edge of the bed until it came to rest on his face. The feathery touch went through his body like a benediction. "She can't help it." The hand brushed him a second time and disappeared. Shortly, he heard his sister's regular breathing. She was sound asleep.

Tell me what to do to make your pain go away.

In late March, the day Nicholas visited Mary Beth's room and found her lying on the bed with hands sandwiched between her thighs, his best intentions counted for nothing. All his furtive prayers produced no benefit. During those sullen, wintry days, he could do no more to help his sister than his mother with her blustery chatter. Now this pilgrimage to Providence - but for what purpose? A social visit? An act of atonement for having done so little at a time when so much was required? Before dozing off, a phantasmagoric image flitted across Nicholas' fading consciousness. He saw Elliot rear up vertically, while gripping the milkweed stem with the rear portion of his body. Like an automated, spring-loaded mechanism, the caterpillar launched his jaws kamikaze-style at the leathery leaf, hardly bothering to masticate the soggy pulp before swallowing. Chop. Chop. Chop. The attack was grim, relentless.

In the morning Mary Beth showed Nicholas the chrysalis. Mint green and wrinkled like a bloated raisin, the cocoon hung by a single thread in the topmost corner of the butterfly box. Elliot had shifted from the shriveled milkweed stalk to the fresh offering and was weaving and bobbing at the meaty leaf like an overweight, punch-drunk fighter. The caterpillar had grown noticeably overnight. "The larvae feed on the milkweed plants and produce a bitter alkaloid that's distasteful to other birds and predators. Each fall the butterflies migrate south to Florida and Mexico."

"Here's the tricky part." She replaced the lid, taking special care not to jostle the green sack. "The slightest trauma and the butterfly emerges deformed."

"Deformed," he said, wondering if she caught the implicit irony. "How long do they live?"

"Two years."

At ten o'clock there was a knock at the door. A young woman with blonde hair and dishwasher-blue eyes stood in the doorway. Mary Beth brought her into the kitchen, sat her down at the table and handed her a manila folder from which the woman removed a pamphlet slightly larger than a small book. The pages were wrapped in a stiff, expensive looking covering - eggshell white with flecks of blue and reddish purple. A single strand of crimson floss ran through the spine holding the contents intact. "Shall we say 200 copies?" The blonde woman seemed pleased.

"I'll have them ready in a week."

“About the price,... ”

“I quoted you a fair price,” Mary Beth parried the remark deftly. “My costs are the same no matter whose poetry I bind.”

“Two hundred copies,” the blonde repeated without further quibbling and went out the door into the bright, morning light. Mary Beth made a note on a slip of paper and placed it, along with the manila folder, in a drawer. Later that morning at a graphic arts store near the municipal court building, she purchased supplies for the blonde woman’s pamphlets. On the ride home, she stopped at a bridal boutique on Wickendon Street. The owner had sold two satin, wedding albums over the weekend and placed an order for several more.

After lunch they assembled 50 of the pamphlets. Using a paper cutter, Mary Beth showed Nicholas how to trim the decorative coverings to size. “The unusual blue and purple flecks are seed husks tossed into the mush before the paper is cold-pressed to its proper thickness and left to dry.”

Running a length of linen thread through a ball of beeswax, she demonstrated how to sew the booklet signatures together, pushing the needle through the paper from the innermost fold to the back. Mary Beth creased the individual pages with a bone folder and collated while Nicholas used a carpenter’s awl to punch holes in the spine. By three in the afternoon a hefty pile of poetry was scattered over the length of the table. “Enough for today,” Mary Beth announced throwing the bone folder aside.

Later that night, Nicholas said, “If you’d tripled the price, the woman would have placed the order.”

It was almost midnight and pitch dark; the crickets were in rare form. “Yes, I suppose so.” Mary Beth giggled at the queer notion, her soft, musical laughter rolling out of her throat and resonating in the blackened corners of the tidy room. A group of Brown students returning from the last show at the Avon Cinema passed by their window, hooting and jeering. They were intoxicated - not with liquor, but the warm weather and their own, unquenchable youth.

“Mother has her birds to look after,” Nicholas said, “and you have Elliot.”

By now the Brown students had disappeared down the street, their joyful exuberance swallowed up by the rowdy crickets and steamy, night air. “Maybe that’s what it’s all about,” his sister murmured. ‘Looking out for each other, evening the odds.’

“I’m going to tell Mom to dismantle the shrine,” Nicholas said, the last, few words catching awkwardly in his throat. “And I’ll explain that the deep sea diver remark was a figurative slip of the tongue.”

“Yes, do that.”

“The picture with you and Doina will go up in the attic.”

“Or, preferably, out with the trash,” She was leaning far over the side of the bed. Though he could not see his sister’s face in the darkness, Nicholas could feel her warm breath on his cheek. “What I’m doing her in this apartment,...it’s not a life,” Mary Beth whispered. “It’s only a beginning and nothing more.” There was a long silence. “A person must start somewhere.”

In the morning before leaving, Mary Beth said, “Mom’s birthday is next month. I thought I’d surprise her and come up to Boston for a week. Is there anything she could use?”

“She dropped her binoculars last week and cracked the lens.” Mrs. Holyfield owned an Eagle Optics model featuring nitrogen purged fogproofing.

“Say no more!”

Nicholas went out onto the porch to say goodbye to Elliot. A goeey puddle stained the lower left-hand corner of the butterfly box - an afterbirth of sorts. The cocoon was in tatters and an orange and black monarch, its moist, newly-formed wings closed together, was resting on the topmost leaf. Oblivious to everything, Elliot continued his eating frenzy.

Mary Beth removed the lid and placed her hand under the butterfly's slender legs. "Problem is, we don't know how long he's been free of the cocoon. Once the wings dry he'll have the urge to fly, so we need to get him out of the box." The insect stumbled onto an outstretched finger. She lifted him gently from the enclosure and went down the backstairs into the sun-drenched yard.

"Did you want to hold him?"

Nicholas shook his head. He was too shocked by the transformation. The butterfly, which was easily three times the length of the wispy chrysalis, flexed its moist wings several times, laying them flat on a horizontal plane. Another five minutes passed. The insect hardly moved as the wings gradually dried and stiffened. Suddenly, in a frenetic burst, it flew straight up in the air and was gone from sight.

"If you come again," Mary Beth flashed her low-keyed, convoluted smile, "I can't promise such a spectacular ending to your stay."

Nicholas had a dream.

He was in the mountains west of Mexico City. The trees were painted reddish brown with millions of monarchs. Shimmering showers, molten firestorms of burnt umber and black. His head rocked forward, eyes opened. Just as abruptly, the millennial dream came to an abrupt end. Nicholas had dozed off on the black woman's fleshy shoulder. "Excuse me."

"You looked so tired, I didn't have the heart to wake you," she said. The gold-capped tooth caught a burst of noonday sunlight and flamed in her mouth like spontaneous combustion.

He rubbed the back of his neck. "My sister raises monarch butterflies." He told her about Elliot and the butterfly they released earlier in the day. The bus passed through Sharon and Canton on the Massachusetts south shore. The Blue Hills loomed into sight. Another half hour and they would be entering downtown Boston. Nicholas couldn't stop talking about the butterflies. The black woman was an eager listener. She shook her head, asked intelligent and thoughtful questions and even laughed when he described how the newly hatched insect rested quietly on Mary Beth's finger. "Well, imagine that!"

"The longest recorded flight for a tagged adult is eighteen hundred miles from Ontario to the American Southwest."

"Eighteen hundred miles!" The black woman exclaimed, stunned by the improbable statistic. "Wherever did you learn such a thing?"

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Gandhi's Goat

A line ad appeared in the classified section of the San Francisco Gazette: *Night clerk wanted for small motel. Mission District. Inquire in person.* A half dozen applicants interviewed for the position. I was the third choice and only got the job by default when the others decided not to accept. "What sort of a night are we having?" asked Mr. Chowdhary, the manager and

owner of the Bay View Motel. A stocky man, his coffee-colored skin was pock marked below bushy eyebrows.

“Three-quarters full with two reservations pending.” I had been there a month already, checking in the late arrivals and showing the guests to their rooms. When a lodger needed extra towels or a light bulb changed, I doubled as room service. If the motel filled up - which hardly ever happened - I turned on the 'no vacancy' sign and usually had little else to do but answer phones.

“Good! Very good, indeed!” The more guests, the friendlier and more expansive Mr. Chowdhary’s mood.

Behind the front desk of the Bay View Motel was a large, rectangular box sectioned off into twenty four smaller slots for spare keys and mail. A water cooler stood near the door along with a display rack stuffed with brochures describing tourist attractions in the Bay Area. A bronze statue of an Indian goddess rested on an end table in the far corner of the room. Three feet tall, the statue depicted a well-endowed, Indian woman perched in a lotus position; the goddess had three separate sets of arms and a coil of venomous snakes writhing on her forehead. The faint smell of incense - patchouli or sandalwood - emanated from the spot where the statue stood.

“After college, what will you do?” Mr. Chowdhary asked.

I had mentioned that I was taking courses at the local community college. “Haven't decided yet.”

“Not to worry. In time, everything will become clear.” Mr. Chowdhary raised his voice several decibels and waved a finger in the air. “My son, Subir - for years, he drifted about aimlessly from one job to the next. A regular job gypsy!” Mr. Chowdhary grinned at his clever choice of words. “Now he works for the Bay Commission. Decent pay, good benefits. Such a lucky man! “He rubbed his pock-marked chin. “And my oldest daughter, Bidyut, is married. Her husband’s in textiles.” Mr. Chowdhary smiled even more broadly showing his straight, white teeth. Thinking about his successful children made him very happy. “And, of course, you’ve met my other daughter, Terry.”

“The girl who works here,” I replied.

Mr. Chowdhary’s smile faded rather abruptly. “I love all my children equally, but that one - she will send both her parents to an early grave.”

One of the guests, a late arrival, came into the lobby. He checked in and went off in search of his room, dragging a medium-size Pullman down the corridor. “My wife’s people,” he continued, “came from Cochin. The city is slightly inland from the Malabar Coast. There has always been a large, Christian community in south-western India since as far back as the first century. My dear wife is a devout Catholic. After giving the two other children traditional names, she decided to name our youngest daughter after Saint Theresa, the Little Flower of Jesus.”

Mr. Chowdhary made a disagreeable face. “Even as a child, Terry had more in common with Attila the Hun than her 19th century namesake.” “And how she eats!” Mr. Chowdhary lowered his voice as though what he had to say was a mortal embarrassment. “My voracious daughter - that’s what I call her. Not to humiliate the girl or hurt her feelings. God forbid! I do it only to remind her that there is a problem.”

“But your daughter isn't fat.”

“Not yet.” Mr. Chowdhary shook his head and the corners of his lips puckered in a bittersweet smile. “No matter. Despite her faults, Terry is a good girl. Her life will fall into place and everything will work out for the best.” He looked up at me with an affectionate grin. “Just as it will for you, my friend.”

Mr. Chowdhary's youngest daughter wasn't fat, certainly not by conventional standards. Fat was two hundred pounds on a 5-foot frame. Fat was when a woman walked across a solid oak floor wearing high heels and left a dimpled trail from one side of the room to the other. In her early twenties, Terry Chowdhary was a plumpish woman with a modestly good figure. I had first noticed her working in the main office alongside her father. Or sometimes she tended the bed of flowers - mostly marigolds, petunias and pansies - that her mother had planted near the motel entrance. A prominent, hooked nose did nothing for her aesthetically but was not overly large, certainly not out of proportion with the rest of her features. And she had inherited her father's dark skin tones.

Granted, her face had begun to flesh out, to lose definition and her body was beginning to go slack in certain critical areas - the valleys rising up to meet the peaks, so-to-speak. She hardly ever came by the lobby at night and, on those few occasions, had nothing to say. Most often, she wore a sullen, disinterested expression as though she found the universe too crass for her high-minded sensibilities and was living her life under protest.

One night after I had worked at the motel for several months, Terry wandered into the lobby. "Quiet" she asked in a flat voice. The hooked nose set against the high cheeks lent her a haughty, almost arrogant expression. A thin, silver cross hung from her neck. She lifted her head but did not actually look at me. Rather, her eyes seemed to slide obliquely over my features without touching my face.

"Yes, very quiet. Only three guests. A couple of businessmen and a family touring from New England." A bunch of large bananas lay in a basket on the counter. Terry took one and placed the peel on a napkin. She stuffed the banana in her mouth and the fruit went down her throat like a garbage disposal. It didn't appear that she even bothered to chew.

"Would you like one?" she asked. "They're quite fresh."

"No, thank you. I just ate." She shrugged and began peeling another.

"The guest in room twenty four thought he saw a cockroach, but it was just a dead water bug from the pool. He was still upset so I switched him over to twenty-six."

"Any prostitutes?" Terry asked. "Sometimes businessmen bring women back to their rooms." Mr. Chowdhary never mentioned prostitutes. Was this an oversight, I wondered, or did he and his daughter have differing views on the subject? "If that ever happens," Terry continued without waiting for my response, "give them their money back and tell them to go elsewhere. Prostitutes bring trouble. Trouble brings police."

"How do I know," I asked watching her nibble away the top of the second banana, "that the woman in question is a prostitute and not some bimbo with a trashy taste in clothes?"

"The first time she comes to the Bay View Motel with a man, she's his wife. No matter she's wearing stiletto heels and tassels on her breasts." Terry deposited the peel of the second banana on the napkin. "If she shows up the next night with someone else, she's a prostitute."

"I'll try to remember that."

"When they try to check in, I usually say, 'We don't rent to prostitutes. Go away.'"

"Very succinct."

"No reason to waste words." Terry slid her hand across the counter and began toying distractedly with the third banana, picking at the topmost portion of the peel with a thumbnail.

"Are you going to eat that one too?"

"Did you want it?"

“No, It's just that I've never seen anyone eat three bananas.”

“I wasn't going to eat it,” Terry said self-consciously and pushed the fruit away. “You've been here a while now,” she said speaking in a harsh, almost accusatory tone. “What are your plans?”

It was the same question her father had posed, though slightly more diplomatically. “I don't know. I haven't decided what I want to do.”

“Well, for what it's worth,” Terry said with a faint tinge of sarcasm. “I don't know what I want to do with my life either.”

Not that she wasn't attractive in an exotic, fleshy way, but her gruff stoicism was too much! At one point during our conversation, I caught a glimpse of the bronze, multi-limbed snake goddess over Terry's left shoulder and, for a fraction of a second, it seemed as though the motel owner's daughter and her metaphysical counterpart merged into one, all-powerful superwoman. “But you have your work here at the motel.”

“That's not the same thing,” she replied less caustically and went back out into the warm night.

After the New Year, Mr. Chowdhary's older daughter, Bidyut, had a baby. A month later, he came to me and said, “The christening is next Saturday. If you could work the day shift, I'll pay you time and a half.”

“That's not necessary.”

“It's the weekend,” he said with soft-spoken firmness, “and you would be doing me a favor.”

I had an ulterior reason for taking the work: In addition to earning a few extra dollars, Terry might drop by. I had begun to look forward to those rare visits when she sauntered into the lobby unannounced - like some visiting, foreign dignitary - sampling the complimentary fruit and stare at me with her chocolaty brown eyes. She reminded me of a nut - not the psychiatric variety, but the edible seed. A walnut or, more specifically, a Brazil nut - hard as hell on the outside, yet deliciously meaty within. Not that I had any desire to make a play for her. Our present relationship - transparent and uncomplicated - suited me just fine. “Yes, I'll work the day shift.”

The following Saturday, Mr. Chowdhary, dressed in a gray, sharkskin suit, a misplaced relic from the late fifties, escorted his wife and his family off to church. An hour later, they returned with a crowd of several dozen relatives. The women, many dressed in traditional Indian clothes, set up a buffet on aluminum tables around the concrete patio. It was off-season and the few guests registered at the motel had little use for the frigid pool.

An hour passed. A coarse-looking man - extremely fat and drunk - wandered into the lobby and came directly to the front desk. Placing his drink on the counter, he smiled piggishly. “Do you know who I am?” He said with exaggerated self-importance.

“One of the guests at the christening,” I said stupidly.

The man howled as though it was the funniest thing imaginable. “Yes, one of the guests!” He looked at his glass and, seeing that it was empty, rushed off. A minute later, he was back with a fresh drink in either hand. “Where were we?”

“We weren't anywhere,” I said making no effort to mask my discomfort.

The fat man shook his double chin and managed an inhospitable grin. Smelling of body odor and sloe gin, he leaned over the counter an inch from my face. "Tell me, how much profit does this shit-hole produce in a year?" His eyes were suddenly clear, limpid.

"Are you planning to buy the motel?" Before the words had left my lips, I realized the impropriety of the remark.

Not that it made a difference. Again, the fat man threw his shoulders back and laughed wildly. He took a swig, draining the frothy, pink liquid almost to the bottom of the glass and smiled scornfully. "Not anytime soon."

Reaching into his pocket, he withdrew a thick wad of money. Peeling the topmost bill off the pile, he waved a hundred dollar bill in front of my nose. "Everyone wants to be rich, but the more they whore after mammon, the further it eludes their grasp." The fat man staggered around the room clutching vainly at the air - his monstrous flesh heaving with oceanic force - in a parody of his own words. "They don't understand the relationship between character and wealth, the businessman's carnal instincts and the financial bottom line." He spun around on his heels and almost toppled over. "You'd like to be rich, wouldn't you?"

"Comfortable," I replied warily.

"Then you'll die a pauper!" He shouted with an air of finality. "Poor as your ne'er-do-well employer!"

The fat man held the drink six inches above his head and let the remaining drops dribble off the lip of the glass onto his protruding tongue. Wiping his mouth with the back of a hand he said, "You don't like me, do you?" The tone was more playful than angry which made the remark all the more confusing. "You're a goddamn damn bigot. You hate dark-skinned people and think you're better—"

"Sukamar, what are you doing in there?" A large-boned woman, every bit as imposing as the drunken man, lurched into the room and began hauling him away. "Come back to the party immediately!"

The fat man tore free of the woman just long enough to retrieve his second drink. "Yes," he whispered in a lethal monotone, "you are a lily-white, Anglo-Saxon bigot!"

After he was gone, I sat down and tried to collect my nerves. An hour later, the party was winding down. Most of the guests, including the drunken fat man and his wife, had left, and the women were cleaning up. Mrs. Chowdhary, dressed in a sari, entered. She was carrying a large dish. "A sampling of Indian foods for our favorite night clerk!"

"Your only night clerk," I noted.

"What should we have done if you hadn't filled in today? My poor husband would have been forced to work, and the blessed event would have been ruined. We owe you a debt of gratitude!" She pressed my hand passionately. "These," she gestured toward the center of the plate, "are pastries. You ought to save them for last."

Three weeks passed and I saw nothing of Terry. One evening shortly after eight, she entered the lobby. Removing the receiver from the phone, she flipped the 'no vacancy' sign on and said, "Come with me."

"And leave the motel unattended?"

"What will happen if you do?" she said acidly. "The sky fall down... the universe come to an end?" The sun had gone down and only a small sliver of moon lit the ground. She lead the way to the back of the building where a pile of rubbish, building materials from a recent project,

had been thrown in a heap. Terry fingered a cracked cinder block. In the murky gloom, I noted a scattering of cedar shingles, several windows with broken glass, random lengths of oak flooring and a metal shower stall.

“What are we looking for?”

No reply. She sifted through some framing lumber - odds and ends - and struggled to lift a slab of sheet rock. The board broke apart splattering her blouse with soggy gypsum. “Over here!” She was trying unsuccessfully to dislodge a 16-inch, split-rib cement block from the debris.

I grabbed the 40 pound block with both hands, lifting straight up, and hurled it onto the soft grass. “What’s this all about?”

Terry climbed down from the pile and escaped into the darkness. I could hear the muffled patter of feet racing frantically back and forth across the length of the yard. She tripped and fell down, got up and hurried off in a new direction. Finally she returned with a rusted wheelbarrow. “Put the block in here and come with me.”

She led the way around to the front of the building, past the office in the direction of the street. In the gutter near the entrance to the Bay View Motel was a brown and white tabby, its hind legs crushed. The cat's eyes were closed but its chest was heaving fitfully. Blood mixed with urine coated the pavement. Bracing her legs against the side of the wheelbarrow, Terry tried to lift the cement block but it wouldn't budge. Only now did she turn to me, her face weighed down with a terrible misery.

“I'll do it.” Lifting the block, I held it chest high over the cat's skull. “I can't see a thing.”

Terry put her hand on my shoulder and sighted straight down through the rectangular hole in the center of the block. “Bit more to the right,” she said. I repositioned the block. “Higher.” My arms ached; I felt sick to my stomach. “Let go!” I dropped the block and promptly threw up all over myself.

On impact, the block split in two. Terry pulled the pieces away, dragging them back onto the sidewalk. The cat was dead. Back in the lobby I washed up as best I could, turned the “no vacancy” sign off and placed the phone back on the cradle. Half an hour later, Terry reappeared. “I put the wheelbarrow away,” she said in a dry, gravelly voice.

“And the cat?”

“Yes, that too.” I didn't bother to ask what she had done with the remains. “Thanks for your helpfulness.” She went away.

Attila the Hun. I remembered what Mr. Chowdhary had said about his youngest daughter. Yes, there was something 'Hunlike' in the way she savaged the pile of building materials and rushed about the darkened yard. Would her namesake, Saint Theresa, have been up to the task? Could the eremitic Little Flower of Jesus have ended the cat's mortal anguish? When my shift ended, I went back to the spot where the animal died. The cat and the broken block were gone, the blood and urine washed away with a garden hose.

One Sunday in July, I was finishing up the paperwork before going off duty. Wearing a tan dress with off-white pumps, Terry entered the lobby. A pearl comb clung to the left side of her straight, black hair. Her expression, as always, was remote, impenetrable. “My father will be down to relieve you. He is getting dressed now.”

“No hurry.” I glanced at her briefly. Even dressed nicely, there was something coarse, dissatisfying about her. Of late, I had begun having X-rated, sexual fantasies about this

outlandish Indian with her dour disposition and eating disorder. But that was all. Even if I had a crush on her - which I didn't - romance would have been out of the question. I'd been that route often enough to recognize the symptoms: the perpetual sighing and palpitations; the blurring of etheric boundaries so you no longer knew where the lover left off and the beloved began. No, it was none of that bathetic mush. "Why are you all dressed up?" I asked.

"I'm going to church. The eight o'clock Mass."

"Would you like some company?"

"I didn't know you were Catholic."

"After a fashion," I hedged. Actually, I hadn't been to church in over a year but saw no need to share that minor detail.

"Yes, I don't care."

"Didn't ask if you cared," I said with mild irritation. "Only if you'd like me to join you."

The corners of her lips turned up in a wan smile. "As you like."

"But what do you like?"

Tucking his white shirt into his pants, Mr. Chowdhary appeared in the doorway. "Yes," Terry said, "I would like you to come with me."

Saint Marks was located three blocks east in the direction of the harbor. As we neared the church, Terry said, "If my father gets irritable and makes a fuss, you shouldn't take it personal." I might as well have been walking on the opposite side of the street, the way she kept her dark eyes straight ahead. "Whenever business falls off for a day or two, he thinks it's a dreadful omen."

"Like yesterday." The previous night there had been only two lodgers and Mr. Chowdhary stormed around the lobby short-tempered and sullen.

"The motel produces little profit but we always manage to muddle through." Terry went up the front steps and into the church. Locating a seat near the rear, she knelt in prayer. The pearl comb caught the soft, variegated light from the stained glass windows, flinging it back in a miniature spray of colors. Lips moving silently and head bowed, she resembled an ancient Hindu goddess from the Bhagavad-Gita. Finished with her prayers, Terry crossed herself, removed her rosary beads from a small, leather pouch and sat back in the pew. The service moved along at a brisk pace.

"Lamb of God, You take away the sins of the world. Have mercy on us. Grant us peace." During Communion, Terry held her hands clasped just under her chin; head bowed, she followed the line of parishioners back to the pew. Again she knelt down and became lost in prayer.

"Thanks for coming." We were standing outside on the sidewalk. The reverential glow of the religious zealot had evaporated. With a peremptory nod, she turned and sauntered off, her ample hips swaying energetically from side to side, in the direction of the Bay View Motel.

In the fall, I bought a ten-speed bike and began touring the city. Each day I set out in a different direction and increased the distance traveled. Sometimes I would pedal west on 20th Street until I hit Guerrero, then head north to Market Street. From there, it was a straight run through Union Square and the financial district out to the San Francisco Bay. Or, on other occasions, I cut off at Van Ness Avenue and biked the four miles straight out to Fisherman's Wharf. At a wooden structure no bigger than an outhouse, tourists queued up all day long to buy excursion tickets - hour-long boat trips into the harbor to view the prison at Alcatraz and the Bay

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