The Bones of Garbo
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A Collection of Short Stories by

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Dedicated, with love and gratitude, to my grandmothers, whose labor lives on in each generation:

THELMA BERTHA BATTLES, 1919–1999
OLLIE FLORENE LEWIS, 1918–1995
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t was one of those neighborhoods, in one of those times, when everyone is waiting for something. Some waited for government checks, some waited for wayward sweethearts, some waited for fame in one of its harlequin guises to give in and ask them to dance. Some waited by necessity and others waited by nature. There were people on the far end of the street who waited for the apocalypse; nearer to Main, they were just anticipating the depletion of the ozone, revolution, or population explosion, whichever came first. They waited for social change; in gardens planted in rubber tires and on wooden porches with open beers, in the street next to an idling pickup, around a picnic table passing a joint, under the bellies of their own ailing transportation, in a mixed game of horse or chance meeting of dogs. They waited for cures to diseases: in anxious pairs on the bumpers of cars, bare legs sticking to metal, in the back yard with a confused neighbor lady, in the bathroom with a sick child. They waited for the mail, which didn’t come until nearly 3:30 in this part of town. They waited for free copies of the paper, to be delivered after the paying customers were served. They waited for the taxi and the bus. They waited for the new millennium with varying degrees of patience and frustration.

Meanwhile, the orange and blue moving vans appeared every summer in flocks. New crews of children patrolled the street with their bikes and balls and skateboards. The cars, usually of a dented and rusted vintage, with many bumper stickers but few vanity plates, assumed their places along the curb. The bushes filled in with trumpet creepers and wild potato vines.

Waiting Period
The grass grew tall and thick, Queen Anne’s lace, day lilies, and purple bull thistles cropping up where no one had requested them. And when the clay-colored street flooded every spring, since there was no drainage system to speak of, then the neighbors came out on their porches, one with a pillow, one with a series of colored candles purchased from an import store, one with a new lover whose body pressed up against a column and shape-shifted in the occasional lightening flash, one with a dirty book and a bottle of sweet wine, to wait out the storm.

And it was in this neighborhood and in this time, that Tom and Yvette served their own waiting period.

Yvette noticed the wreath first, lying on the sidewalk next to the house on the corner. It was about nine by eleven, heart shaped, and covered in red roses the size of brussels sprouts, with a purple band like a Miss American sash twisted underneath it so the writing was illegible. At the time, she thought it had been left out for the garbage men. But day after day, no one came to collect it, the petals began loosening and scattering over the neighborhood, along with the potato chip bags and fast food wrappers that landed like manna in the grass overnight. She walked out the back door in her nightgown and picked one up. It was smooth to the touch, smoother than the skin inside her own thighs that Tom had declared his favorite part of her body. And this too had started to make her nervous.

When Tom jogged past the wreath every day on his way to the bike trail, he’d tap a foot in the center, pretending it was one of the stations of his imaginary obstacle course. In fact, by the Tuesday it was part of his routine, by Wednesday he believed he’d suffer bad luck if he skipped this step in his ritual, and by Thursday he was going to the public library and checking back issues of the paper for suspicious entries on the obituary page.

“What makes you think someone died? It’s roses, it’s hearts, I’m thinking anniversaries and prom nights,” Yvette said.

“Trust me, something irregular is going on over there.”

The house belonged to a single black man in his early thirties. Yvette didn’t know his name, but she recognized him from his front porch, where he was usually sitting in his bare feet, talking on a cell phone. His house was one of the biggest on the block, and the yard was one of the better kept—landscaped with railroad ties and planted with blazing star
and evening primrose. He had a certain pride of place, threw parties on a regular basis and stood outside shaking his barbecue fork to 80’s house music, washed his Jeep Cherokee in the driveway with a professional-looking chamois, wore striped shirts open over his tight and strangely appealing pot belly, entertained a number of women who wore slim slacks and gorgeous rayon dresses.

Tom said he hadn’t seen him around lately. There was an empty dog dish on the front porch. He didn’t have a dog, did he? There was a strange Buick in the driveway. There was a chesty lady in the back yard. Surely, the guy was too young to up and actually die?

“You’re so morbid,” she said, “Why do you always assume the worst?”

“I’ll let you know after D-day.”

That was Yvette’s cue to go ahead and make the appointment, as they had discussed. She called it in exactly two years after they had moved in together, in fact. Two years, twenty-four months, seven hundred and thirty days, one cat, a sofa, a porch swing, and an automobile, probably two hundred fifty acts of copulation. They’d been talking about it for at least that long. But they could never decide how to arrange it. Would they make separate appointments, and spring the news on one another later on? Plan a big party and go in the next day with twin hangovers to pass the bottled water back and forth in the waiting room? There was just no established etiquette for the situation. Not to mention what they’d do once they actually found out. Yvette tried to make her long, twisting voice sound short and brisk. The woman on the phone assured her that the process was quick, safe, and completely anonymous.

But at the City Health Department, there were AIDS awareness posters with cartoon characters and smug messages all over the walls. Sure, there were some families with little kids who were obviously here for vaccinations. A Chinese couple bending over a five-year-old girl in a shrunken, striped cardigan and red pants so long they nearly hid her feet. An Indian family with a skinny wife, a bald husband, four big-eyed toddlers with their cunning shoes dangling in a row over the floor.

Beside Yvette, Tom filled out his form without comment and slid the clipboard down in between his metal folding chair and hers. Touching her knee on his way up, he felt it jump under the wasted-away cotton of her
skirt and wondered how such a high-strung person would handle the real emergency, once it hit.

In the single-sex bathroom, he closed the door and looked in the mirror. Green splotches had appeared under his eyes, just like in that fucking commercial. He splashed some water on his face and wetted his comb. A horrible smell was coming off him too, like rotting cantaloupe. His gut was a rotten melon, cracked along a fetid seam. He washed his hands again, lifted his shirt and soaped his underarms. Then he looked behind him into the stall and saw what was really the matter. The toilet bowl was filled with a momentous turd, so long it circled the basin. He visualized the wreath on the sidewalk, the empty dog dish on the porch. His stomach lurched forward and jammed into his ribs. It would be funny, even, if it wasn’t so gross. Then he wondered how it would be if he actually had it—would people think: “Poor Tom. He’s losing weight, he can’t keep his food up or down, his skin is covered in lesions like vampire hickey. It would be gross, wouldn’t it, if it wasn’t so sad?”

Of course, the toilet wouldn’t flush. He should’ve guessed by the way the water had turned brown around the edges of the vision. He turned and quickly left the bathroom, the soap already drying and caking under his arms.

“Seven days’ waiting period,” Yvette observed in the car on the way home. “Do you think you can make it all the way to Friday?”

“Let’s make an agreement not to obsess about this, deal?” he said, wedging his hand under her leg. “So what did you put for question #9?”

That night, he came in and found her lying on the sofa in a greeny-blue caftan picking ticks off the cat. She looked up and flicked a tick at him. “I found out about that guy you’re so worried over.”

“Who?”

“The dead guy. His name is Lloyd.”

“Who told you that?”

“I was out looking for Felicia and I saw the boomer next door, you know, single father, Oregon license plates, bicycle rack on the back of his car?”

Tom drew closer and stroked Felicia’s orange tiger fur. “I know him,” he said. “Tennis fan, right?”
“Well, this one says he’s actually seen Lloyd. He says the wreath is from an old girlfriend, announcing the birth of Lloyd’s child. Of course, Lloyd doesn’t believe he’s the father, so he’s just signifying for the girlfriend’s benefit.”

“I heard that guy’s wife left him for some lesbian sex ring that’s run out of the Four-o’Clock Diner. He’s hardly a reliable witness.”

“What are you saying, you’re standing up for Lloyd? Or just holding out for a real murder mystery?”

“I believe you’re beginning to have a thing for Lloyd,” he said, scratching another tick off Felicia’s ear. He held it up and observed its tiny legs wriggling in the subdued light from the thrift store lamp Yvette had draped in a printed silk scarf, so that their living room was shadowed with the splotches of an outdated paisley. When he sliced his nail firmly into the tiny round body, it left a dull red smear on his thumb. “You’ve got to be careful about that.”

On Saturday, Yvette made daiquiris in the blender and Tom fired up the barbecue grill. They stood at the table arranging chunks of green and yellow squash, red and green pepper, on shish kebab spears. In between, they’d stop for a modest bit of chicken marinating in cheap sherry in a leftover potato salad tub. It was fluorescent and gelid with fat, clammy to the touch, and Tom felt a grim satisfaction when he skewered each bite onto its appointed metal prong. He thought of all the women he’d gone through, how he’d felt himself moving through the initial friction and on to better things. And now it occurred to him for the first time that something in them could be getting to him. Not to mention Yvette and her own slimy past.

Yvette touched his arm, her hand slick with chicken grease. “Good news,” she said. “Lloyd’s back in action.”

He looked up from his skewer, a chicken bit slipping out of his fingers.

“I talked to the neighbor lady down the street. You know, the one who works the late shift at the hospital.”

That was the house where they had heard screams one night at 1:30. He and Yvette had been half dressed, arguing over whether the place was worth fixing while they repaired leaks in the bathroom, and he’d run out
with a caulking brush in his hand. There was a man bleeding in her driveway, a crowd of onlookers huddled around him in a circle. The man was rolling, egglike, on the gravel, cradling his head. Tom leveraged his way into the crowd, sent Yvette back to the house for a rag which turned out to be a mangled gray pair of his old underwear. Only later, when he was standing on the porch, his ears ringing from the man’s high, repetitive screams—Oh Jesus, oh mama, oh Jesus, oh lord—did he look at his bloody hand and think he should have protected himself.

“You remember Sharon,” Yvette said. “Well, she told me that Lloyd’s involved in some type of gang activity. No kidding, they keep a Chinaman in every precinct, it seems. Now Lloyd’s on the phone all day, every day, with his operatives and finally he gets greedy and they tell him, watch out it’s your funeral. They send over a wreath. Then Lloyd throws it out. But even the garbage men are in on the deal, they’re afraid to pick it up, and so it sits there, moldering, terrorizing the whole community. Meanwhile, Lloyd packs up and goes to Sun City. He sends his various ladies in to feed the dog. He sends a postcard to the mob boss and sits around the pool with a brandy snifter of Rémy Martin and his cell phone sitting on an inflatable raft in the off position.”

“And you believe this?” he said.

“You’re the one who wants a disaster,” she said. “I’m only here to help you out.”

It was true that Yvette had rescued him from one bad mistake after another. The fact checker at work, the divorced president of the neighborhood association, the bottle and the video games and the bong. Before, he’d had very little sense of time passing. But with Yvette, life assumed a kind of decadent domestic rhythm. Sundays, when the two of them walked out to the river or through the forest or the grasslands, made him particularly aware of this. Yvette picked a sprig of loosestrife. He leaned in and inspected a colony of mushrooms bubbling over the root of a tree.

He, on the other hand, had rescued Yvette from a lifetime of boredom with her long-term boyfriend, a pseudo-husband type who wore stiff, ironed jeans and pointed boots and liked to demonstrate Tae Kwan Do techniques at tense moments in dinner parties. When fixing meals or directing foreplay, Yvette often forgot which were his favorites and which
were her ex’s. He couldn’t count the times he’d had to endure mustard in
his potato salad or some highly unusual grace note in bed. It made him
feel eerily gay, like he was sleeping with Tae Kwon Do by association.

Yvette pointed to a low field of rushes next to a sandbar. A group of
birds had gathered there, some resting in the foreground, some fighting
over a carcass. The wind rose and several of the birds—maybe turkey
hawks—spread their wings and flew out over the road, over the phone
lines, to the river beyond.

They’d been discussing the possibility of relocating.

“Well, we’re going to have to move out sometime or other,” he said.
“As far as that’s concerned.”

Yvette kicked at a piece of driftwood with her mauve lace-up boot.
“The only question is, will it be up and out or just on?”

While he was trying to think of an answer, she beat him to the car,
and drove him back through the tall weeds and stunted trees, the cement
subdivisions, the plush old town demi-mansions, into the dicier streets
lined with crack houses and Quonset huts, past the public health clinic
and on back home. There, they saw a couple from the two-story commune
house walk by holding hands.

“We’re aspecting Lloyd,” the girl with the yeasty braids and the smiley
face overalls said. “Do you want to join us?”

Tom rolled his eyes toward the truck garden with its psychedelic
wheelbarrow, the front windows sprouting macramé God’s eyes, the wind-
owpanes shaking with drum vibrations, a homemade banner over the
porch—“We support animal rights. Deal with it”—, and Yvette tried to
cover, saying that they had some heavy processing to do.

In bed that night, Yvette explained that the members of the commune
believed Lloyd had embarked on a spiritual journey. A victim of envi-
ronmental disease, he had set off to find a more conducive spiritual home.
And he’d sent himself a funeral wreath to mark his passage from one life
into the next.

“Where do you get this stuff?” Tom said. “I never heard any of these
bizarro stories before you moved in. I never even talked to any of the locals.”

Meanwhile, the neighbors fought and fucked and drank and barbecued,
celebrating high summer with metal anthems and spirituals, torch songs
and reggae, Gregorian chant and rap. The temperature rose to nearly one hundred. The unemployed gathered in the streets over broken engines or came by to ask to mow the lawn. The employed took on double shifts. A hand-painted ice cream truck took to roving the neighborhood, “Marvin’s Dairy,” stenciled in sloppy black on a plain white ground. It didn’t have the usual bright colors, fanciful posters, or the tinkling music box recording. Instead, the proprietor’s wife sat on the passenger side and jangled a hand-held cow bell, calling out to the children: “Ice cream. Pure phat gladass ice cream. Go get your mom’s lazy butt out of bed and tell her to give it up for the seventy-five cents.” The drums grew louder in the commune house, often lasting until midnight. Yvette woke up at three A.M. to the sound of skateboards scrabbling over the rough pavement of the street. A cat called out like a baby. A baby called out like a cat. Little girls appeared peddling magazine subscriptions with bruised cheeks and big, burnished black eyes. Little boys, propped up on their bicycles, and steering without hands, rode in V-shaped formations after interesting strangers and stray dogs. The laundry snapped dry on the line. The sweat collected in a tree shape at the back of Tom’s T-shirt. The air smelled of spice bushes and wild garlic, rotting fast food. And somewhere in the capitol city of their poor and isolated state, a lab technician juggled Yvette’s blood sample and Tom’s with those of hundreds of strangers, to arrive at their results.

Monday he met her on the street on his way home from work. She was poking down at the sidewalk. The wind blew her skirt against her legs, outlining their dancer’s precision. Her fine, fair hair spread out in a fan, then fed down into a funnel. Felicia twisted around her feet.

“Can’t you stay away from that thing?” he said, leaning over to unlock the passenger door.

“I’m checking for something.”

On the sidewalk, the wreath had begun to molder. The bulb of each rose stood out separately, skinny in the neck, overblown in the head, the gray cardboard backing showing through between them like an unhealthy scalp. The petals were now more brown than red, a kind of umber, and a sweet and sour smell wafted off their matte surfaces.

“Today,” she said. “I had an encounter with Mrs. Hecht.”

“The old lady with the demon weedeater?”

Yvette nodded. “She needed someone to take her to the store. I guess that’s what I get for trying to work at home. She said she needed more
medicine, but it turned out to be plain old Metamucil and mineral water. You should have seen her wandering the aisles in her little flowered dress and her pocketbook out in front of her like an Uzi. It turns out, they don’t carry the strawberry Metamucil anymore. So we had to settle for the cherry. But not, of course, without giving the manager the what for.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” Tom said.

“And guess what she told me.”

“That she didn’t approve of living in sin?”

“No, it seems our decadence has been eclipsed. Friend Lloyd’s been stepping out on several ladies. And one of them is a particularly delicate type with a wasting-away disease. When she found a bottle of mousse in Lloyd’s bathroom, she refused to believe it was his. And then, of course, maybe it was, maybe it wasn’t, but we do know that Lloyd has multiple business partners.”

“Hmm,” Tom said. “We don’t know that for sure.”

Yvette raised her pale eyebrow. “So how many lovers do you think Lloyd has had?”

“In his lifetime, or just lately?”

“Let’s take the past fifteen years. We can leave out the high school gropes and escapades.”

“I’d say eight to ten, depending on your method of calculation. What’s your guess?”

“I figure a guy like that had to do some browsing. I’d put it up to about eighteen.”

“Not really,” Tom said.

“Really. I don’t think it’s a very thorough life experience, do you, when you’re dealing with a sample under a dozen?”

“So what ever happened with Lloyd’s lady?”

“It was an ugly scene. She didn’t have anyone to ask, she wasn’t sure how much medication to take, so she was mixing, you know, very bad form. They found her in the bedroom in a skimpy nightgown with her lunch dribbling down the satin and a selection of assorted guts in her hand. The wreath was her suicide note, so to speak.”

“So to speak,” Tom said, reshuffling the available statistics.

He woke up the next day with a fever. His limbs floated in all directions.
like turkey hawks circling his body. Yvette touched his hot forehead, his sweating chest, that smelled of egg yolk and chives. She looked out the window onto the lawn that was now longer than the most negligent neighbor’s and went to get a cold cloth for his head, but all she found was a fraying blue towel marked with a few grease stains. She wet the center and pressed it to his brow, letting the sides drape down on either side of his face. He looked regal, Arabic, laid out like that, and she remembered how she’d first loved him, his matte black hair with a pubic texture to it, big soulful eyelids in the shape of sea cowries, dark limbs vivid against the white sheets, where he’d collapsed after the tab of acid Tae Kwan Do had accidentally slipped into his hard cider. Proving that love, like disease, is based on a random series of chances. In fact, Tae Kwon Do had once set out to demonstrate this to her with a set of flow charts describing the sexual histories of their closest friends and the whole thing had dissolved into a major dispute, with Yvette moving out temporarily to sleep in the arms of an unrelated subset.

“Can I get you anything?” she asked Tom.

“Get me out of this place.”

“I’m working on that,” she said. “Shall I tell you about the last person to leave the area?”

“Let me guess.”

“It was once upon a time in a side street of history when a young black man set out to make his fortune. I say he was young, which he was, in a relative way of speaking, because he’d kept himself free of any serious addictions or attachments. But the truth was, in chronological terms, Lloyd was nearing the midpoint of his existence.”

“Does this get any better?” Tom said, “Because if it doesn’t I’m going to go ahead and pass out for a while.”

“Just hold on. This Lloyd had lived a full life. He’d had all the good times, bad music, recreational drugs and designer sex a man could desire. But there was still something missing.”

“What?”

“Certainty,” Yvette said. “The end of the story. That’s something you never get until you die. So Lloyd went out in search of his death. He went from neighborhood to neighborhood and knocked on every door until he found the right temptation to do him in.”

“And where’d you get this one?” Tom said.
Yvette rested her hand on his hot forehead. “From the postman, if it matters. He worked his way out to the burbs, and at the last house on the last block in the last slick subdivision of this benighted city, a beautiful woman answered the door. Her hair was braided with shells and precious stones. She had all the wealth of Africa in these heavy breasts jutting out like calabashes under an orange embroidered caftan. When she saw Lloyd, it was like she was waiting for him. She led him to a courtyard far too big for the house to contain. It was filled with orchids and coffee cans, rubber tires, rusted out car parts, parrots, pumpkins, fountains, and stray dogs. In the lushest part of the yard, a mattress was pushed into the foliage, covered in pillows and silks.

‘You can do me once and then it’s over,’ she said. ‘We’ll send a wreath to your family when we’re done. Or did you change your mind?’

‘No, not yet honey. But how do I know you’re worth it?’

‘Check out my references,’ she said.

And when he saw the skulls and bones embedded in the white shale of the courtyard walls, he stopped right there, his hand halfway up her caftan, and asked, ‘What happens if I decide to settle for a little head instead?’”

But by this time, Tom was already asleep, his hand tucked inside the pillowcase, his cheeks flushed to an unearthly glow.

Wednesday, they just came home and hovered. Tom was too tired to go out to the coffee shop for his usual chess game; Yvette was too demoralized to go shopping or call a friend. They ate green grapes and tortilla chips in bed, with Felicia curled on top of Yvette’s feet and an old folk rock documentary playing on the VCR. Tom let his fingers drift to the loose waistband of her sweatpants.

“Don’t, just don’t, I beg you, tell me what any of the neighbors say.”

Yvette didn’t even hint that the little boy who cruised the neighborhood on his beat-up Schwinn calling out code names and personal insults had dropped by to offer his dog poop conspiracy theory. She didn’t indicate that she’d gone over to check out the situation, since she knew he’d been too sick to jog for two days, and found that the roses were rotting into an applesauce substance, with some kind of insect webs connecting the dissolving buds.

“What are we going to do?” she said.
Across the street from Lloyd’s, a skinny white man in baggy clothes sat in front of the open door to a burnt-out house, the wood actually charred along the frame.

“Fuck ourselves into a better mood?” Tom said, but then got up and went to the kitchen, where he dropped something breakable and called out: “You do realize, don’t you, that if this thing turns out badly I’m going to kill you before you start to experience any of the nastier symptoms.”

In the middle of the night, Yvette felt her stomach roll over without her, and became convinced that she’d caught Tom’s flu. The hot air was suffocating, she got up, drank a whole glass of water without stopping for a breath, and moved the fan so that its wind hit her more directly. When she woke up again, drugged, bedraggled, exhausted, at seven-thirty, Tom was already gone. All day at work, she kept counting down the hours until they went for their results. Twenty-four, twenty-one, seventeen. She wondered if he would call to say he was thinking along the same lines.

When he didn’t, she came home at six and made yam stew. Her gut shifted gears again, into a sweet ache with a homey feel. The sharp and honeyed scent of cooking yam. Tom was over an hour late by now, but he’d never kept a regular schedule, it wasn’t necessarily anything to worry about. She considered his comment the night before, started to tear up, then realized that she was getting her period. No matter how old and wise she got, she never remembered to count. But she had noticed that her flow, muddy and almost fecal when she was a girl, had now grown somehow astringent, smelling more like curry than the cheap Mexican food she’d favored in her first few relationships—even before Tae Kwon Do. She was turning a corner; she was moving on; but what was she moving toward?

She went out on the front porch with her green Fiestaware bowl of stew and a dark, chilly beer. The fibers in the yams stuck between her teeth, the flavor melted behind her molars. The beer filled in where the emotion had left off. People began passing in the street: a gang of preteens dragging along a pit bull puppy, a woman in a loose dress and tennis shoes pushing a mixed-race baby in a dented green stroller, a guy in a long purple velvet cloak headed toward the commune, old Mrs. Hecht dropping in on the neighbors with an apron and a rake. A stray dog wandered into the yard, it was the one Yvette hated to look at, the slow black one, with an
irregular tumor as big as a Frisbee high up on its back leg. An old man ambled after it, his long bald head spotted with sun, wearing both a sweater and a wind breaker in the heat. The dog was in the yard, peeing on the front bush, sniffing at an ice cream wrapper, nosing under the front steps.

The old man, struggling along right behind, shuffled to the porch railing and looked up at Yvette as if they knew one another. “Do you have a rope for him?” he asked.

She went out to the garage and found a bit of clothesline, watched the man loop it around the dog’s neck, and lead him limping home. After that, Yvette had to set the bowl down, she couldn’t eat at all. Instead, she went into the house, slipped her sandals on and went down the street to Lloyd’s. The wreath was reduced to a floral mush by now, sitting there on the sidewalk. Yvette got down on her knees, she didn’t care who saw her, who would even be looking in a place like this? She touched the wreath, brought her finger to her nose and smelled the glop that came away in her hand. There was a desiccated aura of sachet, a sharp, sickening sulphur depth you thought you’d never get out of, a rotting apple decay. It was a smell you couldn’t wait to get away from, and then couldn’t resist trying again. She pulled handful after handful off the face of the wreath, trying to clear the surface. Her hands stained to the reddish brown of the clay streets; her nostrils reached saturation, so she entered the smell without smelling it; her fingernails filled up with the stuff. Felicia nuzzled at her hip, wandered over to sniff along, but then got distracted licking her own tiger-striped haunches. And Yvette just knelt there on the sidewalk raking the cardboard clean.

When she looked up, the sun was melting into the long vista of the street, bringing color down on the thick treetops and low, tiled roofs. Inside Lloyd’s house, a light was on, the shades were open, and all the furniture was missing from the front room, except for an elaborate white light fixture drooping down like a lily of the valley, and there was Lloyd himself pacing the bare floorboards with his cell phone, wearing nothing but a very white pair of underwear, its elastic band worn high over the small of his back, low under his tight, buoyant belly. As he moved, he kept adjusting it, like even that was too much constriction for his body to bear. He poked his toe delicately into a warp in the floorboards; he reached up and pulled at his ear. A blank look passed over his face and he covered the receiver, walked over to the window, and flicked the blinds.
“Scat,” he said.

Felicia arched her back. The crickets buzzed around them like an electric fence. Yvette felt her limbs fly out around her and she got up and ran, tripping over her long skirt as she went.

Tom finally arrived at 12:30, and Yvette was still lying there in the tub, goose bumps covering the parts of her body that weren’t immersed in the hot water she’d replenished over and over. Parts on parts, needles on parts, needles on partners. With single, monogamous, multiple, bisexual, consensual, occasional, habitual. The variations made Yvette dizzy. No wonder Tom wouldn’t come home.

“I know, I know,” he said, outside the thin door. “I’m in violation of several treaties. But would you let me in to apologize anyway?”

Yvette touched the inside of the faucet with her toe.

“I know you’re in there, I can hear the caulking creaking. Don’t make me get the putty knife.”

She stood up, leaned over to unlock the door, and stood dripping naked on the bath mat: her nipples two mismatched medallions, the long pear-shaped stomach, the surprising stretch of pubic fuzz.

He pressed the wet weight of her onto his shirtfront.

“I guess you wonder where I’ve been,” he said. “Naturally, my first impulse was to go out and get laid again, before I find out anything for sure.”

“Naturally,” she said, slipping into her gown without drying off.

“Plus I wouldn’t want to think that you’d outnumbered me with your prenuptial figures.” Her nipples made dark blots in the pale cotton, he thought about a quarter of an inch down from the last time he’d seen her in that particular gown. “Just let’s get comfortable now and I’ll tell you what I did. Bedroom or living room?”

“Bedroom, please. I think I’d like to lie down.”

Tom followed her into the room, with one hand on her shoulder. She arranged herself on some pillows and he curled around the other way, holding onto her ankle as he spoke.

“I wanted to go on an odyssey, somewhere I’d never been before. I considered the techno club, the gay bar, the jazz cabaret, even the lounge at the Holiday Inn. But they all seemed too predictable, probably packed with middle-aged guys trying to bag their last score.”
“Very stock,” Yvette said, and put her hand into his hair. “I expect more of you.”

His scalp tingled, until he was ashamed of wanting to be touched so badly. But he went ahead and set her other hand on his thigh.

“So I just went around the corner to that little store. It’s a beauty shop, bar, and convenience stop all in one. I come in and sit at the counter, watching some sister get her hair straightened. A teenage boy is playing pinball in the corner. An old guy is eating potato chips behind the bar. I thought I’d get a beer and just look around for a while. Then this woman comes up to me, she must have been about forty, gravity stopped dead in all the right places. ‘You’re from around here, aren’t you? I’m Anita. I see you out with your lady sometimes. She’s quite the Bella Donna, isn’t she?’

“What do you know about it?” I asked her, and she told me that she’d been dating a local hero, character named Lloyd.

“I didn’t want to act too interested, ordered two more beers, and complimented her hair, which was bleached a dark maple blonde in four streaks in front and left dusky in the back. It’s always been my fantasy to be seduced by an older woman like that and if I wait any longer, well, she’ll be someone’s grandma.”

“I knew it,” Yvette said. “You’re probably still hoping your boss is going to give in and call you in her office to examine her desk top.”

“We move onto the next draft, things get a little sloppy, she starts emptying her purse on the bar. ‘This boyfriend of mine,’ she says, ‘he’s a real scavenger. Take him about half a heartbeat to move in on the prey of some other sorry customer. You know, like a dog will get in there and roll around on something dead, wriggling his behind ’til you think he’d throw his back out. Nothing makes him happier. Anyway, it was a couple of months ago, my Zachariah passed on. That’s him in the green suit there—good looking for a family man, I always thought. Lloyd shows up the next week, shine in his pants, grease in his hair, money in his clip, he wants to buy me an evening out of my misery, he says. Takes me to La Saggiotorre. Plays with my handbag under the table. Puts me to bed with a $25 bottle of champagne.’

“At this point, she picks a cork out of the pile on the bar, and starts running it over her wrist. Mine too, after a while. A couple of gangsta types by the pinball machine are giving me some hairy looks. And she just tells them to pop their bug-eyes back in their sunken skulls, this one’s with her.

“Of course,’ she says, back to Lloyd again, ‘that’s when things begin
to get strange—I mean, excuse me—white boy strange. Not just your usual skanking and dogging around. He starts to ask me about my husband—did it haint him or come on sudden, was he a good father, was he happy in his work? How did he feel about his brothers disappearing all around him? He even wanted me to show him Zachariah’s love tricks, gets me right down in my own bed and begs me to tell him where it hurts.’

“And then right when we’re in the sweet of a long lap-up session, he looks up and asks me, what does it mean for a black man to die of natural causes? “I’m thirty-three, most of my friends are dead or in prison,” he says. “What’s left for me but to go around and try to satisfy their women? Come the judgement day, there’s gonna be a whole lot of black ass waiting to devour those white devils. What am I gonna do but feed the fire? What do I have to do to set you free, sister? Tell me where to lay my burden down. Tell me where to set my stick in the fire.” I mean to tell you, the man had been doing some heavy double-dipping in the Malcolm X.’

“A lot of that going around,’ I said. ‘And how do you know I’m a white boy? I could be Asian, Native American, Italian, anything.’

“She snorted and blew a few sales slips and receipts right off the bar.

“You’ve got white boy nerves. Any self-respecting brother would’ve had me half-way out the parking lot by now. The thing was, I have to tell you Lloyd’s funny business was more attractive than you’d think. I fell flat out screaming and speaking-in-tongues in love with the boy. I’d drive by his place and check out the traffic. I’d lie to my kids about him, saying he was helping me with my taxes, that kind of thing. I’d do his laundry just to get the smell of his stink. I know it seems slutish in a widow lady, it’s not like I didn’t love my husband, stayed faithful to that man most of my married life, with just one little lapse when my babies started to get grown. If I let loose now, it’s on account of the grief.’

“I take it you’re not doing so well with your technique,”Yvette said, moving her hand over his head to stroke the curls at the back of his neck.

“Just wait,” Tom said. “I think you’ll agree that I get my own back. Anyway, all this time, she’s going over the stuff she’s spilled out of her purse. She opens a makeup compact and starts tapping her nail against it, shaking the extra rouge powder off the mirror so she can see herself again. And let me tell you, she’s nothing to sniff at, either. The thing about
Lloyd,’ she says, ‘once he sucked all the sweet stuff off me, he got restless. I catch him one day looking at the obituaries over grits and toast. And it’s not just idle curiosity we’re talking here. He’s marking them up, like they’re the want ads.

‘“See anything you like?” I said. ‘Teenage mistress of a gang-banger over Ruby and Vine? Pretty widow lady still nursing twins in the neighborhood of the Willow Baptist Church?’

‘“I’ve got some things to take care of, might as well get started,”’ he says, tucking his shirt in and walking out the door.

‘“So I tailed the man for five days, and then I took action. I’m not the kind sits around waiting for the griddle to stick. Zachariah could’ve told you that. I squeeze into my funeral suit and march down to the newspaper office to do some fast talking. And here’s where the black thing helps me out. Some white man, pillar of the community or garbageman or thief, they would have at least checked it out first. But they went ahead reprinted it, just like I wrote it. Come Sunday, Lloyd is looking at his paper, probably sitting at his genuine imitation redwood picnic table and picking up the stray piece of lawn litter with his barbecue fork. Then he folds over to the obituaries, rubs his nappy head, and sees his own spook.

‘“When he comes in the door, I’m waiting for him, just sitting there on my brown velvet love seat in a low-cut teddy and silk hostess pants.

‘“Zombie,” I said. “You’re dead.”

‘“What do you think you’re doing, woman?”

‘“Trying to help you out of your troubles.”

‘“You’re an evil, destructive bitch, is what, trying to help me out of my mind. You’ve got your priorities in your panties. You got a missing dresser in your drawers.”

‘“Come on, Lloyd. You’re not the only one has a little hobby. Tell it to my ass,”’ I said, and then he did, for an hour or two, got to conversing good, before he gave up the farm and walked out on me and I haven’t seen him since.”

“So, did you ever check that obituary out?” Yvette asked Tom.

“I’m trying to tell you, there was no obituary, the lady’s crazy.”

“Think so?”

“After what she asked me to do, I think she’s certifiable.”

Yvette lifted her head off the pillow. “What?”

“She asked me to steal the wreath back.”
Yvette looked at her hand on the back of Tom’s neck, the red-brown residue caked in a miniature sunset over each pink unvarnished nail bed, and wondered if he could still smell the stink.

“The weirdest thing, though, when we drove by it wasn’t on the sidewalk anymore. At first I thought it had been disappeared, that the city finally got disgusted and cleared the whole mess away. Then my friend, Anita, you remember, she says look there, and I saw that the petals were all gone, and the cardboard backing had been tacked up to the chain link fence, right by the gate, next to a morning glory vine. So it’s just this gray, bare heart there, like the guy thinks it’s a yard ornament or something.”

“Too late, I guess,” Denise said. ‘But you’re still welcome to take me home.’

“Why don’t I just give you a pale imitation of a kiss and drop you off?”

“White boy nerves,” she said, and I drove her around the corner, just a couple of streets over, looked like a nice place, with a couple of good strong maples and a flagstone path up to the door.”

“So you didn’t get laid after all.”

“Not yet, anyway. I guess by that time, I was more excited to come home and dish the dirt.”

“That’s devotion for you. So here we are.”

“We are here,” he said, pushing one hand further up her chilly leg.

“At least for a couple more hours now.”

Which was what Yvette would remember, driving to the clinic the next morning, the black plastic garbage bags out in droves along the driveways, Mrs. Hecht drinking coffee on her porch, her back turned to the road, a thin boy in a dashiki sliding out of the commune house, a little girl riding her bike and dragging a length of jump rope behind her, two men bent over a pile of yard waste, a woman in hospital scrubs sitting on the curb massaging her neck, a red bird, brighter than anything Yvette had seen that summer, zooming down toward the windshield with an actual twig in its beak, two green and black garter snakes entwined in a slippery knot on the sidewalk, a dog chasing a squirrel up a tree, and the gray cardboard heart nailed up to Lloyd’s gatepost, here and here and here and here, to tell you where it all would end.