

Mitch Berman

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To These Guys

In an hour she smoked a pack of cigarettes. For the rest of the afternoon, after she left, my co-workers at Legal Aid scurried in and out of the room, cadging pens and legal pads, gabbling about the upcoming Bar exam. A shaft of sunlight crept along the scuffed blue fake-marble linoleum floor, up the side of the olive-gray metal desk, across my hands and onto manila folders, goldenrod application forms, green carbonless copies, pink message slips; first striking out the colors bright, then, as the sun set behind Civic Center Plaza, turning the papers red and brown, like autumn leaves. The office rang with high-pitched fluorescent emptiness. I was glad I could still smell the full ashtray on the desk.

Monica had applied for General Assistance — San Francisco's subsistence monthly allowance of \$138 — but had been turned down by the County's infamous Mrs. Kostic on the usual grounds: that she could return to her last job. Mrs. Kostic hadn't asked Monica what that job had been, so I called her up, told her the truth — that Monica had last worked as a prostitute — and asked her if the County wanted a piece of the action.

A week later there was a gaily printed card in my mail, sealed with a peel-off carnation sticker from a box of Cheerios. Monica's writing was ornamental and old-fashioned. It leaned evenly left and was flat on the bottom; she had used a ruler. She thanked and thanked and thanked me, calling me mister, though she was twenty years older than I. The mail room had opened and stamped Monica's card REC'D OCT 9 1982, as if it were official business.

She came in late that afternoon. I told her how much more she could get from federal disability than from General Assistance, got her an appointment with our shrink, and typed up the application, giving it to her for signature. She kept writing until she'd run two inches out of the *Name* box.

"Monica Hidalgo San Juan Garcia Portillo de la Rosa," I read.

"You like it?" She spun the paper toward me and began giving capsule biographies of her husbands, touching a finger for each with the filter end of her cigarette. "Sonny Hidalgo was my first husband," she said. "Gil San Juan's still down on Guerrero, still stealing jewelry and still on methadone. Hector Garcia was negligible. A mistake." Soon she had all five fingers of her left hand extended. "Shit, what am I gonna do if I get another one?"

"Quit smoking?" I suggested.

She knit her brows together. "Quit marrying." She took half a drag and lost the smoke laughing. She'd been doing Ritalin — poor man's speed — and hadn't slept since I'd first seen her. I had guessed she was about 30, but with her features caught in the strobe light of laughter, she looked her real age, 42. Now her pale skin stretched even tighter around her high cheekbones and narrow jaw, sagged more under her nervous green eyes. Her light brown hair was clean and brushed.

At 5:30 we went to the Terminal Cafe, next to the Greyhound station, for what she promised would be “the best cup of coffee in the Tenderloin, but that isn’t sayin much for it.”

We swung open the saloon-style doors of the Terminal Cafe and took a booth. Two teenagers with chains hanging all over them started shoving behind us. An old man in the doorway waved a cane at a lady. A clean-cut guy came in, surveyed the crowd keenly, like he was trying to find someone, then began screaming about Jesus. The cook emerged from the kitchen, yelling at him in Spanish and waving a meat cleaver.

Monica had been talking rapidly, unruffled; I had tried to say “uh-huh” at the right times and gulped half a dozen cups of coffee. My notion of a “cafe” had an accent mark hovering over it: a dark place, like the Café Renaissance, around the corner from my apartment in Berkeley, where you could people-watch but weren’t forced to, where you could get cappuccino and work for hours on an overdue English paper. I was a junior at Berkeley, though I spent most of my time across the bay in San Francisco. The place got quieter and I focused in on Monica.

“My first time in Corona I was nineteen. Thirty days on a stinkin morals charge. I didn’t sleep once the whole time. Corona didn’t have methadone then, 1959. First two weeks I couldn’t keep anything down. Every time I’d start to vomit I was sure I’d die. ‘Not now,’ I’d tell myself, ‘no fuckin food or sleep in two weeks.’ They threw me in the Detox tank, only me and this little old black lady on an overnight drunk. I was so sick I crawled over to *her*: ‘help me, help me,’ but she just looked at me. Didn’t know what the fuck was goin on. I finally kicked up so much noise a big motherly Detox lady came in. She was the only decent person there. She asked me how long I’d been in, I said two weeks, she asked me if I’d slept or ate I said no. She tells me, ‘you probably won’t sleep, but you will be able

to eat.' She had me try some green Jell-O. I couldn't *look* at it sorta wigglin on the plate, let alone swallow it. She tried again the next day. I ate it."

We left the coffee shop. Out in the night Monica was talking about her first husband. "I knew Sonny was goin, he drank a couple fifths every day. He was thirty-four years older, a dope fiend like me. I was twenty when he died. He went to see a doctor about pains in his liver, doctor told him he had cirrhosis. I kept thinkin I shoulda made him stop drinkin, it was my fault. I was so damn young." Monica had a way of watching you closely when she spoke, squinting slightly, as if focusing on something more finely detailed than a human face.

"So damn young," she repeated. "I didn't understand about alcohol. Sometimes I feel him so near me I can reach out and touch his body, big and sweet as ever. 1960, and I still can't believe he's dead."

We wound up on a bench in Civic Center Plaza, the gilt dome of City Hall looming behind us. It was getting late.

An old black man stumbled by to ask, "Ny-ou gah nnickel f'me?" That seemed reasonable, so I gave him one. "Thiggou," he murmured, going on his way, "thiggou v'much, Cap'n."

My stomach, emptied by coffee, was making huge sawing sounds; we talked for a few minutes of smaller things, winding down, and walked to the median strip on Market. Though she was quite tall, heroin had stretched her on the rack for many years, attenuating her, paling flesh that was already pale, weakening flesh that was already weak; she seemed somehow immaterial, as if she were in the process either of assuming physical form or slipping out of it. I had the feeling that if I turned away now and went down the escalator to the train headed across the bay, I would never see her again. I waited until her streetcar came.

I didn't see Monica for three weeks. That turned out to be the pattern: she'd come in to check on her case, we'd spend an evening wandering the city, she'd disappear for a month at a time, and finally she'd show up unannounced at the office, sometimes be waiting there when I arrived in the morning. She spent five weeks with a 20-year-old dealer named Blue, living in eight different hotels because the Mexican Mafia — whose cadres he'd been acquainted to in prison — wanted to "see" him.

"Not my type," she told me simply over instant coffee at my desk. Blue was blond; her surnames were Spanish. He liked guns.

I had had the urge once or twice to put my arm around her, but some unexpected wisdom of which Monica must have been the source warned me against it. On the quiet, hermetically sealed BART subway beneath the San Francisco Bay, I would set my textbook aside and wonder at the way each of us offered native knowledge of a world that had existed only as a suspicion in the mind of the other. There was an absolute safety in our friendship: we knew no one in common, had never known anyone remotely like each other. All my friends were in college or law school; all of hers were junkies.

I didn't know much, but I knew I didn't, and I knew Monica knew more. Born a WASP, adopted by Jews, runaway at sixteen to a series of Catholic marriages, to addiction, prostitution, prison: beside her, I was a baby. But Monica's life hadn't hardened her; it had worn the hardness off her: when my grandfather died, I was frozen, unable to respond, but Monica cried. Though she rarely allowed me to see the edges of the chronic depression that was the basis for a disability claim amply documented by our consulting psychiatrists and several stays in the Napa state mental hospital, I sensed something in her I'd seen only in much older people: that

no time remained for affectation or pretense. She'd been pared down to — or painfully, past — essentials.

When Monica got disability and a six-month retroactive check, she took me out to her favorite bakery, the Court of Two Sisters. We sat down on the Union Street sidewalk with a box of French pastries and enjoyed them so audibly that a blind man would have thought we were fucking. Powdery old rich ladies strolled by, wrinkling their wrinkles at us. Monica stuck a chocolate tongue out at a woman in a white fur.

And then she dropped out of sight for three months. Turnover at Legal Aid had landed me twenty new cases, a raise, and an office with windows that faced the back of Jack-in-the-Box and its vents that belched great clouds of beefy steam into the canyon between the old concrete buildings. I had tried to find Monica, but she'd moved again. I would sit at my desk with her file spread out in front of me, as if a clue to her whereabouts would rise up magically from the papers that bore her name. I wondered whether she'd discarded me now that I'd got her on disability; I checked periodically with the County Registry for any record of her death. In the meantime I'd put together my applications for law school. The idea of New York had got stuck in my head, so unlike most of my contemporaries, I'd tried only NYU and Columbia, knowing that one way or the other, the decision would be made for me. It had been five months since I'd last seen Monica. Six, seven, eight.

A Monday in late January. I dragged in late, signed the time sheet and waved hello to Sandy, the receptionist, who had dealt with each of the permutations of human life while raising six children and spending fifteen years at our front desk, and who was now answering three phone calls at once. She covered the mouthpiece with a broad age-speckled hand to warn that I had a "new one"

waiting for me. "Call 911 if he's any trouble," she added. An office joke; 911 was Sandy's extension.

I opened my door a crack. There at my desk sat the new one, a slender Mexican man in his late twenties with a wide-brimmed densely woven white Panama hat and a black cane across his knees. The hat brim lifted back with slow insouciance, and dark sullen eyes, a hooded challenge, appeared below it.

"Mike ... ?" It was Monica's voice, coming from out of view. "Mike, I want you to meet Ray Rodriguez, my husband."

"Husband?" I said, moving awkwardly into the room. "Well congratulations!" Monica flung her arms around me and kissed me full on the lips. I extended my hand to Ray Rodriguez; he let his eyelids droop and allowed his hat brim a slight dip of acknowledgment.

They'd run off to get married just a couple of weeks since I'd last seen her. "Nine months ago last Thursday," Monica said, even more rapidly than usual. "First we lived with Ray's mom in a trailer park in San Jose. We're staying at Dudley Apartments now. What a dive! an old wino drowned in the bathtub down the hall. In the *bathtub*! Yesterday they found a body in the next room; well not the *next* room, the one next to it. Cops all over the place. Not just cops off the street — detectives!"

As Monica gabbed her husband stared straight on at me. He had the hungry, scrutinizing street look, but his face was pretty: where the skin was taut — high cheekbones, long, slightly pointed chin — it had a sheen like fine glove leather. His eyes were dotted by peaking brows, but whenever I returned his gaze he dropped his head a fraction of an inch and all I could see beneath that hat was a trim pointed mustache and a secretive grin leaned up against it.

At Monica's prodding Ray gave a brief recitation, in unaccented, almost uninflected voice, about his bad leg, heroin addiction, prison history. His picky, methodical enunciation and the even gaps between his words left me with the impression that he was dull. So far as I could determine, he had never killed anyone. Monica expanded on his answers as I felt his stare upon me again.

I said, finally, edgily, that it sounded like we might make out a good disability case for him. Ray would have to sign this application, and I'd fill it out and get him appointments with a shrink — it's routine, I lied — and an orthopedist.

"An orthopedist!" Monica loved anything to do with the medical world; she'd been a nurse in the early 60's, before getting caught in the morphine closet. "That's a specialist, Ray, a bone doc — "

"I know what the fuck an orthopedist is," he said in his slow voice. It seemed the first time I'd ever heard him speak.

Disability cases involved masses of paper, examinations and reports by Social Security's doctors and our own. It was usually six to twelve months between application and decision. Ray's case took four. Everyone who read his prison history — 22 knifepoint robberies! — evidently wanted him off the streets as soon as possible.

While the case was filtering through the administrative strata, we met briefly every few weeks, and Ray made it plain both that he didn't trust me and that it was nothing personal. Monica wrote me a letter: Ray didn't believe in doctors and she had to drag him to each appointment; he didn't open up easily but was so *sweet* and *gentle*, both words getting double-underlines. Ray was shy. I should see him with her guinea pig.

I visited them only once, bringing a small whipped-cream cake for their first anniversary. They were blitzed on some horrendous combination of drugs; Monica

denied it vehemently and at length, but Ray winked and put two fingers behind her head, the “rabbit” sign, as she nodded off in mid-sentence. He was like a good-natured kid that night, joking and kissing Monica and insisting I punch him in the shoulder after he dropped a piece of cake on my shoe. They hadn’t known what day it was until I’d told them; when they came in for their next office visit only a week later they didn’t remember my visit at all. I felt I’d been robbed of Ray’s friendship.

Except for their anniversary, Monica and I saw each other now exclusively at my office. The only sign of thaw on Ray’s part was his habit of giving me a small gift — two English Oval cigarettes, a lucky quarter — at the close of each meeting. But even that was disconcerting; he did it, he said, “because you never know if you’ll wake up tomorrow morning.”

Finally the retroactive check arrived at the local Social Security office. Although it was against the rules, a clerk I knew allowed me to sign Ray’s name and take the envelope. I wanted to deliver it myself.

I knocked on their door. Once, twice. Shit. Not home. And then Monica’s peculiarly thin and penetrating voice from behind the door: “Who’s there?”

“It’s Mike. I’ve got the check.”

She opened the door, waving me inside: “Hurry! Hurry!”

Monica was stark naked. She shaded her eyes with a hand against the bare ceiling light bulb. I didn’t know where I should pretend to be looking, so I pushed the envelope into her hands. Her body looked very smooth, very white and very weak.

“Gmonica ... ” Ray groaned from the bed, “cn lettimin.” He sat up, the sheet falling to his waist. “You don’t have any clothes on.”

“C’mon Ray, this is special!” Monica pulled on a long white cotton blouse. She slit the envelope with a nail file and gave it to him.

Ray held the check in both hands, as if reading an imperial proclamation: “Pay to the Order of Raymond J. Rodriguez One Thousand Four Hundred and Twenty-Three Dollars and Forty-Two Fucking Cents.”

“Ooh, say that again,” Monica told him.

It was summer. I’d quit Legal Aid for a short-term job as a paralegal in an immense corporate law firm; I was leaving for New York and Columbia Law School in September and needed moving money. I had graduated from Berkeley to an apartment in San Francisco with my college friend Bob. I already had a subscription to the *Village Voice*, and a New York subway map tacked up on my wall.

“C’mon Mike!” said Ray. “Wanna see a lot of money?”

At a place called CCC CHECKS CASHED Ray peeled off two bills and tucked them with quick pickpocket hands into my shirt pocket.

“Two hundred? Jesus!” I held out the money, but Ray danced away, raising his hands.

Monica stepped in and snatched the bills. “We’ll take you out for dinner.”

At Molinari’s Delicatessen they bought prosciutto, marinated artichokes, and mascarpone cheese layered with basil and gorgonzola. We went to St. Peter and Paul’s Cathedral and lit a candle for Ray’s father, then ate our provisions in Washington Park. Full of the pleasant, oily food, watching the Chinese kids play Frisbee in the early twilight and smoking one slightly bitter English Oval after another, we felt fabulously rich, so rich we had nothing to do for the rest of our lives, like we had hit a lottery.

I was going to need a haven that summer. I spent my days rushing late to work, shuttling between the corporate firms in the Transamerica pyramid, Embarcadero Center, the BankAmerica Building, trundling through fabric-upholstered corridors to meet a succession of thin-lipped quiet-voiced white men, my colleagues-to-be, across cups of pre-sharpened pencils and tasteless coffee at glossy conference tables, yawning over cartons of photo-reduced spread sheets, Forms 706, 10-K, 1045, S-18, returning to my own fabric-upholstered brass-door-knobbed office to dictate onto mini-cassettes a series of memoranda addressed to "File" which my superiors never read, tucking in my shirt, tightening my tie, suffering an endless paranoia that my fly was open, hustling and jostling through the crowded lunch-hour streets of the financial district to sit in a patch of sun with my tuna sandwiches and the pigeons. The modern apartment Bob and I shared on Nob Hill, with its featureless roll of white wall into beige ceiling, its glass expanse of picture frame and picture window, was too like an office, and Bob himself had begun to seem too buttoned-down and upstanding, too much like the people of my days to provide much relief in the nights.

Ray and Monica had moved into the Hotel Winton, on a motley block of O'Farrell Street with a Chinese grocery store, the expensive restaurant L'Orangerie, an Oriental Massage parlor, a rare record store, and two dildo-and-inflatable-doll shops. Underneath arched gold lettering in the Winton's picture window, old men peered without interest at passersby, exchanging a remark every ten minutes. The lobby, with its sturdy furniture and its still figures of men, always smelled faintly of old books and alcohol, but no one ever seemed to read or drink.

Ray would shake my hand, courtly and old-fashioned, every evening when he let me in. The walls displayed their marriage license, flanked by pressed violets under a sheet protector filched from my office; pairs of silver, shell and turquoise

earrings hooked on a leather thong; a burlap Texas White Rice bag; the colorful panels from packets of Chinese firecrackers; and propped up on two sixteen-penny nails, Ray's three-foot machete. There were English Ovals boxes everywhere, now turned to other uses. A scatter of newspapers lay over the greasy greenish carpet. The guinea pig scuffled in his wire cage on the dresser and crouched silent, nostrils dilating.

Ray and I would sit on the floor, backs against the bed, passing the quart of malt liquor I'd brought. The small black-and-white TV, with a wire hanger for an antenna and an excellent picture, was always on. Monica would stay up behind us on the bed, reading or kibitzing. She read Joseph Wambaugh, Baudelaire and Rimbaud — in the original, having learned French from some sailors who'd been her regular tricks — and so Ray and I stood an equal change of being favored with a halting translation of Decadent poetry or a few lines of dialogue exchanged in a squad car. Pig would be decanted from his cage and run loose, chewing the edges of Monica's paperbacks or burrowing into the covers next to her. Ray would dig out that lump of flesh and roll him around on the floor.

"Pig's an old man," Ray would chant, more to Pig than to me. "He's just a roly-poly old man."

"Pig's nine," Monica told me. "They're not *supposed* to live nearly that long." She leaned from the bed, cigarette in hand, to put her chin over Ray's shoulder as he tickled Pig's belly.

Ray left the room on a mysterious errand one night, with a cryptic warning not to open the door unless we heard three short rings. Monica was scraping ice from the freezer and eating it: "The freon gets you high. But mainly, I'm *hungry*."

"Christ," I said, "why don't I go out and pick up a couple sandwiches?"

“No, don’t. There’s this guy Earl looking for Ray and with him gone I’m afraid — ”

Right on cue, the door was beaten within an inch of its life by a fist that sounded like a Christmas ham still in the can. Panic, panic! But Monica must have been through this kind of thing before; she would surely calm me down.

“Oh my God!” came her shriek in my ear. “OGod! It’s Earl and he carries a *piece!* Ray ripped him off last week and he’s coming to get us! Say something! Anything!”

I did say, or rather sing something: “Who *is* it?” My voice had all the authority of a housewife greeting the Avon Lady.

Monica clapped her hands to the sides of her head. “I wish Ray was here!”

A voice on the other side of the door said, “It’s Earl. Open up.” A tenor; I took heart in my own baritone.

“What do you want?” I bellowed in a linebacker bass.

After a pause, the voice asked, “Who are *you?*”

“Nonea your goddamn business!” Monica hissed under her breath.

“None of your business!” I boomed.

Monica slapped her head again. “Don’t *say* it!”

Now another voice — voices? — rasped unintelligibly. Yes, voices, whispering. I pictured half a dozen hideous Dick Tracy villains out in the hall: disfigured faces, blackjacks, brass knuckles, gats and heaters. Monica pressed something into my hand; I looked back and saw myself waving Ray’s machete. She pried a cinder block loose from the bookshelf, and paperbacks, incense burners, framed pictures clattered down the shelf into a desperate little huddle. “Be tough!” she whispered, raising the cinder block over her head with both hands. “It’s the only way!”

“Get outta here!” I heard myself snarl. “Monica doesn’t want to talk to you.”

More whisperings and some appeals to Ray.

“She doesn’t want to see you,” I repeated.

Finally the voices went away. We collapsed, dazed, in front of the TV, and spent an entire episode of “Columbo” asking each other, “Who’s that lady?” “Who embezzled the money?” “Do you understand?”

Through the summer the daily tide of work and sleep continued, washing me up on the shores of the financial district in the morning, carrying me out to Ray and Monica’s in the evening and to my apartment at night. I had received my letter of acceptance from Columbia Law with a curious dispassion some months before; every so often I had taken it out, expecting each time to recover the thrill I’d missed. Reading it over left me with a slight unpleasant aftertaste, as if I’d failed myself in some way I was only beginning to understand.

Before I was ready it was September 3. Ray and Monica were coming to my apartment to see me off, and bringing tequila.

In the kitchen I broke eggs and sliced onions, mushrooms and red bell peppers. Ray and Monica and roommate Bob, who was driving with me to New York, were in the adjacent living room. Between bursts of Mingus on the stereo I could hear lulls in conversation, fitful, tentative beginnings. Bob had heard much about my friends; I could picture him now, his wide shoulders rigidly upright, his enormous owlish head swiveling from one to the other, sizing them up. Monica would be nervous.

“We’re hungry, Mike!” came her voice, with a pleading quaver.

“We’re fuckin STARVING,” Ray blared.

Half an hour later, full of omelette, we were all leaned back against our respective living room walls, still and useless. Clouds of cigarette smoke hovered over each of us like thought balloons.

Ray got up and could be heard knocking around in the refrigerator. He emerged with a lime and a pound of salt, shook salt on his hand, sucked on the lime, licked the salt, and drank tequila. He offered his salty hand to Monica, explaining, "This is how Mexicans do it."

Bob and I spent the long afternoon packing, carrying cartons out to our rented Pontiac, and drinking with Ray and Monica in the living room, where two, three, four empty bottles lay near a mounting pile of jazz and Rolling Stones albums, and then back to strapping and hauling, throwing ourselves and our belongings around easily as the alcohol and the music spread a good numb heat inside us. When I pulled my last shirt from the closet, the wire hangers rang like chimes.

Ray moved close to Monica to make room for me on the sofa. I drank some tequila, handed the bottle to him. He took a gulp and passed it back.

Monica snatched the tequila fiercely. "Gimme that stuff!" She guzzled a quarter of the bottle. "I'n drink muchas he can!" She coughed, and her body stayed twisted, her right shoulder dipped low.

"Your kidney baby? Is it sore?" Ray was alert.

Monica let out one barking sob, shaking her head violently, her hand hovering near her side as if she could clutch it at a distance.

"Got somethin wrong with her kidneys but she won't go see a fuckin doctor! Doesn't hurt baby? Doesn't *hurt*?" Ray forced her hand aside and poked savagely into her side, his fingers straight.

"Ray!" I yelled in his ear. "God *damn* it!"

"You don't understand! She's been like this for six months and she won't go see nobody." He was up, grabbing his jacket, veering for the door.

"Whe ... ?" Monica bawled.

"Where are you going?" I finished.

"Gonna get a doctor for her! Gonna get a *doctor*." Slam.

I was pacing. Finally I asked, "*Is something wrong?*" Monica shook her head but wouldn't look up. "He shouldn't do that to you," I babbled. "You shouldn't stay with him. You know you shouldn't."

She was sobbing violently; I sat beside her and pulled her against me.

"I gah lay down," she blurted.

I took her to my room, where I hadn't yet stripped the bed. Bob was sitting very straight on the sofa when I returned, his head turning to follow me, like a king awaiting explanation of a failure in battle.

"I don't know." I stretched out on the sofa, suddenly heavy with alcohol and fatigue, and closed my eyes. "I've only heard about this whole side of Ray. He tore up the whole Methadone clinic and got them both kicked off the program. He put his fist through a neighbor's door. He ran through their hotel stark naked with a machete."

"He is not a normal person," Bob recited in the flat robotic tone that denoted absolute fury. "Thanks for bringing him here."

I awoke disoriented, under Bob's hot glare, with no idea that I'd been dozing. The buzzer was ringing, had been ringing, and kept ringing for half a minute solid.

"Shit, Bob." I rose to my feet. "You could at least answer the fucking door."

Ray pushed into the apartment, hair wild, face scratched. I followed him into the living room. He held up his hands: "Look what those motherfuckers did to me! Look at that!"

His knuckles were raw and bloody, but he was showing his wrists: bracelets of blue bruises welling up under the skin. I swigged some tequila and held the bottle out to him, sloshing it.

"Naah." He waved it away. "Where's Monica?"

"She's lying down," I said in a hushed hospital voice.

"Where is she?"

"In my room," I said, not getting up.

Ray was halfway down the hall; I ran after him. As I came into the bedroom he had the groggy Monica by her upper arms and was shaking her awake.

"Because of you! Because of you!" he yelled. Suddenly, before my eyes had adjusted to the darkness, there was a bass Thump! as he slugged her in the chest.

"Ray! Ray!" I yelled, grabbing at him. "Let's get you something for your hands. We've got to fix you up." I turned to Bob as we went past: "Just see if she's OK, would you?"

"She's OK, she's OK," Ray grumbled as I led him down the hall to the living room. He took a deep drink, then rinsed his knuckles with the tequila.

He'd gone to Mount Zion Hospital with the idea of finding a doctor for Monica's kidneys. When he went past the security guard, an alarm went off and he found himself surrounded by men clanking with hardware. He started hitting out.

"Knocked two of em cold," he said proudly. "Took *six* to get me down." They screwed the handcuffs tourniquet-tight and called the city police. "I thought the city cops were gonna start in on me in the squad car," he said. "But the cop was real sympathetic. He listened to me and then he took off the cuffs. He told me they had a lotta trouble with Mount Zion security. 'Pigs.'" Ray laughed. "That's what *he* called em. Cop was all right."

Monica appeared in the doorway.

"Baby, baby I'm sorry," Ray said. "I don't know — "

She stood by him, holding and kissing his head. "I was out in the hall listening to you," she said. "You did it for me."

"I did ... I did it for you," Ray repeated, seizing the phrase.

Bob came in and stood looking.

"Mike." Monica leaned over and whispered in my ear: "I peed your bed."

"We'll be on the road tonight anyway," I told her. "We have to take off around nine."

"That's right, you guys are leaving!" said Ray. "We still gotta celebrate." He twisted the cap off a fresh bottle of tequila, held it high and said: "To these guys."

The bottle made a circuit. The second time it came around to Monica, she said: "To law students."

"To law students and lawyers everywhere," I added when it was my turn. "May they all live happily heretofore and/or theretofore ever after."

"Amen!" said Ray, reaching across Monica for the bottle.

Monica slapped his hand away. She'd fixed me in her narrowing stare, squinting as if she were threading a needle. "Aren't you going to law school?"

"I don't know." I gave the bottle to Ray. "I don't want to anymore."

After several rounds, we did in the tequila, and Ray and Monica got up to leave. Bob surprised me by offering to drive them home.

My face couldn't feel the night air; I was that drunk. A red bus with trompe l'oeil cable-car trimmings swerved onto Leavenworth.

"HEY YOU FUCKEN TOURISTS!" Ray yelled. "THAT ISN'T EVEN A REAL CABLE CAR!"

We piled into the Pontiac, pushing aside boxes. It was a minute's coast down Nob Hill to O'Farrell and the Hotel Winton.

As soon as she got out, Monica went half-swagger, half-stagger down the sidewalk, away from the hotel, every step a near collapse. Ray started off toward the Winton; he didn't seem particularly worried about Monica, about anything. Well-dressed couples exiting the theatre were glaring at Monica. I could hear her bellow: "WHAT THE FUCK YOU LOOKIN AT? YOU GOT SOMETHIN TO SAY TO ME YOU SAY IT TO MY FACE!"

I shut the car door and shouted her name, but it didn't carry far against the traffic. I jogged after her, out of breath and feeling in my voice, in my lungs, the frustration of the slowed runner in a dream.

I turned and held up an index finger to Bob, mouthing, "Wait."

His head floating, disembodied, in the car, Bob looked out with enduring sullenness, his hands still on the steering wheel in a vague hope for escape.

Monica was almost to the corner, leaving her trail of resentment behind. She stood yelling at a passing businessman, eyes closed and fists clenched with effort, went on a little further, then wheeled to scream at a gay couple. Ray stood chuckling, one foot on the sidewalk, the other on the Winton's doorstep. The bigger of the two men said, to the world at large rather than to Monica: "Oh shut up, you sow."

Did Ray hear it? He turned back from the doorstep with a grin. I'd seen that soft smile many times before as we sat on their hotel room floor, the TV at legs' length on its wooden chair, our backs against the bed, slumping more and more into the summer night and the warmth of the beer.

Ray waited until the couple were passing the Winton. "You say something?" he asked quietly.

The men crossed the street, and Ray padded after them. "Hey," he was saying in a voice as soft and loose as his stride, "hey."

I crossed the street behind him. Ray kept the same smile, the same slow amiable tone: "Listen, be careful what you say to people." He was speaking to their backs. "You — you got no idea who they might know." They were crossing an alley, ignoring him.

And in a second Ray was there: he spun the big man by the shoulder, and I never saw the punch that set the man on his ass before his hands could break the fall. I heard the Crack! and Ray, blind and crazy, his face angles, was on him: "You want a knife up your anus you faggot motherfuck? don't you ever talk to my wife that way do you hear? don't you *ever!*" I grabbed his arm; he shook me off easily, not caring who I was. His eyes weren't looking at me, at anything.

There was a long moment: I was sure the man would die, smashed out on the asphalt. His friend reached into his inside pocket and I braced up against the idea of a metal glint; if he tried to knife Ray I'd kick him, knock him down.

The man spread out against the curb dissolved into whimperings. His friend lit the cigarette he had drawn from his shirt pocket. Ray stood, with the blunted expression of a man incompletely recovering from amnesia, a man getting off a plane knowing nobody's waiting for him in the airport but hoping to see somebody anyway, a man lost; his body relaxed, and he wound up trotting across the street with me.

I was still going through mix-chop-whip-puree, my ears singing brightly, but Ray had that pretty, boyish smile again. I put an arm around his shoulders, anchoring myself to his calm.

"That was some punch." I had to say something.

His smile widened. "I'm the new Muhammed Ali!" He raised both fists above his head, prancing around for Bob, who waved mechanically and put a grin

through the filmy windshield, through the same expression he'd been wearing since I'd left him behind in the car.

"C'mon," I said, "let's find Monica." And we went off down the street, Ray occasionally doing a few steps of his victory dance.

Monica was wrapped around a parking meter out front of the Act I Theater, watching the ritziest crowds in the city descend to street level and tittering through her fingers. She saw Ray and started to yell at him, but her guts weren't in it. He told her what had happened and I stood confirming it with wooden-Indian nods.

Ray bent to kiss Monica. I knelt and pulled them hard to me.

Later, packed and ready, Bob and I drove up to the Berkeley Hills. Berkeley's shiny little chaos and Oakland's long straight yellow avenues stretched out below; beyond them, the dark soundless bay, still and thick as oil, and San Francisco, dim and diffuse in the wet night, its hilly outline drawing a low jagged curtain across the stars: San Francisco or the idea of San Francisco, visible only as the absence of that which it obscured, visible only through memory.

Though I could still feel the solidity and warmth of their bodies as I'd clasped them to me, could still feel the slight pain of their sharp shoulders digging into my chest, I knew that the next day, in Utah, or the day after, in Iowa or Nebraska, the sensation would be dulled, by time and distance, into inspecificity, until, finally, I would no longer be able to feel the pressure of their presence at all: and knowing it, I knew they were already gone. Black waters lay between us now.