

## High and Low

### July 14

What Vera has told her friends:

That her mother's the kind of woman who likes a clean kitchen better than sex (her father said).

Her father has had several girlfriends, currently the new young lady cop who shares his beat — great in the sack (her father said), ten years older than Vera.

Her mother is the cause of her father's faithlessness (Vera's opinion) — her coldness, frigidity. What's a red-blooded American man to do with a wife like that?

No, it's Vera herself at the root of every bad thing — her birth defect, to be specific, for, which she bears a rotting bundle of guilt. Her mother speaks to Vera's forehead or hairline, far above the region of her hands. When her father enfolds Vera in his duplicitous, burly embrace (or when he smacks her behind) he touches parts of her she'd rather he didn't, but never, she has noticed, her stunted arm.

Vera has fucked twenty-three guys if you count the brothers from New Jersey, spending a week on the lake with their grandma, who both came in the throes of entering.

At night in her darkened pink and white bedroom, decorated once when she was nine and never again, she has pseudo sex with appropriately shaped items — the handle of a hand mirror, a slim bottle of roll-on deodorant, root vegetables.

And it works — yes, she even told them that — she reaches climax with her arms around the image of her high school principal, a puffy elderly man with kind eyes. Or of her brother Garth, who ran away for a month last summer and came back suddenly taller than she, who looks remarkably like her, people remark on it — hair, eyes, they could be twins except for — what a shame! — that poor little hand of hers.

*What her friends don't know:*

That her sexy blustery cop father does more than smack her sometimes. If the damage shows, she wears long sleeves or stays home.

That this morning, as usual, she went into Garth's room to wake him up for summer school (algebra I — he'd flunked last year), and in her night shirt she shivered in the breeze from his window fan, and she got under his summer quilt for a minute and stayed fifteen, and screwed him, screwed her flesh and blood 100% brother, younger than she, who had laughed at Garfield with her, whom she used to mock and console, who looked up to her. With whom, under whom — she can't stop thinking about this — her body hairs stood out from her pores when she came.

Now it's almost dinner time, and she sits at a picnic table in the empty park. Kay and Nathan have gone. A feathery, weightless rain is coming down. She drags on her last cigarette, stubs it out on the wet tabletop.

She isn't wet, though, just warmly damp, as if she's sitting inside a cloud. She unzips her shoulder bag, opens a small silver case, unfolds a scrap of ricepaper that Garth bought from one of his friends, that against the light reveals a pale circle the size of a dime. Shielding the scrap from the moisture in the air, she puts it on her tongue. The sensation is so faint she can't tell whether the paper has dissolved or she has swallowed it. Or how in fact she has come to be walking away from Kalifornia, not home but toward town center.

She isn't hungry.

She doesn't want to go home, ever.

Garth took a bus to Florida and lived in a van for six weeks with a twenty-year-old cokehead and her pet tarantula. But Garth is back now in drug rehab, playing basketball and pulling B's in school, with a shiny look as if his face is shrink-wrapped. Has she made a rip in all that shininess?

Weak in the back of her knees, still she proceeds townward, admitting only the left-right-left of her hands and feet, wet wind in her hair. Dogs bark. The houses grow smaller, closer together. Become cabins, trailer hook-ups, housing summer people, insubstantial as moths, who rent for a week or a month and leave sunglasses, damp paperbacks. A girl in a bathing suit spins around on a tiny lawn, arms out, head back. A man calls out but the girl doesn't hear or ignores him. "Kim?" Or "Lynn?" Vera's too far away by now to tell. She's off

to the Red Owl for another pack of Camels, maybe a carton. She'll be late for dinner. Dad'll kill her, but so what? When you plan to off yourself, *qu'importe* if someone gives you a hand? She murmurs words from third year French, *Je ne sais quoi. Pate de foie gras*. She floats down the narrow, sandy road.

On Main Street — the two blocks of two-story buildings that comprise downtown Fallen Timbers — the lobe of one of her pierced ears begins to call attention to itself. It's not pain. She hardly feels physical pain, and when she does she forgets it immediately like a dream. Years ago in ballet class completing a grand jete, she landed wrong, heard the snap of a twig and went on — jete, jete, pas de bourree, following the line of girls over the bright, slippery wood — till the piano stopped, and she fell, and saw (didn't feel) the sharp end of bone poking not quite through skin. Now, in front of the Coast-to-Coast, she gazes at her throbbing ear and its heavy, dangly earring in the dusty plate glass. There's dust on the chrome handle of the display lawnmower. Dust on the grease of the blades. Dust on her own reflection. The sidewalk is gray with drizzle. She moves on, stepping high over the tarred cracks.

Still, the earring, an iron bolt in silver mesh that Kay made her last year in some after school jewelry class, pulls on her earlobe. The blood in her ear taps at the side of her head. The repetition is bothersome but only slightly, like fingers drumming a desk. Someone passes her — a woman, walking fast with lots of butt swoosh in a pair of whitestitched Target jeans that show the hip hugger line of her underpants. Vera knows who she is, big sis of someone from the high school. Who has apparently gotten to the place where looks don't matter anymore.

Now Vera stops to inspect herself in a storefront that features a large aquarium. She likes her face blurred on the dark window. Likes the narrow stalk of her from hipbone to ribcage. Long stem of neck. She moves her shoulder bag to her other shoulder, pushes her hair behind an ear. Her earlobe seems to breathe in and out. She shifts her weight, shifting the planes of image. A pair of brilliant blue-striped fish sweep in tandem past the reflection of her neck. Mild pleasure stirs in the base of her stomach. Her ear swells, subsides like an aquatic plant.

By the time she reaches the Red Owl the rain has stopped. Two men pass toting six-packs, bellies bobbing. A woman pushes an empty stroller, followed at a distance by a child of two or three who throws stones at the backs of her legs. With tragic patience the woman holds her head up on her neck. The child looks lumpy, tuberous. Vera's good feeling is gone. Why does no one stand up straight? Her earlobe feels uncomfortably warm.

She's wondering if this is a problem with a solution when her satisfactory thumb and forefinger take hold of the back of the earring. Her unsatisfactory hand rises to assist. But the hand is clumsy, shaking. Poor little retard. Needs mama hand. She feels her clever, strong mama thumb pushing her physically-challenged baby thumb — dumb little thumb, numb, dumb, glum little thumb — against the face of the earring. Doin' great, hon! Better and better every day! Then the earring plummets.

She drops to her knees in search, is struck by glints in the cracking pavement. An ancient penny throbs greenish. The sun has struck the angle where it turns the world golden, the quarter hour of sweet peace before it goes down. Crawling over the sidewalk outside the Red Owl her body and mind open like a baby's. Between beauty and ugliness, holiness and sin is only language, the different word sounds, silenced now by the incredible golden light. She'll write a book, *Joy and Madness*, describing the miraculous truth that if you just stand still and look, everything in the world good and evil will flicker by like television. *The End of Ugliness*? Ugly, in French, is "laid." Hard to get laid if you're "laid." She smiles at her shadow on the pavement, neither pretty nor ugly, eternally beyond comment.

"Hey, beauty!"

A boy of eighteen maybe, a little older than she, in mirror sunglasses and an armless shirt that reads BRAINDEAD, has just exited the Red Owl. She stands. Still gazing down at her, he leans against the window with a shopping bag in a casual bend of his arm, as if he's used to carrying much heavier things. His shirt, cropped to the pecs, reveals a torso dark-tanned. Only medium height with a backsloped chin, he is juicily arm-muscled, the kind of guy imitated by younger, weaker guys. From his fat Mick Jagger lower lip a cigarette hangs, twitches as he speaks. "Hey, Madonna. Is that hair for real?"



"Va t'en," she says, French for "go away." He has probably driven up from Hammond or South Chicago with a bunch of loser friends, to play loud music at the campground and eat potato chips and leave cans of beer inside the fire ring. From his sunglasses to his loose lips over his retreating chin, she knows everything about him she'll ever want to know. Speech from him is redundant. But she likes his Red Owl shopping bag, over the top of which she sees hot dog buns and the corner of a carton of Camels. She'd walk a mile for a Camel. She has walked a mile.

"Sexy lady, did you drop something? Do you need some help?"

The questions ring with a significance just beyond her grasp. It's hard to remember if anything of hers fell to the sidewalk, although she thinks she has been, for some reason, kneeling there. Her knees are dusty. She could easily have dropped something. But she's confused by the word "drop." It shimmers like a fish; won't stay still long enough for her to see it. She fixes on the white, black and gold of the cigarette carton, remembering a camel colored coat she used to have. In her closet now hangs a blazer for college interviews — a birthday gift from her grandmother in Texas, though she herself has no college plans. She giggles, puts her hand to her mouth. *Drop it for God's sake! Drop dead! I didn't touch a drop!*

"Hey, beauty. Let me in on the joke."

She avoids his sunglasses, which give back two distinct, warped pictures of her face. Below his shirt the hard narrow bands of his abdomen vanish into his unbelted jeans. Her hips jerk involuntarily. She puts a hand out — her good hand, though she isn't thinking about that — and touches the bare skin of his side. It's softer than she expected.

"Do that again, baby!" But he shifts his weight away from her. His torso, squeezed in, reveals his six-pack. He holds her life in his hands.

"You're really out of it, aren't you?"

His face becomes suddenly, obtusely sure of itself, as if he just found the twenty dollar bill he knew he had in his pocket. She's at the point in her voyage when images assault, when ideas cast you into darkness. Can she risk speech for the sweet rush of a cigarette? Her good hand presses her weak one to her stomach. Give me please one of your smokes. Would you kiss my chest right here in the middle

between my breasts? Would you hold me hard and not let go, no matter what I say to you?

She's trapped between the camel bronze of his skin and the camel-colored camel on his cigarette carton when a second young man approaches. He has a more defined chin than the first, but he's shorter, with the stiff, self-conscious walk of the junior partner, the sidekick, the pale, diluted version. He leans an arm on BRAINDEAD's shoulder. "Not bad, amigo. She got a little girlfriend?"

BRAINDEAD looks her over again, his regard for her restored, perhaps, by that of his friend. "Sweetheart, you want to party tonight?"

His top lip rises to let the words out. In the twin lenses of his sunglasses is her forehead times two, swollen huge in the curve of glass. Her face deformed. Her face, deformed. "Face" in French is "la figure." A man said once, "You have a nice figure." A friend of her father's. A figure, disfigured. May I borrow a cigarette? Will you fuck me? His gaze is cool and warm at the same time down her face, neck, chest. Her belly squeezes with sweet nausea. Her hands reach for the cigarette carton.

"Hey, what's that?" His eyes lock on her bad hand on the carton it made the mistake of touching. It tries to hide inside its fist, then retreats to her midriff, tan and slim, offering no protection. BRAINDEAD steps back.

"What's with the hand? Are you one of them mutant —" He turns to his friend. "What was that drug those mothers took?"

Coolly, unreflectingly, as if it has performed the feat many times, her good hand takes hold of the front of his shirt and turns him to the store window. Her voice, too, has discovered a new strength. "Dude, look! Somebody punched your chin up into your head! Do you think there's a girl in the state of Michigan who'd pull down her pants for you? Why don't you and brother dickhead hiphop over to your little Ford pick-up and head back to the trailer park?"

She flees, ballet graceful — *jete, jete, pas de bourree*. But her shoulder bag thumps against her side; heavy and damp, her hair beats on her bare back.

She's about to cross a street — not to safety but because the street happens to lie before her — when a fist grabs the hair at the back of her head. The flat of a hand slaps her face, one side, the other.

Somewhere there's an annoyingly bright light. A sound, whap, and her heart beating like crazy. Still she is oddly tranquil. "Go right ahead," she says to the hands hitting at her, "do you think I feel anything?" She thinks she spoke. Her voice is less insistent than the hands, as if it comes from the place where ghosts reside, a murmuring song over everything. It dies into the sound of a woman's voice:

"What are those boys doing? Honey?!"

A male voice: "Young punks!"

"Do something, Mannie! Hey —

The slapping hands vanish. Vera stands head down, oddly bereft. "Assholes," says Mannie. "Twenty years ago you wouldn't see —"

"Is she hurt?" says the woman. "Are you okay, honey? My God, that eye. Mannie, call the police. Call an ambulance."

There is concern in their voices. But she can see out of both eyes. On the back of her scalp is a mild burning sensation, not unpleasant. She's running faster than before, across Lake Street to where Main becomes U.S. 12 heading north to Canada and south around Lake Michigan to Chicago, but offering first a row of fast food restaurants.

"What can I get you?"

The face of the middle-aged woman, who has worked at Burger King since her husband died last year, is hard with cheerfulness. Vera holds the edge of the white-tiled counter. Her teeth are chattering.

"While you're thinking, young lady, would you mind stepping back from the counter?"

Vera takes a step back, bumps into a little girl who's holding a woman's hand. The woman jerks the girl against her, glancing past Vera, but the girl gazes up with solemn interest. The woman's small nose has oddly gaping nostrils.

Relaxing her face into what she hopes is normality, (amusement? apology? excusezmoi s'il vous plait?) Vera tries to elude the beckoning darkness of the woman's nostrils. She has trouble, even, with the child's grave beautiful gaze, is relieved when food is placed on their orange tray. They file to the back of the restaurant. Vera's sweat dries in the cool, dry manufactured air. "Sweetheart," the counterwoman says, "have you got it figured out now?"

Vera looks toward the window but the night, black and opaque, bounces her back inside the bright white walls. Overhead, a glowing sign sings the harmony of the hamburger, its striations of cheese, patty, lettuce and creamy sauce a cross-section of the earth.

"Miss?"

Vera's mind fills with creamy white light. She's waiting in line to go on stage where she will forget the steps of her dance. Still, she knows a response is required now, to reaffirm her right to take up space on earth. She whispers words from the sign, "A Whopper Deluxe?"

"To drink?"

The woman smiles at her. She feels sweet relief. "Coke!"

"Pepsi okay?"

"Yes!"

"There's a wait on the fries, hope you don't mind."

"Yes! I mean no!"

The woman looks at her but not disapprovingly, and calls the order through the window behind her. Vera's heart slows down. A college age couple walks in holding hands. They stand close together, kissing occasionally. The young woman puts a cigarette into her mouth. Her boyfriend strikes a match, bends, cupping his hand over the flame with a tenderness that Vera feels in her chest.

Vera walks to the cigarette machine, gazing at the familiar names — Camel, Marlboro, Kool, Pall Mall. The couple's smoke drifts toward her, sweet and thick. *Living. How easy it seems.* She inhales to the bottom of her belly, breathes in what is bad for her. At age five she loved the smell of gas stations and her father's sweat. At three, beside Garth in his kiddie car seat, she stuck one of her polyp fingers into his sweet open mouth of a baby calf, and he sucked, and she shivered up from her knees to the small of her back, a feeling so bad and so good she wanted to have it always and at the same time wipe it off the plate of her mind right into the trash.

Now, sixteen, stoned on acid, waiting for her fast food, she breathes sour magical secondhand smoke and feels a queasy *frisson*. And she's three again, leaning over little Garth. But now when she looks into his gray eyes the same color as hers she sees *thinking*. His mouth is red with the oxygenated blood of his sturdy toddler heart, a half-open bud, not the hole in the plastic seat of her mother's car into which she likes

to stick her middle finger. In his rapidly organizing brain some bit of this experience will remain, accruing mass and a finger, just a rubber and plastic nipple shape she sets in place and lets go. And feels no nausea, sweet or otherwise. And for the next ten or twelve years nothing burns in either of their guts. This morning didn't happen, could not have happened — amazing, this acid vision that contains truth. Time is malleable like modeling clay. Why, she can back up more than her sixteen years, crawl up the birth canal and trim the bit of DNA that unraveled in one of her chromosomes. Then, when her hands emerge at last from her pockets — here in front of this old Burger King cigarette machine — one of them will reach into her shoulder bag — nimbly, unreflectingly — and unzip her wallet and pull out the bills for the other hand to smooth into the slot, and it will make no difference which hand does what since both are, at last, she's sure, identically graceful and strong.

She's reaching for her carrying bag when she sees the counter woman motioning to her. "*Un moment!*" She pats her shoulder. No strap. Nothing.

"Order up," the woman calls.

Vera inspects her empty hands, the one shrunken soft and grotesque like a cartoon hand.

"Miss? Young lady? Yoohoo!"

Vera calls back, high, thin, adrift, "Have you seen my hand?"

Before the woman can answer, though, Vera's out the door, running toward town and the last spot where, she remembers, her bag hung from her shoulder. She can almost see the curb on which her bag lies giving off a black light. But after a dozen steps the glow starts to fade. She returns to the parking lot, aimlessly circles the building. What is she looking for? The asphalt is warm under her sandaled feet. The building's cream-colored brick shines under the parking lot lamps. Around back a lighted sign announces foods, prices. A car draws up. A window rolls down. She peers inside — yes, weird, who cares? "Have you seen my hand?"

"I'm sorry," says the driver.

A second voice: What did she say, Todd?"

Around the corner by the bright drive-thru window a convertible has stopped, top down. Out of the window comes a large, freckled hand, closed competently upon the rolled top of a paper bag. She takes

a step forward, follows the arm up to the wide-browed face that — it occurs to her now — she has been seeking all night. When the car drives off she moves as softly as she can toward the window in order not to scare off the vision, the supernatural event, this materialization of her unconscious wish. "Saint?"

His face is blank, as it will remain, she knows, when he finally recognizes her. "Saint John?" With his hair netted back his forehead looks higher than usual, the brow of someone who judges people. She dances just beyond the parallelogram of light. "Saint John of the Cross!"

"What? What's the matter? Vera, are you high?"

She laughs with the pleasure of seeing him. "I'm sorry. I'm crazy. Excuse me, Saint, I lost my bag. I lost my brother too. I thought I found my hand but I didn't even find my handbag. But I'm fine. *Je vais bien. et toi!*" Words pour out like water. Her body is warm water lapping around the familiar form of him. "I was lost but now I'm found. Darling, I love you."

"Don't start. Is everyone here already? You know, I still have an hour."

"I'm not kidding, Saint John. It's not the Windowpane. I love you so much."

It feels absolutely true. Her skin, cool and damp, quivers at the prospect of warmth.

Words come easily. "I want your tongue in my mouth. I want that badly."

For the next half hour she sits at one of the outside tables with the cigarettes Saint bought her. Happy with a faint nervous underlay, she smokes one after another as the moon rises and families give way to groups of local teens and unfamiliar single men. A trucker buys her a Pepsi, tells her his road adventures. He picked up this girl, God she was hot for him. Vera smiles politely. One night last winter when her parents were in Chicago and Garth at a friend's, Saint had stayed at her house late. They'd tongue kissed. She took off her blouse. He had seemed turned on. But he left, though she'd begged him not to.



When at last Saint John pushes open the restaurant's heavy front door she pounces on him, wraps her legs around his waist. He stumbles, then rights himself. She kisses the side of his neck, breathing his Brut, sweat and Frymax. His face, though, stays blank, his arms dead at his sides. She slides down. Takes a step back. "Are you angry with me?"

He gives her the calm, blank business but she forgives him. Easily. He has taken off his hairnet; matted hair hangs over his eyes. She reaches up, brushes it back. "Let's not play games, Johnnie, the end of the world is near."

"Stop it, Vera." He heads toward his scooter at the edge of the parking lot. She follows. "As if — As if that isn't a game. What you're doing."

She feels the deadness behind his voice but it doesn't touch her. She puts her arms around him, kisses his shoulder. If she could stay high and clear she could bring him there too. "Please let me love you."

"Where are the compadres?"

*"Je ne sais pas."*

He stands dead still.

"Call them, Saint. Tell them we have to talk privately tonight. We'll see them tomorrow."

"Tell me," he says after a moment, "if I'm such a retard, what do you want with me all the time?"

"I never called you a retard."

"'Stupid.' I suppose there's a hair of difference. Let me wrack my brain."

"God!" She closes her eyes. "You are so sensitive!"

"You're a bitch, Vera."

"Oh! He's getting nasty!"

He grabs her shoulder, squeezes hard. He has never acted like this before. She regards him. Blood pounds in the top of her arms. Then he pushes himself away from her, jump-starts his scooter, yells over the noise, "Get on, I'll take you home." He flicks the headlight. She plants her feet. He shines the light on her face. She wants him still. More than before, even. She shuts her eyes. She has all the time in the world.

The motor goes off. "My God," he says.

She's ashamed, though she doesn't know why yet. She turns her back.

"Is that a black eye? Vera, what happened to you?"

She covers her face. He leaps off the scooter, takes her head in his hand, gently touches the skin around her eye. "It's okay," she murmurs.

It doesn't hurt. She's glad for it, whatever it looks like, since it has appeased him. She strokes the top of his arm, afloat on the prospect of pleasure. Only during certain peak experiences, like sex, does she seem to have a body, or nearly — the promise, the sound, scent, texture of body. "There's no danger in touch," she cries gaily. "Remember our Physics class? There's no real contact, just molecules reacting to too much closeness by pushing each other away." She presses his hand to her cheek, looks into the moonless dark beyond the parking lot. "I'm sorry, Saint. I didn't mean to get on your case today."

"Yes, you did. You said what you thought." He speaks slowly but without hesitation, leading her over to the bright restaurant window. His mouth looks soft.

"It doesn't feel bad. Truly. It feels wonderful in fact." She takes his face in both hands, tenderly, like a cracked bowl.

"Uh huh."

"Saint," she says, "I love you more than anything in the world."

"You love who you're with more than anything in the world."

"I'm with you now, Saint."

"Right. And then?"

"All there is, is now."

He turns away from her. "Let me ride you home. You should take care of that eye."

His tone is parental. She puts her face to his sleeve, breathes him in. "Smell is so sleazy, Saint. Molecules of you are inside me right this minute."

"Vera, tell me the truth. What did you mean today? What was fucking you up?"

"Get out of my head, boy."

"Sorry."

"Don't think too hard, Saint, you start hallucinating. Just get me some ice, okay?"

While he's inside, she walks to the end of the asphalt around the restaurant. There's a field of something — soybeans? Shakily she breathes the darkness, walking a circle in the weeds. She's waiting for something. To be found? Then he's walking toward her with a styrofoam cup. He wraps ice chips in his shirt, holds it to her eye. "I called Nathan. I told him not to come."

"Good doctor." She takes a piece of ice from the cup, rolls it around her mouth. "Saint, I'm not as strong as some people think. Be nice to me." She presses her cold mouth to the back of his hand.

He stands still for a moment. Then his mouth is on the flat of her chest as it swells into breast, making tiny famished little suckings through the fabric of her sports bra. She pushes into him. There's no cell of her skin that doesn't want to be right up against the cells of his skin. She rolls over onto her back, pulls him on top of her, wraps her legs around him. She licks his eye, his cheek. "If I could have sex all the time I might make it through this life."

"Vera, you're scary."

She puts her tongue in his mouth. She beats her heels against the ground. She arches her back, unzips her cut-offs, says with a fake Japanese accent: "Please, your highness, to enter the throne room."

"Vera, what does this mean to you?"

"Does what?" She licks his neck. "No more words, Saint. Don't make this boring."

He pushes away from her. "I'm sorry. But you've been with a lot of other people. I think about that."

"So have you."

"Name one."

She shrugs. He's getting irritating again. She knows his Detroit sexual history, a few girls who don't matter. But right after he moved to Fallen Timbers there was Nicole Massey, who starred in the school plays. Nicole was the daughter of the people his mother worked for. After it ended he started hanging out with her, Kay and Nathan, but he was depressed for a long time, she remembers that. "Let's not get into this. I love you, Saint."

"You say that too easily, Vera. You should be banned from using the word."

He's sitting with his legs crossed, his side to her, the side of his face looking at her with questions and judgments. She sits too, while

meanness upon meanness, words to cut him to nothing, line up behind her voice. "It's the Catholic schoolboy syndrome. You think sex is icky." She leans into him, topples him onto his back, rocks back and forth over his hardness. Through her body little tickling waves merge into bigger, slower waves. "I forgive you, Saint John." She takes off her cut offs and smooths them under his head. "Here's your pillow, dear." She rubs against him till he shuts his eyes. She closes hers, feels the gathering of the forces that will shut down her bad thinking. Put her at the momentary, still eye of the shit storm, turds swirling beyond, not touching her. Laughing breathily she unsnaps him.

"Vera, I feel, well, used."

"Uh huh. Your dick is humongous."

"You could make me hate you."

She tugs his jeans past his hips, then passes her good hand lightly over the underside of his penis. His torso bucks. Breath quickens. "Tell me you aren't liking this."

"Okay, I see your point."

He smiles up at her, starting to relax. She straddles him, slides him inside her, fixed on the unfolding pleasure and the looming of more, and more exquisite. Tears of something spring to her eyes. I love you comes to mind, which he's right about, she has never meant, says only to stir things or maintain things, except maybe with her father a very long time ago. She won't say it now. But her mouth is full of words not said, and her vagina too shivers at what it's on the brink of. Sometimes certain men in their twenties can hold her on this brink indefinitely, after which light and airy, she feels like dancing, and sleep is deep and dreamless. She moves slowly over Saint, whose body she doesn't know yet. She doesn't want to mess things up. Then, inside her there's a series of small twitches. They cease. He takes a long, slow breath. She looks down at him. "Did you come, Saint?"

He closes his eyes, limp now, sliding out of her.

She wants to weep, though that doesn't make any sense at all. She wants to yell at him. Instead, summoning patience, she rests on her elbow, regarding him. In the middle of his forehead is a tiny crater, in the place where Hindus mark their devoutness. On Saint, too, it seems a mark of holiness. Skating across her mind is the smooth skin of Garth's forehead, his pale dandelion hair almost as white as the

pillow. She kisses Saint's pockmark, then licks it, sucking as if to turn it inside out, render his forehead smooth as silk.

"I feel like you're sucking my brains out."

"I'm a nympho, darling. Take advantage."

She pulls his jeans all the way off, takes him in her mouth.

"Vee, I don't know if I — "

"You can picture Nicole," she says.

"Nicole? What about Nicole?"

"Never mind."

"I don't care about Nicole! I never think about Nicole!"

"Sorry. Forget it."

He pulls away, turns on his side, facing her. "Vera, listen. Do you ever get these black holes in your mind?" he says. "I don't mean in a dream. Sometimes I'm walking along or just I'm talking to someone, and all of a sudden I don't know where I am. I freeze. If I move it's like I'll fall in a pit."

She kisses all over his face, trying to shoo away his bad feeling. She touches him gently, then more and more vigorously, cupping his balls with her weak hand, stroking with the other. Soft. Stiffening. Stiff. Soft. She puts him in her mouth, works till her jaw aches, to no discernible end. It's too dark in the field to see her hands but the bad one radiates feebleness and worse — ugliness like sin. She stops all at once, jerks herself to sitting.

"Vera, I'm sorry." He sits too. She puts her cut-offs back on. Stands up. "Hey, what are you doing? You're taking off, just like that? What, do you think you're the only person involved in this?" Across the asphalt parking lot, down the sidewalk, she hears his voice growing fainter with distance. "Christ, Vera, I could just kill you!"

She walks toward town. He doesn't follow, not that she wants him to. Everything liquid in her has dried hard and rough like slag. She walks slowly, smoking one cigarette after another, blotting out the swing of her arms whose asymmetry hurts people's mind when she dances on stage. But in the light of the streetlamp at Lake and Main she sees clear as day. She has a short arm and a fetal hand, fingers white and boneless as worms.

With her good hand she slaps the bad one as hard as she can. It makes a blunt, muffled sound. Swiveling her shoulder for momentum, she swings her short arm out from her body like a rope with a ball on

the end, a tetherball, back and forth, back and forth, at the same time ballet-sidling toward the base of the street lamp. Brush, point. Brush, point. Whap. The back of her hand strikes the pole. Tears spring to her eyes, pain at last, a burnt orange flash. There's a bruise on the back of her hand that will turn dark later. This is her quest — for pain focused enough to draw the ugliness from every part of her mind and body into a dense, putrid ball to be hurled into outer space forever.

Later, on the porch of her house she leans against the railing, inhaling the damp cool of the summer night. In a minute she'll unlock the door, tiptoe up to her room and burrow for a while into the thicket of sleep. She nearly falls asleep standing. It's only when her mouth opens in the tight-jawed yawn of the end-of-acid that she remembers that she has lost her key.