

CORNELIA NIXON

*Beach Bunnies*

“Are you a train?” a crew-cut boy asked me, beside a pink flamingo, in 1968. It was Friday night, Laguna Beach, a motel parking lot, and around us crowds of college students wavered in the pink neon light, drunk on sunburn and grain alcohol with limeade. He wore a crisp white shirt and narrow tie, while I had baby cheeks and a ribbon tying back my hair, in a yellow cotton sundress my mother had made.

“Does anyone ever say yes to that?” I wanted to ask—since what he meant was, “Would you care to get in bed with fifty of my friends?” But he was probably a senior, president of his fraternity, and I had learned to treat my elders with great and silent courtesy, a form of evasive action that had worked well for me so far.

“You surf, right?” he said, as if that ought to clinch the deal.

I giggled like it was a joke. Sure, there I was, as drunk as anyone, and not a virgin, no. And yeah, I tried to surf—though as far as I knew, it had less to do with wild sex than with broken teeth. That was one reason I loved it, how it yanked me out of the safe world where I grew up and meant I couldn’t turn into my mother now. So did flunking out of school, and I was looking into that, cutting class enough to make my GPA a solid D. A boys’ dorm had generously nominated me for Playmate of the Month, and I thought that sounded like the chance to get a guarantee. In other words, if anyone was likely to get into trouble here, it would be me.

But my friend Viv had overheard. Viv knew what was what. She was a real beach girl, dolled up in a waist-cinch, girdle, push-up bra, a red bandeau and black capris, red toenails, high-heeled sandals. A lustrous brunette, she was coiffed, made up and perfumed like a Deep-South belle, gilded with bracelets and serpentine gold chains. She had grown up right here, and she knew why the guy ignored her and chose me—as if the flat-haired, flat-sandaled, relatively flat-chested girl might consider it worthwhile to pull down her underpants for a fraternity.

“You weenie! Straight-off Adolph!” she vigorously called him, stinging insults in a surfing town. “Do you even know which side the board’s waxed on?”

Unperturbed, he moved on to the next group of girls, one of whom leaned over to barf up her limeade.

“Exit stage left,” Viv said and did a graceful plié to stub her cigarette on asphalt, since ladies did not smoke and walk at the same time. “Bet he was a virgin. Wouldn’t have a clue what to do. Jesus, how did you get so smoked?”

Briskly she tugged me up the empty Coast Highway, lit only by a full moon rising like a giant flashlight from behind the coastal hills, and I was so smashed I could see two of them.

I clowned a little, pretended to stagger, like we were having fun, though Viv and I weren’t natural friends. She was an old friend of Candy, my roommate, and she let us spend weekends at her place, to surf and soak up rays. Only tonight Candy was out with her philosophy TA, planning to off-load her virginity. And here was Viv, showing me a good time anyway. Viv was nineteen, a year ahead of me, but she’d skipped college, worked as a secretary and still went to high-school football games. In a few decades, she might become the one most indispensable person in a large office, wearing cat’s-eye rhinestone bifocals on a long chain. That was not exactly my life plan, though I was working as a typist too, on work-study, and I had yet to prove I’d stay in school.

I made an effort. “So, Viv, you still seeing that guy, what’s his name, the Cruel Italian?” He was one of three we knew of. The other two we called Magic Fingers and Mr. Spaz.

In response, she startled me by crooking an arm round my neck and rubbing knuckles on my scalp, like we were guys and me the kid brother. “You, Drunk Girl. Got your cottontail yet?”

She laughed like this was hysterical, though it was not the Playmates who wore bunny tails, or much of anything except their tans. It was the bunnies in the Playboy Club who had to carry trays while wearing rabbit ears, skimpy silver bathing suits with fluffy tails and four-inch heels.

I laughed politely and missed Candy. Candy made us feel good when she walked between us, like she needed us, a phalanx of protection on each side. Her real name was Lillian, but she had ditched

it early on, and she was a wonder of nature, like Marilyn Monroe: leggy, big-eyed, honey blond, with narrow hips and double-D-cup breasts. At school she hid herself in choir-girl skirts, white blouses and conservative black heels, but on the beach, when she had her bikini on, guys took one look at her and clutched their hearts. She had the whole MM thing down—she didn't walk, she minced, paused to giggle each few steps. She spoke in breathy whispers. Everything she said was half a joke and sweet.

"Ooooh, you're so good at that," she said when I helped her with math. "How did you get such a big brain into that little head? I'd flunk right out if it weren't for you."

But she wasn't only sweet. In private, she had lots to say about stuck-up people, catty girls, teachers who thought they were God. She loved four-letter words and bent them every way she could. She would purse her bee-stung lips, show a few small teeth and say, "Grrrrrr, this fucking day so sucks. I'm going to kick its slutty butt."

Her philosophy TA was cute enough and twenty-four, and Candy had picked him since he sometimes actually met her eyes and not her chest. I wasn't so sure. Everyone called him Slotkin, his last name, and his idea of a conversation was to pick apart whatever you said, like he was naturally your teacher even on the beach. He was from Brooklyn, via Harvard, with tight black curly hair and skeptical small eyes, and he played chess for a good time. He and Candy just looked wrong, and I didn't like her awe of him. I had felt the same for Grey, my first lover, also twenty-four and just as supercilious, and he had dumped me when I made the number one beginner's error, falling soggily in love. I supposed I wanted Candy to go through that, too, and join me there. I hadn't really tried to talk her out of it.

Viv paused in the moonlight and checked her rhinestone watch. "Jesus, if you weren't so wrecked, I'd say we ought to cruise that USC party."

"Maybe we should get back, in case she calls," I slurred. "In case she needs ush to come get her or shomething."

Viv laughed and grabbed my head again, rubbed harder. "What do you think's going to happen, girlie? Gidget, that's what we should call you. Gidget Goes to College! There's nothing to worry about."

Cherries are made to pop. She'll be all right. And if she isn't, we'll put sand in his gas tank. Come on, let's get you some coffee."

Nothing was open this time of night, but across the highway, a pink neon sign said *Cottages, Color TV*, two times, one above the other, quivering. The place had a Coke machine, and Viv chunked in our change to get me a cold can and stood by while I drank it down.

As soon as I felt the caffeine/sugar buzz, I went euphoric, happy to be there with Viv. Viv knew stuff I would never learn, like how to sleep around and never fall in love. She often lectured me and Candy about deathless and essential things. One time it was Herbs, sprinkled onto dime-size hamburgers for us to taste. Another night it was *The Secret of the Orgasm*.

"The chick comes after the guy," she had explained. "When he goes a little soft, that's when it feels the best. It gets better and better, till you feel this sort of pulsing, like when he comes, only more so, 'cause it's you." To demonstrate, she had rhythmically opened and closed her fingertips and even supplied sound effects, sort of like *doop, doop, doop*.

She said most guys had one woman who got away, and she would always be the one for them, the rest just sex and getting their meals cooked. You had to pretend you didn't care, if you wanted to be someone's true love. Men needed sex like women needed air, but they still found it a great mystery, and they weren't born knowing what to do. Her first lover had simply stuck himself inside of her and held still.

"Poor guy, he just lay there till he couldn't stand it anymore," Viv said, and Candy and I had laughed so hard we wept, though we were at least as clueless as that guy.

The USC party was nothing but a lot of football players jostling in strobe lights, leering into Viv's bandeau. One guy dropped onto his knees and ran huge meaty hands up my bare thighs under the dress, while he sang "Little surfer, little one," before I jumped away.

Clearly it was too late for civilized discourse, and having taken on a load of sour keg beer, I could hardly stand. The party happened to be near Grey's house, and when we left I subtly steered Viv that way. I had not been there for months, though I couldn't go ten seconds without thinking about him. His street was mostly sand, with scraggly lawns and rhododendron bushes big as school buses, hibis-

cus with red stamens popped out, flaunting in the dark. Cottages sagged under heaps of jasmine and rubbery purple passionflowers. Every yard had trees loaded with oranges, grapefruits big as cantaloupes, avocados dropping to the ground. The flower smell almost asphyxiated you, mixed with the salty air and fallen fruit that rotted all day in the sun.

Grey's house lay low and white, styled for the tropics with a covered porch around one side. Yellow lights shone out from every room, his silver bathtub Porsche parked on the lawn (in duplicate, unless I closed one eye). French doors open, cool jazz blowing out, and as we passed I memorized the sight. Every detail of his life still tortured me. He was a laser engineer who had gone to the Sorbonne, spoke fluent French, surfed like he walked on water all the time. He made me speak in my bad high-school French and alerted me to my provincial upbringing, which showed in how often I smiled, the way I cooked. One night I started to toss the salad before we sat down, and he had boomed, "*Defense de toucher la salade avant le diner!*" (Don't touch the salad before dinner!) with such exasperation, I should have been relieved when he was gone.

Tonight he wasn't visible, but a girl walked into his living room and lit a cigarette. She was light-limbed, graceful, tan, with lithe muscles and no major breasts, blond hair long and free, gleaming like spun sugar down her back. She was barefoot in nothing but a flowered sarong, half slipped off, like a sea-nymph unused to clothes. She looked like something new on earth, something I wanted instantly to be. But I had to keep on in the dark, waiting for Viv's clanking heels, her clinking gold chains.

We crossed the highway to a dirt street along the crumbling cliff, where Viv had a small place in the back of an old house. But she had lost the key, and someone had to climb the loquat tree and shimmy in the bathroom window. I was smallest, so the job usually fell to me.

"Watch out for the bubble-bath," Viv said and shoved me up onto a gritty branch, dusty leaves rattling like armor. Feet first I wiggled in the tiny window, landed in the claw-foot tub.

It was too early yet for bed, and I sat at the table reading the same sentence of French homework over and over. Who was that fucking girl in the sarong? That girl fucking Grey?

Viv removed her nail polish, painted it fresh, flipped through a magazine, and smoked three cigarettes, making my stomach almost keel. Obviously bored with me, she put on pink baby-doll pajamas and wound her hair in prickly metal rollers that would dig into her scalp all night. She yawned. “Guess I’ll rack out. You better too and sleep it off.”

The place had just one bedroom, and I had staked out the splintery old porch to spread my sleeping bag, beside my board. As soon as I was out there, ocean air revived me like an oxygen mask, and right away I thought of sneaking back to Grey’s. But something told me I might not look too good to him right then. I put on my sleep T-shirt and lay down in my thin bag. *Pretend you don’t care*—was it too late for that?

And now, whoa—I was on a Tilt-a-Whirl, shadows spinning. I fought off the urge to barf, knowing it would wreck my mouth and mean I couldn’t go to Grey’s, an option I still wanted for when the spinning stopped. Eyes closed, I started to dream of monster waves that swallowed towns. But I thought I was awake, when I felt a gentle shake.

“Honey, I know it sucks, but could you wake up?” said a breathy voice beside my ear.

Candy knelt beside me with her skirt hitched up, sprayed hair mashed and mascara streaked like black icicles down her cheeks, and suddenly she looked to me like someone from the Eisenhower days. Immediately guilty, I saw she was holding something up between her legs.

“Look at this,” she whispered and pulled it out, a white hand towel soaked with black. “I can’t stop fucking bleeding. Did you bleed like this?” Thick drops fell onto the porch.

“No way. About a teaspoonful.” I grabbed a T-shirt from my duffel bag. “Here. That’s not your period, right?”

“No. God, this fucking sucks.”

I got back into my sundress. Neither of us had a car, and the only hospital was ten miles away, in Newport Beach.

My mind moved like sludge. “We’ll either have to wake up Viv or use her car.”

Candy’s face looked whiter than the moonlight. “Don’t wake her up, she’ll kick my butt. I’ll be okay.” She checked the T-shirt, already turning black.

“No, you won’t,” I pointed out. “Press that on there tight.”

Fear gave me X-ray vision as I found Viv’s purse in the dark kitchen, inched out the keys to her Impala, entered a new phase in my life of crime.

I still saw mostly double all the way and had to keep one eye shut. This stretch of coast was part of a ranch the size of South Texas, home to eagles, mountain lions, long-horned steers, guys in gaucho pants, and it got dark here like the inside of a rock. Our college lay a few miles out in the coyote brush, and in my days with Grey, the infirmary had sent me to the hospital in Newport for a bladder infection (“honeymoon cystitis,” the doctor had called it).

So I knew where it was, on a hill above the harbor, and when we got there I helped Candy walk into the big bright waiting room. Embarrassed, she had left the T-shirt in the car, and when we reached the clean linoleum, red drips the size of poker chips splashed onto it.

A starched nurse met us and whispered, “I take it we’re having a problem *down there*?”

She pulled Candy to a merely curtained enclosure, where she had to take off all her clothes, put on a thin blue gown and lie down with her knees spread wide. A tall white-blond man of maybe twenty-six stepped through the curtains, shining clean as if he’d never seen a drop of blood. He cast cool eyes between her legs, where no man had looked before tonight.

“Did he use instruments?” he asked, too loud.

“Instruments?” Candy breathed.

“Of course not,” I snapped, voice of wisdom.

The man slid a stool up to her crotch, picked up a circular needle big enough for weaving tapestry and poked thread through its eye. “Yes, instruments. Anything metal or wood?”

“No,” Candy said and stiffened as he pried her open with the silver speculum and gave its dial a jaunty twirl. His hand dove at her with the needle, and her pale eyes filled.

The doctor must have smelled the booze on me, but he smiled with brilliant straight white teeth, suitable for a movie star. “Please wait outside.”

Candy gripped my hand, started to gasp. When I did not move, he executed a swift jab and tug, still looking mostly at me, like he

stitched up sex-wounds every night, and he could do it carefully or fast and mean, my choice.

I fought my way out through curtains and did not look back.

Candy was still crying back at Viv's, where I had left the door unlocked, neither of us now in any shape for climbing trees. Trying not to wake up Viv, I creaked the sofa-bed open and brought Candy a box of tissues, aspirin and a cold Bud for the pain. She was too caught up in crying to drink, and I cried, too, and drank the Bud for consolation as I sat beside her on the bed.

"What did Slotkin do?" I whispered. "Anything weird?"

Her tears were slowing down, and she blew her nose. "No, he was really sweet. But, God, it fucking hurt so much, it kicked my butt. Did you hurt like that with Grey?"

"Yeah, it hurt, but not that much. Are you sure he didn't do anything weird?"

She gave me a sweet look. "You take care of me, don't you, honey? But he was fine. It's just my dumb luck to figure out a way to fuck up a big romantic night, gushing blood all over the guy's sheets. It freaked him out. I had to pretend it stopped and get him to bring me back here. I'm so sorry I had to wake you up."

She was getting back her breathy voice, and that seemed like a good sign.

"No being sorry about anything, okay?" I said.

She nodded, sighed, and burrowed under the covers. I stayed until I knew she was asleep, and when I crept back to the porch, the dew was down, the night air cool. I knew I ought to sleep, so I could paddle out before the afternoon wind wrecked the waves.

But I felt almost sober, and it was no use pretending I didn't want to go to Grey's. I brushed my teeth, put on the almost-white lipstick we all wore that spring, and set off barefoot, carrying the full, sloping bowl of my heart.

His place was still lit up like a cruise ship on a dark ocean, and the girl in the sarong sat on the couch, while Grey knelt by the coffee table, rolling a joint. His silky blond hair draped across his forehead, his body light and fine with muscles like axe blades. Barefoot in chinos, perched on his heels, toes cocked against the floor, ready to spring, he heard my step and turned. *What have you got to lose?*



I thought, just like I did each time I dropped into some terrifying wave. I climbed the porch stairs to his living room.

He gave me a deep unsmiling look that seemed to pull me in his arms. “*Ah, ma petite.*”

I staggered frankly to the couch and threw myself down in the nearest corner, propped up with my elbow on the side-rest.

“*Bon soir, mon cher,*” I said and noticed tears were streaming down my cheeks, eager to abandon ship, though I thought I felt pretty good.

His eyes sparkled as he answered me in French. “Your accent has improved. Good little student.” He lit the joint and handed it to me. “Be careful, it’s stronger than you’re used to.”

But I was used to nothing yet, so I grinned and took it, inhaled heartily.

The girl slowly turned her head to watch. Up close she looked dewy fresh, and now I knew exactly who she was: Jennifer Stallybrass, also a freshman at my college. This explained many things. Her father was a U.S. Senator, and she had brought her horse, rode bareback (naked, some said) on the beach. She had surfed since childhood, got straight As while never studying, and was often spotted leaving campus with the entire starting lineup of the basketball team in her English-racing-green convertible. Whatever she did, she did casually, not competing, merely winning in advance. I would have left me, too, for Jennifer Stallybrass.

She turned back to Grey. Bored, but with a perfect accent, she spoke French. “*Quelle cauchemar.* Get her out of here.”

“She’s all right here,” he said, the one documented time he was ever truly nice to me.

My buzz came back with an elated rush, grain alcohol and Bud and dope. *Wow*, I thought, I love these two exquisite people! Grey and Jennifer and all their doppelgangers I could see. I wanted them to be together—yes! Better than love, better than jealousy—it felt like art, to help them get together perfectly. When Grey left the room to get us all something to drink, I closed one eye to narrow down the Jennifers. My lips felt rubbery.

“*Don’t...touch...the salad...before...dinner,*” I said with great urgency, put my forehead on my arm just for a rest, and that’s the last thing I remember of that night.

Let us look away from the events of the next day. Suffice it to say, I learned grain alcohol is not the nightcap of champions. And when you vomit in the ocean, even fish will swim away.

“Oh, doll baby,” Candy murmured and held my hair back every time I hurled. She put ice packs on my head, like she was not the one with stitches in a tender spot. When she wasn’t helping me, she sat right beside the phone, cigarette in hand, waving smoke away from me. Viv got tired of us and went off with the cruel Italian, and I got so bored I did homework.

By Sunday afternoon I felt okay, and the three of us got into our bikinis and strolled north along the public beaches. It was hot, the sand packed, and we pretended to ignore the eyes that tracked us as we strutted almost naked, three abreast, along the water’s edge, where the sand was slicked with a gold sheen. Steam-bath air hinted at flying fish with fins like rainbow scarves, producers’ million-dollar yachts bringing big contracts and true love. We kept going past the parboiled families, transistor radios and leathery old men with metal detectors, retrieving dimes and quarters. Hoping to be discovered and whisked straight to Hollywood, we kept our eyes fixed on some distant spot, to give us true filmic intensity.

A gray-haired man in crisp seersucker and wingtips picked his way across the sand and intercepted us. “You’re so lovely all together. Have you ever thought of modeling careers? I could take some test photos of you in my studio and show them to magazines.”

We liked the sound of that, and we got into his convertible in our bikinis, shedding sand from our bare feet, and let him buy us Cokes at the drive-in. His studio was a glass-fronted store near the Pink Flamingo with a cold cement floor. He arranged us in front of a screen, Viv and me lounging on wood blocks, while Candy stood holding a striped beach ball. He bent behind his camera on a tripod. “Lick your lips, please. Candy, could you hold the ball a little higher?”

She did, sunburnt pink breasts swelling from her flowered top, which was not a string bikini like mine and Viv’s but a serious support system with flying buttresses.

He clicked and wound the camera. “Beautiful! Okay, now, all three of you, toss the ball to each other. Move fluidly, in slow motion. And could you bend over a little, Candy, dear?”

We pretended to play catch with the almost weightless ball, feeling graceful and relaxed. Of course we were beautiful!

He kept his face behind the camera. "You girls are very photogenic. Now, could we try another sort of shot? Candy, could I ask you to remove your top?"

We froze. I wanted to deny what he had said, so we could go on to Hollywood. Candy tipped her head and gave the guy a sad sweet look, like he must have had a difficult childhood.

Viv grabbed the ball and yanked her toward the door. "Exit stage left!"

"Thanks for the Cokes," I gasped, polite to the end.

Candy groped back for my hand, and we all dashed out the glass door, its steel handle hot from beating sun, and hopped along searing sidewalks, yelping with outrage.

"You dorks, I *knew* that's what he wanted!" Viv cried, though she had failed to mention it before. Three abreast, we repossessed the beach and marched back to Viv's.

Back at school, Slotkin did not call, and by Tuesday Candy seeped tears all day. You could almost miss the way her gray eyes misted over and left snail-trails down her cheeks, and I worked overtime to cheer her up. I pulled the screws from a glass wall in our dorm suite and slid it open after curfew, took her hitching down to Denny's for banana splits, or to the all-night student lounge, where gray burgers sealed in crinkly wrap rotated behind glass, ready to be popped in something called "The Revolutionary Radar Oven! Cooks By Agitating Molecules!" Out in the moonlight in dry chaparral, we smoked cigarettes and listened to coyotes yelp.

On Friday Viv came for us, showed us how to make lasagna, took us to see *The Pink Panther*, bought us Junior Mints. On Saturday and Sunday they sunbathed while I surfed.

But still Slotkin did not call, and if anyone said "virgin," "lover," "blood," or "bed," words we found hard to do without, Candy might start to sob, soaking her cigarettes.

"Look, girl," Viv said to Candy when she dropped us at the dorm on Sunday night. "He's just chicken. Give him another week or two. Let him see how little you need him. Sometimes they can only hear you when you *whisper*, you know? And be sure to look like dynamite. Now, you two stay out of trouble for a while, okay?"

A few mornings later, it was hot by dawn. The dorm had only one TV, a boxy number out in the main living room, tuned always to

news, since two of our dorm-mates had brothers in Vietnam, and when the weatherman came on, he said surf was coming up.

Instantly I punted English class and got into my bikini, cotton dress over it, brushed my hair out long and free, close as I could get to Jennifer Stallybrass. I caught a ride in the back of a rusted pickup, lawn mower rattling beside me, three Latino guys with hats pulled low in front. The hot dry air was clear and sweet, live oaks vibrant in arroyos on the ranch. As we dropped into one, I saw a crowd of men on horseback, about fifty beefy guys dwarfing their mounts, in chaps, Stetsons, and silver spurs, like every rancher in the state had come to help round up. All together they loped up a grassy hill, before we dove down a canyon toward the beach.

They let me off at Viv's, and I retrieved my board, hoisted it to the flat spot on my head, and walked the short blocks to Thalia Street. Through palms along the cliff I could see big turquoise swells making for land, and my heart pressed up into my neck and ears. I was afraid of waves, because I knew them and they had hurt me. Around here they got big as cliffs, and they could charge at you, crash on your head and suck you down.

And then there were the guys. Each beach had its own pack, and they would ride straight at you till you flinched. You almost couldn't blame them, with the Greater L.A. Basin trying to get in the surf.

*"Fuck you, bitch! Stinking weenie! Off our beach!"* a guy had shouted my first day here, rammed my board and cut a wedge out with his fin, big as a shark bite.

Today it was still early, no one out but a brown pelican that dove through gold sunlight, and houses on the cliff could watch as I peeled off the dress and knelt to wax the board, stalling. A red bi-plane droned overhead against blue sky, in air so clear I could see people leaning out to look straight down at me, engine reverberating with a thrum you couldn't hear on cloudy days.

I checked the waves for a safe way in. Thalia broke mostly to the right, and since like most right-handers I stood on the board with left foot forward, facing right, turning left felt like a blind back-flip. So of course I practiced rights about a million times more often than lefts.

A car door slammed on the cliff-top, followed by young male laughs. Damn. Didn't anyone have school today? I couldn't let them beat me in, and I abruptly dashed into the cold water. Knee-pad-

dling was something I could handle, and I pawed out through the break, each wave slapping intensely salty water up my nose.

When I made it to the take-off point and turned, brown hard-bodied boys were trotting toward the surf, each with a board casually tucked under his arm like it had grown out of his ribs. A blue ridge sprang up behind me, and I started to paddle, too late—it merely lifted me and dropped me as it rolled toward shore. Damn, I was a weenie, destined to remain so all my life.

But here came another, bigger than the first. I flopped on my belly, dug in with my arms. *Come on, what have you got to lose? What can it do to you?*

It lifted me lightly, pointed the board's nose toward the sea floor. But I popped to my feet and dropped in, angled right and stood for a few seconds, like I knew what I was doing.

A small boy started paddling in front of me, grimacing. "Fuck you, bitch!" he yelled.

I aimed at him and showed my teeth. "Back off, weenie! It's mine! Back off!"

He hesitated for one crucial second, and I shot by him, amazed that it had worked—maybe just because we were so far inside, he knew I was about to eat it in shore-break. Sickening to see, the wave stretched taller, steeper, feathered all along the top and tumbled over toward me like an avalanche. When I tried to pull out, its heavy white lip caught my board. Over the falls I went, backwards, to the bottom. It held me down...still down...still down underneath.

Somehow I didn't drown, my neck intact, and my head popped out, awash in whitewater.

A girl was coming down the cliff path, board under her arm, casual and winning in advance, long bright hair free. I'd rarely seen another girl surf, and I knew it must be Jennifer. Grey would have gone to work and left her there.

Flinging myself onto the board, I paddled out fast, embarrassed to think what I might have blabbed out drunkenly that night at Grey's. In a wisp of dreamlike memory, I caught a glimpse of vomiting off a white porch, protracted slurred speeches, torrential tears, my head hung over the side of an English-racing-green convertible.

But as she paddled out toward me, her eyes stayed blank, not deigning to notice me. Pretending not to see her either, I stroked for a small wave, which shrugged me off.

And now a big new set came rolling toward us. Instinct made me claw out farther to survive, but the first wave almost creamed me anyway. Jennifer caught it, dropped in smooth, and from the back I could see nothing but her head and shoulders smoothly turning, gliding right till she popped out, all of her visible again. Her hair still looked dry.

Relieved to be so far outside, I felt something tug me up and turned to see a huge steep wall already straight above me, too late to paddle over it. I couldn't help it, I was sliding down the front. Reaching for a sky-hook as my feet went under me, I lurched upright, trying to get farther from the water so it couldn't suck me down. My right foot in the back took all my weight, trying to stabilize the board, and I noticed I had somehow whipped it in a right turn toward the crest, almost over the top. In panic I turned down, slid faster to the right and up too high, turned down again and up too high. Scrambling to stay alive, I flashed past Jennifer, just missing her.

The beach was fast approaching, and the wave rose straight up, about to smash on shore. I took a breath to save myself—but it held up. No, wait, shouldn't it break? Doing about fifty miles per hour I careened farther south than I had ever made it. Laughing with disbelief, I zipped over the top, as it broke behind me with a roar like a train wreck.

Out of danger, I blooped off like the spell was gone and clipped my lip against the hard shell of the board. Blood tasted creamy after saltwater, and I was filled with longing and regret: for now I knew I had been granted a divine ripple, brief phenomenon of glory, wrinkle on God's forehead, sent from a typhoon in Tahiti to rescue me just once from weeniehood.

What it meant though was an off-shore wind, my first Santa Ana, when the ocean breeze got shoved back out to sea by blasts of desert air. By afternoon it was 113 degrees, blusters bending trees and whisking lunch bags out to sea. Where ocean met sky, instead of a clean line, a brown cloud lay like mustard gas, inland smog that passed right through my lungs on its way west. My alveoli felt like they'd been scrubbed with a wire brush—my body tried to cough them out. I had to drag the board back up to Viv's and lie on her lawn gasping.

Back at the dorm that night, the Santa Ana nudged out Vietnam in news, with warnings about dehydration, flying trailer rigs, and empty guns that killed people. Apparently hot wind could change the ions in the air, increase the urge to strangle your loved ones. Near Disneyland an old couple had taken down their gun collection and let death part them, while in Costa Mesa a young mother burned inside a trailer soaked with kerosene. And when I cruised into the room we shared, I saw a blond heap on Candy's pillow, her back under the sheet shaking.

I touched her shoulder. "Hey. What gives?"

She bawled something that sounded like, "Fucking never! Fucking sucks!"

I didn't really need details. Who cared what Slotkin said? Maybe nothing. Nothing would have been enough. I could see her standing near him, books pressed to her breasts, while he feigned concentration on another student's question, walked away.

I pried the pillow from her face. "Hey, you'll hyperventilate." I found her cigarettes, lit one, helped her sit up and put it between her lips. "You're not bleeding, are you?"

Her gray eyes were mournful, white showing under the irises. But she shook her head.

"Let me guess. You tried *whispering*." I knew this was a jab at Viv, for being Candy's oldest friend, but I didn't stop. "Of course you looked like dynamite, but he couldn't hear you."

Her voice was a squeak. "How could he do that? He said he loved me!"

"Yeah. He probably believed it, too, that night. But it doesn't mean the same to them."

Her face crumpled again. "Then what the fuck?"

That night it was way too hot to sleep, even with the cheesy aluminum window shoved open all the way, but she crashed asleep like a death wish. I lay naked on top of the sheet, sweat evaporating as it hit my skin. At dawn it was already about 100 degrees.

Candy didn't lift her head, and she was starting to smell sour, like she hadn't bathed.

I called Viv on the suite phone. "This is an emergency."

Viv came to get her, exuding efficiency. "Why didn't you call me sooner? Christ. See if you can get notes for her classes, okay? No use both of you flunking out."

So all that week I went to Candy's classes, plus my own, plus work typing letters in the Anatomy Department, and when Friday came, I was ready for a break.

But Viv did not come to get me. I was too proud to call and hint around, and I told myself I didn't mind. I had a paper due in French on *L'Etranger*, to explain why Meurseult kills the Arab on the beach, something I had wondered myself. His mother has just died, but he doesn't seem to care, and on the beach the sun is too hot and bright. He sees cool blue waves, but he can't reach them. He has a gun in his pocket, and when he sees the Arab, he takes it out and shoots. How was I supposed to know why? In French I was lucky just to get the basics (Frenchman, gun, Arab, beach). I was a person who understood the funny papers *really well*.

*Meurseult est trop chaud*, I wrote in my sincere backhanded script, in fountain pen, peacock-blue ink. After a while, as I still sat at my ugly modern desk, a girl and two guys strolled across the lawn outside, looking cool and relaxed. I watched with dull envy, registering that the girl was Jennifer, in a rumpled green plaid shift and wispy flat sandals.

But wait—who were those guys? They looked like Ron Scott and John Devereaux, world-class surfers from Laguna. Grey was a good surfer, but no way was he in their league, and I saw him shriveled, wizened in his Porsche. Her English-racing-green convertible stood parked on the grass, like they had just popped by for her toothbrush, and they got in and drove away.

I pulled out my box of *Surfer* magazines and gazed at all those tan guys, floating above blue waves, defying gravity: Skip Frye, Donald Takayama, Butch Van Artsdalen, Mickey Munoz, Mickey Dora ("Da Cat"), Ron Scott, and John Devereaux. I had seen the two of them before, at an Italian place on the south side of Laguna, where Grey took me. They had strolled in together, wearing glasses, looking cute but thoughtful, intellectual, despite their muscles and the surf-knots on their knees. Would they ride horses on the beach with Jennifer, or drive to Mexico? It was only ninety miles away, and dollars bought so much there, Grey and I had stayed once in a four-star hotel and scarfed big lobsters, margaritas, papayas, chocolate, flan, and surfed in warm water so clear you could make out yellow stripes and red dots on small green fish below.



Next morning was the hottest yet, and Candy was still not back. I put on my coolest shift, an apricot gingham number I had made myself, badly, a white eyelet ruffle round the boat-neck.

Slumped in a cafeteria booth, toying with a waffle, I tried to finish *Portrait of a Lady* for Am Lit. But I was lonely and depressed, and the paragraphs were all too long, minutely dissecting the lady, like she was a form of insect life the author hoped might be named after him.

Suddenly I was aware of someone standing next to me. It was Jennifer Stallybrass, with Scott and Devereaux behind her, like they were never far out of her company. I was sure they must be walking past to somewhere far more interesting.

But she tipped up the cover of my book and said dreamily, “She seemed young and innocent and not to understand what they meant when they talked. She had a great desire for knowledge, but she really preferred almost any source of information to the printed page. She had an immense curiosity about life and was constantly staring and wondering.”

I wondered if she had the rest of Henry James inside her brain. She waved a backhand toward the men, not bothering to introduce them. “We were wondering if you’d like to join us for some tandem work at Dana Point. Bruce Brown wants to film us, and we need another girl.”

*Bruce Brown wants to film us!* Maker of the best surf movies, he had launched a thousand boards. But Dana Point was big, fast, difficult—I had gone there once and gotten creamed.

In panic, I gestured at the book. “Can’t. Homework.”

She lifted graceful light brown brows. “Really? *Tant pis.*”

When they were gone, I put my head down on the Formica tabletop. How could I be such a weenie, when I could go out on the same board with a possible world champion? Leaping up, still clutching Henry James, I burst out into hot sunlight, expecting to see the green convertible far off in a cloud of dust. But it was parked beside the loading dock, and they all looked up like they knew I would change my mind. I clambered down the grassy bank, and Scott helped me into the back with him before we zoomed away.

We stopped at a beach house, the kind of place that rented by the week, with durable tweed couches, piney disinfectant smells, green glass floats in nets around the walls. Jennifer lent me a vestigial

bikini, nothing but triangles on strings, told me to call her Jenn and that I'd surf with Scott, while she went with Devereaux—no surprise, since I had seen how his eyes tracked her, though Scott seemed magnetized as well. Scott was the less attractive of the two, his body square and blocky, all in shades of brown, while Dev was linear and boney, fair-skinned with straight black hair and blue eyes that tended to get shot with red when he regarded Jenn.

The guys stripped down to baggies and hoisted big, wide, heavy, wooden tandem boards, unlike the lightweight foam and fiberglass we used alone. Easily they lugged them down a sandy path, and Scott spoke to me in a soft voice.

“We'll try a few moves first on land, okay? Nothing fancy. It isn't hard. I'll show you.”

I tried to act casual as we threaded through the Sunday crowd, surfers strutting as they shook water from their ears. This beach was just a narrow strip below the coast highway, and people didn't come to lie around. They came to surf, and heads turned as we went by.

In a clear space, Dev lifted Jenn onto his knee, facing away from him. Her suit hid little but her pubic hair, which was no doubt blond and gleaming. Every other inch of her was smooth, brown, lean, as she flipped forward in an arabesque, one leg raised behind and arms curved out in front, Dev's hands at her waist. He helped her to his shoulders, and she stood like she was light as Tinkerbell and did another arabesque, while he anchored her other calf. Taking hold of both his hands, she slid smoothly down in his embrace, his nose grazing her bare spine, ass to neck.

“It's easy. It's just balance,” Scott said and lifted me onto his knee, solid as wood.

When I felt his fingers at my naked waist, I flinched. At least I did have balance—it was all I had as a surfer. And I had done ballet as a kid, so I could do the arabesque, at least on land.

His head butted between my legs from behind, emerged like I was giving birth to him. He straightened up and lifted me, holding my hands. “Now stand up. Lean on my hands.”

I put my feet on his shoulders and wobbled upright, seeing why they had given the beginner to the guy who felt like an oak stump. When he let go of my hands and braced my calves, I felt the urge to fall and get it over with. Far below me, Jenn held out her arms to

show me how, and I did it, mouth-breathing in fear. There was no way I could do it on one leg.

Drily she said, "Now close your mouth, and put one leg back."

But I was already falling, and Scott caught me. We did it again, about twenty times, until I actually did put one leg back, shakily. That time he spun me so his lips brushed up my front, navel to collarbone, and I thought I felt a tip of tongue. Goosebumps tightened my skin.

"Okay," said Jenn. "You'll do."

The whole beach watched as we all followed her into the shining sea. Scott steadied the board and got on behind me, both of us on our knees, his nose an inch above my *derrière*. The board was so wide my arms barely reached the water, but his plowed us over slapping crests. The farther out we went, the bigger the waves looked. Scott didn't let me dwell on it. In one smooth move he turned us toward shore and caught a tall hissing comber, cold turquoise.

"Now, there's no hurry," he called over the shushing. "Just stand up."

I did, trembling, and he took hold of my waist. "Just stay in balance. Nothing fancy."

He whooshed us through some gentle turns, got us in the right part of the wave, which tamely let him use it. Picking me up, he set my feet onto his knee. "Okay, now, just relax."

It felt like I had everything to lose. Afraid to turn my head, I saw Jenn ahead of us, her arabesque on Devereaux's shoulders modulating gracefully into an actual handstand. What I had done was nothing, and I stood tall and tentatively probed one foot back, under his arm, while he leaned me out over the nose. Then he stuck his head between my legs and lifted me.

I yelled in panic. "I can't stand up!"

"Sure you can. Put both hands on my head and push. I'll hold your calves."

Panting, I wobbled up. Blue water, gold sand, green hills swept toward me from what seemed like the cruising altitude of a small plane. Were seagulls scared? Could I do this?

When we reached the shore-break, Scott raised his hands to help me down and, giddy now, I giggled as he ran his tongue all up my front.

We worked for hours. Scott could keep that huge board steady as a floor while we streaked forty miles per hour and hold me on his shoulders all the while. Soon I even had my own style, pitched forward with a solemn expression and arms swept back, like the hood ornament of a Rolls Royce. When Jenn saw that, she gave me a few slow ironic claps.

When we finally quit, my legs shook, and I was bone-cold. Back at the house, the guys put on shirts, and Jenn and I wrapped up in towels. The sun on the deck felt good as we watched lesser mortals surf below and drank cold Bud from sweating cans. The first went fast.

Scott lifted his can to toast me. "She's as bold as you are, Stallybrass. Watch out."

"I'm watching," Dev said, and even Jenn raised her can to me, though if her lips gave a suggestion of a smile, it did not reach her eyes. Dev leaned toward me, put his arms on the table. "We're sick of hung-up people, you know? Spontaneous, that's what we need to be. Live like the ancient Greeks. They knew the universe flowed like a wave or an electric current. You can try to stop it, but it's gonna kill you. You have to go with it. Then it'll give you all the power there is."

"Yeah," I said, based on my vast knowledge from two quarters of Western Civ. "They thought every living thing had a god inside, even you, and you had to get out of its way."

Scott laughed and put his big hand on my head. "Listen to her."

Scott fetched a round of Dos Equis in brown bottles, and they schemed new moves, betting they could teach me something called the Loop de Loop. Jenn sat peeling the label off her bottle, and I was surprised to see her fingernails bitten to the quick, leaving raw pads.

The breeze must have chilled me, because I started to shiver, and Scott reached over, rubbed my arms. It seemed all right to lean against the big warm body that had held me all day.

Dev pointed at me. "See? Completely natural. She's like you, Jenn."

High on the praise, I let Scott flick his tongue into my ear.

Dev stood and stalked around the table, holding out his hands. "Gimme."

He leaned down and kissed me. Jenn dropped her towel and displayed her perfect body as she leaned across the table to kiss Scott.

Dev picked me up like a baby. “I have an idea. A *spontaneous* idea.” Jenn looked up at us. “Duty first, then pleasure. Tandem partners first.”

Dev set me down and picked up Jenn. “Watch closely. This is our easiest maneuver.”

He started up the stairs, and Scott picked me up and followed. Wow, I thought, laughing, how far would this joke go? Upstairs he nudged open a door, carried me over the threshold to a room with two bare single beds, no curtains on salt-encrusted windows. It still felt like bravado, a dare we would pretend to have fulfilled, until he pulled the ripcords on my suit.

“Salty,” he said, licking the few spots he had not gotten to before.

I wish I could say they blew my mind on something—mushrooms, peyote buds, acid dropped in my drink while Jenn sang, *One pill makes you larger, one pill makes you small*.

But I had only drunk two beers, and not even Bruce Brown and the Big Time could explain why fifteen minutes later I lay on a bare mattress with a strange guy’s come on my belly, left there when he thoughtfully pulled out. Was it because I never saw a graceful moment to say no? They never asked me if I wanted to, just assumed, and I went spinelessly along.

Embarrassed, I lay by Scott in the glare of afternoon, not talking, since there was nothing much to say. Knuckles beat a Morse code on the door, and he wrapped a short white towel around his waist to let in Dev, who also wore a short white towel, like something stolen from a gym. They exchanged shoulder punches with closed fists, and Scott left, not glancing back. Dev didn’t look at me either, as he dropped the towel and lay down by my side. His eyes were red.

Was I really going to do this? I watched myself, as we kissed and touched, uninspired. He made an effort to comply with the program, and, polite girl that I was, so did I. But his body wasn’t in it, having left its heartfelt efforts next door, and he wilted as soon as he was in.

So that was how it felt to be a train. You came to college to find out who you were, right? This was who I was. The rest had cracked and fallen off me by the time I got out of that bed.

Naked, not caring who saw, I found a shower, soap, a dirty towel, and did the best I could with them, located the gingham shift and

Henry James, and set off north along the coast highway, toward Laguna, away from the Big Time.

The scene felt gritty now as hangover. Smoke clogged the fading sky. Silhouettes of surfers failed to catch subsiding swells. Sunburned beach-goers sat mired in motionless traffic, and I made better time on foot. I passed a carload of Marines, bare chests and buzzed heads lobster red.

Their voices sounded like jeers. "Hey, it's a beach bunny! Bunny, bunny! Over here! We've got something for you! Right here!"

Maybe I was a train, but I could still evade. Sandals slapping, rubbing blisters on my feet, I started to run, and ran what felt like eight miles to Laguna. I didn't blame Viv and Candy for forgetting me. Even Viv had more principles than me. But I had nowhere else to go, and they were the only people I wanted to see. Sweaty, feet starting to bleed, I ran down Viv's sandy street.

A few yards from the house, I stopped, unsure of my welcome.

But it was only a few minutes later when the back door slammed, and there they were, rounding the loquat tree, Viv in her capris, bandeau, and heels, Candy in her choirgirl clothes. She looked better, eyes alight the way they used to be, before Slotkin, and I silently applauded Viv's good work.

Candy spotted me and called out breathily, "Honey, where've you been?"

Viv held up a child's red plastic beach bucket. "Just in time. Coming?"

We all piled into the front seat of the Impala, me so relieved I had to hide tears. Viv drove us fast but carefully to Corona del Mar, Candy directing her to Slotkin's white stucco bungalow. It sat smack on the street, no yard, a black VW out front with New York plates, still new enough to shine in the reddish sunset light. Its gas cap was ludicrously simple to get off.

"Dust to dust," Viv said, erect and ceremonial. She handed the small shovel to Candy.

Candy tipped her head and seemed to regard the car with sympathy, like she might balk.

But she slowly scooped a shovelful of sand from the bucket, gently poured it in the tank and passed the tools to me. Solemnly I did the same and put them in Viv's hand. We went on like that until the sand was gone, the night was dark, and justice had been done.