

important. I will go away and he will follow me, as he would never follow you. But let *him* decide, the round woman says. And thus she is betrayed. It is already decided, she is told. You will not see him after tonight. You will never see each other again; it is that simple. This man is an important part of my house at this very moment. You do not know how to use him. He is a beautiful animal, and can become more so. He will come with me, and, if I see fit, he will stay with me. Even in this city where you are. And forget your name. To the end of his days, if I so decide.

The round woman assumes the expression of screaming, without sound. But having said what had to be said, the dark woman turns her back to them, and walks out of the bar. Back of her, the people are staring after her. She is secure. It is simply a matter of time, as with all things. He is right, she is thinking. He did make a mistake last night. But we cannot always have the choices. Her car is there, just at the curb. It shines softly. The blues and greens are reflected in the glass of windshield and the patina of dashboard. As she slides behind the wheel, her hand caresses the fine, leather-like seat. She has a fondness for fine textures. For elegance, wherever it is found.

## Secret Lover: Chapter One / Sydney Martin

*for James*

I was sick with love for James. It was true. He didn't know I was alive. Every day we would meet secretly. He never showed up. I walked down to my favorite bar. It's a rotten place and the drinks are overpriced. The bartender still doesn't know my name. I ordered a Chevas stinger.

I think of him often. When we meet secretly here, he says things like this thing is bigger than both of us, and love walked right in and we have this life to live, darling. I have explained already that he never said these things. He might have. I think about all the things we never do. Oh, the madcap times we don't have dancing in the nightspots of Paris. The dawn when we didn't jump into the fountains of Rome. The special night we never shared in front of the fire, high atop the Rocky Mts.

It's been like this. You understand, my heart was breaking. No end in sight. I changed my order to a pitcher of margaritas. Tequilla always reminds me of the month we didn't spend in Mexico. What to do. My next

move. It will have to be good. Something had come between us. So this is love, I thought.

James walked into the bar. I saw him, sitting down. He was drinking a Brandy Alexander. Sour milk. James says brandy has ambience. He struggled to cross his legs under the bar. It was only an act. I decided to take the initiative. Things can't go on like this, I said. I walked up to him like a friend. The bartender said my motives were transparent.

*I'm doing collaborations with several women now. It's a way to get back into the swing of writing, I guess . . . (from a letter to the editor)*

## Crossing the Caspian / James Mechem and Sydney Martin

Crossing the Caspian on the ferry, we devoured caviar shamelessly and drank Wyborowa vodka straight from tall glasses.

We had crossed the Kirghiz steppes and were on our way home.

Naturally we were drunk as lords by the time we got across.

I liked Sydney the first time I ever saw her. I have described that meeting. Now we were on the Caspian, drunk as lords.

Passengers ask the conductor, What place is this? Where are we now? We were about to debark in Baku.

The movies would show our debarkation better than I. Don't you see us throbbing into the bay, the crescent city in front of us, a statue on the hill coming closer and clearer?

I put my arm around Sydney's waist. We were standing at the rail three sheets to the wind. Everything was spinning round and round us. The movies are right. It's exciting to land in a foreign seaport.

Stuffed with caviar and awash with vodka. Whipped by the salt air. Yes, the movies are right. Snow lay over the city. Deeper into her furs. Sydney ducked her chin. Deeper into her furs.

The crowd of people was waiting for us somewhere. Cheering and waving. So this is it. I put my glasses in my pocket. James looked hazy, an impressionist painting. It is like this when you finish a long voyage. James was leaning with one hand on the railing. A skinny Humphrey Bogart. I started to give him one of my cigars. Everyone knows James. James is a big shot. I have described to you many times what a big shot he is.