

"Yes, Sister."

"How are things at the nunnery?"

"Mother Superior is just recovered from an attack of virulent boils."

"And my dear friends in the scullery?"

"Chapped hands and red knuckles. They miss you."

"What of the backstairs gossip?"

The sister looked at the customer. He cleared his throat and ordered a half pound of this and a half pound of that. "And some of those over there."

"Will that be all?"

He looked wistfully at her chest. He didn't know what he was doing. He was searching for a penny in his trousers pocket.

When the customer was gone Sister Cecilia got down to business, while in the kitchen the new cook read the recipe for marzipan aloud.

Two Women and One Man / Carol Bergé

The woman is sitting at the bar in a certain small city. No one in the city knows where she lives. She is wearing clothing that she has chosen for its ability to blend into whatever surroundings she might choose. Unobtrusive; simple, and in good taste. Although one could not later tell whether she wore one color or another. Her clothing was not particularly modern, and it seemed to be composed of neutral colors. There are certain colors which, having little color of their own, will adopt or reflect those colors around it. In this place, her clothing has overtones of the blue and green sign of the bar, whose light reaches even back to the golden and reddish aura of the bar. There are not many people at the bar, nor in the booths nearby. Nevertheless, her presence has been observed, and perhaps commented upon, by the few who are there. It is not that ordinary an occurrence, here, for such a woman to come in: alone. Usually, the women who come in alone are known to everyone, and their purpose is known.

The woman has been in this bar once before, briefly. Long enough to have noticed the bartender. He is as dark as she; slender as well; she stares, as she did then, at the nape of his neck. One night a while ago she had fallen in love with the nape of his neck. A heart-shaped line, italianate, graceful, rhythmic. She is a woman who is devoted to grace, to details. And sensitive to the overall picture as well. And she has returned to this bar. To this particular man. The line of his shirt over his ribs. The turn of cheekbone, angle of thigh.

The bartender has noticed her. She asks him to recommend a sweet after-dinner drink for her. He fixes a "velvet hammer," and watches her as she sips it. She asks about its ingredients. He has recommended it; she is, clearly, a connoisseur. He tells her the ingredients, but he is watching the line of her throat, her breasts, the line of her arm as she lifts the glass and sips. Good drink, isn't it, and it has quite an effect, he says to her, with a wink. She is delighted with it all, quietly: the smooth, seemingly effortless drink, and the attention of this man. He is, in a sense, an unknown quantity. But his quality is known: he is crude. She looks at his thumb: by which she might gainsay the aspect of his privates. Yes, he is crude. Not merely in the sense of raw material. In the sense of being cultured, or polished. He is a man who will most probably have fine skin, which is so important. But a man who will wink. Gesture broadly and perhaps tell smutty stories. Not quite a man who will bruise a woman, but possibly. Possibly.

He moves to the other end of the bar to attend to the orders of two people who have come in. A young woman whose flesh is rounded and foolish, and another, with her, a companion of equal shape and similar proportions. They remind her of the words 'simper' and 'giggle,' and they assume those names in her mind, for the while. The dark woman notices that they seem to know the bartender, are affable and effusive in their greeting. One of them in particular. And they offer her a greeting as well. Are you new in this city? But one of the young women is wary of her. The dark woman can smell this. She smiles and greets both of them in turn. Not collectively. In a brief while, the dark woman leaves. She is secure.

The following night, at a slightly later hour, she returns. She sees that one of the rounded women is already seated at the bar. This is not unexpected. As she seats herself nearby, she watches as the counter-cook from a near restaurant comes in, giving a plate of food to the bartender. Saying, to the round woman, let me feed him and he'll be all ready to go. In a fond tone which covers them both. Yes, thinks the dark woman. Yes. Feed him, and he will be ready to go.

A man enters the bar. He seems a friend of the bartender. He sits next to the round woman; between her and the dark woman. He speaks his name to the dark woman, who refuses his hand, but in a graceful way. So as not to offend. He has an aura which is familiar to her. It is necessary that he be drawn to the round woman. In a bit, the bartender has finished his plateful, has wiped his mouth with his hand. He comes over to them, to the three grouped at one end of the bar. He leans across, intimately, to the dark woman and invites her to leave with him. It is time for the bar to close. Perhaps she would like to have some coffee with him.

Of course. Why don't the four of them go for coffee. Yes, excellent. So they leave, tout ensemble. But the dark woman moves ahead of the others, so that the bartender has to walk rapidly to catch her. Now he is walking beside her, as she has designed. Back of them, the round woman is talking closely with the friend. Now that they are away from the glisten of bottles, the wild smell of the liquor, the certain atmosphere of the lights of the bar, the dark woman is in a different position. Her clothing seems different. It is as if it has changed color, or texture. In relationship to the night air. The bartender is attentive to her: a gesture of the hand to the waist, a touch at the nape of the neck. That place of nerve endings. Which she tolerates, as a strongly sensual being. What a waste it would be, not to respond to the positive possibilities.

None of them can finish the coffee. After all, it has merely been a ruse. They leave. Where shall we go? A walk? No, let me take you all to my house, says the bartender. I should like to show you my house. It is not so far from here. Quite comfortable. All right. The slight leer was implicit. They slide into the dark woman's car. Her car is of a foreign make, and not modern; the dashboard is of old wood, and there is a soft glow about it. Fine wood, well cared-for. The seats are covered in what seems to be a tan leather. She is driving, and the bartender is beside her, his hand at the nape of her neck, sensuously. His house is not far and it is as she has expected: an ordinary house.

The bartender takes her to his room, and the others go elsewhere. The dark woman goes willingly with him. In the half-light her skin has the glisten of silk. Whereas his has the shine of fur, of clean and fine fur. It is true that he has skin of a fine texture. It is also true that he is a crude man. Not a man who would bruise, but a man without the courtesies. He will neither tarry nor sport. He will insist on being with her body. And she, knowing she cannot reproduce, can accede. It makes the body available for such purely sensual times as these.

They can hear the sounds of the other two in a nearby room. Without being able to distinguish their words. The dark woman talks with the bartender, as they lie together on his bed. She is telling him about her plans for him, but in terms that he can understand. She wants him to help her with the building of her house. To come to her during the daytime, when he is not at his bartending job. In such a way, she can arrange it so that he will spend much of his time with her. Eventually it will move as she wishes. But he is also talking. How intelligent you seem, he says. How many languages can you speak? and she tells him, omitting two. O marvelous. Then you can teach me. Well, I might, she says. That depends. She sees that this is his price. He does not

think himself a smart enough man; he covets my elegance, my polish, as if one could come by it so easily. By being taught! The man is thicker about the waist than she had imagined. So fleshy at the waist as to almost ruin the line of the torso. But that can be corrected.

The dark woman has to leave at once; she has no more time to give to this episode. It has another time to spin out. She offers to leave. He is clearly fascinated. He cannot stop talking about what he wants, his unhappiness with the way his life has been. She says, in a comforting tone, that she has every intention of changing all that. They tell the others she is leaving. She is asked if she will give a ride to them, but she cannot do this, as it would reveal in which section of that city she is living. Even though her refusal makes her seem rude. The round woman thinks her rude. But of course this does not matter. And the round woman stops her, sharply: let me ask you a question: how old are you? And the dark woman answers: a lady never tells her age, and a lady never asks! The men laugh at this. She could not have told them her age. She does not know it herself.

When she leaves, the bartender goes with her as far as the end of his road. Will she come to meet him tomorrow night? He is pleased with her body and with her promises. Yes, she will come, is he quite sure he wants her to? She is quite sure. And she will come: he may expect her during the late evening, before that bar is closing. And then they notice that they have been followed down the road, by the round woman. Who disappears as they turn full sight on her. Wonder what she thinks she is doing, says the bartender, in a sullen way. O I know, all right, the dark woman says. And leaves.

The following night, she is restless, and cannot stay in her house. There are too many noises. She must go to where he is waiting. She is drawn to the feeling of this episode. But as she approaches the bar, with its neon sign in blues and greens, she stops. She is early for the appointment. There is an aura of danger for her, she had better wait. She stops at the entrance; just outside the entrance. As she is going over her plans, he does come out to her. He begs her not to come into the bar. Tells her he has been ill that day; is, in fact, not well right now. And cannot see her that night. It is the round woman, she says to him. She is in there. What is between you. We are friends, he says. I have never made love to her. I only know her a short while; but she is angry with me. I was supposed to leave here with her, last night, and I was with you. I could not change that, the way it went with us, and now she is crying. But the dark woman says, a woman does not cry when she is angry. I want to see her; she is in there. Yes, the bartender says. But it is better that you two not meet again. She wants me. Well, but she shall not have you, you know. She has nothing to teach you, as I do. Re-

member that. She will not know how to please you, how to satisfy your needs as I do.

So saying, she pushes gently past him, past his protest, into the bar-room. Feels that the round woman is seated in a booth. Senses her there, rather than seeing her. And goes to that booth.

How are you tonight, she says to the round woman, maliciously. And the other woman looks at her, with mouth twisted: are you playing a game? What are you doing? Where do you come from? No, is the answer. I am not playing at all. I am quite serious. You need not be concerned with where I come from, my dear. And I will sit down here. And she sits down opposite the bitter face of the round woman. Well into the game. I asked you how you are tonight, she repeats, with a delicate emphasis on the last word, lest she be misunderstood. He is mine, the round woman says, leave him alone, you could have many other men, you are older and more experienced. How do you know that, asks the dark woman, how can we evaluate what one woman knows or another. To be a woman is a difficult thing. Right now, it is more difficult for you than for me. I feel that you have no pity, says the round woman. I do not care for your feelings, she is told. What you feel is not relevant at this time. But I love him, the round woman says. This is not even interesting, says the dark woman to her.

The round woman begins to weep. The man comes over to the two women from his post behind the bar. He has a confused and stupid expression on his face. He sits down beside the round woman, puts his arm around her shoulders. The dark woman is quite calm. He looks at her. I think I made a mistake last night, he says. This woman is my friend and I care about her feelings. Ah but they do not matter, says the dark woman to him. Get your face up, round woman. You do not know him enough to love him. He is not a man for you, nor any woman, to love, just now. What do you mean by that, how do you know all that? You may believe it or not, she is told. You are a fool who will never exceed herself, but even this is not your fault. You would do well to save yourself at this point; to be graceful. But the dark woman is not heard: the woman opposite her is blind to her words. The dark woman, always aware of grace, sees that the other woman is behaving in a clumsy manner.

Leave him alone, she pleads again. I love him. I love him. And the man has his animal look, caught between them. He is sitting next to one, touching her body, but looking across at the other; the body of the other. And he cannot move. The blues and greens of the sign are flashing across his face softly, from the street. At the opening of his shirt, the fine pelt of him shows. The dark woman does not speak to him, but to the woman opposite her: This talk about love is not

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