

Bellying-Up · *Lillian Jen*

BARRY WAS IN the bedroom, naked, waiting for Jane. He rolled back the covers of the bed and lay down.

"You almost done?" he called to her. She was in the bathroom.

"Almost," she answered.

He thought about the way, when they first got married, they would fall into bed, and not brush their teeth until morning. Now Jane had things to do at night: scrubs she used, and astringent, creams. He reached to the night table and lifted an empty beer bottle to his mouth. A last drop trickled out onto his tongue, then he lowered the bottle onto his stomach and just held it there, with both hands. He hadn't told Jane about his being fired yet. Running a finger along the inside of the lip of the bottle, he wondered if he was going to be able to find new work.

"You almost done?" he called again.

"Just have to tweeze my brows," she said.

He heard a drawer open and close.

"Tweeze them in the morning," he said.

"You want me to be beautiful or don't you," she answered.

It was raining outside. He thought about how, living in the basement apartment, he couldn't even hear the rain, though he could see it. The rain ran in luminous lines down the black window, which was high in the room, up along the ceiling. Feeling cold, he moved closer to the night table, put the beer bottle back on it, and reached up for the neck of the lamp that swung out from the headboard of the bed. It was already on; he brought it down closer to him and warmed his hands under the bulb.

"What you making yourself beautiful for," he said. "You got a reason?"

"You," she said. Her voice was muffled. "Nobody else. Just you and me."

"Don't put cream all over your eyes," he told her.

"Why don't you just go ahead and go to sleep," she said.

Barry listened to Jane turn the water faucet on. A pipe shrieked. He took the lamp and put it back behind his head, then reached for a magazine. He read an article about short-term investments.

It was the economy, he thought. Wasn't anything anybody could do about the economy. Businesses were going belly-up everyday. He read

another article, about tax-deductible vacations. The pictures were of St. Martin, Copenhagen, Alaska. He flipped the pages and, feeling colder, finally covered himself with a sheet. He switched the light off and closed his eyes, then opened them again. He stared at the light coming from the bathroom.

She wasn't making any noise.

"What are you doing now?" he called.

"Go on ahead and sleep," she said.

He got quietly out of bed and put on his robe. Then he walked over to the bathroom door and looked in. The light made him squint.

Jane was sitting on the edge of the bathtub, reading a magazine. She was wearing a lavender t-shirt and white bikini underwear, and her toes were curled under, buried in the fluffy gold mat. There was hair all over the mat. The counter was covered with cotton balls and jars, the mirror was steamed up, and magazines were heaped on the bathroom scale, by Jane's feet. The air smelt of herbal shampoo. Barry hesitated, then saw his black umbrella hanging, closed, from the shower rod. He stepped into the room.

Jane stood up quickly, narrow-shouldered and blonde. She had eye-cream in a big white circle around her eyes.

"Sorry," she said. "I just got to reading this article."

He reached up behind her for his umbrella, then turned to leave.

"You going somewhere?" she asked.

He turned around again to face her, and looked straight at her eyes. They were olive green, like the walls. He placed the silver tip of the umbrella between her ankles.

"I own this place," he said. Then he slowly drew the shiny metal all the way up the inside of her right leg.