

Living to Be a Hundred · *Robert Boswell*

IT'S FAIR TO SAY that our house was not in order. Furniture from the living room filled the kitchen. Chairs inverted on chairs surrounded the dining table. A long tan couch, stripped of its cushions, blocked the hall. In our bedroom, beside the dresser, a wooden coffee table stood upright like a basset hound begging for scraps.

On our knees in the emptied living room, we pieced together carpet remnants. I aligned a wide strip of tape, bending low to hold it, my shirt wrinkling against my back like molting skin. Harvis applied heat with Linda's travel-iron, while she held the odd-shaped pieces together. We inched across the floor, inhaling the odors of scorched glue, new carpet, our own sweating bodies. An oscillating fan vibrated against the wall every fifteen seconds, the air from it blocked by Mix, our sleeping golden retriever.

"This is not the way I thought it would work," Linda said. She pressed against the upside down carpet—material rough and woven like a gunny sack. In the crush of hands, her fingers lay on top of mine, our wedding rings grating. "It's going so slowly." Drops of sweat glistened at the base of her neck and on her chest, the straps of her white blouse turning gray with it. Her hair, gathered in a bun behind her head, had ends like the teeth of a comb, and even they drooped in the heat. "It's going to take forever." Her voice sounded desperate, with an edge that suggested she was about to cry. Ordinarily, Linda was the handy one around the house—fixing the clock radio when the numbers quit rolling, building a box to cover Kitty's litter bed—but putting a carpet together had been my idea. For weeks Harvis and I had collected remnants from the construction site where we worked.

"Maybe we should take a break," I said.

The fan rattled against the wall. Linda shook her head until the noise stopped. "The house is such a mess. We can't quit now." She was twenty-eight with a sweetly freckled face and hair as blonde as running water. We'd met in college, an archaeology class, which had been my major. She'd studied art history. We had been married seven years and put up with a lot of lousy jobs and bad apartments, but the past couple of years it had become harder because we couldn't see an end to it.

"Damn." Harvis shook his hand in the air. "Burned my pinky." A bubble of glue coagulated on a finger as thick as a wiener. He put his hands on his knees and straightened his back. Beads of perspiration shone on his forehead. "We won't finish today," he said. "That's clear enough."

The dog groaned at this remark, which made us laugh, and, just like that, we changed our moods and worked happily again.

Linda bought and sold used clothing at a hip second-hand store. Before I got the job working construction, I had been a short-order cook, and before that, a cashier at a convenience market. I was thirty-two. Construction paid best and it wasn't so killing. You know what I mean, killing? The past couple of years had been tough, but I had begun to think things were looking up.

Linda started talking about a woman who had come into the store carrying a black fingertip coat and wanting another just like it. "We don't stock many coats this time of year. I knew I couldn't help her." She ran her hand across the base of her neck as she spoke, wiping the sweat onto her jeans.

Harvis leaned against the iron. "What'd she want with a coat like the one she already had?"

Linda nodded. "That's what I wanted to know."

It seemed obvious to me. "Someone had told her what a nice coat it was, and she wanted to make a gift of one just like it."

"Women don't do that," Harvis said. "They never want anyone to have the same clothes."

"I asked her." Linda pushed a new piece of carpet toward me, leaning low. I could see down her blouse. We slept in the same bed every night, but the sight of her breasts at that moment pleased me as it would a teenager. Harvis was looking too. "She wanted to get rid of the coat but couldn't bear to do it until she had another like it. She said she just felt like a change."

I laughed. "Sounds like a nut." I cut another strip of tape. The dog groaned again and rolled onto his back.

"She didn't look like one," Linda said. "She looked very normal."

"You can't tell a nut by its shell." Harvis smiled at his joke. Then he jerked his hand away from the iron. "Life is too much," he said and stuck his thumb in his mouth.

"Let me iron for a while." I pushed him out of the way. "You aren't going to have any fingers left."

"I'm going to make some iced tea." Linda smiled as she stood. We were all happy, even Harvis with his burned fingers.

I shoved the scraps we hadn't used into a corner, making a path from the front door to the kitchen. There was no point in returning furniture. We were only half-finished. The theater down the street offered a discount in the afternoon, and we had decided to get out of the heat and away from the mess. Harvis showered first then took Mix on a walk.

"That was almost fun," Linda said, her back to the shower nozzle, water spraying off her head in all directions. "It was almost awful, too." Her teeth were as white as porcelain.

"It'll be nice once we're through," I said. "And we could never afford it otherwise."

"You don't have to convince me." She rubbed soap on my chest. A year earlier, after a Sunday of sweating and only half-finishings, we would have been angry with one another. We would have blamed and accused. Linda ran the bar of soap across my stomach, down my thighs, and kissed me.

"Harvis is a good friend," she said, soaping me now between my legs, and kissing me again, so that the only way I had to agree was to nod.

"We can save Harvis a seat." Linda stood in the hall, tucking a purple T-shirt into a pair of khaki shorts. The couch separated us. She combed her wet hair with her fingers. "I can't stand this."

Kitty was in her box, wailing. She was an old cat, one Linda had been given for her fifteenth birthday. Over the course of the past year almost everything had become painful for her. Linda had built the box to reduce odor, but it had become the container for such yeowls of anguish that each time the cat entered we were afraid she would not come out.

Linda crawled across the couch, and just as we opened the front door, the wailing stopped. Kitty padded across the room and out to the porch, where she leaped to the railing, stretched, and closed her eyes. Linda rubbed the cat's belly. "Lazy Kitty," she said, then stepped down from the porch and to the hibiscus bush, which was in bloom. The flowers were red and long, shaped like the end of a bugle. She put one behind her ear, giggling.

Down the hill, Harvis approached, hands in his pockets, Mix loping beside him, leash trailing the ground. Harvis saw this as a way of getting around the leash law. He liked circumventing rules. While we watched,

Mix abruptly lifted his head and darted into the street. A yellow cat streaked across the pavement to a utility pole. Mix, as usual, arrived late, barking and standing on his hind legs. The cat climbed straight up the pole.

"That's why there's a leash law." Linda called out so that Harvis could hear.

He had already grabbed the dog by the collar and pulled him away. "Mix wouldn't hurt anything."

"You better hurry," I said. "We'll miss the start of the movie."

Then everyone was in motion. Harvis and Mix ran to the house, while Linda and I walked toward the pole. "Hey, cat," Linda called. "You can come down now." The cat looked at us but kept climbing. "Here, kitty," she said. "Here, kitty, kitty." The yellow cat reached the transformer box and stepped onto it.

"Maybe she needs to turn around," I said, but Linda kept calling. Meanwhile, Kitty had jumped down from the porch railing and obediently trotted down the hill.

"Did you think I was calling you?" Linda said. She retrieved Kitty and began walking back to the house, passing Harvis who had bolted out of the door to catch us.

"You're going the wrong way," he said.

At that moment, high above me—a loud electric snap. I spun, raising my arms. The yellow cat paused in mid-air, three feet above the transformer box, before beginning her fall to the asphalt. She bounced once, then lay still.

Linda screamed. She looked at me in disbelief, as if it were I who had fallen. "God," she said, her voice squeaking, and ran into the house. Harvis stood on the pavement like a statue, hands suspended above his waist, legs spread as if he were about to run.

Here's what I couldn't decide: Should I go to the cat or to my wife? The cat surely was dead. My wife was crying. What comfort can you give the dead? I wish that was all there was to my decision, but there was also this: I didn't want to touch a thing so newly dead.

Linda knelt on a pile of carpet scraps, crying, stroking Kitty. "How could that happen? How bad is it hurt?"

"It's dead. The shock killed it." I dropped to one knee and touched her back. "Or maybe the fall."

"I should have kept Mix on the leash." Harvis stood by the door, hands in his pockets.

"It was a freak thing," I said. "We should get a trash bag. We shouldn't leave it out there."

"A box," Linda said, leaving me, stepping over another mound of carpet and then onto the couch, ducking her head as she crossed into the hall. She returned with a cardboard box from our bedroom closet.

From the porch, Linda watched Harvis and me walk back down the street, but the cat was gone. "Jesus," I said and knelt as if it were still there. A tiny square of blood marked the asphalt. "I was sure it was dead."

"It must be in terrible pain," Harvis said.

"They hide," Linda called as she ran toward us. "When they're hurt or something's wrong, they find a place to hide."

We searched under cars and porch steps, beneath an old tub in a neighbor's yard, inside a tipped garbage can. I lifted a sheet of plywood that leaned against the side of an adobe house. A black and white cat stared at me, nothing like the one who had fallen. We searched separately until dark, and we returned separately, Linda several steps ahead, arms crossed as if against a chill, and I thought what little it took to throw your life off, to turn it upside down.

"Castellani," Johansson said to me. "Tella truth. You think any of these punks they got fighting today could stand up to Joe Louis? Or Ezzard Charles? Ingemar Johansson? Tella truth, what you think?"

We sat together for lunch in what little shade the skeletal building offered—Johansson, Lernic, Harvis, and I. There used to be more of us, but this was a desert town and it dried out in the summer, everyone going away, out of the heat. Then Graham was fired for drinking and Iglesia deported. The apartments were almost completed. Our crew stayed small.

"I don't follow boxing," I said and finished off the sandwich I'd thrown together before leaving for work. It had been a bad night, Linda and I with no place to sit but the bed, nothing to do but the carpet, and neither of us willing to work on that. Harvis had gone home, but I'd wished that he'd stayed for a while. Sometimes he made it easier for us to be together. Linda, I'm pretty sure, had felt the same.

"They couldn't hold Ingemar's mouthpiece," Johansson said. "He's practically a relative of yours truly, more or less, like we'd be cousins if he lived around here." Johansson was in charge of us, a red-faced little man who wore long-sleeve plaid shirts rolled to the elbows. "And he could

punch. You ever seen those films of him whupping Patterson? Tella truth, you ever seen such a punch? On my father's side, we all been fighters."

Johansson and Lernic sat on the tailgate of a company truck. Harvis and I reclined against concrete, the foundation for the apartments. Dry-wallers worked down the site from us, where we'd been the week before. At the far end were painters and carpet layers. Eventually it would be a big complex. The pool was already in.

"I like to watch girls fight," Lernic said. "They don't have rules for that." His face was big, sloppy; his skin, the color and texture of angel food cake. "Rip those clothes, Mama. Yank that hair. Bite that tit." He laughed and leaned back on his elbows. "Harvis was a boxer, I bet. Big and dumb enough. Fag enough. You a boxer, Harvis?"

"Fuck off," Harvis said.

"Scratch you like a girl, I bet." Lernic laughed again. "Big old nothing Harvis rip at your shirt. 'Let me at them titties. Let me at them titties.'" Lernic wagged his fingers at Johansson's shirt, then leaned back again. "Bite this, Harvis." He gripped the crotch of his pants.

I stood and nudged Harvis on the shoulder. "Let's walk off lunch. We've got fifteen minutes."

"He don't mean nothing," Johansson said. "Tell them you don't mean nothing, Lernic. It's his way of being funny."

Lernic's hand was still at his crotch. "Watch your step, Castellani. That big fag'll cornhole you in the behind."

"That's redundant," I said, walking away. "Like saying Lernic the dumbass."

"There you go," Johansson said. "Everybody's got a way of being funny."

"That guy makes me crazy," Harvis said, throwing his thumb over his shoulder when we'd walked far enough away.

"Screw Lernic," I said. "You let assholes get to you and your life is shit."

"I'm supposed to act like he doesn't exist?"

"He's a pathetic boob."

"You've got Linda," Harvis said. "You can say that stuff. I've got to take boobs seriously. I could wind up one. Hell, I could be one already. You've got Linda. You can let the rest go."

"So, you've got me *and* Linda," I said.

“See?” Harvis put one of his big fingers square in my chest. “That’s just the kind of thing you say to a pathetic boob. See there?”

After lunch I took off my shirt. That was one of the things I liked about the job. I could take off my shirt and work on the high boards, stepping from scaffolding to beam. And the smell of lumber. The pull and give of my muscles. The paycheck.

I had planned to be an archaeologist, although I know now I might as well have planned to be an astronaut. “You can be whatever you want,” my mother had told me, “whatever you put your heart into.” A good-natured lie. I could not be an archaeologist, not and make enough money to eat.

Our plan, Linda’s and mine, had been for her to go to graduate school to become a librarian. It wasn’t exactly what she’d wanted, but it sounded all right to her. Then she’d get a job and I’d study archaeology again, give it a shot. That was why we’d moved here, near a university. There was nothing wrong with our plan, but we couldn’t make it work. At first we needed Linda’s income to get by. Then we bought a television on time. We went to the movies. Sometimes we went out and ate steak. We didn’t sell out our dreams—we siphoned them off.

Construction was better than cooking burgers, a lot better, but once, years ago, I went as a student on a dig in Mexico, and with a whisk and an airbrush, I uncovered a clay jar, a carved spoon, the curved line of a jawbone. I studied people by looking at what had endured. At the ruins of Palenque, I climbed to the opening in the temple, then descended dark stairs, turned a narrow corner, and there was the sepulchral slab, covering the body of an ancient priest. What I felt was wonder, and no matter how many nails I pounded or boards I sawed, I could not claim wonder at seeing a building become. There were some who could; I was not among them. My life hadn’t worked out the way I’d planned.

“Johansson.” Lernic yelled although Johansson was only a few feet away.

I looked down at them. Lernic, on his knees, marked a sheet of plywood. Johansson and Harvis unloaded lumber from the truck.

“You see that show on TV last night?” Lernic said. “I almost forgot. You see it?”

“My television gets nothing but static these days. Lot like you, Mr. Ler-

nic.” Johansson backed away from the truck with an armload of two-by-fours. Harvis lifted the other end.

“It was educational, Mr. Johansson. And you could have used it to save one of your employees — Mr. Harvis. You do have a Mr. Harvis working for you?” He quit marking the plywood and stared at Johansson, as if Harvis wasn’t there. I could see it all from the second story scaffolding.

“Go to fucking hell,” Harvis said.

“Lay off,” Johansson said.

“I got something to tell you, goddamn it.” Leric stood and faced Harvis. “This guy on TV said you can die from screwing nothing but your hand, and here I am trying to save your worthless life, and you got no gratitude.”

Harvis dropped his end of the lumber. The boards rattled against the tailgate. “You fuck,” he said and stepped toward him.

Leric picked up the circular saw and revved it once. “Come on, Meat. Come get carved.”

“Put that down,” Johansson said. “Quit being funny. You want a keep your job, you put that down.”

Leric turned his head from Harvis to Johansson and back to Harvis. For an instant, none of us moved.

I lifted the hammer from my belt and let it drop near Leric’s feet. He jumped, then smiled up at me. “Huh,” he grunted, put down the saw, and went back to work.

I couldn’t hate Leric, although I wanted to. There had been a day, only a couple of weeks back, when Harvis was down with the flu and staying at our house because his cooler was out and he had no television. I had gone home at lunch break to have a bowl of soup with him and was ten minutes late getting back. I didn’t want Leric to have anything else to throw at Harvis, so I said it was Linda who was sick.

Johansson let it go, but Leric, of course, didn’t.

“You pussy-whipped bastard. Worst case I’ve ever seen,” he said. He’d met Linda when she used to take me to work, before I knew Harvis well enough to ride with him.

That same afternoon Johansson told us about a book he’d like to write, *The Life and Legend of Ingemar Johansson*. “I got the first sentence. That’s the hardest part. You listen a this,” he said. “Every man has a day in his life when nobody can defeat him, and that day for Ingemar Johansson hap-

pened when he was fighting for the heavyweight championship of the world.” He beamed. “You read that sentence, who’s gonna be able to stop? I figure I write about that whole idea, how everybody gets one day when they’re the best. Ingemar, he got his day when he had the big fight. That’s a difference between a great man and one a us.”

“Shit,” Lernic said.

“No,” Johansson said. “Really, what you think? Most people, they get their day, they probably sleep through it or lay around drunk. A Johansson don’t. He gets the fight of his life.”

Lernic snorted. “You’re not related to any champion, and you know it.”

“We got the same name.”

“A name don’t mean shit.”

“Name’s as good as anything. Tella truth, if they’d been a Ingemar Lernic who whopped Joe Frazier, say. You’d be proud as two peacocks.”

“The only guy could have beaten Frazier was just what beat him: another big, dumb nigger. I’m going to be proud because I got the same name as a big dumb nigger?” Lernic hammered against a board three times, as if in answer to his question.

“Names mean a lot,” Johansson said. “Castellani, tella truth. If there was a Ingemar Castellani, you’d be as proud as two peacocks.”

“You never called anybody a nigger when Graham worked here,” I said to Lernic.

“So? He was a nigger. You think I’m stupid?” He raised the hammer to pound the board again. There were no nails in the board.

“Names must mean something,” I said.

“You see there.” Johansson wagged a knobby finger. “Now that’s settled. We got work to do.”

Johansson walked away, but Lernic put his hand on my shoulder. “Your wife is pretty,” he said. He looked at me as if I should understand something. “I know all about it.” He squeezed my shoulder slightly, then looked at Johansson’s back for a second. “The hardest thing for a man, is to be a man and still keep a woman.” He dropped his hand to the head of his hammer, which rode in his carpenter’s belt. “I just thought I’d say that.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Okay.”

He lifted the hammer to eye-level, staring at it self-consciously. For an

instant I saw it as an archaeologist might hundreds of years from now, how the blunt black head and sweeping rear prongs resembled the head of a dragon.

"We got work to do," Lernic said, and since then, I couldn't hate him, much as I tried.

Harvis and I arrived at the house before Linda. The living room, the mess of carpet and tape, and the kitchen, the tangle of chairs around Kitty's box, kept us from entering. We sat on the front porch, stalling, until she arrived.

"We can't seem to face it," I said as she walked up the porch steps.

She shielded her eyes with her hands and looked into the window. "This is a test." She spoke somberly, her lips inches from the glass. "A trial of some sort." Linda believed in god, not a man with a gray beard, but a force that gave reason to being. "If we can get through this, it'll mean something."

"If we get through this, it'll mean there is no intelligent life on this planet," I said.

Harvis shook his big head. "If we get through this, it'll mean we'll live to be a hundred."

Linda turned from the window. She wasn't smiling. "Let's go somewhere and have a beer," she said.

Harvis chuckled his thumb toward the window. "I left some in the refrigerator."

"I know that." She stepped from the porch and we followed.

We had pepperoni pizza with extra sauce and drank beer by the pitchers. Harvis told us how he used to be a mugger. "It's the truth," he said. "For about a week. I wasn't any good at it." I wanted to know what made him do it. Linda wanted to know what made him quit.

"I was broke and living in this little dump in Chicago, and my head was all turned around every which way, and I couldn't get a job, and I couldn't think straight, and I'd see these women by themselves or with little kids, and they all had purses, and all I had to do was go and yank it away and run off, and there it was." Harvis, when he drank, rambled.

"You were a purse snatcher," Linda said. "That's not the same as a mugger."

"Whatever you call it, it was low, and I felt mean about it, but I

couldn't get turned around the right way until one day I was out in the park and along comes a young woman carrying a bundle with both arms and a big purse hanging from her elbow, one of those hippie bags, and I figured she wouldn't have much money, but I could just run by and grab the purse and keep on running, and I didn't need all that much money — you see, I was all turned around in my head, but I wasn't greedy." He took an enormous drink from his glass, filled it again, and took another big drink. He emptied the pitcher, then tapped it against the table, holding it as if it were a mug, tapping it as if it were a gavel.

"I ran right up to her, and I had my hand out to rip off her purse, and just then she turned to me, and stared right at me, and she said, 'I need to find the hospital. My baby has died.'" He brought the pitcher down again, breaking it, the handle remaining in his hand, the pitcher falling into his lap. His palm began to bleed. "My head wasn't on straight, and I didn't know what was up, and I didn't know what was down, and that little baby was no bigger than a football, and I wanted to do something good for that woman, and you know, I couldn't think of anything, except taking her to the hospital, which is what I did."

Linda reached into his lap and retrieved the pitcher. She kissed him on the forehead and on the cheek.

Each night we found a reason not to work on the carpet, or we worked for half an hour then sat next to the fan and drank beer and talked. Friday morning, I stepped out of the shower, and Linda lay over the arm of the couch in the hall, crying. I tried to lift her to me, but she didn't want to be held. "We'll finish this tomorrow," I said, "if it takes all day and night." She just crawled across the couch.

After work, Harvis drove me to the florist, then dropped me off at the second-hand store, where I waited in our car until Linda was free. We went out to eat, then drove to a motel.

What I'm saying is I knew there was real danger. I was trying to ward it off.

The motel room was a pastel yellow. A painting of the ocean at night hung above our bed. The air conditioner, which lined the wall beneath the window, hummed and chortled like a friendly drunk. We crawled under the sheets and watched a movie on television. A red-headed woman walked briskly down a city street, wearing a red blouse, red skirt, red

shoes. She practically skipped. Linda put her hand on my chest. "How can we afford this?" It was the first thing either of us had said for a long time.

"We needed to get out of the house." I spoke softly and touched her hair. "We can fix it tomorrow. Tonight we needed to get out."

"We could have stayed with Harvis," she said. "We didn't have to spend all this money."

"This is better," I said.

The woman, in an office now, lifted her red blouse over her head, untied her red skirt, and she was naked. It startled me, like going to a friend's house and a stranger answers the door.

"This must be cable." Linda leaned forward in the bed. "Do you think she's pretty?"

"I don't know," I said, although she was obviously very pretty.

"She is," Linda said. The woman walked around the office in high heels. A man behind a desk smoked a cigar as he watched her. "Why do you think Harvis can't get a girlfriend?"

"I don't know that he can't. He just doesn't. He's shy around women."

Linda crossed her arms across her breasts. We were naked, and I had been hoping we would make love. "He's not shy around me," she said.

"He knows you."

The woman stepped behind the desk and began undressing the man.

"Are they going to show everything?" Linda said. "Are they going to do it? Is this that kind of movie?"

We watched the man and woman make love. The camera moved in close and then backed away.

"They're really doing it." Linda raised herself to her knees and watched. I ran my hand along her leg, but she took it in her palms, patted it gently just the way she pats Mix, then placed it back at my side. "You know who would enjoy this?" she said. "You know what would be fun?"

"That's not a good idea," I said.

"I'll just call and tell him about it." She had already moved toward the phone. "We haven't seen him all day."

"I worked with him eight hours. He took me to the florist. He drove me to the store." She had begun to dial. I reached between her arms and stopped the call.

Linda dropped the receiver and walked to the window. She peeked through the curtains. "Oh," she said softly, and I thought she said something more.

"Come back to bed." I sat on the edge.

She faced me, my beautiful wife, naked, almost crying. "Let me do what I want."

"I've been with him all day. I don't want to see Harvis." Before I could say anything else, she opened the door and stepped outside.

The night was warm. Cicadas rattled. The sky, dark as if blackened by fire. She stood with her back to me in the parking lot. I dragged along the bedspread and threw it over both of us. Her fingers locked around my neck, elbows at my chest. We rested forehead to forehead. "Did you feed Mix?" she whispered. "Did you put something out for Kitty?"

"Harvis said he'd take care of it. He wanted to walk Mix."

Tears appeared on her lashes. "I'm all turned around inside," she said. Whether she knew she was echoing Harvis, I'm not sure. "I want to run through this parking lot naked. I want to scream and wake up everyone. I want to hit you. I want this off of me." She yanked the bedspread down. "I want to stand in the middle of the street and shout the meanest things I can think of. I want to leave you." She tried to pull away from me, but I had a good grip around her waist.

"We'll go back inside." I jerked her even closer. "You can call anyone you want."

She shook her head once, sharply. But she came with me and turned off the television and turned off the lights and lay near me in the dark until she could sleep.

We woke early and drove home. Harvis got there at eight, work time. He had Mix with him. "You let this dog sleep in bed with you? He's a bed hog. Almost nuzzled me to the floor."

"You want coffee?" I said.

"Yeah." He petted Mix and looked at Linda. "He farts too."

She laughed and pointed at me. "He won't let him on our bed."

"I don't blame him," Harvis said. "There's too much dog in this dog."

By ten it was sweltering. We worked steadily, switching jobs, crawling across the floor. Linda and I were in shorts; our knees and elbows burned. We had used all the big scraps, and now pieced together the small ones, which took longer and accomplished less.

"Maybe we don't have enough to make it," Linda said. She sounded hopeful.

"We've got plenty," Harvis said.

"We've got enough for the hall, too," I added, but she didn't laugh.

We ate lunch on the porch, sitting on the rough, sun-dried planks, our backs against the railing. The odor of hibiscus, normally sweet, smelled like smoke, as if cooked by the sun.

"This is good." Harvis waved his egg salad sandwich, his arm brilliant with sweat.

"Oh yeah?" Linda said. "You must have something different from mine. Let me have a bite."

"No way," he said.

She grabbed his arm and tried to wrestle it toward her. "A bite. A bite," she said, laughing, pressing her cheek against his bicep.

"Forget it," he said.

She leaned into him hard and pulled on his slick arm.

"I'll get it." I tried to sound conspiratorial. Before I could snatch the sandwich she threw herself on top of Harvis and dug her face into the smashed sandwich. Egg salad covered her mouth and cheeks, the bridge of her nose. "Delicious," she said, lifting her head. She wiped off her chin and offered me the finger. When I parted my lips, she pressed her finger deep into my mouth.

At two-thirty Harvis and I crept across the couch to the bedroom and searched through drawers until I found PE shorts that fit him. His jeans had become unbearable. We crawled back and worked bare chested. "Cheats," Linda said when we took off our shirts. She pulled off her shoes and socks, then wiped her face with the tail of her T-shirt. Her bare stomach startled me as the television had the night before. She saw my face, looked to Harvis, who had his nose in the carpet, then lifted the T-shirt higher, wiping her forehead and exposing her white breasts.

My heart beat against my chest like a paddle.

By three, we knew we would not finish before dark, probably not even if we worked well into the night. A screech came from the kitchen, from Kitty's box, a scale of pain.

"I can't stand it," Linda said. She ran to the couch, ducked low, and disappeared down the hall.

"I'm a fool," I said. A rash had begun on my chest. The cat's cry flattened, then lifted again.

"Give me some more tape," Harvis said.

We heard the shower begin. We fitted more carpet and ironed. When Linda stepped off the couch, she had on a clean white T-shirt and the bottom half of her black bikini. Her wet breasts shown through the shirt like the mounds of a relief map.

We worked as if underwater, each movement deliberate and unreal. Harvis pointed at my rash and put his shirt back on, but I knew and Linda knew it was to hide his erection. He turned his back to us to button the shirt. I looked at Linda and shook my head. It was the wrong thing to do.

She touched Harvis' thigh. He was on his knees facing away, hands still at his buttons. "Linda," I whispered, as if she would hear and not Harvis. She touched his thigh above the knee, lightly, then moved up his leg. He stared at the wall. Her fingers reached the bottom of the PE shorts, ran along the narrow hem. For an instant, none of us moved.

I wish I could say that I yanked her hand away or that I burst into tears, but there was a trembling inside me, a vacillation of spirit. Some part of me wanted to see her fingers continue their climb up his leg, and that part kept the rest of me silent for the long seconds that followed, until Linda pulled her hand away.

We worked another twenty minutes. "I'll make iced tea," Linda said, almost a whisper, but she did not go to the kitchen. She crawled onto the couch and down the hall.

Harvis stood and stared at the doorway where she had just vanished. "I've never wanted anything so bad in my life," he said, then wiped the sweat from his face. I stood and he put his arm around me. "Do something," he said. "Do something fast." He hugged me for an instant. I felt his erection against my hip. He picked up his jeans and left.

I waited for her, expecting her to appear in just the T-shirt. Or less. When she stepped off the couch, she was wearing an old pair of trousers and a blue workshirt. Her eyes were red, her face mottled.

"Harvis had to go," I said.

"Oh." She looked at her pants. "I've been crying."

"It's been tough today."

She nodded. "Do you think we should quit or stick it out?"

My heart pounded again. "I can do a lot myself, if you're tired."

She shook her head and knelt beside me to return to the hard work.

Near dawn, we glued the final fragment into place and flipped the carpet side up, a difficult maneuver, then inched it into the corners, pushing and pulling, flattening. We lay side by side on the carpet we'd made. She put her head against my shoulder.

"We should have bought a mat to go beneath it," she said. "It looks so good. How long will it last without a mat? A year? Two years?"

"It could last a long time," I said.

She rose and turned off the light, then lay beside me again in the dark. "This was a test."

"No, it wasn't." I closed my eyes. "This was just one of those things."

"Oh, is that what this was?" She whispered this in my ear, laughing gently. "I want to sleep here tonight."

I nodded, and our long fatigue settled us one against the other, letting us sleep.

Almost a month later, Harvis and I were asked to work a Saturday for time and a half pay. The smallness of our crew had permitted the dry-wallers to catch up.

Johansson refused on principle. "They don't want this thing built," he told us. "They just want us to fry out there. I worked construction thirty years. I don't gotta take this. My kid could do better than this. Tella truth, boys, you ever seen such a mess?"

I worked the high boards, pounding a ten-penny nail through a two-by-four into a four-by-four column. I had taken my shirt off. The rash was gone.

Harvis and Leric hammered beneath me. Hungover, Leric had been quiet the first hour, but once he started, he talked as if it was all that kept him standing. He talked as if his life depended on it.

"How far up your ass do you shove this hammer every night, Harvis? I'm taking a scientific survey. Three inches? Six inches? I suppose it depends on which end goes in first."

Harvis handled him by being mute, which seemed to push Leric on. I tried to speak for him, but it did no good. Maybe Johansson could have stopped it. He had the power to fire.

We would quit at noon, I thought. We'd go home and eat with Linda and not return. At ten-twenty, I stepped from the scaffolding to the cross-beams. Below me, between my legs, were the two of them, Harvis, like me, hitting a nail, Leric looking up.

"Castellani," Lernic said, "settle something for me. That wife of yours, Linda?"

I stared at him and nodded.

"She do fags like Harvis here, or . . ."

Harvis' hammer swung away from its board, a backhanded swing of the dragon-head hammer, the blood from Lernic's forehead, a sudden hibiscus bloom. His knees gave simultaneously, and he fell to them, and then to the cement, where his body began quivering, and the life shook out of him.

The nail I'd been hammering still stuck out half an inch. My arm swelled with the next swing. That was my position in it: Would I hit the nail while Lernic bled beneath me?

I did not.

"Give me an hour," Harvis said. "I can get to Mexico."

"I'll try," I said.

"Life's too much." He unbuckled his carpenter's belt, letting it fall, the hammer still in his hand.

I nodded, clinging now to the column, arms tight around it.

"Explain to Linda," he said. "Make her understand. As best you can."

I said, "Check his pulse, Harvis."

Harvis shook his head. "He's dead."

"Check it, Harvis."

"I don't want to touch the bastard."

"We have to make sure he's dead," I said. "He could still be alive."

Harvis knelt over Lernic, his knee in the red puddle. He raised his hammer high.

"No!" I yelled it.

Harvis threw the hammer past me. I ducked, but it missed me by a few feet.

"Some things you don't ask," he said and he ran to his car.

I stayed up there a while. Lernic's blood made a big pool. I had to be careful getting down.

The police kept me a couple of hours. Johansson was called. He put on a coat and tie and drove over, his hair greased flat against his head and perfectly parted, a gesture of respect, I guess, for the dead or for the police. "The deceased was a no good who liked to cause trouble," he said. "He was asking for something like this all a his life." They wanted to know

where Harvis might run. I told them he'd lived in Chicago, that he might have family there, or friends. It wasn't exactly a lie. They didn't hassle me too much. They believed me when I said that I was on the high boards when it happened.

I walked home.

I could tell you about the walk, the alleys I deliberately took, the broken glass and rotting fruit, the sweating magazines peeking out of trash lids. I could tell you how, when I finally came down to earth, I tried to pinpoint the moment my life had turned wrong, and how I came to decide that I never should have married Linda, that I should have struggled to pursue my obsessions, that I had been made a coward by love.

I would make my life over, I decided. I would let Linda leave me.

I could tell you about my plans, grand ones and petty ones, but when I came out of the alley near our house I saw Linda in the afternoon sun. She was in the grass on her hands and knees. Her hair was thrown over her head to dry, the way women for generations have dried their hair, a position as timeless as the curve of bone. The back of her neck was white and smooth, an exposed and vulnerable swatch. A thing of wonder.