

## *Joshua Ferris*

### MRS. BLUE

She wants to make love to me in an abandoned train yard beneath an old rusted caboose. I explain to her all the hallway posters reiterating the importance of school attendance. I tell her of the pursuit and reward of higher education. Finally I say it's possible I could be arrested for truancy. She reports in rapid fire on how she needs to be stripped bare in a pitted and forsaken construction site and ravaged in the crane of a yellow tractor. I'm a bit vague, I say to her, on the details of ravaging. I tell her about a renowned public speaker who came to the gym recently to discuss sensitive topics, who said abstinence was best, but if we must, use a condom, and be sure our partners are tested. She says she knows all about that because she voted for him to come at the PTA conference in January. That's when I ask if she's ever been tested. She responds that she grew up to the songs of Johnny Mercer and Julie London, that her mother hosted come-as-you-are parties for the neighborhood girls, and that she in turn purchased a foreign-built station wagon to ensure the safety of her own three children. The risk, she assures me, is all hers. She speaks briefly but knowledgeably of the Illinois penal code. Mrs. Blue, I've come to notice, smells of certain sections of the library seldom visited. "I'm thirteen, Mrs. Blue." "Indeed you are," she says, palming the inner seam of my jeans.

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Gus and I pass through the neighborhood and climb East Hill to the Ransom High Track, where Mrs. Blue does her laps. The track circles the perimeter of the football field. I take to the bleachers as Gus continues on to the brink of the outer lap, where he stretches a little, knee bends and body tucks. Mr. Yackley, his wheat-haired German shepherd, yawns and lies down in his red harness, his head upon a paw. Mrs. Blue introduces herself. "I've been watching you," she says. She is wearing a turquoise warm-up suit with reflectors and a shiny pair of Nikes. She takes out a thin metal flask and drinks from it. "They were discussing heartbreak and weight loss," she says, indicating a group of women walking toward the parking lot, "and I kept wondering

about the boy in the stands who talks to himself.” I explain how I have a nervous condition, how talking to myself is an indication that I’m an anxious child. “Certain medications to sleep,” I say. “Other medications to wake.” She says she understands about the troubles of getting up and the troubles of going down, and it’s only human to need a little help doing both. “But such a young boy,” she adds. Mr. Yackley is leading Gus to the inside track. They always run against the flow of the other joggers. She leans into me, her eyes like sad wilted olives. “Are you familiar,” she asks, “with Mr. Cole Porter?” She begins to hum “My Heart Belongs to Daddy” as the dog guides Gus in a loose and sightless run. “Far be it from me,” she says, “to have a romantic notion. Far be it for a crapped-out, chain-smoking, cancer-laden divorcée to look back on the songs of her youth and remember a better time. But fuck it anyway. Let’s get you the Cole Porter Songbook and lead ourselves a life like a song.”



Burke Hapsburg’s woolly mustache freezes over during his Arctic missions. It is here along the Straits that a scene of widespread destruction is about to occur between Burke Hapsburg’s Scandinavian fighter and the loaded DC-8 of Mustafa the Uranium Merchant. Before impact, Chenye comes walking down the hall. Her white nylon knees cross my line of sight. At her door she puts a key inside the latch, a second key, a second latch, then a third. After the fifth she inches in. I hear the slide and catch of dead bolts, a chain lock, a buttress rod. I return to the collision momentarily stalled in mid-air—collision of international implications unbounded—when Macky appears. He, too, slips inside his room. The planes collide. Parachuting through the brilliant winter sky after ejecting himself from the cockpit, the international crime-fighter loses one limb after another until, landing in an ice gorge, he exists strictly as head and torso. Above me, Macky is making his way along the vents. The weak aluminum flexes and pops under his knees. Burke’s arms and legs are quickly lost beneath vast snowdrifts. A lone finger manages to remain unburied through the brief nightfall, pointing upward at the farthest northern star. In the meantime, Mustafa’s band of mercenary fanatics have risen from the white banks and surrounded helpless Burke, who thumbs his nose at them as best he can. He curses their mothers and talks trash about Allah. “Fine, fine,”

says Mustafa. "Poke fun at the prophet. You are the limbless one. Now you must die." The vents are quiet.



I am explaining to Mrs. Blue about the KR-RMPH. "The KR-RMPH," I say, "is a guttural sound that ends in an agreement between the bottom lip and the teeth." Mrs. Blue says she likes my little teeth. The KR-RMPH, I point out, is made after any high-impact collision, either between cars and cars or people falling to earth from extreme altitudes or buildings shattered by harry-carrys. The BAM, on the other hand, is a commonplace expression for fistfights and low-end collisions, those between cars and people or people falling from high-rises, while the BDLMP is an expression of body parts crushed under the weight of falling meteors, trained elephants, and cars dropped from magnetic strips. "Now let me tell you what it was like when I was a girl," she says. In the beginning it was all a blur. The trees, the seasons, the sky. "It was ticklish, all this creation in a little girl's eyes." But soon a pattern emerged. May followed April. Leaves fell in the fall and the invitations were sent and the children were born and the china stayed in the china cabinet. The mystery of creation and existence went barreling through an inscrutable hole in the ground and she came to. Mrs. Blue, she insists, is always coming to—in her kitchen, her garage, from the corner hibiscus in her neighbor's garden. "When I was a little girl," she says, "no one ever said anything of the possibility of a life unlike a song." She had listened to hymns and she had listened to big band. She fell in love with Patti Page and everywhere she went she searched for a man called Daddy. "Every time I found him," she explains, "Smalls emerged." Smalls is the name she gave her four husbands in celebration of their bodies, their hearts and their minds. "Eventually Smalls the first moved into a room at the end of the hall and played cards on a TV tray," she explains. "I took the Aztec rug and moved to Phoenix." In Phoenix she met Smalls the second. He took her on camping excursions, a wild up-shift from the first Smalls, Smalls the shut-in, but then he told her to make fire from nothing. He wouldn't return until he saw the light. Smalls the third played her daughters against her. "And now Judy lives in Plano, and Sarah the good Lord only knows, and the little one's been dead for years." The final Smalls retired from American Airlines and took a seat on a lawn chair in the living room and opened bottle after bottle of Five O'clock High. "My fiftieth birth-

day," she says, "he flicks his Amex clear cross the room and tells me go buy myself something nice." Mrs. Blue and I are in the train yards, in an abandoned box car, giving each other back rubs. "In this world," she explains, "there are only two favors a woman can give. Sexual and otherwise. The first doesn't count and the others go unnoticed." "You should be introduced to Burke Hapsburg," I say. "Who is Burke Hapsburg?" "He's the man who falls from the sky."

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Chenye sits at her mirror in a sheer black nightie with spaghetti straps, flicking an empty gray Bic. Through the wooden slats of her closet door she appears bored, interminable, erotic. She is at her most erotic, Macky assures me, when sleeping. But her manner of sitting bored runs close behind. "How she hangs there," he says, "sad and limp." Chenye pulls a cigarette from her pack and places it in the middle of her mouth. "Watch carefully, Woodrow, the way she lights them. She loathes smoke in her eyes. Watch now." She lights the cigarette, quickly snapping it away while inhaling through the perfect O of her mouth. "Something to be learned from that," he says. She sets the cigarette on an old can of Diet Pepsi and takes up her lipstick. He tells me lipstick was created by an Arabian king who spent his nights watching his harem women paint themselves into dappled cherries. "Have you read this week's graffiti? Of course not," he says. "Too busy graphing systems of linear equations or some such shit." I explain how linear equations are to calculus what organic elements are to the composition of—"Chenye's pussy is my Golgatha," he recites. The graffiti is carved into the divider wall, each week a new carving. "Our man is most likely not a Catholic, as that would be too obvious, but a man who understands religion, the effectiveness of a religious metaphor." On the oak vanity before her mirror sits an assortment of lotions and creams, perfumes, compacts, brushes and eyeliner pencils, a half-eaten Snickers bar, a pack of Chesterfields and a small marijuana pipe. Years of discarded girlhood rear up behind me—stuffed animals, Disney dolls, field hockey sticks. "Chenye's pussy is my Wailing Wall," he continues. She has taken up a clamping device to curl her lashes, occasionally inhaling from the Chesterfield. "Chenye's pussy," quotes Macky, "'is my Sermon on the Mound.'" He points out it's the Sermon on the Mount, M-O-U-N-T, while mound is another word for pussy. "Our man," he says, "is nobody's fool."



Eventually fourth period gym class comes to pass something like this: we dress, line up, stretch and begin play. By then we know whether or not Mr. Karlsbad, our yell leader and captain, will speak. Tucked into his muscle-t and athletic shorts, the man appears bulbous in spots and smells of wet camphor and witch hazel. One day I suspect Burke Hapsburg will emerge from behind the fake rock wall and stand and accuse Mr. Karlsbad of participating in hate crimes. There are days he does nothing but blow on his silver whistle. If he does speak, it is only after every attempt to avoid it, and then it's loud and technical. "Address the ball, man!" he shouts in resignation, followed by short rhythmic cadences into specific faces. "Swivel and roll!" "Clean and jerk, boy, for the sake of Jesus! Clean and jerk!" Mr. Karlsbad's favorite game is something he calls Supervisors and Workers. His pet students are chosen as Supervisors. Their job consists of rolling any number of weight balls out to the center of the gym. The Workers must lift the balls and carry them to the far wall. When all the balls are against the far wall, the Supervisors roll them out and the Workers begin again. I am always a Worker. That is, until the office girl's heels address the dull gymnasium floor. "Woodrow William, up front, sir," barks Karlsbad. "You are wanted at the front desk. Dis-missed!" Rounding the end of the school block, I see the station wagon panting in the November air. Once again I notice the shotgun holes on the passenger side door, the bent metal just now rusting at the edges. Inside it smells of cedar and stale Virginia Slims. She leans in to reveal a broken red heart she's had tattooed onto her left breast. "Mrs. Blue," I ask, "who is shooting at your silver Volvo?"



Burke Hapsburg is searching about frantically in the lost forest as Macky and I stare down into the refrigerator. "Do you remember," he asks, "Easters at the Jenkins? The roasted duck?" Occasionally one of us reaches in and tosses something to Mr. Yackley, who noses it around the kitchen floor. "She made a glaze I could eat with a spoon." Mr. Yackley rips into a blackened banana. We are left with a half-eaten hot dog, some eggs and a box of baking soda. "And Chenye would wear her bonnet." Burke Hapsburg has wounded something in the lost forest, something small and furry, and now searches franti-

cally about before he loses it to the black trees. Gus is at the kitchen table, giving his cry specific to hunger, steady as the Emergency Broadcast signal. "Feed the blind," says Macky. I soothe him by turning on the microwave. "It's cooking, Gussie." Macky checks the cupboards. "Is that the doorbell?" I ask. "Here's what we have left," he says. "Some flour, some brown sugar, some white sugar. Three cubes bouillon. Packets of table salt, full bottle vanilla flavoring, some loose oatmeal in a plastic baggy." I tell him to give the hotdog to Gus and then I ask why he won't answer the doorbell. "But I want it," he says. "Gussie's the youngest," I say. "Give it to Gus." Meanwhile, Burke is stumbling. He spots the twitching shape fleeing in the dark shadows but he's too weak, he's too hungry, even a wounded opossum outdoes his best effort. "I'm—getting—weaker," he says. Macky has gathered the contents of the cupboard and brought them together at the kitchen table. "Flour, sugar, salt, vanilla. I have an idea." He goes under the stove for a ceramic bowl and two mixers and cracks the eggs into the bowl. "Oatmeal Bouillon Cookies," he says, smiling down at Gus. Burke falls to the floor of the lost forest. "Baked—opossum," he ekes out, before the jackals arrive. The doorbell, the doorbell.

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Behind the convenience store I reiterate to Mrs. Blue my refusal to sleep with her. "I've seen pictures," I say, "and it looks like an animal." She assures me it's more like a fruit. She is drinking from a brown paper sack, stretching her nyloned legs out across the concrete and broken glass. "Woodrow," she says. "Do you know I used to be a librarian?" "You look like a librarian, Mrs. Blue." She wears reading glasses and a silver chain. "I think it's important to read," she says. She brings out a grocery bag. I tell her about the magazine I found under my brother's baseball cards. "I looked at the pictures, and in pictures it looks like an animal. I'm not sure I'd know what to do with it if I saw it in person." She explains there are many things I can do with it, but only a few things that work. I have absolutely no idea what she means by this. A cooling fan kicks on, sending up a heavy whirl that brings over to us grease and rotting fruit from a nearby dumpster. "All I know is that Burke Hapsburg, on tours in the Mediterranean, does this thing with a Turkish concubine." Still, I repeat, Burke is not without an invincible personal ethic. Mrs. Blue rolls her eyes. "Honey," she says, "I am a woman with annuities." She opens

a new pack of Virginia Slims and lights one with a gun-metal Zippo. She explains how she's seen four dogs die of old age. "For various charities I've baked Bundt cakes, performed minor accounting, lobbied in supermarkets, spoke to Congress, and paraded as a giant caterpillar down Ransom Avenue." She insists she knows all about strict moral codes. "I bought a Volvo for my three girls." I tell her about the boys at Ransom High, how they are a bunch of despicable goats. "They write graffiti on the walls. About my sister." In addition to being a librarian she has also been a girl in the backseat, a housewife at the stove, a volunteer for conservative causes. "Arthur—he was the third Smalls, the real estate fuck horse—he used to encourage community involvement." She opens the grocery bag and brings out the magazines—*Hustler*, *Penthouse*, *Club*, *Forum*. "You were playing videogames with the quarters I gave you," she says, "and I just couldn't resist." She sets the top magazine on my lap and peels it back with the nail of a pinky. It lands on a dazzling pictorial.



We are playing a game of Supervisors and Workers when Mr. Karlsbad blows into his whistle and I'm directed into his office. He shuts the door and the shutters fly out and settle. He says my name like a drill instructor. "Woodrow William," he says. "Woodrow William, the Second. WWII." He has moved over to the office window, where he stares at the kids scattered about on the gymnasium floor. Some of them are trying to lift the weight balls. "Woodrow William, sir, you have come to my attention." He turns. Inspirational tags have been posted throughout the office, store-bought placards in backgrounds of soft blue accompanied by images of running shoes, a ball and net, a diamond in the dusk. "Two balls," he says, coming to a stop at my feet, hovering like a man pumped full of air and floating. His silver whistle is dangling in mid-air. "Two balls per period. Not acceptable. No sir, not acceptable at all." I tell him it's my father. He wants to know what's wrong with my father. "He's sick, sir. Sometimes I have to leave during fourth period to take care of him." "What's wrong with your father?" "Multiple sclerosis. He's very weak." Mr. Karlsbad backs away and stands up straight. He puts his whistle in his mouth and blows softly. After a while, he says, "Like Maria." He grows quiet again. "We've been struggling with it for years," he finally says. "It's a ter-

rible disease.” “Yes, sir. Yes it is.” “How far advanced is your father?” “Not too advanced, Mr. Karlsbad.” “My wife—well . . . it’s a terrible disease.” The office girl knocks on Mr. Karlsbad’s door, waving a pink slip. “Thank you,” he says. He sits down. “She’s in a wheelchair now, actually. Since last spring. Swimming helps, you know. We swim twice a day, she and I.” He looks down at the note. “Well,” he says. “This is for you.”

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We are driving eastbound down the Kennedy Expressway when Mrs. Blue tells me to love the black man. The back seat is full of various bottles she’s brought along for what she’s calling a picnic. She has a spot picked out, she tells me, on the south side, where an old tenement building burned last week under suspicious circumstances. I ask if she’s sure she wants to have a picnic in a burned-out tenement building on the south side. “I’m sure,” she says. Then she reaches into the back seat and retrieves a bottle. “An example of a dry London gin,” she says, unscrewing the cap with one hand. She waves the bottle under my nose. “A spirit of the juniper berry.” She tells me to go into the glove box for the tumblers and the shot glass. “Now a bit about measurements,” she says. I try to explain to her how dangerous it is to drink and drive. “It doesn’t pay,” she says. I tell her many people have died. “Friends don’t let friends,” she says. She goes on to tell me a dash is about six drops, a pony is about an ounce, and a jigger is an ounce and a half to two ounces, depending on if that’s a straight jigger or a large jigger. “You put an onion in the glass and the martini becomes a Gibson,” she says. She sets the tumblers between her legs, pouring into the shot glass and steering with the bottle. I describe for her a car the Ransom P.D. had set out in front of the school not too long ago, to deter people from drinking and driving. “A Chevy, smashed to hell,” I say. “Use scotch instead of rye,” she says, “and a Manhattan becomes a Rob Roy.” I tell her I don’t know what it’s like to drive, and I don’t know what it’s like to drink, so I don’t know what it’s like to do both at the same time, but I hear it can be dangerous. She smiles and shows her age. “That Chevy,” she says. “They dragged that fucking thing from the compound. It’d been lying in there for years.” She offers up the bottle. I explain how it’s inadvisable to mix alcohol with the medications they are currently prescribing me. “Oh, Woodrow. Pharmaceutical leaflets lie,” she says. “Health officials lie. Parents lie billboards lie television lies homework



lies sex lies love lies. Especially love.” She looks over. She considers. “Fine,” she says, setting the glasses down. “But why you should love the black man.” Her eyes are back on the road. “Because it’s the finest fucking a white woman can do.”



Macky is at the stove peering down at a pot of boiling water, stirring it with a wooden spoon. “Huh, Macky? What are you cooking?” The pot is frantic with bubbles, like a great cauldron of gumbo. The windows are fogged over, the steam is rising in loose and steady folds. Mr. Yackley walks in with a cardinal between his teeth. “Is that blood?” asks Macky. I tell him I think that’s the natural color of a cardinal’s wing. Mr. Yackley takes the bird to a corner of the kitchen and lays himself out, the cardinal flapping between his front paws, and the two of us watch him tear into the bird. He holds it steady with his teeth and claws. The doorbell rings. “Don’t answer it,” says Macky. Mr. Yackley bites at the bird like a hungry cat; it struggles out a few final flaps before the dog rids it totally of its wings. “You remember, Woody, Thanksgivings at the Potters? The brown turkey?” Gauging strictly by the sound of the roiling pot it might be a thick stew, a creamy bisque or a meaty chowder. “Please, Macky, what are you making? Gussie wants to know.” From the doorway the path is lined with a trail of red feathers. The doorbell rings again. “Who’s at the door, Macky?” “Grandma Potter cooked the skin till it was crisp,” he says, “when she could slide it off the turkey like a loose wig.” Mr. Yackley has finished eating the cardinal. His tongue hangs from his mouth red and wet like a limp sock. Macky looks over at me. “They leave a card by the window sill.” “Who are they? What does it say?” “It says, ‘We called. We will call again.’” “Are you cooking a stew, Macky? Hunter’s stew? Can Gussie and I have some Hunter’s stew?” But we haven’t had hot water for days. He’s only heating the water for a bath.



The doorbell coincides with the intermittent release of high-voltage electrodes through the body of Burke Hapsburg. Burke is strapped to an iron wall with staples fastened to his wrists. His feet dangle six inches above ground. “Gussie, can you shut Mr. Yackley up please?” The boy is balled in the corner

mumbling softly, frightened by the persistent dinging. "I think she knows, Gussie. I think she's got us figured out." A wall of televisions on opposing stations form a patchwork of conflicting images. Suddenly they all click onto the same screen. It's the chamber of ill-will echoing with water drops, where the brusque shadows of candlelight swirl in the draft and Burke Hapsburg is being served up his shock treatment. "Shhh, Mr. Yackley, shhh." The woman in the vest is shielding her face from the glare. "Don't move, Gussie." She peers in to find Mr. Yackley barking at her from the center of the room. "If she tries to enter," I whisper to him, "I'll clobber her with Burke Hapsburg." She sets another card along the window sill. "AHHH!" Mustafa the Uranium Merchant sits on a swivel chair listening to the torture groans, his hands behind his head and a Don Diego in his mouth. "Electrocute me, you bastard," Burke says into the camera. "See if I care. AHHH!" One man rubs him with water while the second applies the electric rod. "I never liked this Burke Hapsburg," says Mustafa. "Who is he?" The henchmen sharing the scene with him shuffle behind their leader, evidently embarrassed on his behalf. They turn to one another, one of them shrugging. "He's, you know, boss." "Burke Hapsburg." "The man who fell from the sky."



In the striped light Macky furrows his brow. "'Chenye's pussy is my Valhalla?'" It's the stall divider, I explain. So many carvings is turning it into palimpsest. The graffiti is becoming increasingly difficult to read. "But who has ever heard of Valhalla?" he asks. Her body is cloaked in the television's purple light; she has eluded the electric company by running the TV and VCR by generator. Valhalla is the heavenly hall and dwelling place of Norse Gods and heroes, which, I've learned from Mr. Blankenship during our section on Scandinavian religions, serves an excellent leg of lamb. "I know Valhalla," he says. "And it's an appropriate allusion." He is, I think, considering Chenye's Aryan features, her flaxen down, her flame-blue eyes. Our man, says Macky, has researched his subject well. "Mr. Blankenship," he says. "Of course, Mr. Blankenship." I ask if he's ready for the final quote. "Tell me," he says. As if he doesn't already know. "'Chenye's pussy is my Fiddler's Bush.'" It's Fiddler's Green, he explains, the heaven reserved for sailors and soldiers, but our man has played with the meaning. "It's Mr. Blankenship," he concludes at last. "No one else could manage those allusions."

To correct his overbite, Principal Quire wears an orthodontic device that causes his noticeable lisp and undermines his authority. A thin silver band runs the length of both rows of his teeth. "Multiple sclerosis," I say. Once again Mr. Karlsbad calls me a little bastard. "Mr. Karlsbad," repeats Principal Quire, "you will have to contain yourself, sir, or I will be forced to ask you to leave." He turns from Karlsbad to me. "You mean to say that both your brother *and* your father suffer from multiple sclerosis?" Mr. Karlsbad is peering out the window. From time to time the figures in the room run so still and quiet they turn into strategically placed rooks with razor-thin turrets. A wooden paddle sits three inches deep on Quire's desk. "As far as I know," he explains slowly, "MS is not a genetic disease." Ms. Hinicke is stroking a baseball. Up close, I better understand what has Mr. Yackley barking so wild and rabid when she appears at the door. "Of course it's not a genetic disease!" Mr. Karlsbad's crimson lips are suddenly inches from my eyes. "Mr. Karlsbad—" "Any fool knows it's not a genetic disease," he says, and then he calls me a lying punk ass little bastard. "Principal Quire," she cries out. "We have a frightened boy here." Quire tells Karlsbad he's going to have to wait outside. On his way out he says my ass both your father and brother. "You'll have to excuse Mr. Karlsbad, Ms. Hinicke. He feels he's been taken advantage of on a very personal matter." She repeats we have a very frightened boy here. "Woodrow," she says. She tosses me the ball. It's up in the air. "Woodrow, we know that Mustafa has abducted your mother, removed her toenails and deprived her of food and light, tortured her into believing she is a pasha's wife, and now she sits on an Arab throne, while your father has been pronounced dead or king, our reports are conflicted." It lands in my lap. "Woodrow," she says. "The Department Principal Quire discussed earlier is called the Department of Children and Family Services. We'd like to know where Macky is." I tell her about the vents, the graffiti, the wooden slats in the closet door. "Nobody's in trouble," she assures me. "We'd just like to know where he is." She doesn't believe me. "It's just that we haven't seen Mackenzie for some time," says Mr. Quire. He doesn't believe me either. "We thought you might—" The principal removes his mouthpiece. "We thought you might tell us where your parents are."



I report to Macky there's been no graffiti on Chenye since his expulsion from Ransom. "Strange," he says. But I tell him I don't think it's so strange. "I suspect it's you, Macky, you who writes the quotes, you with those far-flung allusions, you with the pen-knife." He doesn't respond. He explains how Chenye's skin has a smell of its own, which changes depending on what day it is. I'm trying to express to him with some kind of urgency that the people from the Department are coming. "The woman is bringing them. They're coming at six." He wants to know what it matters. "No one," he says, "not the SWAT team, not even your own Burke Hapsburg, could penetrate Chenye's door. Besides," he says. "Six o'clock. That's plenty of time." "Plenty of time for what, Macky?" He's not listening to me. "Plenty of time for what?" But he's not listening to me at all. He's reaching out for the closet door, the slats casting dark light in wobbly bands across his arm. "Plenty of time," he says, stepping in.



Burke Hapsburg is orchestrating an elaborate raid on the Argentine compound of Mustafa the Uranium Merchant. "It's extremely well-sealed," he says to one of his men. "The chances of penetration are slim. The mortality rate is bound to be high. Still . . . there is evil in there." The light switches read On but we haven't had light for weeks. The hallway is sunk in pearl-gray; the day is dying. "What in heavens," she sighs. She's startled me. "What in heavens are you doing, Woodrow?" This is her first time inside, standing in the hallway in a polyester blouse the color of lily pads that remind me of motel curtains. "They're coming," I say. She's stirring her drink, her shoulder and head leaned against the wall, one red pump dangling from her foot. "Who's coming?" "Soon," I say. "Mustafa's henchmen. They've spotted Burke Hapsburg from the nearby forest." "Who's Burke Hapsburg?" I explain again how Burke Hapsburg is a mercenary for truth and goodness, commissioned by various international covert agencies, attempting to repeal negative forces, the man who falls from the sky. "I've known too many of those," she says. "Let me see." She takes Burke Hapsburg and flings him down the hall. "They're coming," I say. She smells faintly of broken bottles, emptied dumpsters, kitchen grease. "I don't feel comfortable, Mrs. Blue." She responds that only a small

fraction of the time does anyone ever feel comfortable in matters of sex. She tells me sex makes little sense unless there exists a certain level of physical danger or threat of discovery. I ask her if she would like me to introduce her to Mustafa the Uranium Merchant, who under the threat of a fatwa sees his fair share of intrigue. "Whereas I wouldn't even french a girl, Mrs. Blue, unless I loved her." Mrs. Blue kisses me. Her mouth is warm and deep. "Say you'll play Burke Hapsburg with me." On a day she can stand the light, she assures me, she'll play Burke Hapsburg. "But not here," I say. "Anywhere else." Mrs. Blue suggests the box cars. "I'm not without a certain budding personal ethic," I say. "Of course you're not," she assures me. She suggests the abandoned KFC on Ransom Avenue. "I held off," I say. "Everyone says it's good to hold off, and I held off." There comes a long pause. I give her my hands. She lifts me in her arms and carries me down the hall.