

Sweet Embraceable You

Murder me,” Ada said.

“The reception began at eight.” Cameron set his second bourbon glass down on his newspaper blotting Herb Caen’s Tuesday, August 15, 1972, column. “It’s now eleven-thirty, precisely. Time is not your forté, my darling. Must you always run on your own clock?”

“Don’t tick me off,” Ada said. She was chilled from the San Francisco night. Her coat hung from her shoulders. “I hate when you play daddy. Next you’ll be into spanking.”

“We’ve never tried that.”

“Keep it that way.” She stood her ground across the tiny cocktail table.

He smiled under his thick black moustache. “Let me help with your coat.”

Cameron Vicary rose to his full height. Ada watched him grow taller than she, and she was tall enough to be striking. Her coat rode like a cape across her shoulders. He lifted it and dropped its smartly tailored lines across the chair he intended for her.

She sat.

A waiter stepped from the piano bar. He looked up at Cameron who said something Ada could not hear. Cameron sat down.

“I asked you to murder me,” she said.

“Don’t change the subject.” Cameron lit a cigarette. “I never do anything uncivilized.” He handed it to her.

“I’ve stopped again.”

“Start again,” he said. “You prefer yourself with vices.”

She took the fresh cigarette and held it. “God, I hate this place. All of San Francisco and here we sit.” She tugged at the light fold of dark tricot falling down from her throat. “We come here so often.

I'm suffocating." She ground out the cigarette. "Must we always come here?"

"Where were you?" Cameron asked.

She looked at him.

He looked at her.

"I had a reception of my own to attend," she said. "Stop trying to make me obedient."

"Simple, isn't it?" He knocked down neat the last of his scotch.

"Simple? What is? For godsake, do you need such a big bush to beat around?"

The waiter hovered for a moment. He served Ada. He served Cameron. He disappeared.

"Cheers," Cameron said.

"To what." Ada said it flat. "Our one-thousandth visit to this bar?"

"Bistro. This bistro," Cameron said. "Remember? You picked me up here."

"Correction," Ada said, lifting her glass. "I met you here. I picked you up later."

"You love this place. We're old faces here."

"Being an old face anywhere is something I don't love."

Cameron lifted the single candle. His hands cupped the warm glassful of wax through the white plastic mesh. He lifted the wavering light to Ada's face. "An old face, Ada, you'll never be."

She began to melt in tenderness to him, but caught herself. Was he joking? "You could be fatal to me," she said. "So lay off the mood swings."

Cameron lowered the candle to the table. "Well?" he said.

"That's a deep subject."

"You're so sophisticated for a professor's wife."

She glared at him. She had her own degree, her own teaching certificate, her own car, what had been—before he moved in—her own Victorian flat. She bit her lower lip. From tables nearer the bar came brief applause as the pianist finished her set. Ada's ears rang in the sudden silence. Cameron stroked his chin, waiting. She knew

the feel of his sharp clean face when his midnight stubble raised just enough to rasp her body raw. There was no part of her he had not scraped. Night by passing night the tiny bristles of his strong face were sanding her smooth. She felt she was losing herself to him.

"Don't be abrasive," she countermanded. Her word choice pleased her.

"Where-have-you-been is hardly an abrasive question. Not when a husband asks a wife who has stood him up publicly in front of his colleagues for two hours."

"You mean those goddam geologists actually noticed?"

"Yes."

"All eight of them?"

"And their eight wives. And the chairman. And the woman who was the guest of honor."

"You've never cared what they thought."

"So where were you, Ada?"

"I was having an affair with a rich man from China. A kinky little fellow. You know: whips and chains. *Spanking*. And a special little gadget that..."

"I don't care where you were." Cameron gulped down his drink.

"Then I'll tell you. We had a department reception of our own at the St. Francis."

"Why didn't you call?"

"Why didn't you?" She smiled at him. Things were always shifting tectonically between them. "Can this marriage be saved?" she asked.

"Why not?" Cameron reached for her hand.

"That'll cost you two-bits, buster." She stood up.

"What for?" He dug into his pocket for change.

Ada held out her hand and took his quarter. Leaving the table, she signaled the waiter for another round. "If my students could see me now," she called in the silence left by the stilled piano. "Hi, honey," she said, passing a young, balding ex-jock. He was all teeth and curly blond hair. She patted his butt the way she had seen players pat rump on the Bowl games Cameron insisted she watch with him. She made sure that Cameron saw her action. "What this joint

needs,” she said to Mr. Touchdown, “is some sounds.” She headed to the jukebox.

Ada hated herself, taking a too-cute finger-in-the-mouth eternity deciding on her selections. She felt the ex-ballplayer heating up behind her.

Cameron watched her through his lifted glass. She rippled in the soft psychedelia of the jukebox. He knew her every trick and he liked watching her.

She fed the coin into the machine and danced onto the floor by herself. Her arms were slender and bare, silky against her rich mauve dress. The barkeep to amuse himself more than the patrons turned a flashing strobe on the lone and lovely woman. Her body flowed, flicked out in instants by the light. For half a lyric she was lost in her exhibition. Then with a fast move the blond jock joined her on the floor. Cameron watched her pull away with short, jerky motions. She left him, standing bewildered, alone in the middle of the floor. She made her way back to the table and stood: “He says he played a little ball in college.”

Cameron smiled. “I bet he wanted to play ball with you.” He leaned into the table, pulling her soft hand to his chin. The strobe caused Ada’s eyes to divide his tender movements into rhythmic spasms, but the feel of him pulling her hand to him felt smooth. Between the appearance and the reality, she often lectured her classes, is the difference of what isn’t and what is.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s get out of here.”

“I drove my car,” she said.

“My bike’s outside.”

“On your motorcycle in this dress? I’ll die.”

“You wanted me to murder you.” He took her by the arm. “Come on. We’ll get the car in the morning.” They both of them knew they were odd. Not so anyone else took notice. Just late-at-night odd: confessing, prevaricating, revealing to each other their apt match.

*

“I should have written a different thesis,” Ada said. She turned on

her side in the bed toward Cameron and ran her hand down his back.

“Lower,” he said. He liked the feel of her hands. Her light touch floated across the dark hair downing his cheeks.

“My master’s thesis,” Ada said. “I should have written on Emily Dickinson.”

“Lightly,” Cameron said.

“An American woman poet.” Ada sat up in bed.

“Don’t stop,” Cameron said into the pillow.

“Not a poetess,” Ada said. “A poet.” She hiked her nightgown above her knees. “A bit of tippler, Emily was.” She straddled Cameron’s thighs from behind. “A spinster like me.” She massaged from the small of his back up the twin muscled ridges leading to his strong neck. She touched lightly the scar on his left shoulder. It was a bullet wound from the war that he had hated.

Cameron moaned in pleasure, his face buried in the pillow.

“What?” Ada said. She pushed hard on the base of his spine.

“You’re no spinster. You’re a married woman.”

“Then I haven’t been a spinster twice.”

Cameron rolled over beneath her light straddle. “You’re my first marriage,” he said.

Ada laughed. “But hardly your first fuck!”

“I’m cold,” he said. “Come here.” He pulled Ada down, her face to his face. “You’re beautiful,” he said.

She kissed his ear. “Then there’s a pair of us....Don’t tell.”

He began the familiar rocking motion, holding her. She was a little girl and a grown woman, in a boat, holding the sides, laughing and screaming, holding Cameron now, because years before Curtis had rocked her so wildly in the rowboat on Stow Lake lagoon that the Golden Gate Park attendant had called to them through a megaphone.

Cameron slipped her cotton nightshirt over her head and inside it she smiled remembering how she had been so embarrassed by Curtis, mortified, when at the end of their row, the attendant with the megaphone had helped her from the boat. She and Curtis had

been married a week then. The attendant had reached for her hand. The marriage lasted into that winter. The attendant, throwing a quick look at Curtis, had apologized to her, as if he, and not Curtis, had frightened her nearly out of her wits in the middle of the wide lagoon. The week after Christmas she had, with justifiable anger, left her groom of five months.

The last of the nightshirt trailed off her arms. Cameron tossed it to the floor and Ada descended at her own speed full on to him. He was perfect. She knew he was perfect. But nothing, not even this, she had felt—long before she had nearly drowned in public embarrassment—was ever going to be enough. She could never forgive Curtis.

“Be here now,” Cameron said. “Ada, be here now.”

With his call, her mind came back into her head. “I love you,” she managed and floated away again. This time to the porch glider. Cameron had spent the warm afternoon watering the lawn. He had worn white flannel trousers rescued from a resale shop. She had drowsed idly lying in the porch glider. Its gentle squeak had lulled her half to sleep, dreaming she lay aboard a gentle sloop rocking lazy at anchor. Through the white porch railing, she watched Cameron, all in white, wrap the dark green garden hose around his forearm, his thumb pressed hard into the water to fan the pressure into a wide spray.

He’ll have arthritis when he is old, she mused. His thumb will grow stiff and gnarled because this one August afternoon he has meticulously watered every inch of grass.

She closed her eyes.

He was too bright. He was far brighter than Curtis. He was perhaps always too bright for her. Out there, white on the lawn, against the wet green, he soaked up the very heat of the sun. She was cool and he was too warm. At night he glowed, as if the sun had gifted him with dazzle. Sometimes she lay awake next to him and watched him sleep. Once she had awakened, cold as death. The old dream of Curtis clutched her throat. Her breath had been pressed out. She had wanted to wake him, to say, “Hold me.” But then, as now, finished, he lay asleep, dark moustached and naked. She knew

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he would gladly hold her, but she said nothing. He was a good man and she rolled off him, reaching out her hands, chafing them together, holding them over his sleeping body, warming herself in his sweet animal heat. She watched him glow in the moonlight streaming down past Sutro Tower and in through the old Victorian windows.

He turned toward her on his side. She turned away and snuggled her back into his belly. It was their favorite way of sleeping.

The moon hung low and full outside the windows. The tower blinked a hundred tiny red lights on and off. Ada, her face in full moonlight, smiled.

*

In the morning, Ada smelled the coffee. In the kitchen, Cameron stirred his cup with a silver spoon. She pulled the blankets tighter around her. An ocean chill had crept over the City and into the room. Unusual even for August. A lock of her long black hair caught on her lip. Her tongue pulled in one of the hairs. Her teeth bit it lightly, nervously, careful not to cut it through. The hair had thickness and resiliency. It had sides, definable, as she turned it between her teeth. She had slept soundly, but she had not slept well. The blankets had weighed her down. She threw them back and shuddered as the cold air of the room sank into the warm sheets. She lay studying the ceiling. "Might as well," she said outloud, and she meant get up, which she did, pulling her terrycloth robe around her.

From the bathroom, she shouted to Cameron, "Good morning!" "Coffee!" he shouted back.

She splashed water in her face and pulled a brush through the pleasant tangle of her hair.

She headed down the hall, past two photographs Cameron had taken of the City. Both showed the Golden Gate Bridge shrouded in fog. In the background of the second, the tip of the new TransAmerica Pyramid pierced the fog bank with the rising sun haloed directly behind it. "You ought to sell postcards," she shouted into the kitchen.

He looked at her framed in the doorway. "Lay off," he said quietly.

"That's not what you said last night." She swept into the kitchen

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and went straight for the coffee. “What are you reading?” she asked, stirring three teaspoons of sugar into the small cup.

“Nothing,” he said. His forearm, peeled out of his rolled up flannel shirt, shielded the book.

“Come on!” She pulled at his big soft fist.

He relaxed.

“*Dickinson*,” she said. “the *Collected Poems of*. Really, Cameron, I’m touched.”

He took a long slow pull on his coffee. He said nothing. He was expressionless.

“Here’s one for you,” Ada said, turning the pages. “Pain has an element of blank.”

“I’m cycling out to the park,” Cameron said. He stood up.

“Someday you’ll be killed on that motorcycle. Someday you’ll leave me all alone.”

“Maybe today,” he said.

“And that will be my proof.”

Cameron pulled on a light leather jacket. “What proof?”

“That we’re alone.”

“That you’re off-balance, sweetheart.” He kissed her. “And out-of-whack, out-of-synch.” He touched her breasts lightly.

“And out-of-bounds,” she said, pushing his hands away.

In his big silence he moved away from her. Something they both needed more than they recognized, something that had not quite melded together from their separate spiritual lives, sometimes hung unspoken between them. He turned at the door, and said, “Whatever,” as if she, not he, held the mystery.

The ancient front door closed. Beneath her, the garage door of the old Victorian ratched open. Cameron kicked his bike into muffled life, paused on the lip of the drive, returned, pulled closed the garage door, and roared away into the sounds of the City.

Ada put both elbows on the table and interlaced her fingers across her forehead. She stared down into the steam rising from her coffee. She had papers to grade. Errands to run. And the telephone was ringing.

It was Cassiopeia.

*

Unhelmeted, Cameron cruised west out Fell Street, along the green boulevard of the Panhandle. The morning cool felt wet and good on his face. He angled his Harley Sportster smoothly into Golden Gate Park and roared loud down Kennedy Drive. The park lay emerald in the morning light: meadows, rose gardens, eucalyptus groves. Every stick and bush and tree transplanted into perfect place. He passed behind the DeYoung Museum and prowled the tarmac circle wrapped around the Stow Lake lagoon.

He laughed thinking of Curtis years before rocking Ada insanely in the rented rowboat. He gunned his bike. Hard. Fast. Breaking down curds of inertia inside his own flesh as the bike ate up the parkway. He turned right, in full shot of the ocean, roared past Point Lobos, Land's End, and out El Camino del Mar toward the Golden Gate Bridge.

*

Once he had taken Ada for the thrill of her life, speeding in an earlier dawn, in and out of the fogclouds, across the Golden Gate. She had held him tight as the lover she was then, tighter than when she made love to him now. Her raven hair had whipped around his face as she buried her head into his shoulders. He caught a mouthful and pulled on it. She clung tighter. He thought he heard her scream, "Balance!" as she dug her nails into the insides of his jeaned thighs.

They had ridden that Sunday to Tiburon. She was furious. "You're worse than Curtis," she said. "What is it with men? Don't ever scare me like that again."

"How should I scare you?"

"The usual way will be just fine," she said cupping his crotch.

"That's never scared you," he said. "Come on."

"Where?"

"Brunch, kiddo." He stooped down to chain up the big bike. The sunlight caught in his hair. It reddened his moustache. He hadn't shaved. He clamped the padlock shut and smiled up at her.

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He grinned around the butt of a small burnt-out cigar in his perfect white teeth. "You're some looker," he said.

"You're no Bogart."

"Thank God," he said.

Ada followed him into the dark interior of the restaurant-bar. At the end of the hall, sunlight burnt bright enough to hurt her eyes. Cameron headed straight for it. She squinted as he pulled her out onto a floating deck with a hundred or so summer people brunching over eggs and gin fizzes. Three waiters and a busboy seemed to manage the whole affair for an invisible chef.

"There's no place to sit," Ada said. "It's too bright. I can't see a thing."

"I can." He took her gently by the hand.

"Must you always lead?" she said.

He pulled her through the maze of close tables. She bumped a chair, pushing a matron's leather-tanned face into the foam of her gin fizz. "Sorry," Ada said. The woman tried a smile, then napkined it away along with the ridiculous moustache of fizz beneath her nose.

"Sunday's House Specialty," Cameron said over his shoulder.

"What is?" Ada giggled.

"Gin fizzes. They're terrible, but they're In." He pulled her down to one of the two vacant tables. They leaned back against the railing. A yacht rose and fell at anchor twenty feet down a short gangway.

"This whole place is floating," Ada said. She panned the entire Sunday morning scene. "If I don't go blind, I'll get seasick. This better be good."

"Watch this," Cameron said. He pointed to a couple newly arrived into the glare. No one seemed to notice them. The woman's hair was lazily knotted on top her head. She wore big-rimmed shades. Her blouse and jeans looked comfortable enough to scrub floors in. She was warm. She walked a short-leashed mongrel dog. Ada liked her. But the man with her projected something: breeding, aristocracy, cool.

"That's California for you," Ada said. "That's pure San Francisco."

The couple headed straight for the empty table next to them.

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“What do you mean?” Cameron said.

“The men are more chic than the women.”

“Chic? No,” Cameron said. “That’s the wrong word.”

The couple sat down. The woman excused herself as she bumped into Cameron’s chair.

“That face!” Ada whispered. “Cameron, do you know who she is?”

Cameron put the mock of his fist to his mouth. “And who do you think the guy with her is?”

“Don’t let them know,” Ada said.

“Don’t let them know what?” Cameron whispered back. “You’re acting like a groupie.”

“Don’t let them know we know who they are.”

“Nobody seems to care,” Cameron said.

“Nobody else recognizes them.”

“They’re off-camera,” Cameron said. “Movie stars aren’t what they used to pretend to be.”

“Quiet,” Ada said. She had this fan-madness about her. Cameron had witnessed it before. She had a passion for the fabulous, for fabled people. She collected fame the way a philatelist collects stamps. Once in Union Square, Clint Eastwood had smiled at her between takes in one of his films.

“Do you think he recognizes me?” Ada said.

“You’re kidding.”

Six months before, Ada had been in the right place at the right time, the corner of Broadway and Columbus, when the cast and crew of *The Streets of San Francisco* carried Edmund O’Brien costumed like a cop out of a little jeweler’s shop on a stretcher. Ada had worked her way to the front of the crowd and planted herself smack between Karl Malden and Michael Douglas. Malden’s line had been to the crowd: “Move back, everybody. Move back.” And she had, frowning, but not too much, under-acting for the Panavision camera, determined not to end up on the cutting room floor. When the take was over, Michael Douglas, like Clint Eastwood, had smiled at her. She had been wearing a tight T-shirt of alternating blue and yellow stripes that she had then folded into her cedar chest as a souvenir.

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“Ada,” Cameron whispered. “I think he recognizes you.”

“No, he doesn’t. He couldn’t.” Ada looked for a menu. “Why do you think so?”

“By the way he keeps his back to you.” He nudged her ribs.

A gull reconnoitered greedily overhead.

“Call a waiter, will you, Cameron? For godsake, I’m starving. I need a menu.”

The woman with Michael Douglas turned around. “Here you go,” she said. Her voice was husky. “We seem to have three.” She handed the menu to Cameron.

“Thanks,” he said.

Ada smiled. The woman turned back to her section of *The New York Times*. “Don’t let her know,” Ada said. Her eyes narrowed from more than the glare.

“Know what?”

“She’s Brenda Vacarro.”

“She probably knows that,” Cameron said. “What are you doing with the menu?”

“I’m folding it up for my collection. It’s not everyday a movie star hands you a menu.”

“Ada, you’re putting me on.”

Ada’s eyes narrowed even more in the Tiburon sunglare.

“Omigod,” Cameron said. “You’re not putting me on.”

“Right,” Ada said. “Indulge my little fantasy.”

“You’ll laugh about this when you have a saner moment,” Cameron said. “Don’t you dare ask for an autograph or I’ll tell our future children.”

“You hate children.”

“I forgot.”

A waiter took an order from Michael Douglas, who did not smoke, while Brenda Vacarro lit up a filter king, and tossed a bread-crust to a cruising gull. The waiter, oblivious to Ada and Cameron, spun his exit still scratching on his pad. Douglas returned to the “Arts” section of the *Times*, looking up only when Vacarro interrupted to

show him a recipe which his father's wife, Mrs. Kirk Douglas, had been asked to supply to the "Gourmet Supplement" she was reading.

"What about our order?" Cameron said. "We were here first."

"We're not famous," Ada said.

The waiter returned with two gin fizzes and a Sanka for Brenda Vacarro. So close were the two tables, he kept his position and turned on point to Cameron and Ada. "Have you decided?" he asked politely.

"We'll have..." Cameron began.

"Whatever they're having," Ada interrupted, triumphant.

*

Cameron grinned as he sped north off the Bridge. Sausalito lay below him to the right, and that crazy Sunday in Tiburon lay even farther off in time and space. Ada should have written her thesis on Millay, he thought. With her little petulant hand an annotation of her greatly petulant life. He took the off-ramp from 101 and headed up the canyon roads, past the Muir Woods turnoff, shifting gears and climbing the snaking asphalt up the mountain, above the Pantoll Ranger Station, roaring beyond the natural Mountain Home Theater, to the top of Mount Tamalpais, the highest point in the Bay area, a forest and crest sacred to the old Miwok Indian gods.

Cameron loved the mountain.

It was worn and smoothed, twisted with trails as ancient as the fog that rolled through its pines. Hikers puffed up and down its paths, rediscovering traces of the old gravity-pulled Mt. Tamalpais Railway that before the San Francisco quake had pulled fashionable ladies and gentlemen up the steep grade for picnics of chicken and lemonade in the sun.

Cameron kicked up his bike in the asphalt parking lot below the peak. The ladies with the lemonade had vanished. A tie-dyed hippie replaced them, lounging in the mountain heat against the stainless-steel sides of a pickup truck fitted out to serve cellophanned sandwiches and coffee.

"Black or white?" the hippie asked.

“Black.” Cameron took the styrofoam cup of coffee in his hand and flipped the kid a half-dollar.

“It’s sixty cents, man.” The boy hooked his long hair back behind his ears and dropped his hands to his hips. “Overhead,” he said, looking up at the clear blue sky. “The cost of doing business, man.”

“Yeah.” Cameron flipped him the dime.

The kid caught it. “Have a nice day,” he said.

Cameron headed back to his bike. “Whatever,” he said over his shoulder. He set the coffee on the asphalt, zipped off his leather jacket, pulled off his flannel shirt, picked up the coffee, and lay back on his bike, head and shoulders padded with his rolled jacket against the handle bars, feet stretched back over the hot leather seat and rear fender, his torso exposed to the sun.

He sipped the coffee and watched the valley below the mountain. Brown grasses, dry with August, waved in heat shimmers between him and the water of the Bay. A road below, white and winding, wended its way up and down ridges and rises, leading toward, and then disappearing, before it reached the Golden Gate Bridge and the white City of Oz itself shimmering across the Bay in the translucent August sun.

He closed his eyes.

Be here now. He relaxed into his mantra. *Be here now. Three. Here.* Counting backwards. *Two. More here. One. Really here.* He breathed deep from within his center and through his eyelids saw not the Fire Watch Station at Tam’s peak but the clear unspoiled way the mountain had been when holy men roamed its trails fasting and praying, dreaming visions for their hunting shields.

Cameron had dreamed once of a bull’s head, horned and cocked left, nostrils flaring. A tattoo artist in Oakland had needled it deftly on the outside of his shoulder above his left bicep. He had never regretted the rite. He had opened his flesh to the ink and the needle like a burning razor blade. It had been his first willful and completely irretrievable freewill act.

“How terribly,” Ada had drawled, mocking his machismo, “existential.”

Behind his eyes, he smiled and opened his pores to the sun. Energy flowed into him. Sweat beaded on his chest, grew to a rivulet, and inched down his side. A fly buzzed, circled, landed, sampled. Cameron felt its feet gigantic on him, treading up and down in place, the way Ada's cat at night often stood atop the blankets padding its paws up and down on his chest as if he were so much dough to be kneaded. He relaxed into the fly, tried to become the fly, but finally the itch was too much. Eyes still closed he swatted, missed, and had only his own sweat to lick from his hand. The fly landed again. This time it marched strangely across his chest. A bead of sweat headed fast down his belly toward the pool in his navel. He opened his eyes.

"About time," said the figure silhouetted against the sun.

Cameron was momentarily blinded. Startled. The man had been tickling his belly with a stalk of mountain grass.

"Curtis!" Cameron said. "You're late."

Curtis brought the stem of grass to his mouth. He bit off the end and smiled. "I like to talk to people when they least expect it." He spit out the butt end of grass. "Guess you'd say I'm strange."

"Curtis," Cameron said putting his feet on the ground, "you're more than strange."

"Come with me," Curtis pointed partway down the slope. "We can talk better down at the old Tam Railway Station. My car is parked over by the lovely hippie." He climbed uninvited on the motorcycle. "You can drive us down," he said. The straw twitched between his teeth.

"So get off so I can start it," Cameron said pulling on his shirt.

Curtis obeyed.

Cameron kick-started the bike into roaring life. "Okay," he said. "Get on."

Curtis swung his leg across the machine. "Where do I hang on?" he asked.

"Sit on your hands," Cameron said. "Don't play so dumb."

"It's time we talked," Curtis said. "Really time."

"About what?"

"About Ada."

“What about Ada?”

“I married her before she married you.”

“That makes you some kind of expert?”

“Exactly.”

Cameron shifted the bike, angry, and peeled out of the parking lot with Curtis hanging on for dear life.

*

Ada sat naked on the marble floor of her shower watching the water sputter down the brass mouth of the drain. Once she had read of an elderly woman who had slipped in the tub and laid in five inches of water for six days before anyone found her. She was alive but wrinkled as a prune; she had kept warm by adding hot water every hour or so. Ada had filed that information away for her old age. “If there’s going to be an old age,” she said outloud. “I wonder if other grown-ups ever sit on the shower floor and play?” She laughed thinking of Cassiopeia sitting on the shower floor, if Cassiopeia ever showered, with the water pelting down, filtering through her hip Brillo-frizzy locks.

Cassiopeia had been Cameron’s prior old lady. He had met her in the Haight, five years before, during the Summer of Love. Ada had visions of Cassiopeia leaning provocatively against the Haight-Ashbury street sign with her madras skirt up over her head and her mattress on her back. Or at least her sleeping bag.

The little lady’s birth name, before she had rechristened herself Cassiopeia by taking an extra large hit of magic mushrooms and shouting “Here I go,” had been simply Margaret Mary O’Hara. After her christening, she had felt the need for a lysergic communion service; she had renounced her Catholicism, but adored its sacramental choreography: her confirmation ceremony had been a strung-out drug-bang of chemical mysticism.

Cameron, at that time a mescaline novice overdosed on Alan Watts’ books, had been certain that against the Hashbury street sign leaned his spiritual guide. Margaret Mary O’Hara was buying none of it. “St. Theresa of Avila, honey, I’m not.” She raised her hands.

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“With these,” she said, cupping her 36-D breasts like a treasure, “I am Cassiopeia Star Child.”

Ada knew Cameron had said something ridiculously trendy like: “Far out!” She shook her head violently under the shower spray, shimmying like a retriever run in from the rain. Her hair whipped water around her face. As far as Ada was concerned Cassiopeia was a burnt-out chick. Talking to her was harder than running on foot across a twelve-lane freeway.

She turned off the shower, splashed herself with baby oil, wiped down with a soft sponge, then wrapped her waist with one towel and turbaned her head with another. She stepped carefully from the shower and met her bare breasts in the medicine cabinet mirror. “Thank God,” she said, “I’ll never be as mystical as Cassiopeia.”

She toweled herself dry in the bedroom. A few beads of water flipped onto the ungraded student papers stacked on her vanity. Her students hated papers. She hated papers. Still they wrote and she corrected. She tried to towel dry the top paper. A blot appeared across the title. It made no difference. The paper, twice as long as assigned, was from an ardent little feminist who always wrung political relevance into everything. Ada checked the blotted title, something about “‘Women in Literature: Enter as Juliet; Exit as Ophelia’ by Ms. Pat Leavitt for Ms. Ada Vicary, MA.”

Ada grabbed a red felt-tip. “All these abbreviations,” she wrote petulantly on the title page, “remind me of writer S. J. Perlman who wished he had become a Jesuit so he could have signed himself S. J. Perlman, S. J.” Ada appreciated Perlman’s chiastic sense of humor, knew that it would be lost on the intense Ms. Leavitt, and added, “Sorry about the blot.” She threw the marking pen on top the stack; that was at least a start on the thirty-four research papers for English 252: Shakespeare.

Ada felt mean pulling on her jeans and knotting her blouse above her midriff. She had neglected to tell Cassiopeia that Cameron had roared off for the day. She blow-dried her hair and was almost finished when the doorbell rang. She grabbed her lipstick, drew a bit of color across her mouth, blotted her lips together, tossed the tube on

top the “Juliet-Ophelia” paper, said, “Whoops! Sorry, Ms. Leavitt,” and headed down the stairs to the door. Through the stained glass, she could see the dark silhouette of the one, the only, the original.

“Cassiopeia!” Ada said, opening the door. “How are you?”

“My nose hurts,” Cassie said.

“I can see why,” Ada said. “Come in.”

Cassiopeia’s nose had been pierced with a gold ring, or, more accurately, her left nostril had been.

Cassiopeia also had a Janis Joplin tattoo on her wrist and Bette Midler tweezed eyebrows. Her body was a map of fads in and out.

“Why have you done that?” Ada asked.

“Makes me think twice about Kung Fu fighting,” Cassiopeia said.

“It would be hell to have someone grab your nose in a catfight,” Ada said.

“Worse than pierced ears, but I’m a nuclear pacifist now. No fighting,” Cassiopeia swooped into the Victorian parlor. “Far out!” she said.

“What a lovely saffron robe you’re wearing,” Ada said. “Sit down, please. Have you joined that dervish group? What are they called? The ones who shave their heads except for the ponytail and play drums for the tourists down at the Powell and Market Street cable-car turnaround?”

“Still the same old Ada,” Cassiopeia said. She pulled a joint from her totebag.

“Still the same old Cassie.” Ada threw her a box of footlong wooden fireplace matches.

Cassie toked up. “Where’s Cam?” she asked, her voice whistling and high as she spoke on the inflowing blue air.

Ada settled back into a large wicker chair, one leg under the other. “Cameron’s out,” she said.

“Just us girls then, huh?” Cassie said, hitting her joint again. “Say,” she said, “does Cam still leave the toilet seat up?”

Ada knew they were off and running.

“Cam always used to leave the toilet seat up,” Cassie said. “More

than once with that man I crawled out of bed at night and plopped my buns right down into the water.”

“How refreshing,” Ada said. “Did you have to change your jammies?”

Cassie was deep into her joint. “Do you have any peroxide?” she asked. “For my nose.”

Ada shifted a cushion behind her back. “In the bathroom. Left side, second shelf.”

“Thanks,” Cassiopeia said. She billowed up from the couch like a saffron cloud.

Ada checked out her spreading size. “You want to go to aerobics class with me?”

“You’ve got to be joking,” Cassie said. “Hold this, will you?” She handed the jay to Ada who sat holding the burning joint. Across the front bay of windows hung Ada’s precious Boston ferns, four huge bushes with fronds bursting up and then down through the macrame hangers. She laid the joint in an ashtray, crossed to the windows, picked up her misting can and sprayed the jungle-sized plants.

“I can’t find the peroxide.” Cassiopeia’s far-away voice whined a child’s ploy.

Ada set down the misting can and headed down the long hall. “I’m coming,” she said. She turned into the bathroom. “It would help,” she said to the stoned Cassie, “if you opened the cabinet.” Ada pointed. “What’s this mess on the mirror?”

Cassiopeia grinned at Ada. She held up a bar of soap. “I was feeling inspired.”

In the mirror both women were reflected. Over their reflections handwriting was scrawled with soap.

Ada attempted a smile. “When did you become a graffiti artist, dear.”

“My latest poem,” Cassie said. She began to read: “Chameleons are not furious. They color themselves to fit their world. Suddenly this long here....” She studied Ada’s face. “What do you think so far?”

“Terrific,” Ada said.

“Suddenly this long here,” Cassie continued, “I no longer speed

on the urgency of there. Chameleons are.” She stopped. “That’s all the farther I wrote when you came in.”

“Too bad,” Ada said. “You and Coleridge.”

“Huh?” Cassie said. “I don’t get it.”

“He was a poet. Here let me squeeze this cotton over your nose. Someone interrupted him in the middle of a poem and he never could finish it. Hold still.”

Cassiopeia gasped like a fish as the peroxide foamed in her nostril. “But I finished mine,” she blubbered.

Ada capped the peroxide. “That figures.” She tossed the soaked cotton into the wastebasket.

Cassiopeia stood between her and the door. “Chameleons are adaptable.”

“Move aside,” Ada said.

Cassie moved, still reciting: “Chameleons will be here long after the rest of life, extinct, has died of a mushroom ulcer.” She smiled at Ada.

“That’s it?” Ada asked.

“Far out, isn’t it?” Cassie said.

“No wonder Cameron thought you were a muse lately sprung up in America.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She led Cassie into the hall. “Care for some tea?” she asked.

“I have some ginseng in my tote,” Cassie offered.

“Thanks, dear,” Ada said, “I’d as soon not swallow anything in your bag.”

“Don’t be smart,” Cassiopeia said. “Just because your toilet seat is down.”

“You noticed.”

“You’ve broken him, paper-trained him like a lap dog.” Cassiopeia looked genuinely sorrowful.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Ada said.

“No. Really,” Cassiopeia said. “Signs and omens are everywhere.”

“You’ve confused peace, love, and granola with life,” Ada said.

“In the universe. In the cosmos. In the constellations of stars. It’s all magical.”

Ada busied herself with a pot of Mu tea.

Cassie rattled her costume bracelets across the old white-oak table. Silence stretched between them. Once, when she was eleven years old, Ada had connected a wire between two soup cans and had given one to her best girlfriend. They had been barely able to hear each other.

Cassiopeia stared vacantly at her fingers full of rings.

Ada switched on the 1932 Philco that Cameron had restored. KFOG crept around the aspidistra and wandering jew plants, filling the kitchen with guileless music. At least once an hour they played an instrumental version of “I Left My Heart in San Francisco.”

“That station makes me feel like I’m in a dentist office,” Cassiopeia said.

“It calms me,” Ada said. “In the room,” she clung for balance to her favorite line of poetry, “the women come and go, speaking... speaking...”

Cassiopeia was not listening. She nervously twisted her rings. “I think I’m leaving Frisco,” she said.

It grated on Ada. “Never call San Francisco ‘Frisco,’” she said. “What’s the matter with you?”

“Nothing,” she said. “It’s all over here, unless you’re gay. I just want to go away.”

“Then go.” Ada said it flat.

“You’ve never liked me.” Cassiopeia looked about to cry.

“I could cheerfully murder you,” Ada said. “Hand me your cup. The tea’s ready.”

“I tried to leave before.”

“That was a happy day till you called us late that night.” Ada poured the tea.

“Long distance.”

“Collect,” Ada said. “I accepted your call when Cameron refused.” She poured her own tea. “Why should I like you? My husband’s old...” Ada stopped pouring in mid-cup.

She felt reversed, turned around. It was the New World the liberated Ms. Leavitt loved: Ada, the princess, out defending, rescuing again, perhaps, her prince.

She set the tea-cosy down on a mirrored tray in which she saw the upside-down face of Cassiopeia. “Okay,” Ada said, “take a sip of your tea.”

“Thank you, Nurse Rat Shit,” Cassiopeia said.

“Furious this may make you, my tired little hipster, but you’re going to hear me out for once. Stoned or not. Try to focus your fried-out brain.”

Cassiopeia rose up in her seat. “Nobody talks to me like that.”

“Except me,” Ada said. “And you look straight at me, Margaret Mary O’Hara. “Watch my face. Read my lips.”

Cassiopeia bolted. Lectures frightened her. She stood straight up, knocking over her chair. “Dear, dear Abby,” Cassie said, “I’m not one of your sophomores. Who needs this? I’m leaving.”

“Good-bye, good luck, and good riddance.”

Cassie grabbed her tote and ran down the hall, heading toward the front door. She stopped. She turned. “I’m pregnant,” she screamed. “Tell Cam that!” She slung her tote over her shoulder. “From what I figure about you, Ada Tomato, that’s more than you’ll ever be able to tell him!”

Ada started for her, walking fast, then faster down the hall. “I’m going to tear your nose off your face,” she screamed.

Cassie yanked open the front door. The afternoon sun hit her directly, exploding her into a ball of saffron light.

Ada was momentarily blinded. She stopped in her tracks. The door slammed. The hallway grew quiet, except for the tiny snuffle Ada stifled with the back of her hand. This wasn’t what she had meant to happen. Not at all. “Oh damn,” she said.

*

Curtis directed Cameron down the dirt fire-road to the old Mount Tamalpais train station. The sign on the stone-and-timber building read West Point Club. Cameron pulled the bike up under three

shady pines. The dust ball that had followed the bike down the trail caught them and sifted into their clothes. Curtis hopped off, preening himself like a swan. Cameron wondered if Curtis, neat old Curtis, sportscar nut and terror of women, wasn't just a bit of a fag, even if he had married Ada who refused to rate Curtis' performance on a scale of one-to-ten. He kicked the stand under his bike. Why give fags a bad name, he thought. Curtis is Curtis.

"Hey, Mala!" A raspy voice called down from the porch. At first Cameron couldn't see to whom the man at the railing was shouting. Then a streak of gray flashed out of the bushes. Curtis moved quickly behind the bike as the gray Malamute loped her panting way up to the newcomers.

"Hey there, girl," Cameron said. The dog looked up at him and rolled over on her back. Cameron stooped down.

"That's it," the man on the porch said, "scratch her."

Cameron pulled the white hair on the dog's belly back and forth. Her back wriggled through the dusty gravel. Her eyes rolled ecstatic back into her head.

"Be careful," Curtis said. "She might bite."

"Come on, Mala," the man said coming down from the porch. "Don't be a pest." His chin was grizzled with whiskers. He was shirtless and wearing brown leather hiking shorts he had crafted himself. "She found a rattler this morning," he said, "curled up on the porch steps." He held out a hand to Cameron stooped over the dog. The tips of two fingers were missing. "Name's Jerry," he said. His grip was strong and he was so veined with muscle he easily pulled Cameron to his feet. "I killed it with a stick." He pointed to a nail on the porch railing. "Come on up. You can see the rattles."

The dog followed the three men up to the porch where she lay down possessively guarding the steps. Four hikers, two couples, in their late fifties, early sixties, sat at one of the many tables on the porch, one sipping hot tea, and three lemonade.

"What a view," Cameron said. "From down in these trees I didn't think you could see anything."

"Everything from out in the Pacific, in past the Golden Gate, all

of San Francisco, Oakland, on around to Berserkley and the Richmond Bridge,” Jerry said. “On a clear night, the ocean and Bay are black as the sky. You can hardly tell the constellations of stars from the constellations of city lights.”

“A poet,” Curtis said, “and you know it.”

“Nope, the caretaker.” Jerry spit over the railing. He liked most people, but already he disliked Curtis. “Lemonade?” he asked.

“Fresh squeezed?” Curtis sat in one of the heavy wooden porch chairs.

“Wyler’s Brand,” Jerry said. He toyed with a chain hanging heavy with keys at his left hip.

“Make it two, okay?” Cameron said. He shot a .22-caliber look at Curtis.

“Come on, Mala,” Jerry said.

The dog rose, looked with dumb affection at Cameron, and passed on into the club rooms. Cameron looked in. The floors were rough and unfinished. The walls and ceiling were an ancient enamel yellow. Some of the leaded glass had fallen out of a built-in cupboard, and the fireplace had been converted to a gas burner. Even the globes hanging from the ceiling burnt gas. Directly opposite the door hung a portrait of John Muir.

“How long has this place been here?” Cameron asked.

“Forever,” Curtis said. “Sit down. I want to talk to you.”

“Yessir!” Cameron said and saluted smartly.

The woman with the tea took a quick look at Curtis and then whispered something to her husband with the lemonade. They both laughed.

Cameron sat down, back to the view. Curtis began talking. Cameron studied the map of trails that hung framed under glass over Curtis’ head.

“Here’s your lemonade,” Jerry said. He set the tray down between the two men.

“Pay the man,” Cameron said to Curtis. “It’ll be good for your soul.”

Curtis looked hurt. Ada always said money was Curtis' only friend. "How much?" he said.

"Fifty cents," Jerry said.

Curtis laid five dimes on the table. Jerry's stubbed fingers deftly flicked the change into the palm of his hand. "For the West Point kitty," he said.

The other hikers called him to sit with them.

Curtis drank the lemonade in one gulp. "Everything tastes like chemicals," he said. "Even if you could afford it, where could you find any quality to buy these days?"

"What makes you think you could ever buy it?" Cameron sipped his lemonade.

"As I was saying," Curtis said.

"What were you saying?"

"I was saying the trouble with Ada is..."

"There's no trouble with Ada," Cameron said.

"...is the same as the trouble with me." Curtis was relentless. "When we were married, such a short time, we both were very young. She was in school. We were both in school. We were peace activists in the streets, but we fought each other. All the time. About everything. We needed, well, a referee."

"Someone to count you out? 8-9-10?"

"I loved...no, love, Ada." Curtis looked about to whimper.

"That makes two of us," Cameron said. "But I have my doubts about you."

"No doubts," Curtis said.

Mala crept over next to Cameron's chair. Jerry was playing the harmonica, one of three he kept on a shelf inside the door, and the four hikers were singing a German song.

"So what do you want me to do?" Cameron asked. He scratched the dog behind the ears.

"I want..." Curtis hesitated.

"Go on," Cameron said. "Good girl, Mala. That's a good girl, Mala."

"I want," Curtis said, "to live with Ada."

"You're crazy," Cameron said. "She thinks you're a joke."

"No." Curtis leaned into the table. "I want...and this is really hard to verbalize."

"Try," Cameron said.

"I want to move in with Ada. And with you."

*

Ada lay prostrate on the couch with laughter. "Poor Curtis!" she said. "What did you say to him?"

Cameron fell across her, stretching down the length of her body. Her laughter was infectious. He laughed too. "What do you think I said?"

She roared. "Yes!" she screamed. "You said *yes*! We're no longer a marriage. We're a *menage*!"

"He wants us to be his mommy and daddy."

Ada's hilarity ignited her immense energy and she pushed Cameron off her to the floor. "You idiot," she said, gaining control of herself. "Of course, you didn't really!"

"You hurt my back," Cameron said. "Of course, I did. I couldn't help myself."

"You didn't!" She began to strike his shoulders with her small fists. "I'll hurt more than your back. I'm not ready to adopt. Anyone." She meant Cassiopeia especially.

"Watch your knee," he said. He rolled into a fetal position.

"Say you didn't," she said. "I'll positively murder you!"

Cameron was laughing, tickling her, teasing her, driving her crazy. She pounced across his butt, snatched a pillow from the couch, and pummeled his head.

"I didn't." He confessed, but he never surrendered. "I didn't. I really didn't."

"That's more like it." Ada stood up triumphant. "Curtis and Cassie are both children, and we agreed not to have children."

Cameron rolled over and unhitched the belt on his jeans. He held out his arms to her. "We can change our minds," he said.

"Is that all you care about?" Ada reached for the misting can and walked indignant toward the windows.

"Go drown your ferns," Cameron said.

She sprayed the ferns so heavily they began to drip on the hardwood floor. "That's all you care about," she said. "That tramp Cassie might have been your trampoline, but not me!"

He locked his hands together under his head. "I used to care about a lot of things."

"Here it comes," she said. "Whatever it is we never talk about." She pulled a red bandana from her back pocket and tried to wipe the wet floor.

"Yeah. Here it comes," he said. He leaned up on an elbow and stuck a cigarette between his teeth.

"You ought to trim that moustache before you burn yourself up."

"Here it comes," he said. He lit the cigarette and pulled the smoke down deep.

Ada took advantage of the pause. "First there were the Kennedys," she recited. She repeated his litany by heart. "Assassinations. Executions, you say. And second there was..."

"Nam," he said.

"Sometimes I think the only heart you have is purple."

"Smart-assing doesn't become you, Ada."

"Don't forget drugs," she said. "You and your sacred mushrooms."

"And drugs."

"And Cassiopeia, the human air-mattress."

"Lay off," Cameron said.

Ada rose from her knees waving the wet red kerchief. "Would the bull like a surprise?"

"What surprise?"

"She was here today."

"Cassie?"

"Yeah."

"What'd she want?" Cameron let the cigarette hang forgotten in his mouth.

"Same as Curtis I imagine." Ada folded the wet kerchief

deliberately into squares. “But you know Cassie. She always says the opposite of what she means. You have to read her in a mirror.” Ada never believed in telling anyone everything. She decided not to lighten up with a joke about Cassie’s chameleons.

“What’d she say?” Cameron rose and crossed to the bottle tucked away in the bookcase.

“She said she’s leaving San Francisco. She said she stopped over to say good-bye. She said she’d never call us again. Not even collect. She said she was a chameleon. Her hints were as broad as her hips. I think she wants to live with us too. Fuck her!”

“Cut it, Ada,” Cameron said. He was flashing on the night Cassie had called them long distance, desperate and sick on junk. “That poor kid,” he had said. He had spent the night in the Greyhound Bus Depot waiting for her to get back from Santa Cruz.

Ada had been furious. “You can’t really expect me to go down to that filthy bus station practically on our honeymoon to meet your whore,” Ada had said. “What kind of woman do you think I am?”

“I don’t know,” he had said. “I suspect I’ll find out. Sooner or later.”

*

Even through that long night waiting for Cassiopeia, Cameron hadn’t blamed Ada. Strangers in the station had surrounded him, deathly alive at 3:30 AM. They had breathed on him. Everyone smoked. Their blue exhalations had yellowed the air, thickening the pallid fluorescent light.

He hadn’t blamed Ada and he hadn’t blamed Cassie.

The longer he had waited that night the more he had needed the men’s room. He had stalled leaving his seat in the crowded terminal, mainly because an old woman, a white choir robe folded over her arm, had stood sentinel, waiting, like God’s Righteousness at the end of the full row of seats. She had tried to stare Cameron into relinquishing his chair. But he had sat, steadfast, bladder hurting, because her face, over the folded choir robe, because her face, over the righteous folds of her melting flesh, was so mean.

From the moment of Cassie's emergency call, Ada had given him no peace; and Cassie wasn't due till 6:47. Cameron had reached for a cigarette. Out. He had frisked his pockets for a stray pack.

Another predator had eyed his nervous movements. Seated in the row opposite, a young hooker, in shorts and leg-warmers, had been clipping her nails, licking each finger after each snip, rubbing each cuticle meticulously dry on her denim blouse. That night among desperate travelers going nowhere had been terrible.

Cameron took his drink and turned to Ada. "If nothing else," he mumbled, "here and now...."

"What?" she said.

"Nothing." He took a good slug of the whiskey. "There's too many people in the world to care anymore," he said.

That night in the bus station, too far away to hear, Cameron had watched a security cop hassle two men lounging without luggage. One, a young black, had produced a ticket. The cop had reached for his eyeglasses. He took the ticket, examined it, and handed it back. The other man, a wafer-thin Appalachian with red hair, had fumbled through his pockets, offering at last to the cop a shred of paper. Even at a distance, Cameron had felt the failure. Outside, a bus roared. The cop had jerked his fist, thumb extended, back over his shoulder. Obediently, the red-haired man had risen, defeated, cast out, and shuffled out towards Seventh Street and Market Street.

"How can anyone care anymore?" Cameron lay back on the couch. "There's just too many."

The depot had been a mess with people. Too many people always meant a mess. They had drained him of sympathy. All their patience. All their hurry. Their smell. Their sound. He knew he was the same to them. Just another body taking up the last available seat. If the security officer had shot the red-haired man in the face, Cameron would have felt no pity. No more sorry than watching an actor like Edmund O'Brien get shot in a TV series. Maybe the cleaning woman might have minded the red-haired Appalachian brains blown under the bus station seats about as much as she minded the hooker's snipped crescents of dead-white fingernail.

*

"Hello in there!" Ada rubbed Cameron's forehead with the cool wet bandana.

"Cassie's really gone then," he said.

"As much as Cassie ever goes," Ada said. "I wouldn't worry. She has her own ways of coping, weak as they are."

"She'll keel over out there, Ada." The hand with his drink sank to the floor beside the couch.

Ada lifted the glass to her lips and finished the burning whiskey. "Cassiopeia will be alright. So will Curtis," she soothed, climbing on top of Cameron's outstretched body. She kissed him. She loved him. "Everything's alright," she said. "Everybody drops people now and then." She kissed him again. "We're alright, Cameron. We're here now."

She cupped his head in her hands, nuzzling his lips, nose, eyes. "They're both gone," she said.

"They'll come back."

"And we'll send them away."

"We have no choice."

She kissed him. "We're all alone."

"We need to be alone together," he said. He brought his arms up around her, pulling her down on to him. "We two." He needed to hold her, just hold her.

She let him embrace her sweetly.

She relaxed across the full length of his body. She rose and fell with his breathing as he drifted off to sleep. She felt his unshaven face chafe against her cheek. Some things she sometimes accepted. She was not sleepy in her vigil, holding him, protecting him, but she could not afford to look too long at his face. Maybe he wasn't the best man in the world, but he was the best who had yet come along.

Everyone thought they were a great couple. They were charmed, emerging from the burden of their pasts. He was as handsome as she was attractive, and, lord knows, something in the very look of him warmed the cold Curtis had left deep inside her when his dose had

killed her fertility. Someday when Cameron was ready, when she was ready, when she could afford the astonished look in his face, when she could chance his disappointment might not drive him away, she promised herself to tell him why, really why, she didn't want, couldn't have, children.

God! His radiant heat made her eyes burn. She closed them, in self-defense, closed them tight against his seductive, engaging brightness that was like the beautiful blinding brightness of San Francisco itself when tour boats pull away from the Embarcadero at noon into the windswept cross-currents of the Bay.

