

Let Me See You Smile  
by Lucia Berlin

*It's true, the grave is more powerful than a lover's eyes. An open grave, with all its magnets. And I say this to you, you who when you smile make me think of the beginning of the world. —Vicente Huidobro, Altazor*

Jesse threw me for a loop. And I take pride in my ability to size people up. Before I joined Grillig's firm, I was a public defender for so long I had learned to assess a client or a juror almost at first glance.

I was unprepared too because my secretary didn't announce him over the intercom and he had no appointment. Elena just led him into my office.

"Jesse is here to see you, Mr. Cohen."

Elena introduced him with an air of importance, using only his first name. He was so handsome, entered the room with such authority, I thought he must be some one-name rock star I hadn't heard of.

He wore cowboy boots and black jeans, a black silk shirt. He had long hair, a strong craggy face. About thirty was my first guess, but when he shook my hand there was an indescribable sweetness in his smile, an openness in his hazel eyes that was innocent and childlike. His raspy low voice confused me even more. He spoke as if he were explaining patiently to a young inexperienced person. Me.

He said he had inherited ten thousand dollars and wanted to use it to hire me. The woman he lived with was in trouble, he said, and she was going to trial in two months. Ten counts against her.

I hated to tell him how far his money would go with me.

"Doesn't she have a court-appointed attorney?" I asked.

"She did, but the asshole quit. He thought she was guilty and a bad person, a pervert."

"What makes you think I won't feel the same way?" I asked.

"You won't. She says you are the best civil liberties lawyer in town. The deal is she doesn't know I'm here. I want you to let her think you're volunteering to do this. For the principle of the thing. This is my only condition."

I tried to interrupt here, to say, "Forget it, son." Tell him firmly that I wasn't going to do it. No way could he afford me. I didn't want to touch this case. I couldn't believe this poor kid was willing to give all his money away. I already hated the woman. Damn right she was guilty and a bad person!

He said that the problem was the police report, which the judge and jury would read. They would preconvict her because it was distorted and full of lies. He thought I could get her off by showing that his arrest was false, that the report of hers was libelous, the cop she hit was brutal, the arresting officer was psychotic, evidence had definitely been planted. He was convinced that I could discover that they had made other false arrests and had histories of brutality.

He had more to say about how I should handle this case. I can't explain why I didn't blow up, tell him to get lost. He argued passionately and well. He should have been a lawyer.

I didn't just like him. I even began to see that spending his entire inheritance was a necessary rite of passage. A heroic, noble gesture.

It was as if Jesse were from another age, another planet. He even said at some point that the woman called him "The Man Who Fell to Earth." This made me feel better about her somehow.

I told Elena to cancel a meeting and an appointment. He spoke all morning, simply and clearly, about their relationship, about her arrest.

I am a defense attorney. I'm cynical. I am a material person, a greedy man. I told him I would take the case for nothing.

"No. Thank you," he said. "Just please tell her that you're doing it for no charge. But it's my fault she got into this trouble and I want to pay for it. What will it be? Five thousand? More?"

"Two thousand," I said.

"I know that's too low. How about three?"

"Deal," I said.

He took off one of his boots and counted off thirty warm hundred-dollar bills, fanned them out on my desk like cards. We shook hands.

"Thanks for doing this, Mr. Cohen."

"Sure. Call me Jon."

He settled back down and filled me in.

He and his friend Joe were dropouts, had run away from New Mexico last year. Jesse played the guitar, wanted to play in San Francisco. On his eighteenth birthday he was to inherit money from an old woman in Nebraska (another heartbreaking story). He had planned to go to London, where he had been asked to join a band. An English group had played in Albuquerque, liked his songs and guitar playing. He and Joe had no place to stay when they got to the Bay Area, so he looked up Ben, who had been his best friend in junior high. Ben's mother didn't know they were runaways. She said it was okay for them to stay awhile in the garage. Later she found out and called their parents, calmed the parents down, told them they were doing fine.

It had all worked out. He and Joe did yard work and hauling, other odd jobs. Jesse played with other musicians, was writing songs. They got along great with Ben and with his mother, Carlotta. She appreciated how much time Jesse spent with her youngest kid Saul, taking him to ball games, fishing, climbing at Tilden. She taught school and worked hard, was glad too for help with laundry and carrying groceries and dishes. Anyway, he said, it was a good arrangement for everybody.

"I had met Maggie about three years before. They called her to our junior high in Albuquerque. Somebody had put acid in Ben's milk at lunch. He freaked out, didn't know what was happening. She came to get him. They let me and Joe go with her, in case he got violent. I thought she was going to take him to a hospital, but she drove us all down by the river. The four of us sat in the rushes, watching red-winged blackbirds, calming him down and actually helping him have a pretty cool trip. Maggie and I got along fine, talking about birds and the river. I usually don't talk much but with her there is always a lot I need to say."

I turned a recorder on at this point.

"So we stayed a month at their house in Berkeley, then another month. At night we'd all sit around the fire talking, telling jokes. Joe had a girlfriend by then and so did Ben so they'd go out. Ben was still a senior and he sold his jewelry and rock star photos on Telegraph, so I didn't see him much. Weekends I'd go to the marina or the beach with Saul and Maggie."

“Excuse me. You said her name was Carlotta. Who’s Maggie?”

“I call her Maggie. At nights she’d grade papers and I’d play my guitar. We talked all night sometimes, our whole life stories, laughing, crying. She and I are both alcoholics, which is bad if you look at it one way, but good if you look at how it helped us say things to each other that we had never told anybody before. Our childhoods were scary and bad in exactly the same way, but like negatives of each other’s. When we got together her kids freaked out, her friends said it was sick, incestuous. We are incestuous but in a weird way. It’s like we are twins. The same person. She writes stories. She does the same thing in her stories that I do in my music. Anyway, every day we knew each other more deeply, so that when we finally ended up in bed it was as if we had already been inside each other. We were lovers for two months before I was supposed to leave. The idea was to get my money in Albuquerque on December 28, when I turned eighteen, and then go to London. She was making me go, said I needed the experience and we needed to split.

“I didn’t want to go to London. I may be young but I know what she and I have together is galaxies beyond regular people. We know each other in our souls, all the bad and the good. We have a kindness to each other.”

He told me then the story of going to the airport with her and Joe. Joe’s belt knife and zippers had turned on the alarm at security, all three were strip-searched and Jesse missed the plane. He was hollering about his guitar and music being on the plane, got put into handcuffs, was being beaten by the police when Maggie came in.

“We all got arrested. It’s in the report,” he said. “The newspaper headline was ‘Lutheran Schoolteacher, Hell’s Angels in Airport Brawl.’”

“Are you a Hell’s Angel?”

“Of course not. But the report says I am. Joe looks like one, wishes he was. He must have bought ten copies of that paper. Anyway, she and Joe went to jail in Redwood City. I spent a night in juvenile hall and then they sent me to New Mexico. Maggie phoned me on my birthday and told me everything was fine. She didn’t say a word about any trial, and she didn’t tell me she had been evicted and fired, that her ex-husband was taking her kids to Mexico. But Joe did, even though she told him not to. So I came back here.”

“How did she feel about that?”

“She was furious. Said I had to leave and go to London. That I needed to learn and to grow. And she was believing all the shit about her being bad because I was seventeen when we got together. I seduced her. Nobody seems to get that part, except her. I’m not your typical teenager.”

“True,” I said.

“But anyway, we are together now. She agreed not to decide anything until after the trial. Not to look for a job or a place. What I’m hoping is by that time she’ll go away with me.”

He handed me the police report. “The best thing is for you to read this and then we’ll talk. Come over for dinner. Friday okay? After you’ve read this. Maybe you can find out something about the cop. Both cops. Come early,” he said, “when you get off work. We live just down the street.”

Nothing applied anymore. I couldn’t say it was inappropriate. That I had plans. That my wife might mind.

“Sure, I’ll be there at six.” The address he gave me was one of the worst blocks in town.

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It was a beautiful Christmas. Sweet presents for each other, a great dinner. Keith invited Karen, one of my students. I guess it's childish, but it made me feel good for him to see how much she looked up to me. Ben's girlfriend Megan made mince pies. Both of them helped me with dinner and it was fun. Our friend Larry came. Big fire, nice old-fashioned day.

Nathan and Keith were so glad Jesse was leaving that they were really nice to him, even gave him presents. Jesse had made gifts for everyone. It was warm and festive, except then in the kitchen Jesse whispered, "Hey, Maggie, whatcha gonna do when I'm gone?" and I thought my heart would break. He gave me a ring with a star and a moon. By coincidence we each gave the other a silver flask. We thought it was great. Nathan said, "Ma, that's so disgusting," but I didn't hear him then.

Jesse's plane was leaving at six. Joe wanted to come along. I drove us to the airport in the rain. "The Joker" and "Jumpin' Jack Flash" on the radio. Joe was sipping from a can of beer and Jesse and I from a pint of Beam. I never gave it a thought, that I was contributing to their delinquency. They were drinking when I met them. They bought liquor, never got carded. The truth was I was so much in denial about my own drinking I wasn't likely to worry about theirs.

When we got inside the airport, Jesse stopped and said, "Christ. You two will never find the car." We laughed, not realizing it would be true.

We weren't exactly drunk, but we were high and excited. I was trying not to show how desperate I was about him leaving.

I realize now how much attention we must have attracted. All of us very tall. Joe, a dark Laguna Indian with long black braids, in motorcycle leather, a knife on his belt. Big boots, zippers and chains. Jesse in black, with his duffel bag and guitar. Jesse. He was otherworldly. I couldn't even glance up at him, his jaw, his teeth, his golden eyes, flowing long hair. I would weep if I looked at him. I was dressed up for Christmas in a black velvet pantsuit, Navajo jewelry. Whatever it was, the combination of us, plus all the buzzers that Joe's metal set off going through security ... they saw us as a security risk, took us into separate rooms and searched us. They went through my underwear, my purse, ran their fingers through my hair, between my toes. Everywhere. When I got out of there I couldn't see Jesse, so I ran to the departure gate. Jesse's flight had left. He was yelling at the agent that his guitar was on the plane, his music was on the plane. I had to go to the bathroom. When I came out no one was at the ticket counter. The plane had gone. I asked somebody if the tall young man in black had made the plane. The man nodded toward a door with no sign on it. I went in.

The room was full of security guards and city police. It was sharp with the smell of sweat. Two guards were restraining Joe, who was handcuffed. Two policemen held Jesse and another was beating him on the head with a foot-long flashlight. A sheet of blood covered Jesse's face and soaked his shirt. He was screaming with pain. I walked completely unnoticed across the room. All of them were watching the policeman beating Jesse, as if they were looking at a fight on TV. I grabbed the flashlight and hit the cop on the head with it. He fell with a thud. "Oh Jesus, he's dead," another one said.

Jesse and I were handcuffed and then taken through the airport and down to a small police station in the basement. We sat next to each other, our hands fastened behind us to the chairs. Jesse's eyes were stuck shut with blood. He couldn't see and the wound on his scalp continued to bleed. I begged them to clean it or bandage it. To wash his eyes. They'll clean you up at Redwood City Jail, the guard said.

"Fuck, Randy, the dude's a juvenile! Somebody's got to take him over the bridge!"

“A juvenile? This bitch is in big trouble. I ain’t taking him. My shift’s almost over.”

He came over to me. “You know the peace officer you hit? They have him in Intensive Care. He might die.”

“Please. Could you wash his eyes?”

“Fuck his eyes.”

“Lean down a little, Jesse.”

I licked the blood off of his eyes. It took a long time; the blood was thick and caked, stuck in his lashes. I had to keep spitting. With the rust around them his eyes glowed a honey amber.

“Hey, Maggie, let me see your smile.”

We kissed. The guard pulled my head away and slapped me. “Filthy bitch!” he said. Just then there was a lot of yelling and Joe got thrown in with us. They had arrested him for using obscene language in front of women and children. He had been angry when they wouldn’t tell him anything about us.

“This one is old enough for Redwood City.”

Since his arms were cuffed behind him, he couldn’t hug us, so he kissed us both. Far as I remember he had never kissed either of us on the lips before. He said later it was because our mouths were so bloody it made him feel sad. The police called me a pervert again, seducing young boys.

I was disgusted by then. I didn’t get it yet, didn’t understand the way everyone would see me. I had no idea that my charges were adding up. One of the policemen read them to me from the counter across the room. “Drunk in public, interfering with arrest, assaulting a police officer, assault with a deadly weapon, attempted murder, resisting arrest. Lewd and lascivious behavior, sexual acts upon a minor (licking his eyes), contributing to the delinquency of minors, possession of marijuana.”

“Hey, no way!” Joe said.

“Don’t say anything,” Jesse whispered. “This will work for us. Must have been planted. We had all just been searched, right?”

“Shit yeah,” Joe said. “Plus we would have smoked it if we had it.”

They took Jesse away. They put Joe and me in the back of a squad car. We drove miles and miles to the Redwood City jail. All I could think of was that Jesse was gone. I figured they would send him to Albuquerque and then he’d go to London.

Two nasty butch cops gave me a vaginal and rectal exam, a cold shower. They washed my hair with lye soap, getting it in my eyes. They left me without a towel or a comb. All they gave me to wear was a short gown and some tennis shoes. I had a black eye and a swollen lip, from when they hit me after they took the flashlight away. The cop who took me downstairs had kept twisting the cuffs so there were open bloody cuts on both wrists, like stupid suicides.

They didn’t let me have my cigarettes. The two whores and one wino with me let me have their last wet drags at least. Nobody slept or spoke. I shook all night from cold, from needing a drink.

In the morning we went in a bus to the courthouse. I talked through a window, by phone, to a fat red lawyer who read the report to me. The report was distorted and false all the way through.

“Advised of three suspicious characters in airport lobby. Woman with two Hell’s Angels, one Indian. All armed and potentially dangerous.” I kept telling him that things said in the report were total lies. The lawyer ignored me, just kept asking me if I was fucking the kid.

“Yes!” I finally said. “But that’s just about the only thing I’m not charged with.”

“You would have been if I had written it. Statutory rape.” I was so tired I got the giggles, which made him madder. Statutory rape. I get visions of Pygmalion or some Italian raping the Pietà.

“You’re a sicko,” he said. “You are charged with performing sexual acts upon a minor in public.”

I told him I was trying to get the blood off Jesse’s eyes so he could see.

“You actually licked it off?” he sneered.

I can imagine what hell prison must be. I could really understand how prisoners just learn to be worse people. I wanted to kill him. I asked him what was going to happen. He said I’d be arraigned and a court date would be set. I’d come in, plead innocent, hope that when we went to court we got a judge who was halfway lenient. Getting a jury in this town is a problem too. Far-right, religious people out here, hard on drugs, sex crimes. Hell’s Angels were Satan to them and marijuana, forget it.

“I didn’t have marijuana,” I said. “The cop put it there.”

“Sure he did. To thank you for sucking his dick?”

“So, are you going to defend me or prosecute me?”

“I’m your appointed defense lawyer. See you in court.”

Joe was in court too, chained to a string of other men in orange. He didn’t look at me. I was black and blue, my hair curled wild around my face and the shift barely covered my underpants. Later Joe actually admitted I looked so sleazy he had pretended he didn’t know me. We both got assigned court dates in January. When his case got to court the judge just laughed and dropped the charges.

I had called home. It was hard enough telling Ben where I was. I was too ashamed to ask anyone to post bail, so I waited another day for them to let me out on my own recognizance. Stupidly I got that by having them call the principal where I taught. She was a woman who liked me, respected me. I still had no idea how people were going to judge me. It baffles me now how blind I was, but now I’m sober.

The police told me that Joe needed me to put up bond for him, so when I got out I went to a bondsman. It must not have been much, since I wrote him a check.

We figured out how to get to the airport. But it’s like seeing Mount Everest. It just looked close. We walked in the rain, freezing cold, miles and miles. It took us most of the day. We laughed a lot, even after we tried to take a shortcut through a dog kennel. Climbing a fence with Dobermans barking and snarling beneath us. Abbott and Costello. No one would pick us up when we got to the freeway. Not true, some guy in a truck finally did, but we were almost there, waved him on.

This was the worst part of the entire situation. I’m serious. Trying to find the damn car. We went all the way around every vast level, up and up and then back down around and around then back up around and around until we both were crying. Just bawling away from being so tired and hungry and cold. An elderly black man saw us, and we didn’t scare him even though we were soaked through and crying like fools. He didn’t even mind us getting mud and water in his spotless old Hudson car. He drove up and down and around over and over saying that the good Lord would help us, surely. And when we found the car we all said, “Praise the Lord.” When we got out he said to us, “God bless you.” “God bless you and thank you,” Joe and I said in unison, like a response in church.

“That dude is a fucking angel.”

“He really is one,” I said.

“Yeah, that’s what I just said. A for-real angel.”

There was more than half a pint of Jim Beam in the glove compartment. We sat there with the heater on and the windows steamed up, eating Cheerios and croutons from the bag for feeding ducks and finishing the bottle of whiskey.

“I’ll admit it,” he said. “Nothing ever tasted so good.”

We were quiet all the way home in the rain. He drove. I kept wiping the steam off the windows. I asked him not to tell my kids or Jesse about all the charges or about the cop. It was a disturbing-the-peace problem, okay? Cool, he said. We didn’t speak after that. I didn’t feel guilty or ashamed, didn’t worry about the trouble I was in or what I was going to do. I thought about Jesse being gone.

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I tried to call Cheryl before I went to Jesse’s, but she hung up on me, tried again but the machine was on. I was going to drive but worried about parking in their neighborhood. I was worried about walking in their neighborhood too. I guess it says something that I left my Porsche in the office garage, walked the seven or eight blocks to their apartment.

The downstairs door was graffitied plywood behind metal bars. They buzzed me into a dusty marble foyer, lit from a star-shaped skylight four stories up. It was still a beautiful tile-and-marble building, with a sweep of stairs, faded mirrors in art deco frames. Someone slept against an urn; figures with their faces averted passed me on the stairs, all vaguely familiar from the courthouse or jail.

By the time I got to their apartment I was out of breath, sickened by smells of urine, cheap wine, stale oil, dust. Carlotta opened the door. “Come in,” she smiled. I stepped into their technicolor world that smelled of corn bread and red chili, limes and cilantro and her perfume. The room had high ceilings, tall windows. There were oriental rugs on the polished wood floors. Huge ferns, banana plants, birds of paradise. The only furniture in this room was a bed with red satin sheets. Outside in the late sun was the golden dome of the Abyssinian Baptist Church, a grove of tall, old palm trees, the curve of the BART train. The view was like a vista in Tangiers. She let me absorb this for a minute, then she shook my hand.

“Thank you for helping us, Mr. Cohen. Eventually I’ll be able to pay you.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’m glad to do it,” I said, “especially now that I’ve read the report. It’s an obvious distortion.”

Carlotta was tall and tanned, in a soft white jersey dress. She looked around thirty, had what my mother used to call bearing. She was even more of a surprise than the apartment, than Jesse, well maybe not Jesse. I could see how the combination of them would be disturbing. I kept staring at her. She was a lovely woman. I don’t mean pretty, although she was. Gracious. If we did end up going to trial, she would look terrific in court.

This would turn out to be only my first visit. I came back every Friday after that, walking, no, rushing from my office to their place. It was as if I had taken some drink, like Alice, or was in a Woody Allen movie. Not where the actor climbs down from the screen. I climbed up into it.

That first evening she led me into the other room, which had a fine Bokhara carpet, some saddlebags, a table set for three, with flowers and candles. “Angie” was playing on the stereo. These tall windows had bamboo blinds and the slight wind made shadows like banners on the walls.

Jesse called hello from the kitchen, came out to shake my hand. He was in jeans and a white T-shirt. They both glowed with color, had been at the estuary all day.

“How do you like our place? I painted it. Check out the kitchen. Baby-shit yellow, nice, no?”

“It is fantastic, this apartment!”

“And you like her. I knew you would.” He handed me a gin and tonic.

“How did you...?”

“I asked your secretary. I’m the cook tonight. You probably have questions to ask Maggie while I finish up.”

She led me to the “terrace,” a space outside the windows, above the fire escape, big enough for two milk crates. I did have dozens of questions. The report said she claimed to be a teacher. She told me about losing her job at a Lutheran high school, about being evicted. She was frank. She said the neighbors had been complaining for a long time, because there were so many of them living there, because of loud music. This had just been the last straw. She was glad her ex-husband took the three youngest to Mexico.

“I’m completely mixed up, messed up, right now,” she said. It was hard to believe her because of her beautiful calm voice.

She briefly told me what happened at the airport, taking more blame for it than Jesse had given her. “As far as the charges, I am guilty of them, except the marijuana, they planted that. But the way they describe it is sick. Like Joe did kiss us both, but from friendship. I don’t have any sex ring with young boys. What was sick and wrong was how the cop was beating Jesse, and how others stood there watching it. Any normal person would have done what I did. Although, thank God, the cop didn’t die.”

I asked her what she was going to do after the trial. She looked panicked, whispered what Jesse had told me in the office, that they had decided not to deal with it until the trial.

“But I can get it together. Get myself together then.” She said she spoke Spanish, thought about applying at hospitals for jobs, or as a court translator. She had worked for almost a year on a trial in New Mexico, had good references. I knew the case, and the judge and lawyer she had worked with. Famous case ... an addict who shot a narc five times in the back and got off with manslaughter. We talked about that brilliant defense for a while, and I told her where to write about court translating.

Jesse came out with some guacamole and chips, a fresh drink for me, beers for them. She slid to the ground and he sat. She leaned back against his knees. He held her throat with one fine long-fingered hand, drank his beer with the other.

I will never forget it, the way he held her throat. The two of them were never flirtatious or coy, never made erotic or even demonstrative gestures, but their closeness was electric. He held her throat. It wasn’t a possessive gesture; they were fused.

“Of course, Maggie can get a dozen jobs. And she can find a house and her kids can all come home. Thing is they are better off without her. Sure they miss her and she misses them. She was a good mother. She raised them right, gave them character and values, a sense of who they are. They are confident and honest. They laugh a lot. Now they are with their daddy, who is very rich. He can send them to Andover and Harvard, where he went. Rest of the time they can sail and fish and scuba dive. If they come back to her, I’ll have to leave. And if I leave, she’ll drink. She won’t be able to stop and that will be a terrible thing.”

“What will you do if you leave?”

“Me? Die.”



The setting sun was in her brilliant blue eyes. Tears filled her eyes, caught in the lashes and didn't fall, reflected the green palms so that it looked like she was wearing turquoise goggles.

"Don't cry, Maggie," he said. He tilted her head back and drank the tears.

"How could you tell she was crying?" I asked.

"He always knows," she said. "At night, in the dark when I'm facing away from him, I can smile and he'll say, 'What's so funny?'"

"She's the same. She can be out cold. Snoring. And I'll grin. Her eyes will pop open and she'll be smiling back at me."

We had dinner then. A fantastic meal. We talked about everything but the trial. I can't remember how I got started on stories about my Russian grandmother, dozens of stories about her. I hadn't laughed so hard in years. Taught them the word *shonda*. What a *shonda*!

Carlotta cleared the table. The candles were halfway down. She came back with coffee and flan. As we were finishing, she said, "Jon, may I call you Counselor?"

"God, no," Jesse said. "That sounds like junior high. He'll ask me where my anger comes from. Let's call him Barrister. Barrister, have you given some thought to this lady's plight?"

"I have, my good man. Let me get my briefcase and I'll show you just where we stand."

I said yes to a cognac. They both were drinking whiskey and water now. I was excited. I wanted to be matter-of-fact, but I was too pleased. I went through the document and compared it with a three-page list of untrue, misleading, libelous, or slanderous statements from the report. "Lewd," "wanton behavior," "lascivious manner," "threatening," "menacing," "armed and dangerous." Pages of statements that could prejudice a judge and jury against my client, which in fact had given me a distorted idea of her even after talking with Jesse.

I had a copy from airport security saying that she and her clothing and bag had been thoroughly searched and no drugs or weapons had been found.

"The best part, though, is that you were right, Jesse. Both these guys have long lists of serious violations. Suspensions for improper use of force, beating suspects. Two separate investigations for killing unarmed suspects. Many, many complaints of brutality, excessive force, false arrest, and manufacturing evidence. And this is only after a few days' research! We do know that both these cops have had serious suspensions, were demoted, sent from beats in the city to South San Francisco. We will insist upon Internal Affairs investigations of the arresting officers, threaten to sue the San Francisco Police Department."

"So, let's not just threaten them, let's do it," Jesse said.

I would get to learn that drink gave him courage but it made her more fragile. She shook her head. "I couldn't go through with it."

"Bad idea, Jesse," I said. "But it is a good way to handle the case."

The court date wasn't until the end of June. Although my aides continued to get more evidence against the policemen, there wasn't much we needed to discuss. If the case wasn't dismissed, then we'd have to postpone the trial and, well, pray. But I still went over to the Telegraph apartment every Friday. It made my wife, Cheryl, furious and jealous. Except for handball games, this was the first time I ever went anywhere without her. She didn't understand why she couldn't come too. And I couldn't explain, not even to myself. Once she even accused me of having an affair.

It was like an affair. It was unpredictable and exciting. Fridays I would wait all day until I could go over there. I was in love with all of them. Sometimes Jesse, Joe, and Carlotta's son Ben and I would play poker or pool. Jesse taught me to be a good poker player, and a good pool

player. It made me feel childishly cool to go with them into downtown pool halls and not be afraid. Joe's mere presence made us all safe anywhere.

"He's like having a pit bull, only cheaper to feed," Jesse said. "He's good for other things," Ben said.

"He can open bottles with his teeth. He's the best laugher there is." That was true. He rarely spoke, but caught humor immediately.

Sometimes we walked with Ben in downtown Oakland while he took photographs. Carlotta got us to make frames with our hands, look at things as if through a lens. I told Ben it had changed my way of seeing.

What Joe liked to do was to sneak into photographs. When the contacts were printed, there he'd be sitting on a stoop with some winos or looking lost in a doorway, arguing with a Chinese butcher about a duck.

One Friday, Ben brought a Minolta, told me he'd sell it to me for fifty dollars. Sure. I was delighted. Later I noticed that he gave the money to Joe, which made me wonder.

"Play with it before you get any film. Just walk around at first, looking through it. Half the time I don't have any film in my camera."

The first photographs I took were at a store only a few blocks from my office. It sells one-shoes for a dollar each. One side of the room has piles of old left shoes, the right side has right shoes. Old men. Poor young men. The old shoe seller in a rocking chair putting the money in a Quaker Oats box.

That first roll of film made me happier than anything in a long time, even a good trial. When I showed them the prints, they all high-fived me. Carlotta hugged me.

Ben and I went out together several times, early in the morning, in Chinatown, the warehouse district. It was a good way to get to know someone. I'd be focusing on little kids in school uniforms, he'd be taking an old man's hands. I told him I felt uncomfortable taking people, that it seemed intrusive, rude.

"Mom and Jesse helped me with this. They always talk to everybody, and people talk back. If I can't get a picture without the person seeing me now I'll just talk to them, come right out and ask, 'Do you mind if I take your picture?' Most of the time they say, 'Of course I mind, asshole.' But sometimes they don't mind."

A few times we talked about Carlotta and Jesse. Since they all got along so well, I was surprised by his anger.

"Well, sure I'm mad. Part of it is childish. They're so tight I feel left out and jealous, like I lost my mother and my best friend. But another part of me thinks it's good. I never saw either one of them happy before. But they're feeding each other's destructive side, the part that hates themselves. He hasn't played, she hasn't written since they moved to Telegraph. They're going through his money like water, drinking it mostly."

"I never get the feeling that they are drunk," I said.

"That's because you've never seen them sober. And they don't really start drinking until we've gone. Then they careen around town, chasing fire trucks, doing God knows what. Once they got into the U.S. Mail depot and were shot at. At least they're nice drunks. They are incredibly sweet to each other. She never was mean to us kids, never hit us. She loves us. That's why I can't understand why she's not getting my brothers back."

Another time, on Telegraph, he showed me the words to a song Jesse had written. It was fine. Mature, ironic, tender. Reminded me of Dylan, Tom Waits, and Johnny Cash mixed together. Ben also handed me an Atlantic Monthly with a story of hers in it. I had read the story a

few months before, had thought it was great. “You two wrote these fine things?” They both shrugged.

What Ben said had made sense, but I didn’t see any self-hatred or destructiveness. Being with them seemed to bring out a positive side of me, a corny side.

Carlotta and I were alone on the terrace. I asked her why being there made me feel so good. “Is it simply because they are all young?”

She laughed. “None of them are young. Ben was never young. I was never young. You probably were an old child too, and you like us because you can act out. It is heaven to play, isn’t it? You like coming here because the rest of your life vanishes. You never mention your wife, so there must be troubles there. Your job must be troubles. Jesse gives everybody permission to be themselves and to think about themselves. That it’s okay to be selfish.

“Being with Jesse is sort of a meditation. Like sitting zazen, or being in a sensory deprivation tank. The past and future disappear. Problems and decisions disappear. Time disappears and the present acquires an exquisite color and exists within a frame of only now this second, exactly like the frames we make with our hands.”

I saw she was drunk, but still I knew what she meant, knew she was right.

For a while, Jesse and Maggie slept every night on a different roof downtown. I couldn’t imagine why they did this, so they took me to one. First we found the old metal fire escape, and Jesse jumped high up and pulled it down. Once we were up the stairs and onto the ladder, he pulled the stairs up after us. Then we climbed, high. It was eerie and magical looking out onto the estuary, the bay. There was still a faint pink sunset beyond the Golden Gate Bridge. Downtown Oakland was silent and deserted. “On weekends, it’s just like On the Beach down here,” Jesse said.

I was awed by the silence, by the sense of being the only ones there, the city beneath us, the sky all around. I was not sure where we were until Jesse called me over to a far ledge. “Look.” I looked, and then I got it. It was my office, on the fifteenth floor of the Leyman Building, a few floors above us. Only a few windows away was Brillig’s. The small tortoise-shaded light was on. Brillig sat at his big desk with his jacket and tie off, his feet on a hassock. He was reading. Montaigne probably, because the book was bound in leather and he was smiling.

“This isn’t a nice thing to do,” Carlotta said. “Let’s go.”

“Usually you love to look at people in windows.”

“Yes, but if you know who they are it is not imagining but spying.”

Going back down the fire escape I thought that this typical argument was why I liked them. Their arguments were never petty.

Once I arrived when Joe and Jesse were still out fishing. Ben was there. Maggie had been crying. She handed me a letter from her fifteen-year-old, Nathan. A sweet letter, telling her what they all were doing, saying that they wanted to come home.

“So, what do you think?” I asked Ben when she went to wash her face.

“I wish they’d get rid of the idea that it’s Jesse or the kids. If she got a job and a house, stopped drinking, if he’d come by once in a while, they’d see it could be okay. It could be okay. Trouble is they’re both scared that if the other one sobers up, they’ll leave.”

“Will she stop drinking if he leaves?”

“God no. I hate to think about that.”

Ben and Joe went to a ball game that night. Joe always referred to them as the “fuckin’ A’s.”

“Midnight Cowboy’s on TV. Want to come watch it?” Jesse asked. I said, sure, I loved that film. I thought they meant to go to a bar, forgetting about his age. No, they meant the Greyhound bus station, where we sat in adjoining seats, each with a little TV set we put quarters in. During the commercials Carlotta got more quarters, popcorn. Afterward we went to a Chinese restaurant. But it was closing. “Yes, we always arrive when it’s closing. That’s when they order takeout pizza.” How they had originally found this out I can’t imagine. They introduced me to the waiter and we gave him money. Then we sat around a big table with the waiters and chefs and dishwashers, eating pizzas and drinking Cokes. The lights were off; we ate by candlelight. They were all speaking Chinese, nodding to us as they passed around different kinds of pizza. I felt somehow that I was in a real Chinese restaurant.

The next night Cheryl and I were meeting friends for dinner in Jack London Square. It was a balmy night, the top was down on the Porsche. We had had a good day, made love, lazed around in bed. As we got near the restaurant, Cheryl and I were laughing, in a good mood. We got stopped by one of the freight trains that invariably crawled through the Square. This one went on and on. I heard a shout.

“Counselor! Jon! Hey, Barrister!” Jesse and Carlotta were waving to me from a boxcar, blowing kisses.

“Don’t tell me,” Cheryl said. “That must be Peter Pan and his ma.” She said, “Jon’s personal Bonnie and Clyde.”

“Shut up.”

I had never said that to her before. She stared straight ahead, as if she hadn’t heard me. We went to the elegant restaurant with our elegant, articulate liberal friends. The food was excellent, the wines perfect. We talked about films and politics and law. Cheryl was charming; I was witty. Something terrible had happened between us.

Cheryl and I are divorced now. I think our marriage began to end because of those Friday nights, not because she began having an affair. She was furious because I never took her to meet them. I’m not sure why I didn’t want to, whether I was afraid she would dislike them, or they would dislike her. Something else ... some part of me that I was ashamed to let her see.

Jesse and Carlotta had already forgotten the boxcar when I next saw them.

“Maggie’s hopeless. We could learn how to do it. We could travel all over the USA. But every time we start clickety clacking along, she gets hysterical. We’ve only got as far as Richmond and Fremont.”

“No, once to Stockton. Far. It’s terrifying, Jon. Although lovely too, and you do feel free, like it’s your own personal train. Problem is nothing scares Jesse. What if we ended up in North Dakota in a blizzard and they locked us in? There we’d be. Frozen.”

“Maggie, you can’t be worrying so much. Look what you do to yourself! Got your shorts in a knot about some snowstorm in South Dakota.”

“North Dakota.”

“Jon, tell her not to worry so much.”

“Everything is going to work out, Carlotta,” I said. But I was frightened too.

\* \* \*

We checked out the watchman at the marina. At seven thirty he was always at the other end of the piers. We’d toss our gear over and then climb the fence, down by the water where it wasn’t wired for an alarm. It took us a few times before we found our perfect boat, *La Cigale*. A

beautiful big sailboat with a teak deck. Low in the water. We'd spread out our sleeping bag, turn the radio on low, eat sandwiches and drink beer. Sip whiskey later. It was cool and smelled like the ocean. A few times the fog lifted and we saw stars. The best part was when the huge Japanese ships filled with cars came up the estuary. Like moving skyscrapers, all lit up. Ghost ships gliding past not making a sound. The waves they made were so big they were silent, rolling, not splashing. There were never more than one or two figures on any of the decks. Men alone, smoking, looking out at the city with no expression at all.

Mexican tankers were just the opposite. We could hear the music, smell the smoky engines before we saw the rusty ships. The whole crew would be hanging off the sides, waving to girls on terraces of restaurants. The sailors were all laughing or smoking or eating. I couldn't help it, once I called out *Bienvenidos!* To them, and the watchman heard me. He came over and shone his flashlight at us.

"I seen you two here a coupla times. Figured you weren't hurtin' nobody, and weren't stealing, but you could get me in a mess of trouble."

Jesse motioned for him to come down. He even said, "Welcome aboard." We gave him a sandwich and a beer and told him if we got caught, we'd be sure to show there was no way he would have seen us. His name was Solly. He came every night then, for dinner at eight, and then he'd go on his rounds. He'd wake us early in the morning, before light, just as the birds were starting to whirr above the water.

Sweet spring nights. We made love, drank, talked. What did we talk about so much? Sometimes we'd talk all night long. Once we talked about the bad things from when we were little. Even acted them out with each other. It was sexy, scary. We never did it again. Our conversations were about people, mostly, the ones we met walking around town. Solly. I loved hearing him and Jesse tell about farmwork. Solly was from Grundy Center, Iowa, had been stationed at Treasure Island when he was in the navy.

Jesse never read books, but words people said made him happy. A black lady who told us she was as old as salt and pepper. Solly saying he up and left his wife when she started gettin' darty-eyed and scissor-billed.

Jesse made everybody feel important. He wasn't kind. Kind is a word like charity; it implies an effort. Like that bumper sticker about random acts of kindness. It should mean how someone always is, not an act he chooses to do. Jesse had a compassionate curiosity about everyone. All my life I have felt that I didn't really exist at all. He saw me. I. He saw who I was. In spite of all the dangerous things we did, being with him was the only time I was ever safe.

The dumbest dangerous thing we did was swim out to the island in Lake Merritt. We put all our gear—change of clothes, food, whiskey, cigarettes—in plastic and swam out to it. Farther than it looks. The water was really cold, stinking foul dirty, and we stank too, even when we changed clothes.

The park is beautiful during the day, rolling hills and old oak trees, the rose garden. At night it throbbed with fear and meanness. Horrible sounds came magnified to us across the water. Angry fucking and fighting, bottles breaking. People retching and screaming. Women getting slapped. The police and grunts, blows. The now familiar sound of police flashlights. Lap lap the waves against our little wooded island, but we shivered and drank until it quieted down enough for us to dare swim for shore. The water must have been really polluted, we were both sick for days.

Ben showed up one afternoon. I was alone. Joe and Jesse had gone to play pool. Ben grabbed me by the hair and took me to the bathroom.

“Look at your drunk self! Who are you? What about my brothers? Dad and his girl are on cocaine. Maybe with you they’d die in a car wreck or you’d burn the house down, but at least they wouldn’t think drinking was glamorous. They need you. I need you. I need not to hate you.” He was sobbing.

All I could do was what I had done a million times before. Say over and over, “I’m sorry.”

But when I told Jesse we had to stop, he said okay. Why not smoking too, while we were at it. We told the guys we were going backpacking near Big Sur. We drove down the hairpin Highway 1 above the water. There was a moon and the foam of the ocean was neon white. Jesse drove with the lights off, which was terrifying and the start of our fighting. After we got there and up in the woods it began to rain. It rained and rained and we fought more, something about ramen noodles. It was cold but we both had bad shakes on top of that. We only lasted one night. We drove home and got drunk, tapered off before trying again.

This time was better. We went to Point Reyes. It was clear and warm. We watched the ocean for hours, quiet. We hiked in the woods, ran on the beach, told each other how great pomegranates tasted. We had been there about three days when we were awakened by weird grunts. Thrashing toward us in the foggy woods were these creatures, like aliens with oblong heads, making guttural sounds, weird laughs. They walked stiff-legged and with a rocking gait. “Good morning. Sorry to disturb you,” a man said. The group turned out to be severely retarded teenagers. Their elongated heads were actually rolled-up sleeping bags on top of their packs. “Christ, I need a smoke,” Jesse said. It was good to get home to Telegraph. We still didn’t drink.

“Amazing how much time drinking took up, no, Maggie?”

We went to movies. Saw *Badlands* three times. Neither of us could sleep. We made love day and night, as if we were furious at each other, sliding off the silk sheets onto the floor, sweating and spent.

One night Jesse came into the bathroom when I was reading a letter from Nathan. He said they had to come home. Jesse and I fought all night. Really fought, hitting and kicking and scratching until we ended up sobbing in a heap. We ended up getting really drunk for days, the craziest we ever got. Finally I was so poisoned with alcohol that a drink didn’t work, didn’t make me stop shaking. I was terrified, panicked. I believed that I was not capable of stopping, of ever taking care of myself, much less my children.

We were crazy, made each other crazier. We decided neither of us was fit to live. He’d never make it as a musician, had already blown it. I had failed as a mother. We were hopeless alcoholics. We couldn’t live together. Neither one of us was fit for this world. So we would just die. It is awkward to write this. It sounds so selfish and melodramatic. When we said it, it was a horrible bleak truth.

In the morning we got in the car, headed for San Clemente. I’d arrive at my parents’ house on Wednesday. On Thursday I’d go to the beach and swim out to sea. This way it would be an accident and my parents could deal with my body. Jesse would drive back and hang himself on Friday, so Jon could find him.

We had to taper off drinking just to make the trip. We called Jon, Joe, and Ben, to let them know we were going away, would see them next Friday. We took a slow trip down. It was a wonderful trip. Swimming in the ocean. Carmel and Hearst’s Castle. Newport Beach.

Newport Beach was so great. The motel lady knocked on our door and said to me, “I forgot to give your husband the towels.”

We were watching Big Valley when Jesse said, “What do you think? Shall we get married or kill ourselves?”

We were close to my parents’ house when we got into a ridiculous fight. He wanted to see Richard Nixon’s house before he dropped me off. I said that I didn’t want one of the last acts in my lifetime to be seeing Nixon’s house.

“Well, fuck off, get out here then.”

I told myself that if he said he loved me I wouldn’t get out, but he just said, “Let me see your smile, Maggie.” I got out, got my suitcase from the backseat. I couldn’t smile. He drove off.

My mother was a witch; she knew everything. I hadn’t told them about Jesse. I had told them I had been laid off at school, the kids were in Mexico, that I was job hunting. But I had only been there for an hour when she said, “So, you planning to commit suicide, or what?”

I told them I was depressed about finding a job, that I missed my sons. I had thought a visit with them would be a good idea. But it just made me feel that I was procrastinating. I’d better go back in the morning. They were pretty sympathetic. We all were drinking a lot that evening.

The next morning my father drove me to John Wayne Airport and bought me a ticket for Oakland. He kept saying that I should be a receptionist in a doctor’s office, where I’d get benefits.

I was on the MacArthur bus headed for Telegraph about the time I was supposed to be drowning. I ran the blocks from Fortieth Street home, terrified now that Jesse had died already.

He wasn’t home. There were lilac tulips everywhere. In vases and cans and bowls. All over the apartment, the bathroom, the kitchen. On the table was a note, “You can’t leave me, Maggie.”

He came up behind me, turned me around against the stove. He held me and pulled up my skirt and pulled down my underpants, entered me and came. We spent the whole morning on the kitchen floor. Otis Redding and Jimi Hendrix. “When a Man Loves a Woman.” Jesse made us his favorite sandwich. Chicken on Wonder Bread with mayonnaise. No salt. It’s an awful sandwich. My legs were shaking from making love, my face sore from smiling.

We took a shower and got dressed, spent the night up on our own roof. We didn’t talk. All he said was “It’s much worse now.” I nodded into his chest.

Jon arrived the next night, then Joe and Ben. Ben was pleased that we weren’t drinking. We hadn’t decided not to, just hadn’t. Of course they all asked about the tulips.

“Place needed some fucking color,” Jesse said.

We decided to get Flint’s Barbeque and go to the Berkeley Marina.

“I wish we could take them to our boat,” I said.

“I have a boat,” Jon said. “Let’s go out on my boat.”

His boat was smaller than La Cigale, but it was still nice. We went out, using the engine, went all around the bay in the sunset. It was beautiful, the cities, the bridge, the spray. We went back to the pier and had dinner on deck. Solly walked past, looked scared when he saw us. We introduced him to Jon, told him he had taken us out on the water.

Solly grinned, “Boy, you two must have loved that. A boat ride!”

Joe and Ben were laughing. They had loved it, being out in the bay, the smell and freedom of it. They were talking about getting a boat and living on it. Planning it all out.

“What’s the matter with you guys?” Joe asked us. It was true. The three of us were quiet, just sitting there.

“I’m depressed,” Jon said. “I’ve had this boat for a year, and this is the third time I’ve been out on it. Never have sailed the damn thing. My priorities are all out of whack. My life is a mess.”

“I’m...” Jesse shook his head, didn’t finish. I knew he was sad for the same reason I was. This was a real boat.

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Jesse said he didn’t want to go to court. I told Carlotta I would be by for her really early. It was the time of gas rationing, so you never knew how long the lines would be. I picked her up on the corner by Sears. Jesse was with her, looking pale, hungover.

“Hey, man. Don’t worry. It’ll be fine,” I said. He nodded.

She put a scarf over her hair. She was clear-eyed and apparently calm, wearing a dusty-rose dress, patent leather pumps, a little bag.

“Jackie O goes to court! The dress is perfect,” I said.

They kissed good-bye.

“I hate that dress,” he said. “When you get back I get to burn it.” They stood looking at each other.

“Come on, get in the car. You’re not going to jail, Carlotta, I promise.”

We did have a long wait for gas. We talked about everything but the trial. We talked about Boston. The Grolier Book Shop. Lochober’s restaurant. Truro and the dunes. Cheryl and I had met in Provincetown. I told her Cheryl was having an affair. That I didn’t know what I felt. About the affair, about our marriage. Carlotta put her hand over mine, on the gearshift.

“I’m so sorry, Jon,” she said. “The hardest part is not knowing how you feel. Once you do, well, then, everything will be clear to you. I guess.”

“Thanks a lot.” I smiled.

Both the policemen were in the courtroom. She sat across from them in the spectator section. I spoke with the prosecutor and the judge and we went to his chambers. The two of them looked hard at her before we went in.

It went like clockwork. I had page after page of documentation about the police, the paperwork from the security check that did not find marijuana. The judge got the idea about the police report even before I really got into it.

“Yes, yes, so what do you propose?”

“We propose to sue the San Francisco Police Department unless all charges are dismissed.” He thought about it, but not for long.

“I think it appropriate to dismiss the charges.”

The prosecutor had seen it coming, but I could tell he hated facing the policemen.

We got back into the courtroom, where the judge said that because of a lawsuit pending against the San Francisco Police Department he felt it appropriate to drop all charges against Carlotta Moran. If the policemen had had flashlights, they would have bludgeoned Carlotta to death right there in the courtroom. She couldn’t resist an angelic smile.

I felt let down. It had been so quick. And I had expected her to be happier, more relieved. If the other lawyer had handled the case, she’d be locked up now. I even said this to her, fishing for compliments.

“Hey, how about a little elation, er, gratitude?”



“Jon, forgive me. Of course I’m elated. Of course we’re grateful. And I know what you charge. We really owe you thousands and thousands of dollars. More than that was that we got to know you, and you liked us. And we love you now.” She gave me a warm hug then, a big smile.

I was ashamed, told her to forget the money, that it had gone beyond a case. We got into the car.

“Jon, I need a drink. We both need breakfast.”

I stopped and bought her a half-pint of Jim Beam. She took some big gulps before we got to Denny’s.

“What a morning. We could be in Cleveland. Look around us.” Denny’s in Redwood City was like being in the heartland of America.

I realized that she was trying hard to show me she was happy. She asked me to tell her everything that happened, what I said, what the judge said. On the way home, she asked me about other cases, what were my favorites. I didn’t understand what was going on until we were on the Bay Bridge and I saw the tears. When we got off the bridge, I pulled over and stopped, gave her my handkerchief. She fixed her face in the mirror, looked at me with a rictus of a smile.

“So, I guess the party’s over now,” I said. I put the car top up just in time. It started to rain hard as we drove on toward Oakland.

“What are you going to do?”

“What do you advise, Counselor?”

“Don’t be sarcastic, Carlotta. It’s not like you.”

“I’m very serious. What would you do?”

I shook my head. I thought about her face, reading Nathan’s letter. I remembered Jesse holding her throat.

“Is it clear to you? What you are going to do?”

“Yes,” she whispered, “it’s clear.”

He was waiting on the corner by Sears. Soaking wet.

“Stop! There he is!”

She got out. He came over, asked how it went.

“Piece of cake. It was great.”

He reached in and shook my hand. “Thank you, Jon.”

I turned the corner and pulled over to the curb, watched them walk away in the drenching rain, each of them deliberately stomping in puddles, bumping gently into each other.