

The Renovation of Marsha Fletcher

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MARSHA CRUMPLED THE LETTER into a ball and hurled it across the living room. It caromed off the TV screen and rolled a few feet before settling in the middle of the carpet. Once again she inserted her fingers under the waistband of her bell-bottom jeans and began rubbing, very lightly, as much as she dared, her abdomen.

“Damn these stitches!” she complained, hoping Robert, shaving in the bathroom down the hall, would hear. It was Saturday and he’d just finished his mid-morning shower. In their twenty-nine years of marriage he’d rarely showered, let alone shaved, on Saturday morning. He always waited until late afternoon, just before taking Marsha out to dinner, or Sunday morning before church. Because they rarely went out anymore and hadn’t attended church for over ten years, it wasn’t unusual for Robert to go an entire weekend without shaving or showering until Monday morning, when he reported back to work at Douglas Aircraft. But for the past six weeks (Marsha had been keeping tabs), he’d showered and shaved every Saturday morning and, right around noon, had left the house, always with a valid excuse: three times to work overtime, twice to attend the San Diego State game (he’d even shown her his ticket), and once to get a tooth capped (Dr. Bunzel had verified the appointment). Today he was working overtime again.

The doorbell rang.

“Bob!” Marsha shouted down the hall. “Could you get that?”

Her husband’s electric razor droned monotonously.

Marsha managed to rise using the arm-rest and walked to the front door, limping like an injured athlete. She opened the door and wasn’t particularly surprised to see a Mexican standing before her. This close to the border, she saw a lot of wetbacks passing through the neighborhood. Generally, they wanted nothing more than a couple of dollars or a good meal and were willing to work. Although Marsha pitied them somewhat (she and Robert knew what

it was like to go without), she'd always distrusted them, convinced that their Chicano brothers were the catalyst for San Diego's social problems.

"Look at this, Bob," she remarked while glancing over the paper one evening. "A school bus went over the guard rail out by Fallbrook. Ten children were killed. Yep, I knew it: the driver was a Mexican. I bet he was drunk, too. . . ."

This one was about seventeen, with a mop of thick black hair covering his ears and forehead. His dark skin, unblemished, shone as if it had been lacquered. He was wearing a baggy white shirt and dingy white pants held up by a piece of twine knotted around his trim waist. His shoulders were broad and his forearms well muscled.

"*No trabajo*," Marsha said automatically.

The wetback, holding a straw hat against his belly, wrinkled his brow as if he didn't understand. "*¿Nada?*"

"No. *Nada*."

He forced a smile. Marsha noticed that his front teeth were dark and jagged, rotting away. She felt sorry for him. They all looked pathetic, with their smudged faces and rotting teeth, but he was so young. He turned quickly away and began trudging up the long driveway leading to the road at the top of the hill.

"Sorry!" Marsha called out after him. "*¡Lo siento!*"

The young man didn't seem to hear. Marsha closed the door and returned to the sofa.

Robert's electric razor droned on.

Marsha picked up the pen and pad of paper lying on the arm-rest. Letter-writing was about the only thing she'd been permitted to do since her last operation. It was her third day home, and during that time not once had she ventured beyond the oleanders that fenced off their lot from the rest of the neighborhood.

It annoyed her, being cooped up indoors. When her children were growing up, she'd always driven them here and there — to ball games, music lessons, Scout meetings, church socials. . . . Now that they were all married or living away from home, she liked to take long drives alone to the beach. "My therapy," she told Robert, half-jokingly. She loved the winding drive through Via de Dios Canyon and the smell of the salt air. It worked on her like a balm miles before the Pacific came into view. And she loved the sea: from a distance, a vast, silken gown fringed with white lace; up close, a mystery of limitless capacities in many shades and textures.

She preferred the beach in winter, when the hot dog stands were boarded up and the waters deserted save a few die-hard surfers. She loved the changing winter moods — sunny skies over blue-green waters one day, a thick fog painting it melancholy gray the next. She loved the relentless hammering of the surf: all day and night the waves rising and crashing down upon the shore, instants of thunder fading into silence, over and over and over.

Marsha stared at the blank pad of paper and then at the row of photographs on top of the TV. Five individual portraits, her three daughters and

two sons, were flanked by family portraits — the two older girls posing with their husbands and children. Marsha focused on Adelle, her youngest, her unmarried daughter, still living alone and sorting packages for the United Parcel Service, still taking three showers a day and karate lessons four nights a week, still despising men. Urgent, muscular, reclusive Adelle, who, up until the day she moved out, had gotten up at six each morning to jog with Marsha down at the high school track. Adelle. She would be the easiest.

Dearest Adelle,

As I sit here laughing, feeling very warm & special to be thought of & labored over, it occurred to me that Sarah must have felt just like I feel: “Am I, at 47 yrs., to have pleasure?” Slightly not verbatim, but justified. When I feel 1000 yrs. old, feeling sorry for myself, convinced pleasure will never come again, there you are, reducing me to a joyful teenager.

Marsha paused, glancing over what she had written. Not informative enough. Adelle liked facts. Hated “emotional drivel.” Or so she said.

Dr. Norman (“The Sadist”) while taking out the stitches from the first surgery, went on and on how I wrecked his back for life. “Pretty Boy” hates stripping veins because you have to keep turning the “cadaver,” as he calls it, and this is hell.

The worst part of the whole thing was the waiting room. One lady came out in a crouch clutching her breast with tears streaming down her face. She sat down to get enough strength to leave & apologized for the display & said she’d had a radical mastectomy & Dr. Norman just popped the swollen scar tissue by squeezing as hard as he could with his hands. The lady started sobbing hysterically & was saying things like, “My husband looks at me like I’m some kind of freak . . . he’s afraid of me . . . he won’t touch me . . .” I knew it was more than the scar. Men are all alike — give them their squirt of pleasure & your body suffers as a result. Then they despise you because of it. That poor woman. I guess she’s going to have reconstructive surgery in a month or so. I couldn’t handle that, living in a totally dehumanized condition.

Your Grandma Christiansen had a radical mast. & I know the hell she went through. Back then the surgeons made Dr. Norman look like Marcus Welby. They were all butchers. Spot a lump and hack the whole thing off, that was their motto. Did I ever tell you what the butcher who did the job on Grandma said? “What’s the big deal, lady? You’re 55!” If I’d been there I’d have kicked him where he lived. Then, “What’s the big deal, Doc? You’re 39!” Of course, today’s doctors think they’re all super-humanitarians. They smile so proud of themselves & their wonderful profession as they tell about all the options modern science has for poor diseased females: extended radical (very rare), halsted radical (also rare), modified radical (most reasonable, they say), simple or total (controversial), & the good old lumpectomy (the one Grandma probably could have gotten away with!!!). Some even prescribe radiation or chemotherapy, so if the cancer in your breast doesn’t kill you, the radiation & chemicals will. The plastic surgeons are even worse. They brag about how they can fix you all up afterwards — “much much better than new!” They miss the whole point.

Marsha turned suddenly, drew the drape aside, and looked out across the driveway. She thought she’d heard someone drive up but could see no one except the Johnson’s girl, a chubby ten-year-old riding by on her pinto pony, which seemed to sag in the middle from the child’s weight. Her own children had never been overweight. Tall, blonde, California girls. She’d never under-

stood the inferiority complexes that had nagged them through high school. They had been — still were — so beautiful: no fat, no acne. Blue-eyed Scandinavians, all of them. Adelle might be stocky but not obese.

With all the operations I've been having they're liable to put me in the Surgeon General's hall of fame. In case you've got nothing more exciting to record in your journal, here's the latest run down: Three months ago, strip the veins. Last week, the tummy tuck. Next week, the tooth & mouth job — the worst of the lot. Then I'll be all fixed up. Just call me the \$6 million housewife!

Thanks for the letter. That part about how you put down your boss when he started coming onto you, I couldn't stop laughing!!!! But for heaven's sake, don't worry about ME! I may look like death warmed over for the time being, but underneath I'm fit as a fiddle. I'll snap back. I always do. Write again when you have time.

XOXOXOXOXOXO

Mom

Marsha folded the letter, placed it in an envelope, and sealed it. This gave her a tremendous sense of relief, and for the next few moments, she gazed outside, admiring the morning. Earlier a coastal fog had shrouded the valley, but now the sky, rinsed clean with November sunshine, was glowing brightly, like silver-blue foil, and the day looked warm and inviting. She could tell by the sugary edges of frost on the dichondra that there would be a crisp autumn breeze, just enough to require a sweater if she drove down to San Elijo Beach that afternoon. Today the ocean would look like a postcard — smooth, glossy, rich with color.

The electric razor was silent. Just some metallic clicks as the cabinet door opened and closed and opened again. The sound of water.

He was washing his face again. He always rewashed his face after shaving. It was part of his ritual. Like the dab of cream he meticulously spread through his hair, silver-white now, parted conservatively on the left and combed back, exposing his entire forehead, solid, tanned, experienced. For a moment, Marsha pictured his naked body, big, broad, the shoulders rounded like a bear's, slumping forward more from bulk than poor posture, his chest carpeted with grizzled hairs. His muscles had softened as he'd worked his way up from baggage boy to supervisor. But his forty-eight years had compensated in other areas: the bright, metallic streaks in his hair gave him the look of a British aristocrat, and the wrinkles and tiny pouches under his faded blue eyes made him look more seasoned than old; vintage stuff. Marsha recalled an old TV commercial in which a graying man in a black tuxedo hands red roses to his slender, smiling, middle-aged wife: "You're not getting older, you're getting better. . . ."

This was true, for Robert. But what about *her*? Rippled blue legs and lumpy landscape. If the body was indeed a temple, then women — Mormon women especially — had permitted desecration. Sister Harper, her buttocks swaying like the Liberty Bell, conducting the monthly homemaking lesson. Fat and happy. Too fat and happy. Or the others who dropped by for their obligatory monthly visit — some even sincere with their bright smiles. Or worse, poor Sister Watson who at thirty-two with a scholar's mind and a grand-

mother's body was too intelligent to be fat. Or happy. Just used. No, Marsha didn't despise them. Pitied them, yes. Almost as much as they pitied her.

Marsha snatched the pen from the arm-rest and scribbled a hasty postscript on the outside of the envelope:

Woman is the nigger of the world.

She looked at the portraits on the TV set. Sherril Cozette Adelle Gary Stephen. Stephen would be next. Gary, the cumulative 3.84 G.P.A. computer science major who had lettered in three sports and served as student body president at El Rancho High, he could wait. Big, broad like his father, but more refined, more bookish. Always had everything under control: emotionally, academically, socially, athletically, financially. . . . But Stephen. What to do with Stephen? Eighteen, sharing an apartment with three potheads in Billings, Montana, working seven-to-seven in a warehouse shelving brake shoes for three dollars an hour. Her wayward son. Not prodigal. Not even a black sheep. Just missing. Gone.

From the beginning his teachers had pressured him: "You're sure not like Sherril!" "Why can't you read like Gary? That Gary, he was a reader!"

Sherril the valedictorian, Cozette the artist, Gary the all-league linebacker, Stephen the . . . pothead? And Adelle? The karate expert? The man-hater?

Marsha glanced around the room, paranoid, as if someone had lifted the lid off her mind and were peeking down at the image inside: Stephen's fifth grade teacher, a crew-cut drill sergeant type, warning her to get Stephen involved in more sports "or he may have a problem with his masculinity." It was absurd, of course. The man was absurd. And yet Stephen's ex-wife had never responded to him. She'd admitted this to Marsha, hushed, and Marsha had suggested a lubricant. But nothing had worked, and later Marsha had tried to explain to him that Dawn was "just one of those girls" who was too attached to her father to ever give herself to another man, "any other man. . . ." She'd read him very convincing passages from Janov's *Primal Scream*. But Stephen had moved out after a two-week R & R at home. As far as she knew, he hadn't gone out with a girl since the divorce.

Dearest Stephen,

We planned to do some research in some towns for future use. Chula Vista is getting so large, & we find ourselves jumping & flinching every time we drive into town, dodging all the maniacs on wheels. It could only get worse, so we may not want to retire here when your dad is 65. We have this U.S. catalog that lists acreage way out in the boondocks for each state. So far, the most beautiful sounding is Colorado. Your own trout stream, hunting, fishing, etc. in Delta, Colo.

She stopped. She wanted to say: your dad didn't mean what he said about you being a parasite. Just because we got married when we were your age and his father dumped him on the spot, he seems to think all birds have to leave the nest at the same time, but you know he really does love you, deep-down,

even if he doesn't act like it at times . . . Justifying, qualifying, apologizing, lying. And Stephen would know. Maybe not consciously, but he would know.

Someday I may get your dad in a 4-season climate wilderness. He's a little turned on by this catalog. I know it's hard for him, because I was raised in Utah until I was 17 & storms really turn me on. Dad has always lived in Calif. & storms make him feel like the sky is falling.

The bathroom door opened and Robert's voice echoed down the hall: "Did you call me, Marsh?"

"No, I didn't say anything."

"I thought you said something."

"No."

She watched his bear-like body, the towel wrapped around his waist, cross the hall and disappear into the bedroom. She hobbled into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator, and studied the shelves: a ten-pound horn of cheese, a bottle of bran, fresh fruits and vegetables, a jar of brewer's yeast, and on a separate shelf, a row of small bottles — cod liver oil, B-complex, vitamin E, rose hips. Marsha had always distrusted doctors, even before her operations. "Proper diet and preventive care," she'd always preached to her children, heaping vitamins on their breakfast plates.

She took two of the B-complex tablets and poured herself a glass of carrot juice. As she alternately popped the vitamins and sipped the juice, her eyes wandered out the window, beyond the redwood deck, and down into the Chula Vista Valley, spread out like a multi-colored fan. Split-levels with roofs of Spanish tile studded the hillsides, their backyard swimming pools gleaming like inlaid turquoise. In between, the precise rows of orange and avocado groves stood like green regiments. A narrow highway bisected the base of the valley, with either side furrowed dark or grass green. At the far end of the panorama, smooth, humped hills, like the flanks of palomino ponies, walled the valley, a soft contrast to the harsh brush and stubbled buttes immediately surrounding their home. Except for a small spotting of clouds and the bright, throbbing sun, the sky was immaculate blue. A perfectly unbothered blue, thought Marsha, setting her empty glass on the sink. She began scratching her abdomen, softly at first, then with increasing intensity.

"Marsh! Have you seen my blue socks?"

She stopped. Slowly removing her hand from her jeans, she clasped it, gently but firmly, with her free hand. "No, I haven't."

"Never mind. I found them."

His dresser drawer slammed shut.

Marsha looked back outside at the Johnson's orange grove. A man in white with a gunny sack slung over one shoulder was standing halfway up a ladder picking oranges. Was it the wetback? She hoped so. He'd looked hungry. She thought about him, his pure black hair and hard muscles, his face the color of the distant hills. What would his fine hair feel like? His soft face? It seemed so long since she'd truly embraced a child. Or a man. She realized

she was no longer looking out over the valley but instead at her own vague reflection in the window, pale and hollow, a premature grandmother.

Marsha gulped down another glass of carrot juice and returned to the living room. She glanced at the portrait of Cozette, standing beside her husband, an angular, boyish-looking young man of twenty-three with carefully sculptured hair, wearing a bright blue suit. Jerry's mouth was small, deceptively simple, lamb-like, with thin, unkissable lips. Painfully pro-Church, born into it, the son of a bishop who later became a stake president, he was a victim of the unbroken Mormon mold: baptized at eight, Eagle Scout, two-year mission in Ecuador, temple marriage. A real hand-shaker, thoroughly saturated with all the anti-birth-control-mother's-place-is-in-the-home-pay-your-tithing-with-a-smile-don't-ask-questions-if-ye-love-me-keep-my-commandments business the Church stood for. As fanatical about Mormonism as she had been while growing up in Salt Lake. As fanatical as she had tried to be her first few years with Robert.

Cozette. Tall and slender, like Marsha, with blonde hair hanging to her hips. She could have been a model. Or better, an artist. She was only twelve credits shy of her B.A. in art when she was "blessed with little Christopher" and had dropped out of school. Standing beside Jerry, smiling as she held her eight-month-old son, his tongue sticking out like a piece of wet taffy.

Dearest Cozette,

Are you sure the postage on that letter was only 16¢? Anyway, remember Mrs. Kiner from Fallbrook? She taught abroad. Denmark would be my pick too. Those other countries have to pay people to come to their pest holes, with terrorists under every rock. If they don't get you, the bacteria in their food will. Only greasy races can survive there.

Robert emerged from the hall fully dressed, flicking some lint from the sleeve of his navy-blue sport coat as he headed into the kitchen. He had a casual but lively gait, the creases in his flared slacks snapping to attention with each bouncy stride, his head bobbing slightly, as if fastened to a spring. She could smell his cologne. As he yanked open the refrigerator and began rummaging through the shelves, Marsha felt her body stiffen. She felt pale, almost faint.

I'm going into the slaughter-house again next week. This time for my teeth. If I didn't explain, they are going to uncover the entire bone & take an impression. In one week they take out the stitches, in one more week, they uncover the bone again, & insert an appliance over the entire bone. They sew you up leaving 4 protruding steel pillars exposed, welded to the bone appliance. Now the teeth will snap onto the pillars, & this remains fixed when I eat. This will prevent further bone loss since friction is now eliminated. The Dr. showed me how it works & it's as effective as implants into the bone in eliminating movement. The Dr. said the first couple of weeks I'd be sorry I did it, but after the mouth heals, it will really be worth the initial discomfort.

Robert dropped a glass or something on the kitchen counter.
"Bob?"

He peered around the corner, two big, surprised eyes, like a guilty little boy. "Marsh?" he said, overly concerned.

For a moment she recognized a bit of the old boyishness within the man, and she almost laughed. Marrying him she had hoped for a mind and spirit to match his strong man's body. These were the sins of her youth: Faith. Hope. Shortsightedness. Naivete. Idealism. Still, in twenty-nine years he had matured. In some ways. Which was far more than she could say for his father, Oroville Fletcher, the granite-jawed retired building contractor who still gulped his morning cup of Yuban and carried a temple recommend in his wallet. Cocky, bald, muscle-bound, the king chauvinist who used to whip off fifty one-armed push-ups for his astonished little grandchildren. Always giving them gifts but always demanding. *Thank you Grandpa Fletcher thank you Grandpa Fletcher thank you Grandpa.* . . . Refusing to tend them as infants. Even for an hour. Instead, he sat on his tail watching TV while his corpulent wife tottered about the house cleaning up his filth. Occasionally slapping her around. For burning the roast, for over-starching his shirts. For the hell of it. Disciplining, *training* her. Because it was his right, he felt, by virtue of his sex or priesthood or whatever.

Robert had at least matured beyond a caveman conception of women. Which was quite remarkable, considering his upbringing.

Marsha set the pen and pad of paper gently on the arm-rest and smiled at her husband, still peering around the corner. "Could you get me that medicine in the bedroom?"

"Sure, Marsh."

"It's on the dresser."

Marsha's eyes followed him down the hall until he disappeared into the bedroom.

You know, when you consider the pain & expense when you allow tooth decay, until you can afford it, it makes you wonder why somebody didn't warn you when you were too young to realize. I remember pledging \$500 to the Church building fund while my teeth needed work. What a dumb generation we were. Since I have always inundated each of you with info, it will be interesting to see if it goes in one ear & out the other, especially with Stephen since he's probably the most naive about health care. The most important word in regard to health is preventive care. Traumatic, painful surgery would never be a factor if we ate properly & had our teeth checked regularly.

"Here you go!" Robert held out the bottle of medicine. "How are the stitches?"

"Okay." Marsha unscrewed the cap and peered into the bottle as if she were looking down a well. "Thanks."

"Well, I guess I'll be seeing you." Robert raised his big flat palm in an awkward farewell. "Need anything at the store?"

"No."

"Well, we'll see you then." He bent down and kissed her forehead.

"Remember when we were first married?" she said. "Everytime you'd leave for work I'd come to the door."

"And put your arms around me," Robert said. "I remember."

"You'd never leave without kissing me goodbye."

"That's right." He chortled. "Sometimes I'd never leave."

Marsha smiled. "You'd call in sick. And we'd stay in bed all day."

She felt his hand settle gently on her crown.

"Do you have to go to work today?"

"They need someone with experience."

"When do you think you'll be home?"

"Probably around four. Maybe five."

In spite of herself, she snapped at him: "That's what I like about you, Robert — you're always so damn decisive!"

"Five," he said flatly.

Marsha shook her head, exasperated. "I'm sorry, Bob."

"Sorry about what?"

"I don't know. Everything. Hawaii."

"Hawaii?"

"I was awful in Hawaii. Here we'd gone and saved all that money and the whole time I sat around and bitched."

"It was the rain, Marsh. We didn't expect it to rain the whole time."

"But I bitched. I bitched at *you*, not the rain. When we were walking along Waikiki, I bitched because you were walking so slow."

She noticed him sneak a glance at his watch.

"Look, Marsha, forget about Hawaii, okay? It was the menopause again. That's what Dr. Norman said."

"When in doubt, blame it on menopause. Do you think I should have taken that estrogen like he suggested?"

"Jeez, I don't know."

Marsha folded her arms and literally shivered. "The thought of putting all that junk into my body . . . when you know sooner or later it's going to crop up in the form of cancer. . . ."

Robert shrugged. "I don't know. From all I've read and heard, it seems if cancer's going to get you, it's going to get you. If not through hormone shots, then some other way — the water, the air, preservatives, diet drinks. . . . But if your number's up, one way or another, it's going to get you. And there's not much you can do about it."

"Get *me*?"

"You. Me. Us. The whole damn world. You know what I mean."

"It's not fair."

"Who ever said anything about being fair?"

Robert glanced at his watch again, openly this time. "Look, I'd better get going." He kissed her lightly on the cheek.

After his car pulled out of the driveway, Marsha got up and opened the drapes to the picture window. Briefly she scanned the landscape. To her left, in the Johnson's orange grove, she noticed the same white figure she'd seen earlier, still picking fruit. Again, she wondered if it were the Mexican boy —

or rather, the young man. No, he was just a boy. Like Stephen. Had Thelma Johnson fed the boy? It was just like her to hire wetbacks dirt-cheap, fifty cents an hour, and not even feed them a decent meal. He'd probably been working all day without a break. Probably starving. Tell them about it in church, Thelma. Tell them about it Sunday when you bear witness of Jesus Christ. . . .

Marsha eased down gingerly on the sofa and angrily picked up the pen and pad of paper.

By the way, your letter about Stephen was absolutely perfect. With all the PIGS daddy works with who brag about kicking their kids out into the street, every bit of pressure for going the extra mile is needed to counteract the poison influence. Your dad needs generosity pumped into his veins every day.

Marsha wondered if she should give the details. How Stephen had suddenly showed up on the doorstep one morning, long stringy hair covering the collar of his Levi jacket, eighteen, broke, and already paying alimony; how Robert had answered her plea with a flat, emotionless "No"; the argument, she and Robert yelling in the bedroom while Stephen sat like a marionette in the kitchen, waiting to see who would pull his strings this time; Robert fuming as he stormed out, shouting over his shoulder: "Two weeks! That's it. Two weeks."

Stephen was talking for the first time in years. He talked about teachers doing jobs on him way back in grade school. His face got red. It really is shocking how little a parent knows of what a child is feeling.

Marsha paused. Her eyes wandered around the room — the seascape above the fireplace, a gray, windy scene, lifeless save for a distant diving gull, sketched in as an afterthought; the big brass sun, four feet in diameter, covering the wall opposite the grandfather clock — Robert's anniversary gift ("Twenty-five years of happiness" the card had read); the photographs on top of the TV: Sherril, her eldest, her tallest, the once blond hair now dark, her graceful figure already bulging; Elise, her six-month-old baby, posing like a statue in her lap; the other, two-year-old Bradley, standing soldier-like beside her; and Brian, her husband, six-four, athletic, in his double-breasted pinstripes looking very lawyer-like and churchy beside Sherril, her half-smile painfully exaggerated, Instamatic.

Marsha glared at the paper wadded in a ball in the middle of the floor. Sherril's letter, received that morning. Angrily she resumed her letter to Cozette, the letter Jerry would certainly read — he read all of Cozette's mail and she read all of his. They shared everything.

My only advice which is sound but totally against the tyrannical Church doctrine, is not to get pregnant again. It's your body, Cozette, if you really don't want a hanging leaky bladder etc. not to mention the outside hanging parts; (every pregnancy takes its toll) then assert yourself. After all, no one else is sacrificing *their* beautiful body. Sorry, Jerry, but think about it: you really *like* your body intact, don't you? Nothing personal, Jerry. You are No. 1 husband & father in my estimation. It's not your fault that you have a patriarchal hang-up.

Jerry wouldn't like it. She could already hear him, raging or chuckling (he was so unpredictable) over the letter: "What's she whining about this time? Birth control again? Cozy, what does the Church say?" Cozette obeyed him like a child. Hopeless. Cozette wouldn't listen, just as Sherrill hadn't — overruled by Brian, conditioned by the propaganda week after week, the joys of motherhood, a "woman's greatest calling," the red and white carnations on Mother's Day.

O.K. already, so stop asking advice, & I won't lay my militant attitude on you. Remember Cozette, I have always been capable of wielding a death blow where my children were threatened.

Death blows, yes. But life cries, too. Six years ago Stephen, trying to fetch the cat out of an oak tree, falling twenty feet, a head-first dive into a pool of concrete, his skull splitting dead center. As he lay there writhing like a severed tail, his brain showing through the chasm in his skull and the clear spinal fluid oozing out his nostrils, her knees had hit the concrete. And she, Marsha Fletcher, who had not partaken of the sacred bread and water for four years, she'd begged and pleaded, making all sorts of impossible promises, if only the Lord would heal her son, without reservation. Without paralysis or brain damage or other fine print. Calling Bishop Jones and begging him to administer to her son. She wasn't above begging on behalf of her children. Nor was she so grateful at the boy's recovery that she forgot to curse her husband for his impotent priesthood. Or later dismiss her promises as the frenzied utterances of a desperate mother.

Cozy, I can't handle you sacrificing your health & beauty. I get sick inside when I see that beautiful gifted Sister Watson a captive inside that abused body. Sherril is really vulnerable emotionally & I'm concerned at the toll this third pregnancy will take on her. That's right, in case you haven't heard already, Sherril is pregnant again. I got her letter this morning. She said for a whole year she's felt run-down. She is in some kind of turmoil. I don't know whether it's financial, emotional, or what, but I feel it.

Marsha's hand stopped, but her thoughts continued, meandering, stumbling through a labyrinth of memories: Robert, his fullback shoulders swelling his skin-tight t-shirt, blue jeans, the cuffs rolled high-tide style, standing beside his monster jalopy in the Jefferson High parking lot, laughing at his diploma on graduation day; driving all over L.A. on their wedding night, searching for a motel that wouldn't ask for I.D.; Robert fumbling with the luggage, fumbling with her spaghetti straps; a month later, her big dreams — happy marriage, big house, big happy family — crushed: in the tinted window of Angelo's Pizza Parlour, Robert sharing a booth with a chesty redhead, laughing as he inserted a thick-crust wedge into her cavern of a mouth. No confession, no remorse. Marsha, already pregnant, taking it like a good old broad, taking it as her mother had taken it, twenty years from her alcoholic brothel-hopping husband, hiding the pain and hurt and humiliation. All through Robert's lean years: bread and cheese in basement apartments, the children — one two three, bam! bam! bam! (the episiotomies hadn't even healed), a two-year break,

then four five, bam! bam! The blue worms growing on her legs, thicker, bluer, the muscles in her belly sagging further and further, once good supple healthy robust flesh, turned to flaccid dough. Which she hid from the world, public and private, dressing and undressing in the bathroom to spare herself Robert's queasy gaze.

Sherril's flute lessons. No money, but Marsha insisting. Demanding this much refinement for her daughter, her first child. Robert's conditional consent: "All right, all right! I'll work overtime!"

"You're already working overtime. I'll get a part-time job."

"Over my dead . . . what's the deal? You think I can't support my own family? I'll work double overtime if I have to . . . no, you're not going to work. . . .!"

Sherril with her flute and her lessons. At night, the children in bed, Marsha reading in the living room. Robert sneaking into the bathroom with the instrument, practicing simple tunes, barely audible beyond the bathroom walls. Marsha smiling at the thought of her big teddy bear blowing into a silver stick late into the night. A secret until one night little Stephen, up for a drink, opened the bathroom door. And laughed. "Daddy, what are you doing!"

At first, Robert laughing too. "What's up, Even Stephen? You want a drink?"

Turning on the faucet, filling a paper cup. The boy gulping thirstily.

"Okay, now go on back to bed."

The boy giggling. All the way down the hall, laughing, chanting, waking up the house: "Daddy's playing Sherril's flute! Daddy's playing Sherril's flute! Daddy's playing Sherril's. . . ."

Soon all five children standing at the door, giggling. Robert trying to smile, to laugh; trying to mimic the Pied Piper and convert embarrassment into humor. But breaking down, hollering at them: "Get the hell out! Get the hell out of here! All of you!" Glaring at Marsha, watching from behind. "You too! Get out!" Bashing the instrument on the sink, on the toilet seat, against the wall. Sherril weeping over the broken fragments, the other children scampering back to bed terrified, Marsha furious, suppressing her fury.

The next morning, stone-silence at the breakfast table. Cold eyes over cold oatmeal. But recovering. Surviving that night as they had others like it. Robert bringing home a new flute, some read-along books, candy, always something. Or taking the family out to Bob's Big Boy for hamburgers, or to the San Diego Zoo, or the beach. Always something to patch things up. Their marriage of scars and sutures holding together; somehow always healing before the next gash.

Robert's promotion. The Dream House. The kids all in school. Measuring day after tedious day with soap operas and game shows. Mechanically taking the sacrament, then not, then sleeping in Sundays while the kids, the youngest eight and the oldest sixteen, diligently attended their Sabbath meetings. Robert, the workaholic, up at 5:30 and home at 10:00, bringing the bacon and not much else. Too much time to think, to read, to remember —

her youth, her childhood. Growing up in Salt Lake City, so religiously and genealogically insulated from the coarse scheming world of men, when everything was directly or peripherally Church-sanctioned and everyone believed as she had, and the fragrances, colors, moods, and seasons were not much different than when her grandmother was a little girl standing on the porch of her pioneer home, watching the gay lights of Saltair burning in the distance. Pioneer Day picnics, summer evenings playing run-sheep-run and Red Rover-come-over on freshly mown fields, the winter snow parties, hot chocolate by a blazing fire in the Stoddard's cabin. Dance festivals, volleyball tournaments, the corny road shows. The many, many MIA excursions. Spring hayrides and weinie roasts up Big Cottonwood Canyon, with the boys in levis and crew-cuts flirting in their awkward adolescent self-conscious Mormon way. Back when she, as a young woman, a female, had felt at least equal to the young men, those gawky Aaronic Priesthood holders going about their Sabbath business in a sort of jovial stupor. But moving to California at seventeen and a year later marrying Robert, she'd suddenly been relegated to the office of "wife" — *the* wife, housewife, later euphemized to "homemaker" though still and always *the wife*, a title which had blackballed her, first for life, then three years later, following the sealing ceremony in the Los Angeles Temple, for time and all eternity. While he'd been designated the husband, the head, the poppa, the patriarch. And from that point on she was no longer on par but always supine, on or off the delivery table, legs spread, feet in the stirrups, a sacrificial lamb to the man-gods.

Too much time to remember, to relive. To fantasize: being not such a good old broad; being not wife, not mother, but physician or attorney or professor. Being not body-bullied. Being woman. Beautiful intelligent unapologizing uncompromising woman. . . .

Robert's first and last confession of what she knew was neither his first nor last affair — "Never again . . . I swear it!" Marsha driving recklessly down the highway, heading nowhere. An hour later parked on the surf-eaten cliffs of San Elijo, gazing down at the sunset reflection on the sea shining like stained glass. Watching the surfers in black penguin suits paddling in to shore and the couples, young and old, strolling along hand in hand — enamored silhouettes against the fiery western sky. Darkness smothering the last flicker of light. Then all night in her car listening to the monotonous surf, watching the stars ride each wave to a peak, then tumble into the madhouse of white water. Listening to each turbulence simmer to a hush; a brief, redeeming moment to recuperate, to poke your head above the rage and steal a bite of air. Then another breaker. Silence. Another. The inexorable cycle.

She was awakened by the melancholy cry of the gulls. Awakened to a thick fog; the ocean concealed, invisible. But still pounding away, constant as a pulse. The steady, reassuring voice of the sea.

Recovering. Surviving.

Night classes at Chula Vista CC. Intro to literature. The instructor, tall, bushy red beard, lean face, arms. Aesthetic. Or intellectual? Wire-rim glasses

on a starved nose, the tip crooked, as if it had been broken. Lecturing in a soft, mellow voice. Slouched in a chair in front of the class, both hands buried in his pockets, or sitting cross-legged, like a yogi, on the table. But a sensitive man, she'd thought. Long slender fingers, like a pianist's.

Sitting in the rear, hiding behind the black woman who borrowed her pen every other week, anonymous, she'd thought, until her midterm conference, an office conference, a personal conference in a cramped windowless room walled on three sides by shelves of books — some familiar to her: Milton, Shakespeare, Hawthorne, Poe; others alien: Berryman, Shklovsky, Oates, Machado.

"You obviously agree with Browning's attitude towards male egoism."

She smiled, nodding slightly, self-consciously, glancing down at her hands, cupped on the notebook lying flat across her thighs. Feeling foolish — foolish for being so nervous. A woman ten, maybe fifteen years older than this man, yet behaving like a schoolgirl.

"Tennyson's *Princess* might give you a little different perspective on Victorian attitudes towards the male-female syndrome. You might read a few selections and try a comparison-contrast theme."

He leaned back in his swivel chair, tapping the eraser-end of his pencil lightly against her paper as his eyes pondered a paragraph, never looking up, absorbing it, oblivious, it seemed, to her presence.

She leaned forward, peering stealthily at her theme, as if she were cheating on an exam. His lips separated, his bushy beard quivering slightly as he whispered through the passage. He was nodding. Smiling and nodding. He flipped quickly through the remaining pages.

"Very good. Excellent." He penciled an A- on the paper and circled it.

"Thank you," she said, accepting the paper from him as if it were a gift.

"Thank *you*," he said. "It's not often I stumble across a theme I actually enjoy reading." The far corners of his eyes wrinkled when he smiled. He looked older than he was. Late twenties maybe. He looked thirty-five.

As she stood up and reached for the doorknob, he called her back.

Yes, it was rather late. Yes, maybe it would be a good idea if he walked her to her car. Yes, she would have a cup of coffee with him, no harm in that.

But it had been a sensuous experience for her, sitting in a secluded little booth having a cup of coffee with another man. A man who had joined her, not out of obligation or dull habit, but because he was attracted to her, physically, intellectually — at one point, she thought, even spiritually. They chatted for a good hour — literature, movies, overpopulation, women's liberation. During a lull, he casually reached across the table to take her hand, but she jerked it away, avoiding his eyes, which had been cross-examining her, not without compassion: You are married but are you happy? Why are you so dissatisfied, an attractive woman like you? What would make you happy? Don't worry, I know. I know. I know what you're feeling. I know what you're suffering.

When he said it out loud she suspected it was a line. But it was exactly the line she wanted — *needed* — to hear.

His apartment had been far more materialistic than she'd anticipated: a step-down living room with a tiny bar tucked away in one corner, the adjoining walls lined with shelves of wine; a stereo with monstrous speakers and a jungle of indoor plants; in the bedroom, a color TV, a digital alarm clock enumerating each green second, a water bed.

As he stood at the bar preparing their drinks, she became uneasy. A cup of coffee or glass of wine was one thing; this was quite another. What was she doing here? And why? Pouring the drinks, he looked over at her and grinned. She hated that grin. Cocksure.

She sat down on the sofa and tried to relax. But already she could feel what was coming: the unhurried warmth of his initial touch, his careful, artistic consideration as he proceeded down the length of her body. But after that, nothing — except his long lean fingers curiously exploring the rippled ridges of her doughy belly, and their mutual frustration as they made love in a catalog of different positions, none of which would satisfy either of them. Afterwards, he would shrug, exonerating himself: "Uptight, Mrs. Fletcher. Too uptight." While she would be left feeling humiliated, bitter, guilty about her sin against not only the God she was feuding with but her self, her sex. Ultimately admitting to herself: *I've been had. . .*

As she watched him casually stirring the drinks, his pianist's fingers suddenly turned to icicles. What did this bearded man-child know about her anyway? Nothing. And what did he really want? A midnight discussion of Swinburne's love poems? Ha! The same thing they all wanted. No, she was not going to be an easy lay. Another feather in his cap.

She stood up. "I have to go."

Before he could even protest, she rushed out the door, leaving him slightly dumbfounded, holding two martini glasses in his dim-lit bachelor's den.

When she arrived home, Robert was waiting up, angry, ready to pounce, to interrogate. But she beat him to it: "Yes, I was out with another man. I'm ready to tell Bishop Myers about mine any time you're ready to tell him about yours. Good night!" Sobbing, she fled into the master bathroom and locked the door.

Thus ended *her* first and last fling.

Marsha picked her pen off the floor.

I just realized that I have a hang-up about pain tolerance. I was never able to stay around my brother Phil, because it was too hard on me emotionally — watching him jab an ice cream cone into his forehead while the other kids thought it was so funny. Is this what happens to overprotective mothers too? It's a terminal emotional drain.

Everything seemed quiet. Unbearably quiet. Marsha stopped and listened to the late afternoon silence that had become her enemy and ally ever since Adelle had moved out: the refrigerator humming, the fat Johnson girl calling to her pony, a jet purring across the sky. Silence.

This drug hangover is mentally lowering. I may have to go to the new Golfland we have in C.V. & vent my frustrations on the quick-draw games. You get to kill 6 gun-

slingers if you are fast enough, & I intend to cheat, rather than holstering my gun between each fight.

Marsha set the pen cross-wise on the pad and slouched down as if her body had suddenly collapsed. She remained limp, rag-like, until the little door on the grandfather clock popped open and the tiny wooden bird slid forward, cuckooing five times before retreating back into its grotto. Then five ominous tolls of the gong.

It's a good thing I have class next week. I'm taking real estate principles & income tax. Don't ask me why. Aunt Toots is getting married — again! I hope she is happy. She deserves it.

XOXOXO

Mom

P.S. XOXOXOXOXOXO for beautiful Laura. No one is hungry right after they wake up. Wait an hour & give her fresh air and exercise just before. It stimulates the appetite.

P.P.S. Sherril really likes Idaho but it sounds like they will be in the Salt Lake vicinity January where Brian will work.

P.P.P.S. Stephen is still looking for a used car, but he's still a bit shy after the Mustang trauma.

P.P.P.P.S. Adelle has some secret plan. She wrote & told me she's buying a lot of clothes & just made a down payment on some new furniture for her apartment.

Marsha hastily tore the scribbled pages from the note-pad and hurried into the kitchen to locate another envelope and seal the letter before she changed her mind. Shuffling through a drawer, she glanced at the kitchen clock: 5:45. Robert should have been home an hour ago. Two hours ago. She could phone his office, but what difference would it make? She looked outside. The sun was bleeding through the clouds on the horizon.

As Marsha watched the twilight settling like deep sleep over the valley, she tried to hate her husband. In the past, this would have been easier, when he would heave the boys against the walls for quarreling or scold her for not having them ready for church on time or wake her in the middle of the night to demand his nuptial rights. But over the years he had mellowed. No more yelling, no more violence, no more workaholic. No more kids, of course. That had a lot to do with it. Now he got up at 7:00, put in his eight hours, came home at 5:30, shoveled down dinner, and camped in front of the TV with a science-fiction paperback until 10:30 or 11:00, when they went to bed, and slept. He was mellow now. Perfectly mellow. And generous, too, now that he had some money to spare. She'd first suggested cosmetic surgery half-jokingly, certain he would veto the idea. But he'd surprised her:

"A complete overhaul? Sure. Why not?"

"Robert, you're not serious! It would cost a mint."

Razor poised in his hand, ready to slide across his lathered face, he mocked: "There goes our trip to Europe! And your Mercedes!"

He lowered the razor, smiling. He was wearing nothing but a towel around his waist. With his frothy beard and grizzled chest, he looked like a Norse god. "If that's what you really want. . . ." He boldly stroked the razor across his left cheek, whistling, grinning at her inquisitive reflection in the mirror. "Actually, if I'd known that's all there was to it, I'd have had you on the operating table fifteen years ago."

"Ha! The truth comes out!"

"What truth?"

"That you think I looked *that* bad fifteen years ago."

"Not at all, Marsh." Another bold stroke, this time across his right cheek. "It was more like *twenty* years ago!"

He raised his big forearm, shielding his face as Marsha shoved him. She snatched the can of shaving cream and sprayed it in his face. He scooped her up, threw her over his shoulder, and toted her, laughing, squirming, into the bedroom where he flung her across the bed and plopped down beside her, pressing his frothy face against hers, the two of them laughing hysterically as he covered her cheeks with lathered kisses.

That had been the first time in what seemed ages that they had spontaneously frolicked. For those few precious moments wrestling with him on the bed she'd felt as if she really were falling in love again, as if there never had been a first time. And all of her sexual energy, past and present, expressed and repressed, culminated in a burst of passion that, for a very brief moment, as she spotted his face with kisses, wishing unguiltily that the bitter lather were whipped cream she could lick off of his face, his body — for a moment she thought fifty might be the apotheosis rather than the coffin of her womanhood. But that was as far as he'd gone, the kisses. He'd had to run — the football game; kick-off in twenty minutes.

"But what about Europe?" she asked as he relathered his face.

"Who needs Europe?" He set the razor on the wash basin, turned, and took her in his arms. "I'd rather pay a mint to make love to a renovated Marsha than look at some crumbling cathedral."

She saw that he intended the statement as a compliment, so she acknowledged it as such: "You're sweet, Bob. Thanks."

"Hey, don't thank me. I'm not the one who's going under the knife!"

The grandfather clock began sounding the hour, each haunting gong echoing through her head. Marsha wanted to lie down and sleep but knew she was not through. Not yet. She returned to the living room and once again took up the pen and pad of paper. Sherril. Her first, the last. The hardest.

Dearest Sherril,

They say an unbreakable bond exists between a mother & her daughters, especially her eldest, & I think I've always shared that relationship with you. Even as a little girl (somehow) you could always tell when things were going sour inside me. But for all your marvelous insights & visions, this time you missed the boat! No, I don't begrudge you another child. You know I've always wanted whatever would make you happy & it seems with Brian you've found happiness. Cozette, too, with Jerry. You both have

good faithful (if somewhat chauvinistic) husbands, & in this day and age that's really something. They're an endangered species. As for my returning to church, don't hold your breath. For you and Brian the church has worked out, so far. But you're both working together to make it work, & that makes all the difference. Your father & I never quite had that vision. During our courtship as he stood at the sacrament table, a husky crew-cut priest breaking the bread, we'd make eyes at each other. Our hearts & thoughts were in the back seat of his Ford, a far cry from Golgotha. But we saw potential in the church. We wanted you kids to have standards, avoid the mistakes we'd made. And the church seemed the best way.

No, I don't apologize for the way I'm living now, & I certainly don't expect you to. True, there was a time when I thought the church filled a major void in my life. When I was growing up in Salt Lake & everything we did was church this or church that, & everyone we met Brother X or Sister Y. But I'm not so sure anymore if it was the church or something else.

Marsha stopped, dissatisfied. She was evading what she really wanted to say. Talking about the Church, God's Church, it never came out right — ignoring the bad, spotlighting the good. Somehow she could never accurately express the ambivalence — the bad within the good. Mostly good. Good, she thought, for imperfect people in a theoretically perfect system. Bad for some. For women. Some women. But when she tried to communicate this, even to herself, it came out as just so much schizophrenia. Like her love-hate relationship with Robert. It was real — volatile, passionate, sometimes even violent. But where in the Church of the Peacemaker is there room for hate? Even within love? And where in the Church of a perfect God a place for imperfections? Sherril would accept none.

I was thinking the other day about you kids, how as a (much younger) mother watching you laughing on the rides at Disneyland or riding your rafts at the beach I always got a bigger kick out of it than you did. So maybe this is the real Fountain of Youth — God bless your children & grandchildren!

Did I tell you about my visiting teachers? Yes, apparently my name still hasn't been blotted off the records because they're still dropping by to deliver their monthly message. Don't worry, I'm civil to them, if opinionated. Sister Williams is about my age. A big heavy-set woman who looks like a veteran from the hand cart company. Stoic, hard-nosed pioneer look. Spiritually tough as nails. Her companion is a sweet young girl about 20 with her faith and figure still intact & a 6 month old baby. One of their monthly messages was on resisting the ways of the world, & Sister Williams used birth control as an example of how the world's standards differ from ours. I disagreed of course flat out. It really threw Sister Williams for a loop when Sister Mitchell started asking me about different kinds of b.c. "Well, Sister Mitchell, we'd better be going. We've got another appointment with Sister Quiner." Why some people want to keep you young girls in ignorance is beyond me.

The year before, when Sister Williams had a different companion, they had caught Marsha at a bad time, when things — no, nothing in particular, just "things," the cumulative chore of being female mother wife homemaker — had dog-piled on her. The sisters had caught her at her worst, and she had spilled everything.

"Me. I'm losing me. ME! It's like . . . I . . . I can't explain it."

“Have you prayed, Sister Fletcher?” was their counsel. “Have you confided in your Father in Heaven?”

Sniffing, she shook her head and promised to try. But later, alone, couldn't — couldn't even try — because her problem seemed so intangibly female that only a woman could begin to understand. For there was no appropriate analogy to it, her cumulative grief. And a man, because he is a man, regardless of the extent of his power knowledge and compassion, even a glorified, a deified man. . . .

Believe it or not there are some things even God doesn't understand. Not entirely. Pardon the blasphemy but it's true. So what good does it do to scream out for recognition? Marsha Fletcher crying Job from the confines of her \$100,000 home. Who gives a hoot if your breasts are sagging to your knee caps? Vanity, saith the preacher. People are starving in Cambodia, be thankful you've got tits period. Besides, you know how I've always despised public grief — the long countenances of the fasters & billboard martyrs. Don't worry. I'm a tough old bird. It'll take more than a few bloated veins and cellulite sag to put me out to pasture.

She glared at the pad, her usually neat cursive gone haywire, oblivious to the ruled lines. No, it wasn't even the Church she was squaring off with anymore. This was an inequity not of any system or organization but of life itself, the life cycle. Not political or social or environmental or ecclesiastical, but biological. Established from the foundation of the world, the heavens. As old and everlasting as the priesthood she and her female compatriots were somehow denied.

I'd better sign off now. I've passed on enough happy thoughts for one day.

But she didn't even sign the letter before tearing it from the pad, wadding it into a ball, and hurling it across the room.

She sat there several moments, silent, allowing nothing into her mind but the gray fog of that morning. Then she got up and strolled into the kitchen. She was tired, she wanted to lie down, she wanted to sleep. She felt as if she were standing upright in a huge cradle, rocking and rocking, complacent in her warm ease, her eyelids slowly closing out the view. Then she was struggling to maintain the obscurity. But the image emerged. A blonde this time, a platinum penthouse blonde. A busty divorcee with a phony Texas drawl, squeezing his sagging biceps, handing him a drink, snuggling up cozily beside him on the sofa, purring into his ear: *You ah the most aggressive may-un I have evuh known . . . you ah moh aggressive than Mistuh Mean Joe Greene, or the entah Dallas Cowboy front lion. . . .*

Marsha turned to the window. The sunless horizon was glossy pink, an infection. A solitary pair of headlights drifted down the highway. At the far end of the Johnson's orange grove an empty ladder was leaning against a tree.

She stared across the valley, waiting for it to darken. There was a clammy silence, a nothingness in the air. Robert. Twenty-nine years she'd waited for the angel to outgrow the ogre. Now that it had, she wondered, who was this man she'd fought and loved and slept with over half her life? Robert the only

child growing up lonesome in L.A. Inventing invisible brothers and sisters to escort him through grade school. He'd wanted kids until he had them. Then sat on *his* tail, like his father, giving orders. Then took off. Went a-whoring, first in spirit, then body. Now both. Yet he'd always defended her. Beaten her to a pulp emotionally, but when the kids had talked back to her or at an office party when Russ Hardy gave her a bad time, he'd threatened them with his sledgehammer fists: "Don't you ever . . . ever . . . ever . . . !" Who was this alien who had locked himself in the bathroom secretly with the flute?³

But now she felt nothing but anger. Resenting him. Resenting the age-old equation he had perpetuated: WOMAN=BODY. A woman's worth depreciating from the first time she unlocks her thighs and lets the world in. Yes, he did have his reasons. "But damn them, Robert! Damn your reasons!"

She whirled around and fled down the hall and into her bedroom. Whipping off her blouse and Levis, then panties and bra, she studied her body, tall and naked in the full-length mirror. Three rows of stitches, chapped with scabs, furrowed her lower abdomen. Her "tummy-tuck." These, Dr. Norman had assured her, would heal in a matter of weeks. Further down, the veins — the thick, rippling veins that, like the stretch marks, had grown larger and uglier with each pregnancy — these too were gone. Aside from the suture marks patterned at even intervals like rungs on a ladder along the length of her calves, and the little black nubs she had to avoid in shaving, her legs looked quite attractive, more thirty-five than forty-seven. Her legs had always been her strong point and, for a nostalgic moment, she admired them.

Then she focused on the upper half of her body, where her skin was beginning to sag. Not excessively. Not a grandmother's droop. But noticeably — a doughy, celluloid sagginess that nothing, not vitamin E or Scandia Slim 'n Trim or scalpels and sutures or even fasting and prayer could redeem.

"This," she muttered bitterly, glaring at the stitches and the scars and the invisible scars, recollecting the strippings and the shavings and the drugs, the anesthesia and starving for days at a time. "None of it — not one bit of it for you, Robert. But me. For me and me and no one else. . . ."

She studied her breasts for some time before the fingertips of her right hand began massaging, very slowly, in a circular motion, the circumference of her left breast. Cautiously, her fingertips inched inward, towards the nipple, until about an inch short they stopped and pressed down firmly, two, three, four times, reassuring her of the lump that she'd let Dr. Norman examine, hoping that for once the odds would be in her favor. They were, on paper. But she lost anyway. The biopsy proved positive. Malignant. "Unusual," Dr. Norman had said, "though your records do indicate a history of breast cancer in your family. . . ." Then he very clinically reviewed her options: extended radical, halsted radical, modified radical, total. . . . But she wasn't listening. She was staring outside at the hazy blue sky, wishing it were an ocean she could drive into, wishing she could swim forever down to its pure black bottom.

"I'd like a second opinion."

"That's only reasonable."

Second opinion ditto the first.

“Let me think about it.”

“Of course, Mrs. Fletcher.”

“I’d prefer to tell my husband myself.”

“Of course.”

Staring at her naked self in the mirror, Marsha fingered the lump, pinching it several times — gently, curiously at first, like a scientist, probing. Then she began squeezing, harder and harder, wanting to gouge, to rip. Dr. Carlyle, the young plastic surgeon, had assured her with such beaming optimism that reconstructive surgery could provide her with a “very cosmetically attractive breast” — a breast, his eyes said as he showed her some before-after photos, much nicer than that shriveled, sagging sack you’ve got now. . . .

Then she had lied to herself. She had told herself there were alternatives; there were more important things than breasts, sex, self-esteem, womanhood.

Marsha squeezed the lump harder, harder, until the pain stung her eyes and her naked image melted on the mirror. Quickly, recklessly, she threw on her blouse and levis and hurried down the hall and into the kitchen, darkened with dusk. Laughing and weeping, she took the car keys from the rack above the counter and headed out the front door, pausing just outside to inhale the chilly night air. She glared up at the half-face of the moon, scarred, pitted, nimbused. She muttered defiantly, “I’m a tough old bird . . . I’m a tough. . . .”

Minutes later she was speeding down the Via de Dios Highway, heading towards the sea.