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Gods in their Heaven, all's right with the world.

Selena: fighting desperately to keep her eyes open.

The road: North Carolina, like a snake, rock mountain wall to the left, sheer drop into nowhere on the right.

The night: black, dead and staring, like the eyes of a man lying on a kitchenette floor in a motel in Washington, D.C. Somewhere back there behind Selena.

The fear: that they could trace her, through his department, or through the woman who had rented them the motel room. And catch her. And put her in prison. And then kill her, for killing *him* .

The car: a 1951 Packard, sea-green, huge as a Tyrannosaurus, bought late the day before, for thirty-two dollars, all she had had in her purse (all she had been able to take off his body) from a street-corner used car lot in the filthy Negro section of Fredericksburg, Virginia.

The destination: Florida. Getaway. Hideaway.

Her eyes slid quickly guillotine closed. The uneven ratcheting of gravel under the front tires brought her sharply awake again. She pulled the car back onto the road. Over the edge, out through the right-side windows, she knew there was a sheer drop into the valley below. It was too deep and too black even to estimate the fall. Enough to kill a car, and its driver.

The road twisted back and around, heading up and up, always up and up. Fog slithered toothlessly across the road at every minor dip, and the center line had been dimmed to headlights many years before by wheels and weather. The lanes were one each way, and too narrow for a compact, much less the behemoth she spun through the turns. It smelled of vomit in the back seat. Thirty-two dollars. A dead man lying face-up on a linoleum floor, a corkscrew still in his hand.

There was no guard-railing or built-up shoulder over there on her right. It ended with frost-chipped road edge, thin rut of dirt, and the drop into the abyss. Her eyes closed slowly, flickering, drooping lids over dull film of sleep...

...and woke suddenly as the right front tire left the road, skimmed across the dirt, and rode in empty air...

...her eyes snapped open, and instinctively she wrenched the wheel back hard left. The right front tire spun against the side of the edge, still clawing emptiness, but the Packard lurched left and forward as she hit the accelerator, and the tire chewed its way through loose topsoil and regained the road, the car now plunging hard left, suddenly rushing up the short incline at the base of the rock wall, tilting, and running along the side of the wall almost horizontally.

The car struck an outcropping with a monstrous clang, and Selena was thrown against the steering wheel, crushing her breasts against the unyielding circle. Sudden gray washed over her and she fell back, feet flopping off the pedals, arms limp at her sides. The car rebounded, suddenly stalled, and in the North Carolina night there was only silence...

...and the sound of a storm, far off in the mountains...

Nowhere is North Carolina. Nowhere is the land of fear. Nowhere is flight without destination, only a looming *back there*, where all flights begin.

Selena, in fog gray, lived it again...

* * * *

Three years at Duke University had taught Selena all she needed to know: that college was a dead end for her. The degree of cunning she brought to her academic life was more than she needed to get a steady 3.2 average. It was tantamount to hunting a flea with an elephant gun. She had been fascinated briefly by some of the experimental studies done by Rhine and others in parapsychology labs, but even that had palled quickly; they were fools, tinkering with improbabilities. Selena doted on reality.

Reality for Selena took essential form in one word: *manipulation* .

Hidden deep in the entrails of that word was its power-source, the word: *power* .

There was an electrical fascination for her in getting people to do what she wanted them to do. Often it was to their advantage, occasionally not. But they were gambited, and that was the essence of the

relationship. After which, Selena vanished in mist and memory.

She had been the most beautiful girl in Minneapolis. From high school on, she had always had her way. It became a constant, an accepted thing—she would date the most eligible boys, she would win the queenship of the senior prom, she would take first place honors on the debating team—and it became a way of life—they came to her to find out what the theme of the annual school fair should be, they came to her to find out if the new girl should be asked into the sorority, they came to her to be maneuvered, to have their decisions made for them—and it finally passed into the realm of an unnoticed seventh sense. Selena could see and hear and smell and touch and taste and remember and...

Order people to her will. Almost unconsciously after her teens. She no longer had to work at it. They came to her and gave her what she wanted, and Selena took it as her due. And when she had left Minneapolis far behind her; when she had left Chicago behind her; when she had left New York behind her; then she no longer needed to ask people to do what she wanted them to do, to enter the regimented little ranks of her life, and march to the intricate route-step she had set for them.

College, and two brief marriages, and a modeling career, and boredom. Oh God, deadly boredom. The end result of getting whomever and whatever she wanted. Boredom ... scintillant, murk-deep boredom, driving her to Washington, D.C. Where there were men who ordered entire nations to their will. In that city, she would find the ones who could compete with her on her own level.

But it had been the same for Selena. The same as it had been in Minneapolis, when she had challenged Teddy to climb through the old, broken culvert pipe, and he had done it, though shivering with fear; and a rusted nail protruding from a block of scrap wood had torn his thigh, and he had gotten lockjaw. But had done it. For her. The same as it had been at Duke, when she had seduced the assistant professor of psychology, to get the final term mark that would continue her scholarship, and he had done it, though cursing himself for his weakness; and he had been sacked the following year, when it had come to light, but that didn't matter to Selena for by then she had moved on. But he had done it. For her. The same as it had been in Chicago when she had befuddled the poor homosexual art director of a men's magazine, and gotten him to choose her for their centerfold thereby making three thousand dollars for her. What had happened to him had been unpleasant, but Selena never heard about it; she had moved on. It had been the same in New York. And in Washington, D.C. The same. Always the same. Selena always got her way, shivered with delight at making these movers & shakers move and shake to her designs.

Until she had met the man from the government department.

He had been stronger than she had expected. And he had not thought of it as a game. What Selena had not realized in time, was that *he* was a male counterpart of *her*. He was used to winning.

The contention had been a sheaf of papers, light-blue in color, that had come from a sealed file in his department. What each of them had wanted to do with those papers became unimportant the moment he stole them. Became *less* than unimportant in the motel, when the showdown came, and each planned on winning. Selena had used all of her standard gambits—those that had worked on the best, and the worst. None of the gambits had any effect. But then, neither had his ... on her. They had jostled with one another for an hour, in all the subtle, mysterious ways of the manipulators, and in the end he had come for her with the vicious corkscrew in his hand. The corkscrew he had used less than an hour before to open two bottles of a fine Medoc, only to discover both had gone sour; and then he'd twisted open the magnum of champagne.

She had struggled with him, and he had slipped in a smear of melted ice on the linoleum floor, and flailed backward, and smashed his head on the edge of the sink. At that particularly vulnerable juncture of neck

and cranium; she had heard the ugly crack, like rotten wood, and he had slid sidewise, onto his back, his eyes wide open and staring, the corkscrew in his hand. And she had rifled his body, taken all the money on him, and fled...

* * * *

The veil of gray tore away like mist before a storm, and Selena felt her arms hanging straight down on either side of the steering wheel, terribly heavy. She tried to move, to lever herself back into an upright position, but her upper body was without muscular control, lying against the wheel. Her long auburn hair was over her face, and she could not open her eyes.

The sound of the storm was not in her head.

Outside the Packard the mountain night had opened; black rain, thick as lava, thundered down over the silent car. Her window was open. Rain was pattering off the sill, onto her left cheek. She tried to lurch farther to the left, and succeeded in getting her head to loll back and to the side.

Blessed cool wetness cascaded over her hot face, and she opened her eyes. Stringy moist strands of auburn hair hung across her face, and she moved her head idly, shaking them back with difficulty. Then she tried using her arms. They were limp from having been in that bloodless position for so long. But agonizingly ... she drew her left hand up onto her lap. Her dress was soaked through, on the left side. The Pucci cocktail dress she had worn to aid her manipulation of the man from the government department. It was cold and flat against her side and her left breast. She wore no underwear.

Selena rolled her body back against the seat, and a surf-crash of sickness broke over her. She pulled the door handle and barely managed to swing the door out and up, realizing the car was tilted. The door was incredibly heavy. But she threw her weight against it, and fell from the car. The slamming door barely missed her legs.

The rain helped.

In a few moments she was able to stand, leaning against the side of the car. Her knees were filthy with road mud. The storm beat against her. Lightning exploded all around the mountains, chain-reacting like lunacy in a cyclotron. Thunder boomed *inside* the stones of the hills. Bursting outward on waves of muscularity that promised the ground beneath her would shatter in a moment.

Selena looked up into the rain, and it washed over her, plastering the thin silk cocktail dress to the lines of her body. In a short time, a time without duration, she was able to climb into the Packard again and start the engine. She backed it off the incline, and turned on the lights. They cast fitful light across the desolate Carolina nowhere. Rain slanted through the shafts.

She let the clutch out slowly and the car moved forward, as though testing itself: a wounded creature waiting to feel the sting of pain in one of its appendages.

She drove blindly, pain in her chest and the shivering chill of wet clothes against her flesh keeping her alert. The road went up and around, doubling back on itself as it threaded its way through softly-lit passages in the rain-choked darkness.

Somewhere along the way, she took a wrong turn.

In that night, any turn would have been a wrong turn.

It didn't matter until the Packard began chewing itself to pieces.

At first the sound was a soft *ting!* as of a paper clip hitting a revolving fan. She did not realize she was hearing it for some time, until the irregularity of its occurrence struck her. Selena's brow drew down, and she bit her lip. As if the machine had been waiting for this reaction from her, the *ting!* ing sharply changed to a harsh metallic clank that came again and again, then ceased for fifteen minutes till she was lulled that it had cured itself ... and then clanked again.

By the time she reached the crest of the mountain, and saw the dim lights below, the noise had changed again: it was now the sound of metal chewing on metal, the sickly diseased sound of a creature eating itself alive.

She started down the twisting nightmare with the rain suddenly slackening its beat and then ceasing entirely as she threaded her way around fallen boulders lying in the oncoming lane.

Forty minutes later she passed the blurred and weatherbeaten sign that said **PETRIE** , pop. 650. It was decorated with Kiwanis and Moose emblems.

She drove down the last of the mountain slopes, and grinding hideously, pulled onto the main street of Petrie, North Carolina.

Five stores. Three on the left, two on the right. And beyond them, thirty feet beyond, a gas station.

She rolled into the station. It was a brand of gasoline she did not know. There were three men lounging on straight-backed chairs, tilted up against the wall of the slatboard station, under a protective overhang. She pulled past the pumps, the Packard ratcheting and grinding, and stopped directly in front of them. She turned off the engine and stared out at them. They stared back, unmoving.

Selena got out of the car.

They still hung there, feet off the ground, chairs back against the wall, three men of indeterminate age, tanned and lined by life in the mountains. They were alive, she could ascertain that much, for two of them were chewing gum, and the third smoked a battered meerschaum, from which a curling filigree of silver-gray smoke regularly climbed into the suspiciously gentle night breeze. She was able to tell they were alive, additionally, by the looks of malicious lechery that invaded their faces. (In the mountains, far back in the hills of nowhere, the term "cool" had been invented, without having ever been named. These people were cool: they would not acknowledge their own unsettled reactions ... to anything. Like mummies they would sit, until the world around them turned to ash, and the sky dripped fire, and then they would slowly turn to one another and nod. Coolly. But Selena, dress plastered to her ripe body, could draw reaction from a lizard, from a stone, from a gallon of sea water. They registered, and their eyes brightened. But cool. They did not speak.)

"I'm having some trouble with my car," Selena said.

An unspoken chain of command was established, and the youngest of the three men—perhaps thirty-five—nudged himself forward, and the chair legs hit the wooden platform. "What seems to be the trouble?" he asked, bored.

"Something's broken inside," she said.

Slowly, almost languorously, the man slid out of the chair. Selena thought he might just settle in a pool of

tired flesh, but he came toward her, hands thrust into the back pockets of his limp coveralls. “Like what?”

Selena's hands went to her hips, and her jaw thrust out. “Friend, if *I* knew ‘like what,’ I wouldn't be asking *you* to look at it, now would I?”

“You ain't from ‘round here,” he said, moving toward the car, chewing his gum furiously.

“No, I'm not.”

“Where y'from?”

“Are you going to take a look at this damned car or aren't you?”

The gum-chewer seemed startled by her language. He stopped, looked dull. On the front porch of the station, the second man—fortyish, nearly bald, wearing a filthy coverall with the gas station emblem on the breast pocket—hit the boards with his feet. The scene had been turned over to him: the young one had come up against something he couldn't handle.

“Well, I c'n take a look at ‘er,” he said, and got up. The gum moved sluggishly in his mouth, and he matched pace with it toward Selena and the car.

He stood in front of the Packard for a moment, as if trying to decide which end contained the engine. Then he fumbled around the hood, looking for the latch. With exasperation, Selena moved beside him, reaching in through the front grille. “It opens from underneath.”

The older man attained a tone of cool disdain that completely repudiated his obvious unfamiliarity with the business end of an automobile: “Why, thank you, ma'am.” It was a brand of sarcasm honed to perfection by four hundred years of misdirecting the outsiders.

She opened the hood, and the man leaned over the front bumper, carefully not touching the mud-spattered metal with his already-filthy coverall. He stared down into the guts of the machine for long minutes.

Finally, without looking at Selena, he said, “Why don't y'all start ‘er up.”

Selena felt a rising tide of frustration and fury. She got in and turned the ignition key. The engine coughed to life. The sound of metal grinding and tearing came up solidly. Superimposed as the latest symptom of a disease that had been built in sixteen years before when the car had been new. It was a strange kind of testimony to the excellence of the Packard manufacturers that the car was even able to *start* sixteen years later; a feat far beyond the capabilities of contemporary Detroit Iron.

The gum-chewing went on apace, the staring into the innards did not change phase, the observers said nothing, the sound of thunder caromed through the mountains.

Selena leaned out through the open door. “Can you *do* anything...?”

The man slowly looked up at her. His expression was one of mixed lechery and disgust. He did not have to say *Lady, shut yore damned face, you're in awuh part of the woods now, with yore damned long legs and all yore damned pretty skin a-showin' through that skimpy li'l dress, an whut we want to do is whut we gonna do, so sit back an' don't be haranguin' us whilst we playin' with puttin' you*

in yore place ; he didn't have to say it. There it was, arrogant and infuriating for Selena, in his expression.

The youngest of the three ambled up beside the gum chewer, and they stared down at the machine together.

* * * *

Nowhere is North Carolina. Nowhere is the land of the Gods. All the Gods. Not only the ancient Gods who have gone to sleep, and the recent Gods who are still worshipped, but the God of Rain, and the God of Lightning, and the God of the Hunt, who have taken on new attributes and new faces. And the newest, youngest, strongest Gods: the God of Neon, the God of Smog, the God of Luck, and the Machine God. People come to worship at strange altars. They place their oblations at the feet of graven images without knowing these are truly Gods they have found. The War God grows fatter each year, gorged on blood. The Love God fornicates with himself, weakening his genes, rebirthing as a thalidomide monstrosity. Paingod does his work and doles out his anguish, paying no attention to the cries of those crushed beneath his millstones. But the Machine God..

* * * *

The sound had grown more violent. It was an ugly sound. In final frustration, Selena shut the car down, and got out. The tableau was still the same. The little porch on the slat-walled gas station; the old man still tilted against the front wall, smoking his pipe; the two observers still looking down into the engine as though studying a slide under a microscope; the mountains looming huge and dark around the town; the sound of the storm gathering strength to hurl itself against them once more.

“All *right* !” Selena snapped. “Enough is enough.”

The two looked at her. Then as one, they looked at the old man in the chair. And Selena realized all at once, that neither of these two fools could have done anything, had they *wanted* to: the old man was the mechanic. The other two were camouflage, the sportsmen who had been given Selena to toy with for a few minutes. It was the old man she should have approached.

He did not move an inch from his comfortable position as he informed her in a doughy, wheezing voice, “Can't he'p you, ma'am. Trouble you got's too big. Have t'take it on in to Shelby, or someplace, where they's “quipped to make them kinda repairs.”

“But you didn't even *look* at it!” Selena yelled.

“Too much. Can't fix “er,” the old man said, and closed his eyes. Smoke rose from the meerschaum once more, lazily.

The two fools stood where they were, staring once again down into the engine, as if hoping the show might resume. Selena shoved them aside and slammed the hood closed. She was speechless with fury. She strode back to the front door and started to get in. And realized ... she could not go *anywhere* .

She needed this car in working order.

If they were tracking her, she could not afford to be without transportation.

But these fools would not—or could not—repair the engine.

She was hamstrung.

A wave of such helplessness possessed her that she almost sank down onto the car seat.

The old man, without opening his eyes, said, "I s'pose you could call old Ernest..."

And the two fools fell down laughing. The youngest one rolled around on the muddy ground as though possessed by St. Vitus's Dance. The middle-aged one barked a kind of laughter Selena had not heard since she had been at the Bronx Zoo. The old man was smiling, smugly.

"Who the hell is Ernest? And what's so funny?"

The old man opened his eyes, and looked at the middle-aged one. His laughter came under control with difficulty, but when he could speak without gasping, he wiped the tears from his eyes and said, with difficulty, "Ernest? Oh, he, uh, he r'pairs things, sometimes..."

And they fell down laughing again.

Selena watched them with incredulity. *Something* was funny, unquestionably. But *what* that something was she could not even begin to fathom. The two grown men tumbled back and forth at her feet like an unmatched set of children's toys, loose-jointed, rubber-armed, totally without control of themselves as the *enormity* of the joke paralyzed them. Their laughter drowned out the thunder that whipped overhead.

She had to repeat herself three times before they could hear her: "Well, all right then, why don't you just run and *get* 'old Ernest!'"

The youngest one sat up, suddenly. There on the ground. He looked at her. She was serious. *Why the hell* shouldn't *I be serious*, Selena thought, interpreting his look in an instant. The young one looked over at the old one. The old one nodded with a barely perceptible movement of his head. The young one leaped to his feet and, cackling uproariously, dashed off through the town, and was gone in an instant. Selena stood beside the Packard, tapping her foot. Every few seconds, the middle-aged one, now back in his chair on the porch beside the old man, would chuckle deep in his throat, and build it till he was roaring with laughter. *Fuck you!* thought Selena.

* * * *

....Ah, He is a special God. He loves his gears and his pumps, his springs and his transistors, his printed circuits and his boilers. He is not a jealous God, like some, but he is an attentive God. He tends to business, and keeps his world of machines functioning. But every now and then, every once in a while, every few centuries in a mind that is Machine and not Man, the Machine God finds one He can care about more than the others. A special machine, or a special man, and they become the beloved of the Machine God. Saint Joan had the power of moving masses of men to religious fervor. Ahmad, who was Mohammed, was able to die of his own volition when he was presented with the keys of eternal life on earth, and those of Paradise. Gandhi saw the sheep being led to the slaughter and worship of Kali, and rejected her tenets, turning to the wisdom of the Gautama Buddha, drawing unto himself the powers of peace. Christ was able to heal the lepers, to walk on water. Samson brought down the temple, and David slew Goliath, and Jonah lived in the belly of the whale. And for the Machine God, the beloved child was...

* * * *

Loping down the street, the gum-chewing fool leaped high in the air, like a lovesick schoolboy who has grabbed his first thigh in the schoolyard at recess. He came tumbling, gibbering, capering, laughing up to

the station, and pointed back in the direction he had come. He broke up completely, slumping down against the porchpost. The other two men laughed with him. Selena looked in the direction their laughter was fleeing.

He was perhaps six feet tall, incredibly thin, with arms that might have been figs. 87 & 88 in a medical text on rickets. He was the compleat Ichabod Crane. His hands hung six inches below the cuffs of his no-color jacket, his knobbed ankles were exposed between the tattered legs of his pants and his highly-polished cordovan shoes. He moved in a long, disjointed manner, more like some whisper-articulated insect, a mantis or a spider, than a man. His hair was lank and as colorless as his clothing: the color of sand, the color of bricks, the color of rain, the color of teak, but none of these: all of them, with the highlights leached out. Mudpie hair. His face was all angles and planes, eyes big and a little vacant. Mouth as wide as a dog's. He stumbled and stepped, a coordinated spastic, a colt learning its legs.

Selena stared at the apparition, and realized what the joke was. Ernest was the joke. His totality ... his look, his manner, his walk, his *presence* ... was a joke. The three men on the porch had extended the scope of their sport. They had brought her a half-wit to repair the car. The viciousness of it did not escape her.

Ernest came to her, and stopped.

She looked up into his eyes.

He was by no means a half-wit.

There was something living behind those eyes, and from silt-deep in her memory came a quote from Gerald Kersh that fit precisely: ... *there are men whom one hates until a certain moment when one sees, through a chink in their armour, the writhing of something nailed down and in torment.*

He stared at her, and she was beautiful. More beautiful than she had ever been before. For the first time in her life, Selena was uncomplicated. Light bathed her. She felt her flow and her pulse. The boy stared at her. He was no more than sixteen years old, possibly seventeen, but he saw her as she was, reduced to her essentials.

“Can you fix my car?”

He did not reply.

“There's something wrong with it. Can you repair it?”

Shyly, he nodded yes. And the three fools fell down laughing at him.

Then, oh so strange...

Ernest started at the rear of the Packard. His long, delicate, pale fingers barely touched the metal. They grazed the green rusted hide of the ailing creature, and traced four thin lines from the rear fender forward, as he walked to the front of the machine. The light touch of *someone getting to know someone*. He stood in front of the car for a minute (while the fools roared and beat each other on the back), head cocked to one side, the hair hanging down over his right eye; listening. Then he touched the grille.

When Selena had angrily opened the hood for the gum-chewer, it had sprung up just as angrily on its

counterbalanced springs, clanging fully open and quivering.

The grille opened smoothly now. Smoothly, slowly, as though exposing its interior to the gentle ministrations of a physician with the power of mist and cool.

Then Ernest laid his hands on the engine.

He touched it.

He touched it all over.

He pressed it. Senuously. Charmingly.

As they watched, his hands caressed the engine.

Lightly.

He leaned in, and listened to the machine silently.

He talked to the machine. Silently.

Then he reached far up under the engine, where there was only darkness, and he moved his fingers delicately.

Selena watched, amazed. It was lunacy, of course, but the way he moved, the sureness and coordination in his hands. It was the joy of watching a good shoemaker at his last, the pleasure of watching a skilled cabinetmaker rabbit-joining two perfectly planed surfaces, the exquisite wonder of a sculptor forming grandeur from base rock; *he talked to the machine.*

After a while, he brought his hands back up into sight, and they held a twisted twig of metal, brightly smeared down one side where its surface had been scored and abraded.

“Fell down into the engine,” he said.

His voice was a small child's voice; the voice of a boy not yet a man, who seldom spoke.

“Can you repair it?” Selena demanded ... gently.

He nodded.

The three fools were giggling now, holding their sides from the pain. Ernest went past them into the gas station. In a moment he came out with a plain black wire coat-hanger. He took a pair of wire-snips from a heavily laden workbench just inside the door of the garage, and snipped off a straight piece nine inches long. He laid the wire-snips where he had found them, returned the useless coat-hanger to the station, and came back to the car.

He took the nine-inch piece of coat-hanger in his left hand, and with his right he began to bend it.

He should not have been able to bend it so intricately, over such a short span, but Selena watched with growing wonder as he did precisely that. The final shape was something unlike a helix, and something unlike a Möbius, and something unlike a button-hook. It was something else.

Then he reached down, back into nowhere, where he had been, and he did things *inside* the engine. When his hands emerged, the metal had been left inside. There was grease on his hands, and none on his jacket.

“Well?” Selena demanded. Gently.

Ernest nodded toward the car, and she knew he wanted her to start it up. She got in, turned the key, and listened to the instant surge of thrumming power that coursed through the Packard. It sounded strong, potent, impressive. The sound not even a new car makes.

She turned it off, and got out. She had two dollars in change in her purse. She offered it to him, but he shyly smiled, a childlike grin of embarrassment, and thanked her no ma'am thank you very much. Then he bobbed back down the street, and was gone.

Selena stood there with the silver in her hand; she wore an empty, startled expression of *what happened* .

The three fools were now prostrate, clutching one another for support even on the ground.

“All right, you three incompetents!” she snapped.

They stopped laughing instantly.

“Ernest fix y'up real good, Ma'am?” the youngest asked, snickering.

“He did a hell of a lot more than any of you idiots!”

The old one stared at her smoothly. He wasn't laughing now. “Guess you'll be movin' on now, that right?”

Selena was not moving on.

“Where can I stay overnight in this cemetery? There's a storm brewing and I'm not going on till I find someone in this idiot town who can give me a straight answer how to get back on the main road. If I take directions from any one of you, I'm liable to wind up in Nome, Alaska.”

The old one looked at her.

The other two looked at each other.

One of them bit his lip.

One of them coughed into his sleeve.

One of them licked his lips, hoping.

She went to the boarding house. Her room was on the first floor, in the rear. It was cold, and it smelled of mildew. She undressed in the dark and used the bath down the hall. Then she came back and started to get into bed. As she pulled back the thin blanket, she felt him staring at her. She turned toward the window, and for a moment she thought it might be the youngest of the three fools, and she made an

instinctive movement to cover herself with the blanket. But the feeling passed, and she knew it was him: that Ernest.

Dark in the night, wrapped in rain, silent staring, tensed and trembling, molded into shadow, as the storm broke in fragments of sound and light that formed a pattern of violence only hinted at by the earlier holocaust. Jagged scythes of lightning ripped away the darkness and blasted the earth. A tongue of flame from a thunder dragon crushed, seared, and vaporized a tree stump. In the darkness he did not move. Flame lived beside him as the stump returned to its component parts. Rain made a second face on him, filling his eyes and draining down through his hair into his waiting mouth. Wide-eyed and wondrous, he saw her there in the window, only faintly seen through the deepest shadow.

Selena lived to manipulate.

Nowhere is the desolate countryside of the amoralist soul. The twisted, blasted, blackened wreckage littering a landscape of lava pits and brine holes and quicklime pools. Selena, naked, pulse throbbing in her wrist, muscle quivering on the fleshy inner surface of her thigh, smelling sweetly of sudden woman sweat, found her great gambit.

Out there, she thought. This child who has never been with a woman, who has never sunk himself hard into the body of a woman like me. Whatever he is, magician, maniac, wild psi talent, elf gnome troll leprechaun, whatever he is, there's one thing he's not. Yet. Gambit. Point counterpoint. What would it be like to do it with someone like him? I thought at first he was an idiot, a retarded thing. But he isn't. He has a power. And I have a power. Let him feed me that power through the soft place.

In the darkness, Ernest watched her come to the window, her white flesh shining out at him, as she opened the window, raising it, cutting off the vision at the breasts. Then she stepped over the sill, into the thundering rain, and down in the running Carolina mud, and she came to him, standing beside the smoking burning stump that had been blasted by a God.

He could not move. He held animal still as she moved up to him and the rain washed her body with streaks of topaz, like the lines on a blueprint, and yellow ochre. Her body, a naked woman's body, a miracle in brightness. His belly heaved as he fought for air. Electricity surged and pulsed in the night.

Then she undressed him, carefully, slowly, with subterfuge and stealth, and laid his naked white smooth body down in the mud, and she became more a woman as he became a man for the first time.

She led him the way, guiding him, her own special way, the way only special certain women have that way; it was not the way he could have found with a local town girl; but then, like everyone in the town, they laughed at him.

She did not laugh at him.

Not at first.

* * * *

No God is sane. How could it be? To be a Man is so much less taxing, and most men are mad. Consider the God. How much more deranged the Gods must be, merely to exist. There can be no doubt: consider the Universe and the patterns without reason upon which it is run. God is mad. The God of Music is mad. The Timegod is punctual, but *he* is mad. And the Machine God is mad. He has made the bomb and the pill and the missile and the acid and the electric chair

and the laser and the embalming fluid and the thalidomide baby in his own image. For the lunatic Gods there are minuscule pleasures. The beloved of the Gods are the best, the most highly treasured, the most zealously guarded. God is brutal, God is mad, God is vengeful. But all Gods revere innocence. The lamb, the child, the song. To steal these, is to steal from the mad Gods...

* * * *

Daylight came like a drunk climbing down off a week's binge. Colorless, nervous, tremblingly, wan and wasted.

In front of the gas station, the old one sat silently, flaking out the grime from beneath his fingernails with the plastic edge of a gas credit card someone had driven off and left behind.

Water ran in gullies through the center of Petrie, North Carolina, and returned somewhere to the land to rise and wait to fall again another time.

When the old man saw Ernest walking through town, he sat forward on his chair, his mouth a little open, and he could not believe. The boy walked like you or me. Gone was the loose-jointedness at which everyone laughed.

Gone was the slack mouth at which everyone laughed.

Gone was the wild look in the eye at which everyone laughed.

Gone was the adolescent silliness at which everyone laughed.

Gone was the power.

* * * *

Later that day, when she did not answer the furious pounding on the door of the boarding house, they sent the youngest of the three who hung out at the gas station around by the window. He found it open. He stared inside, and started to run back inside to tell them, but he licked his lips, knowing he had lost his chance, and climbed up into the room, and touched her body for a few moments before unbolting the door.

Dried Carolina mud covered her body, as though she had been rolling sensuously in it when it had been soft and wet. There was blood on the inside of her thighs, but that wasn't what had killed her.

They could not tell what had killed her.

She did not look peaceful, as if she had died in her sleep; Selena had died reluctantly, fighting every squeeze of the way. She did not look peaceful.

There was not a mark on her.

But one of the crowd lounging in and out of the room said it; he didn't know he'd said it, but he did: he said, "Looks like somethin' stopped her pump."

The Packard ran so well, so beautifully, they could not bear to junk it. So they kept it, and for years thereafter it ran without the slightest difficulty. It ran and ran, and gave generous gas mileage.

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