

# Action Figures

By [Mark Bourne](#). Short story originally published in *Realms of Fantasy*, Oct. 2002. Distribution in any form without written permission from the author is forbidden.

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From the 55th floor of a high-rise construction project, the city is a 3-D maze of steel and glass and traffic.

Thirty seconds after the 6 o'clock whistle blares, Tony Ottavino has already secured the welding tools and signaled to Carello down on 50 to bring them down. Time to knock off for the day. It may be July and hot as hell down on the streets, but up here with the birds and the view, the breeze is strong and cool. Tony unwraps a Butterfinger bar, carefully folds the wrapper before placing it in his pocket, and sits on an I-beam next to Frank Stropough, who, 55 stories above the streets, stares out into empty space toward downtown.

Tony watches Frank's eyes move left, then right, then up, down, and back up again, tracking. Tony looks with him, then sees what Frank sees. "Oh," he says. "Huh." Frank just keeps staring. Frank is like that.

After about three minutes, Tony points toward where they're looking and says, "My kid did a report about him in school last week. My daughter, Jennifer, you met her. She says he's six-foot-four, has black hair, turquoise eyes like Barbie's, and always tells the truth. Ain't that the cutest thing?"

As if snapping out of a trance, Frank turns and says in that way he has, "You're full of shit. He's six-foot-six, can change his eye color just by thinking about it, and isn't bound by your narrow definition of morality."

"Ooooh. There you go again with your new college book crap. I'm just sayin' what my kid said she learned in school is all. I tell ya, from up here I feel like I could fly and bend steel bars between my teeth and save whole towns from, y'know, hurricanes and shit. Yeah. But y'know, he's not really anything special. When you get right down to it, where it really counts, he's just a guy like me and you."

"He's an alien. From another planet. He's plenty different from you."

"That ain't what I'm talking about," Tony says. Frank is a good guy, but sometimes he comes off real snotty. He goes to some community college at night and sometimes puts on airs. He's 41, but he works out and still has the kind of good looks that women like. Always did, to hear him tell it. Sure can handle an arc welder, boy.

Tony shakes his head and laughs.

"What?" says Frank.

"Don't that knock the shit out of them monsters-from-space movies. He looks like us. No tentacles or one eye or shit. My daughter, she watches that *E.T.* video every time she's at my place. Now look at that guy. Does he look like E.T.? No sir, not a bit. Looks like you and me. You see *Independence Day*? That Will Smith is pretty good. Don't like Jeff Goldblum, though."

"How come?"

"You know. He's too . . . I don't know. Just never worked for me, is all. Always plays the same character."

Frank nods. "I heard he fucked Geena Davis."

"Who, him?"

"No, Jeff Goldblum."

"Jeff Goldblum was *married* to Geena Davis, Professor."

"No shit?"

"No shit. So yeah, they probably fucked once or twice." Tony likes that he called Frank Professor. You know, to show the uppity son of a bitch. Tony bites off a dangling chunk of Butterfinger goodness.

"She's too skinny for me."

"Geena Davis."

"Yep. I like 'em big enough to hang onto."

Frank smirks. "She'll be sorry to hear it." He laughs and Tony laughs with him.

Tony finishes his candy bar and wipes his hands on his pants. "Now *he's* tall."

"Who?"

"Jeff Goldblum."

"Oh. Uh huh." Frank's eyes follow a purplish streak above the river docks. "Makes you wonder."

"What?"

"If there were any black people on his planet."

"Whose planet?"

"Who the fuck do you think? Or Asian types. Or even what religion he is. I mean, to us he's like some kind of god or something. So what's God like to him? Or is he an atheist? And if he's an atheist, is he really the kind of all-powerful being we want being taught to our children in school? The waters run deep once you stir them."

"The waters, Frank, are full of shit." Tony cocks his head toward the flying figure silhouetted against the sky. "Him? Heh. He's probably Jewish. Wouldn't that be a kick in the balls, huh?"

From the wall-sized picture window in a condo on the 40th floor of a high-rise apartment building, come Sunday night the view of Fourth of July fireworks over the East River will be splendid. Nicole says to herself: It'll be a damn shame to miss that. The view down Broadway has Nicole thinking about Lego towers and, what with all those cars ant-marching in 6 PM gridlock, a science video she saw in fourth grade. Turning thirty in three weeks and four days, she hasn't thought of those things in, like, twenty years. She doesn't know why she's thinking of them now. Especially now.

The condo used to belong to Nicole's father. When his cancer finally took him, he left what he called his "summer cottage" to her. More, she suspected, out of guilt than of genuine fatherly love. It was a token salve, an attempt to heal physical wounds that vanished long ago, and nonphysical ones that hadn't. She never visited her father in the hospital. By that time it was far too late for him to decide to become her hero.

Late afternoon sun hits the mirrored surfaces of high-rises throughout the midtown district. A quarter mile to the east, a new office building is going up. The construction crew started work last fall, using explosives to bring down the old warehouse that had been there forever. Nicole has already forgotten what the warehouse had looked like. Now the new building is 53, 54, 55 stories tall, higher than where she's standing looking out the window. Girders like bones are being manipulated into position. Some jut out into empty space far above the streets. She can barely make out the shapes of two men sitting on the girders. They are big men, but they look tiny from this distance. One of them is good-looking in a rugged sort of way, tanned and muscular from working outdoors. His hands are large and rough, with a scratchy callous on the right palm.

There hasn't been a cloud in the sky all day and it's hot. Nicole unbuttons the top of her powder blue Saks blouse. Sure, the air conditioning is on, but it's hot anyway. She stares out the window another moment, then loosens another button. Her right bra strap bites into her shoulder, so she pulls it down toward her elbow. Her bra is that nice peach one she bought at a Victoria's Secret in an instant of impulse. She had walked in front of the Victoria's window display on Broadway six times before going in. Coming out, she felt her heart beat so hard she had to stop and press her forehead against the wall outside the store. Now she's wearing that nice peach bra in her late (ha) father's condo, and it's hot, and she loosens another button.

Outside, a moving flash of color catches her attention. In the middle distance, among skyscrapers that had been the tallest in the world back in the '30s, or was it the 40s?, a man-sized bullet circles and darts and dives among the steel and glass and traffic, doing what he's done for so long that Nicole rarely notices him anymore.

From the tiny "balcony" of the tenth-floor apartment, the former Patricia ("not Patty") Dabrowski looks west across the river into the city's famous skyline. For months now she's been watching a high-rise going up, girders like toothpicks being swung into place, the pinpoint of arc welding like tiny suns. Patricia has lived here enough years she can name every one of those skyscrapers. From the inner boroughs you can tell the weather or the purity of the air by how visible the windows are on those clean and gleaming façades. A little ways beyond the construction site, a high-rise apartment building glows golden and silver in the 6 P.M. summer sun.

In her left hand hangs a cigarette, more ash than paper. With her right she raises a glass of Scotch — the good stuff, from the "private stock" her husband won in a bet and hides in his bottom dresser drawer. The bottle she's forbidden to open. She raises the glass, looks over its rim, finishes her third round. Ice a half-hour old rattles, and through the glass's bottom the city skyline goes all wavery and distorted and melty.

She puts the glass down next to the potted plants and tosses the cigarette over the railing. She watches it fall, watches it carried on a breeze half a block before landing on the sidewalk near the liquor store. Patricia turns, supports herself on the sliding door's frame, and steps back into the apartment. The air conditioning is still out so the place is hot and smells like socks.

Should she fix another drink, or wait a while before finishing off his precious bottle? It's Friday so he'll be home his regular time unless he stops to talk or have a beer before catching the subway. She looks at the clock above the couch. 6:05. There's time.

In their bedroom she puts on her favorite fancy dress, the one she keeps in the thin plastic wrap from the dry cleaners so it doesn't get all dusty in the closet. It's burgundy with black trim, just enough classy and just enough sexy. She used to feel so good in that dress. Now she looks in the dresser mirror and loathes the fat woman staring back at her. Sometime over the past twelve years, she can't figure out exactly when, this fat woman replaced the former Patricia Emily Dabrowski.

She remembers what it feels like to be in love. She read in a magazine that falling in love was exactly like being hit by a bus: It happens when you're not looking and afterwards you either go to heaven or end up in a body cast eating whipped shit through a straw. She thought that was funny at the time. She's realized that somewhere during the past twelve years, when she wasn't paying attention, she got moved out of heaven and put into that body cast.

She smoothes the dress against her body with her hands, feeling beneath the fabric every curve of flab along the way. She's a cow. It's amazing she can still fit into the dress at all. With age she's gone soft, all loose-fleshed and pale. It's normal, it happens to everyone, it happens to everyone. She hates her thighs most of all. Dimpled and pasty. Like bread dough. To think she wanted a baby through those thighs. It wasn't her fault she couldn't. What would she look like now if she'd done that?

It's easy to remember why she fell in love with him. He had strength, both the inner type as well as the outer type. He was quiet, which she always took as a sign of inner depths. He wasn't rich, but she never had a chance to know what that might be like anyway. She had been alone and lonely and years of therapy had not changed that.

Somewhere along the way she has failed him. He says so every time he tells her she needs to lose weight, every Wednesday night when he comes home after midnight smelling of that other woman's cunt. Not that he's been able to be a man in their bed anyway. He hasn't gotten it up for ten months, ever since that trip to the bank he still refuses to talk about.

Patricia rubs her red-rimmed eyes with a wrist that she notices is puffy and veined, then goes back to the living room. The dress makes a whoosh-whoosh sound with her footsteps. She thinks of her senior prom twenty-five years ago. Bobby Reyerson had gone with her. He told her she was beautiful and she let him feel her breasts. Wonder what happened to him. That new young clerk at the market has eyes for her, that's for sure. Lately she responds to his subtle flirting by flirting right back. What would the bastard think of that, huh?

She sits on the couch — whoosh! — and shoves aside a clutter of magazines. A razor blade and a

pile of cuttings spill onto the freshly vacuumed carpet. They're pictures and articles neatly sliced from the daily paper or from *People* and *Newsweek* and *MetroToday* and even a *National Enquirer* she picked up at the market just for the fun of it. It's a girlish hobby, she knows, but lots of people do it and it isn't that silly really, no more than collecting baseball cards or recipes. Still, she hides them from her husband, who more and more lately flies into a fitful rage or a sulking silence whenever she cuts and sorts them in front of him.

From the photos an oh so handsome face stares right at her. Beneath his obsidian hair, those intense clear eyes focus on her above his flawless white teeth and perfect jaw. He can melt steel girders with those eyes. That image makes her laugh and almost fall off the couch.

Then she sees the letter on the coffee table and all laughter leaves her. Its two neatly typed pages have been torn in half and Scotch-taped back together. She had started drinking while sticking the tape on, and the corner of one page is still wet from a little spill. Her hands had been shaking.

She doesn't feel like reading the letter for a third time. Instead she finds the TV remote and presses On. An evening news report about a school bond proposal. She picks up the VCR remote, presses Rewind until the machine stops, then hits Play. For the second time today the crude video plays on the 25-inch screen. The sound is poor, but that doesn't matter. Her face emotionless, Patricia manages to watch the tape for almost six minutes before throwing up.

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"Oh, he's such a hero!" Tony says. He gestures with his hands for dramatic effect. "He stops a 747 from crashing and it's all 'My hero!' He catches those crooks in Jersey by freezing that lake solid and it's 'He's so brave and courageous!' Or, like last week, he strolls as calm as you please into a burning building and rescues a couple dozen welfare mamas and their brats and everybody's all 'Ooooooh! He's so wonderful and daring and our capital-fuckin'-H Hero!'"

Frank nods. "Mmm," he says. A pigeon lands on a girder below their feet. Frank watches how it sticks its head under a wing when it's scratching an itch.

"Look," Tony says a little louder. "The way I see it is, if he can do all this superhuman shit and it doesn't cost him anything, where's the hero in that? He stops a runaway subway from going kablooeey, but he doesn't break a sweat, so how is that any more heroic than me saving an anthill from being stepped on?"

The pigeon flies off again. Frank studies the way it banks in the air. "I hear he's gay," he says.

"Who?"

"What do you mean 'who'? Him."

"Him? No way." From 55 stories above the pavement, Tony looks all around over the city before whispering, "Where'd you hear that?"

"People. It makes sense. He could have any girl he wants, right? He could have, you know, Pamela Anderson, or even the Penthouse Pet of the Year."

"Did you see that video with Pamela Anderson and Tommy Lee? Man."

"See there, that's my point. That guy can have any woman, any woman at all. But do you ever — ever — see him with a fine babe on his arm?"

"Or more than one. Man, I'd like that."

"Right. But no, you don't see that with him. Nobody does. Why do you think that is?"

Tony starts to speak. Stops. He rubs something off the tip of his nose and says, "Just because we don't see it don't mean it's not true."

Frank checks his watch. 6:20. The sun is setting into the top of that high-rise apartment building a quarter-mile to the west.

Tony thinks, rather triumphantly, that the conversation has concluded.

Finally Frank says, "Well, I've seen him up close. So I have my reasons for certain conclusions."

This gets Tony sitting up straight. "Oh, yeah. Heard about that. What, some sort of terrorist thing or whatever, right?" He is alarmed by Frank's reaction: tense and rigid, a vein bulging in the neck, and for a second he's afraid that Frank is angry with him.

Frank looks away from Tony. After a while he says, "Bank job. But they were terrorists, yeah. Had more heavy artillery than the Montana Militia. You should've seen the Heinsbaum MR-70 the leader was carrying. It was a beauty, all right."

"So, what happened? Did you get to talk to, you know—? Did he shoot those lasers from his eyes or what?"

"Well, first off you got to know that he wasn't there until late. I mean, those sons of bitches had their firepower out and could've wasted everyone in the room before he showed up. In fact, one more minute and I would've taken out the leader myself. While everyone else was on the floor all scared and sweatin'—"

"I'd be shittin' my pants."

"They had everybody on the floor, and they thought I was harmless like the rest of 'em. That was their first mistake. I learned a few handy tricks in the army—"

"Like what? What tricks?"

"How to kill a man before he knows you're even there. How to move fast, like a cat—"

"What, Special Forces? Commando training?"

"Something like that. Anyway, there I was, on the floor but all crouched and ready to spring into action. I mean, all those people were counting on me, you know? It was all up to me and I had this plan where I'd get the leader in a headlock, take his gun and put the barrel to his fuckin' head and tell his goons to back off and drop their weapons."

"Shit, Bruce Willis oughtta play you in the movie."

"Well, that's what I would've done if that son of a bitch hadn't flew in and fucked it up."

"That bastard."

"Boy, I was ready and had everything under control."

Tony knuckle-punches Frank in the shoulder. "Now that woulda been heroic."

"Damn right."

"You coulda got yourself killed. But you risked your life anyway and didn't need that guy comin' in and messing up your plan."

"Hell, he coulda caused more danger just by showing up. One of the shooters opened up on him with a machine gun."

"No shit?"

"What if one of them bullets hit somebody else, huh? The place was full of old ladies and little kids. One ricochet and *bam!* That's the end of one valued customer."

Tony exhales as if he's exhausted from the experience. "But no one got hurt, right?"

"Yeah," said Frank. "But that's not the point."

"And he caught the bad guys, right?"

"Of course he did. What else he gonna do?"

"Did you get a good look at him?"

"Sure. He shook my hand before he left and said it's people like me that make his job easier."

"Was he sweatin'? Did he have a scar where the bullets hit him?"

Frank pauses. "No."

"Then there's what I'm sayin'. He ain't no hero if he's not in any danger himself. However, you, my friend, were a hero for even thinkin' about taking those bastards out. You coulda done it, then you woulda been on the news and in the papers. But for that guy—"

"—it was nothing special."

"Exactly. That's what I'm sayin'."

Frank watches the sun disappear behind the apartment building. He studies its backlit façade, and Tony tries to figure out what Frank is looking for down around its 40th floor. Tony gives up when Frank

says, "I think he's a fag."

"How can you tell?"

"The way he looked at me when he shook my hand. All intense like."

"Yeah, that's happened to me. Gives me the creeps."

"But with this guy, what can you do?"

"Nothin'"

"Damn right. Just ignore it."

Tony nods. "Yep. Besides, what's with that outfit?"

"That too."

"Dead giveaway."

Nicole doesn't feel good about mailing that first videotape. But it was the right thing to do. There is pain, and then there is pain. Her conscience would have never stopped speaking if she hadn't made the copy and put it in yesterday morning's mail. She got his real address by calling his boss at the construction site and saying she was his long-lost sister in the city for a surprise visit. She's never been an "other woman" before.

The second tape she's making now, this one won't be mailed to anyone.

She first met him last autumn in the least romantic of places: the teller line at the bank during an armed robbery. She was there to make a transfer from her savings account to her checking account. The ATM was out of order, so she had to come inside and deal with people. He was two strangers ahead of her, waiting to deposit a pay check. He was good-looking in a rugged sort of way, tanned and obviously worked outdoors. His hands looked large and rough and that aroused her a little. Tiny fantasies, nothing more, just like everyone has. Even now she has to rationalize the events that led to her, at this moment, preparing the second videotape.

Like all bank lines, this one moved with annoying slowness. *Hurry up!*, she thought at the old ladies and wrinkly men standing in front of the tellers. She knew it wasn't their fault but it felt good to think that anyway. Two strangers ahead of her, Mr. Outdoors shifted his weight from his left foot to his right. Nice butt in those jeans.

Then somebody screamed.

The first robber's face was hidden behind a plastic Charlie Chaplin mask. He shouted that everyone should lay on the floor now. You mean lie, Nicole said in her head. A panic reaction. With everyone else she dropped to the floor, palms flat on the cool tiles. Her heart hurt in her chest. Her brand new powder blue Saks blouse was getting dirty.

The masked robber was armed with a what looked like an ultra-modern machine gun, one of those new military things as portable as a toy but very real and deadly. She'd seen one like it in a spy movie. Another man, she couldn't see him, shouted that everything would be all right as long as everyone cooperated. A third voice mumbled something incoherent to the second. How many were there? Nicole heard the metal-on-metal rattle of armaments. They demanded access to the safety deposit boxes. *Fast!* shouted Machine Gun Man.

Fingers brushed her right hand. Mr. Outdoors lay near her, crying and mumbling *don't shoot me don't shoot me please don't shoot me*. His hand twitched as he gulped down sobs, his fingers accidentally touching hers. His eyes were clenched shut, so he did not notice her. She could smell his sweat. During the next few minutes, when fear came close to taking over her consciousness, she concentrated on the lines of his face and focused with absolute intensity on the what she imagined his voice was like.

Wind mussed her hair. Wind? She looked away from Mr. Outdoors and turned her head slightly, just enough to look up and see him standing before Machine Gun Man. His tights and cape looked more impressive in real life than they did on TV or in magazines. The muscles beneath the tights bulged in beautiful smooth lines like a Renaissance statue. His black hair glistened under the fluorescent ceiling lights. He was superb. His gaze was coolly fixed on Machine Gun Man.

Pow! His left arm moved so fast the air snapped. At that same instant a gunshot exploded behind her. You couldn't tell which happened first: the gunshot or the blurred flash of his arm. Didn't matter — his left fist was extended at shoulder height, and he opened his fingers and dropped a flattened wad of lead to the cool tiles inches from Nicole's right hand.

A smeary streak of color blew like a benign tornado through the room for four seconds. On the fifth second, five plastic-masked men sat unconscious and propped doll-like against the wall of teller stations. Their weapons had been pretzel-twisted together and placed near the security guards who, Nicole found out during that evening's news, had been sleep-gassed before they could take action. The hero helped the bank manager and the elderly patrons to their feet, told everyone that the danger was past and everything was fine, then flew out the front doors and up out of sight. A wailing police siren grew nearer.

Minutes later, she asked Mr. Outdoors if he was all right. He turned away from her, hiding his face and wiping it with his hands. Then he turned to her and said yes. She said she was too, covering the anxiety and fear that still dug its teeth into her. His hand still shook. She surprised herself by reaching out and patting it and telling him that she sure was glad that was all over. He nodded. She said her name was Nicole. He told her his was Frank. His voice was deeper than she had imagined. When she noticed his wedding ring, her heart sank a little. Figures.

Now, today, ten months later, Nicole stands half-naked looking out the window through a video camera mounted on a tripod. She aims the camera on the two tiny men on the high-rise girder. She zooms the lens until the features of the bigger man are almost recognizable.

Patricia watches the video, the one she received in the mail, watches its entire 40 minutes for a third time, although now her finger is on the Fast Forward button a lot. She compares her body to the younger woman's on the tape and it doesn't make her feel one way or another. The tape is not particularly flattering to Frank, who's put on the pounds in spite of his time at the gym and on the job. Frank's pride in his body was part of what attracted her to him twelve years ago. Patricia studied psychology during the two years she went to college, so she understands these things. Psychology and counseling, because she'd wanted to help women who were like herself. Well, a lot of plans can get pissed away over twelve years.

The video had been his idea, she's sure of that. He had suggested similar "spice" to her more than once after he bought that damn camera. She always said no. It was sick for him to even think it. Well, he finally found a tootsie willing to be immortalized (as well as other things) on tape for him. According to the time stamp, they recorded these activities three weeks ago. A Wednesday night, of course. It's in a private bedroom, a fancy city high-rise (the curtains aren't completely closed, probably an extra kick). From the few moments of conversation before they begin, it's clear that they've been here before.

She watches impassively. It's as if both figures moving on the screen are strangers. Sometimes Frank brings home tapes from the adult video rental place down the block, and that's fine (she considers herself broad-minded) though two or more strangers going at it on the TV screen just doesn't do it for her. Now in this one, the lighting is bad and the single unmoving camera makes it all that much more tacky and amateurish.

And what do you know? The son of a bitch manages to get it up again. Though it's obvious what does that for him: power games and displays of macho dominance. Patricia almost feels sorry for that young thing with her husband. He always did like asserting his "alpha" qualities. For years after their marriage, Frank had occasionally hinted at new kinds of "play" during their own love-making. She gently refused, finding no pleasure in that sort of power shifting. Recently she talked him into taking one of those magazine personality quizzes. It had dubbed each of them a "warrior" and they both had a good chuckle over that. Privately, it confirmed what she has come to believe: that she has changed during the past twelve years. Her dependence on pills and hotlines and the wrong men has been over for — for a long time now. She enjoys realizing that.

With her he could, when he tried, be genuinely tender and giving and sharing. There's none of that on display here. Watching, Patricia feels nothing. Certainly not surprise.

She doesn't bother to rewind the tape when it's over.

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"My daughter, Jennifer," Tony says, "She got an A on her report. She cut pictures of him from magazines and made a . . . what's she call it? . . . a collage. You shoulda seen it. She just loves him."

Frank grunts, dismissing Tony with a sound. Tony sees that he's touched a nerve. "She says she's going to marry him. Is that cute or what?"

Frank says nothing, but his face goes hard and Tony changes the subject. "My little girl. Sure is growing up. Things have changed since her mom and me divorced. Yeah. Everything has. Things would be different now." But Frank isn't listening. Instead, he's looking out over the city. Tony waves a hand out toward the south, toward the crowded heart of the metropolis. "Makes you wonder what he does on his days off. You know, they say he lives a double life, as a real person with a disguise and a secret identity and shit. So maybe he does have girls and, you know."

Frank finally speaks. "Yeah, maybe he's me. Maybe I'm his 'secret identity' and all I have to do is push you off this beam and down you go, and I have the choice of flying down and saving your sorry ass or letting you grease the sidewalk."

"Hey, relax, man. I'm just sayin' is all." Tony thinks about what it would be like to have a secret life. To be one thing to some people and something completely different to other people. That would be sweet, you bet. If you did it for the right reasons. Tony recalls the years when his daughter was just a baby, and the reasons why her mom wanted to divorce him.

For what feels like a long time they watch the city from their superior vantage point. Below them, for miles in all directions, a great city gets ready for the evening and the Independence Day weekend. From up here city noises blend and roar like sounds inside a giant seashell.

Suddenly Tony points due south. "Look!" Frank follows his point and sees the flying man heading this way, flying a path as straight as an I-beam and higher than a diddly 55 stories. "Up in the sky," Tony sing-songs. "It's a bird! It's a goddamn plane!" He laughs.

"He could have it all," Frank says. "What kind of a man is it who could have everything — he could take what he wants, be President of the United States, hell he could be king of the whole fucking planet and no one could do a damn thing about it. What kind of a man lets that go to waste? He could have every *thing* and every *body* he ever *wanted*. And what does he do? Saves goddamn old ladies and makes asses out of the rest of us, makes us look weak and, and—" His voice trails off. He looks away from the sky, begins packing up his gear for his trip home.

Tony shrugs. "Like you say, he's a fuckin' alien, so who knows why? But, I dunno, maybe that's what it's all about, bein' a hero." He stops. Gauges his words with effort. "It's not what you can do, it's what you *don't* do, y'know, even when you can. Maybe that's what it really means. Y'know?"

Frank ignores him.

Tony smirks and says in a deep voice, "The waters run deep when you stir 'em."

Frank scowls. "The waters, asshole, are full of shit."

They both laugh as the flying figure passes directly over the apartment building a quarter-mile to the west.

Nicole has the camera aimed at herself. She is on the bed and naked. All the lights are on so the camera can see everything, including the fading bruises around her right eye and the blacker bruises on her arms and thighs.

She speaks to the camera, addressing Frank by name. She rambles from thought to thought without a plan for what she's going to say. She talks about what first attracted her to him: His good looks and maturity. His revealing vulnerability in the bank, which made her want to comfort him. She's a giving



person, everyone says so. His explosive animal energy during their sex that first evening, aggressive and forceful and so masculine as if he had something to prove. Three months after they began the affair, during the only rendezvous where they got really drunk together, he told her to never mention his "failure" in the bank. So she mentions it now. She wants it to hurt. Why not? It's not as if he's happily married, so this past Wednesday, when she brought up her need for a real commitment from him, he shouldn't have gotten so angry. He said cruel things to her, things meant only to hurt. Although she had long ago grown used to little tortures, she ended up in tears and agreed with him that it was all her fault. He called her a pity junkie. He accused her of manipulating him like she did other men. He was right. She always did that.

She tells him that she feels so sorry for his wife. What's her name? Patty, he had said. She tells him that Patty has the first tape they made three weeks ago. And a letter telling her everything. Nicole says she doesn't want to cause any more unnecessary pain, but sending the tape and the letter, that was necessary. Patty needs to know what kind of a man she's married to. Nicole hears her voice getting slurred and blurry.

Five years ago, living with a boyfriend in Michigan, on a day when something brought back the black, shattering depression for the first time in almost a year, she swallowed what was left in a bottle of sleeping pills. The boyfriend came home from work to find her semi-conscious on the floor. He rushed her to the nearest hospital, where they pumped her stomach and made her fill out a lot of forms. She refused to see a counselor. Days later, talking about the incident had led to a quarrel. He said she obviously hadn't meant to kill herself or else she would have taken a larger dose. This enraged her and her tantrum was so loud the neighbors called the police. They broke up that week. Ever since, she has had to prove that she can follow through with anything she puts her mind to.

This, now, is no exception. Twenty minutes ago she popped the plastic lid off another bottle of pills. A half-empty glass of water is on the nightstand, leaving a ring on her father's expensive wood furniture. She pours the other half of the bottle's contents into the glass and wraps her fingers tight around it.

The phone on the nightstand rings. Slowly she turns her head to look at it. It's probably a wrong number or a telemarketer or someone from work wondering why she didn't go in today. Maybe she should answer it just so the last voice she hears won't be her own. Or not. She has to follow through, to show her father and Frank and all the others that she doesn't need them anymore.

The answering machine is unplugged so the ringing goes on and on and on. She wishes it would just stop. Then, as if someone had read her thoughts, it does. She looks beyond the phone and out the window. The sky is darker now, but she can see a familiar flying shape high above the skyline. Flying a straight path from south to north, the perfect man is looking for victims more deserving of his attention. Just like at the bank, he's not looking for her at all. Within a minute he approaches this part of the city, a graceful missile. He passes directly over her building and is out of sight. So much for goddamn heroes. She raises her glass toward the ceiling. Thanks for everything. She laughs a little and is too tired to wipe her mouth though she'd really like to and the video camera catches it all and the goddamn phone rings again . . . .

Patricia Stropaugh has her luggage packed. On the TV is a note she has written to Frank, along with the taped-together letter that arrived this morning. She can imagine how hard it must have been to write that letter. The videotape that came with it is in her purse, which is in her hand. Her note mentions the name and number of her lawyer.

In a magazine, maybe it was Time, she had read about an experiment involving two groups of mice. The mice were under scientific observation, both groups in identical conditions and trained to perform an identical task. The task was that somewhere in their cage there was a lever they must press or nudge or move in some way. The first group of mice got an electrical shock whenever they moved the lever. Every time. The second group got the same thing, only every once in a while, whether at regular or irregular intervals, they got a piece of cheese or a treat of some sort.

The first group, the one that got electrocuted every time, they eventually stopped performing the task.

That group learned to stay away. The second group always went back. They just kept going back. Until they died.

Nothing in the article said whether or not a mouse from the first group ever tried to help a mouse from the second group. Probably didn't. They were, after all, only mice.

In the taped-up letter is a phone number that Patricia dialed just moments ago. She let the ringing go on and on and on before giving up. She should just get the hell out and forget about that girl — that slut, that bitch — in the letter, on the videotape. Instead, something pushes her to dial the number a second time. She walks to the balcony carrying the phone. Above the construction site and other high-rises midtown, a tiny moving speck is silhouetted against the early evening sky. This time the phone on the other end picks up . . . .