

Mam'zell Boy-Scout.

By Teresa Jones

Hermione at thirty-four had it all: cute clothes, a decent job, and a way with women. Sometimes she couldn't believe it herself. She, a skinny librarian, a redhead who still freckled every summer, had floor to ceiling windows, a score of seersuckered attorneys all of whom agreed she was "smart as a whip," and a roster of loves won and lost or tossed that stretched from Alabama to Texas and back again. Sometimes there was nothing for it but to lock her hands behind her head, prop her feet on her desk, and let loose a "Praise God!" or a "Yeee-ha!" Divinity or cowboy confection, mystery or magic, Hermione joyfully claimed in the slightest serendipitous turn the rowdy hand of fate. And each time she did, Janice, the director of the library since the days of carbon copies, a born-again Baptist but practicing skeptic, dependably and distractedly replied, "I don't know about you." But she did. They were fast friends—in the way of people who don't always understand each other, but occasionally find in each other relief from being themselves.

But this time was even better. This time Hermione had smiled into the face of the sun and the sun, brazing Birmingham's back, turning rusted steel mills and white-steepled churches to brassy siennas and umbers, smiled back. God had kicked up a torment, a reorganization, an influx of immigrants that spun Catalina Marquez out of the whirlwind of Miami bars and beaches to the banks of the Cahaba where the only folks who spoke Spanish also served tacos or spread mortar between bricks, where the exotic was defined as not black, not white, but—so it seemed to Hermione—brownly unfamiliar to Mountain Brook money and manners. Hermione had felt it, the breath of God's goodwill, the moment Willem Sagamantis, heir apparent to the firm and a Bob Jones graduate presumed to be a black tie and a bicycle away from the Latter-day Saints, fell into humility at the hands of greed and accounting errors or—contrary to his father's face-saving spin—greed and affectional errors at the hands of a strapping young intern. Likewise, she felt it this morning when mirrored elevator doors opened and Willem, all

bowtied graciousness and prickly excitement, stepped aside to introduce the dark-eyed, sun-burnished, hair tied like a morning after afterthought at the back of her neck, Catalina. Pinstripes and necktie could not have made it clearer; lipstick and pumps could not hide it. The handshake—not even the rain has such small hands—was heartbreakingly sure, a moment of conjunction ratified by instant assessments and sudden ground-breaking smiles. Hermione heard floors ticking by like swift centuries, felt the rising wheeze in her chest of hydraulic conviction: here at last, a woman of sadness and sacrifice worth sacrificing for. *Pietà*? No, no. *Dulcinea*? Oh, yes.

She looked away, just a flicker toward Willem. His eyebrows lifted, his smile turned whimsical. Hermione could see that he got it, that he would follow her lead. To Catalina she said, rolling the dice, bright Argus-eyed and grifter-sure, “My boss said I might like to meet you. She was right.” Catalina, red-dogging, tossed it back. “She must know you well.” Hermione laughed as if she’d been caught off guard by a full house. “Let me know if you ever want to see the sights,” she said. “I’m not a bad tour guide.” Willem, doing his part, stepping up to the plate, said, “She isn’t. I’ve heard that.” Hermione made a note to befriend him sometime, maybe—the firm picnic was coming—at his next at bat. His last performance had been a study in humiliation, last chosen, first out, grade school all over again. She saw him differently now, not so much fundamentally impaired as circumstantially unable to concentrate on the ball—and who could?—when his sunny-haired bat boy had been summarily sidelined. She smiled at Catalina, held the elevator door. Catalina hitched her bag’s leather strap higher on her shoulder. “Vulcan, right? Birmingham’s sight? God of steel mills?”

Hermione chuckled. *Steel mills*? Not so fast, my lovely. She imagined looping a thumb over her belt, thrusting her chin. She said, “God of fire.”

Catalina peeled a slow smile. Hermione and Willem, statuettes in the quiet, carpeted hallway, watched as she strode toward her office, listing right then left, not quite loping, but still not unlike a gunslinger in heels.

“When a love of your life walks into your life,” Hermione insisted, “you know it.” Janice, married nineteen years, flatly disagreed. Bobby, she said, had a festering boil at the base of his spine. She’d been watching it for days, waiting for it to “ripen,” as the

doctor said, applying medication every night. That's how you know the love of your life, she said. She held out a boiled egg. "It's *this* size, Hermione." She shook her head. "I can't eat this."

Hermione, growing annoyed and, as a consequence, less inclined to share, nonetheless opened her white bakery bag and placed two cookies, one oatmeal-raisin, the other raspberry-chocolate for Janice, on a napkin tea party-style at the corner of Janice's desk.

"But when you *met* him," Hermione began.

"I had no idea he'd have boils on his butt." She burped the lid on the remaining baby carrots and made sure the top of the Ranch dressing was good and tight. "There you go," she said. "Now what?"

For two weeks Janice had been dieting in anticipation of her daughter's upcoming high school graduation and the out-of-town relatives who refused to miss it. For two weeks, Hermione had been providing dessert. That's how she was, supportive of effort, prepared for weakness, intuitive when it counted. As would follow, few things exasperated her more than having to explain what should be obvious, especially when doing so involved reducing her lightheartedness to its most literal components. "It's not like I'm really saying she's the *one*, Janice. I'm just saying—"

"Oh, I know what you mean." Janice snapped her cookie in half with her teeth, licked a trace of raspberry from her lip. "She's hot, and you're randy." She smiled behind her hand and chewed, brought out one of her grandmother's favorite expressions, an all-purpose closer that she and Hermione usually found so absurdly devastating and decisive as to be hilarious. She hunched down over her desk like an old farm woman over a cowering child. "I am familiar with you," she said.

Hermione felt the full weight of Janice's inadequacy as a friend. It wasn't about *that*. By many standards, Catalina wasn't even pretty. Objectively speaking, too many teeth rushed out when she smiled. And her eyes, a little binocular behind the glasses, seemed slightly recessed, shadowed, as if she'd been reading too hard too many times all night long. On the other hand, she had an arm-wrestling kind of sexiness about her, a toe-to-toe toughness. Exchange the skirt for jeans, baggy and low-riding, and she could be a gangland kind of knockout, all straight talk and smirk, earthy and honest and

comfortable with herself in a way that, it seemed to Hermione, she herself and people like her, white people pinched and pressed, neurotically bony and thin-lipped couldn't ever be. She shook crumbs from her napkin into the trash. Janice spread *The Birmingham News* on her desk and began reading recipes. Hermione guessed it was true what they said about suffering. It always happens—she gave Janice an unhappy glance—when someone else is eating or opening a window or—she turned her head contemplatively to the side—just reading dully along.

“Listen to this,” Janice said. “Zesty Parmesan and Pecan Encrusted Halibut.”

“Uh-huh,” Hermione said, feeling the formality that follows great pain. “Excuse me. May I?” She lifted Janice's wrist by its silky cuff to extract the sale and movie sections. “I need to get going.”

“Allrighty, then.” Janice flexed her wrist and fingers like a pro, eyeballed the layout, and set in to snipping fine straight borders around recipes. “You know what I need? A lemon zester.”

Hermione laughed softly, falsely. “I'll keep that in mind.”

She made her lonely way to her lonely office with the floor to ceiling windows overlooking the city from which the sun had fled. There on her desk were pink telephone messages. Harriet's, as always, was on top. Harriet, 23, called all the time, ever since she installed Hermione's kitchen cabinets. “We will,” she liked to say, “be lovahs,” a line she'd heard in a Jim Carrey movie that cracked her up every time she said it and was yet another reason—cute though she was—that Hermione had made it clear that they would never be lovers. But she was funny, tiny but all swagger, New York Italian, and alarmingly ready to tell anybody who crowded her to climb the hell down out of her ass. The first time Hermione witnessed it, they'd been at the post office. When they got outside, a full half block away from any postal patrons, Hermione gave Harriet's muscular shoulder a jocular, athletic pat. “You know,” she said, hoping to speak man-to-man, as it were, but gently and with kind laughter, “a little discreet discretion—“

“Hey!” Harriet said, “I'm waiting my fuckin' turn and he wants to fuckin' crawl up my ass? He's in a fuckin' hurry?” She shook her head. “I'll kick his fuckin' ass.” No, Harriet and she were far too different. Self-expression had its place, but so did gentility, and Hermione wanted someone who understood that, understood her. In fact,

what she wanted most, more than anything, was to be understood. Loved, yes. Appreciated, of course. But mainly—and now she saw that her life had been defined by this absence—she wanted to be understood.

The awareness lifted a burden she hadn't known she was carrying and soon she was soaring with the good spirits that come to those who imagine they have suffered and survived great hardship without complaint. Thus it was that she was very nearly euphoric when, returning from a mid-afternoon run to Rich's, she came upon Catalina in the lobby holding a cup of Dunkin' Donut's coffee. She looked splendid. As all newcomers do, she was taking an interest in the firm's wall of first-rate, sometimes second or third-rate, local and regional art. She turned her head from side to side, leaned in, stepped back, tightened her lips, nodded at a farm scene: a wheelbarrow, some chickens, rain. Hermione smiled. A week from now, she bet Catalina wouldn't turn her head if human beings were nailed on the walls.

Hermione scooted up behind her and looked hard at the painting. She'd been told it was *primitive*, not—and here the distinction broke down for her—simply bad. She said, "I like it, too." When Catalina startled, Hermione heard like an echo the spectral quality of her own voice, felt the easy-to-misconstrue nearness of her chest to Catalina's shoulder. She backed away smiling with hands raised as one does when a child in the grocery cart ahead suddenly begins screaming. "Because it's true," she added.

Catalina laughed. "Is it?"

Hermione laughed, too. "Sure, it is. You know it is."

Catalina laughed again and put her hand on Hermione's arm just above the elbow where Hermione's heart had come to rest. "You surprised me," she said. And Hermione, looking down at her, heard apology, reprimand, and delight. If she had dared to move—but who would dislodge warm fingers from the sleeve of a tropical-weight wool jacket?

"Will you," she said. What? Marry me? No, the courts were still out on that one. Be mine? No, women, especially professional ones, often had ownership issues. "I mean to say, would you like to—"

"I bet I would," said Catalina, checking her watch, "in about three months when I get settled in. For now, it's all about work." She lifted her coffee cup. "This is lunch." She pointed toward Hermione's Rich's bag. "Shopping spree?"

Now, see, this was all wrong. Hermione was this close to envisioning them stowed away on an Olivia Cruise surrounded by rich women all jealous of their love and glowing good health. Instead, she gets the watch check, the I'm too busy to eat or sleep routine. She sighed as if she couldn't be more bored and burdened. "Spree? I wish," she said, "but, no, not really. Just shoes." Sometimes lies simply sound better. This was one of those times. "A gift," she added. "For my mother. You know, down to the wire. But, whew, what a price, huh? I'll be working all night."

Maybe it was Hermione's tone, maybe it was something else, but Catalina changed. Her full brilliant cheeks caved to the bones. Her black eyes burrowed backward. *Cruel* was the word that came to Hermione's mind. "That *is* a price" Catalina said, tossing her cup, slipping away. "But for your mother? It's worth it. I know in Cuba—" Koo' bä, Hermione couldn't help noting—"well," she lobbed a buoyant smile full of shiny knives. "This isn't Cuba, is it?"

Clearly not, but Hermione could feel herself missing a move, caught in a bind. She could play the culture-blind game, say we're all people, it's all the same, but there was that whole Elian Gonzales thing and something about refugees in rowboats and who knows what all, Communism. She tried to register her awareness of tough times around the world in her face. "No," she said, "No, it isn't." It was hard to know whether to sound courageous or sad about that, so she aimed down the middle.

Catalina repaid her by climbing on her high horse. "Some people do, you know. Work all night. Even for their mothers sometimes."

"Hey," Hermione said, feeling a little like Harriet and more than a little put upon. "Hey," she said again, but Catalina was doing her Affenpinscher imitation, all dark and scrappy, and too close to high-pitched. "Why did you say that? What was the purpose? Will you work all night? Will you, really?"

Okay, now Hermione just wanted to shake her by all three throats off her pant's leg. "Probably not," she said, "Not *all night*." Her own eyes got wide on that one, and she shuddered. Not a minute past 4:30, more like.

"And the shoes?"

"No shoes for Mom, I'm afraid." Hermione twisted her mouth to bite the inside of her lip. She watched as Catalina's back mercifully diminished in the distance of the

cavernous lobby. She could barely hear the clickty-clickity-click of tiny infuriated heels crossing cold marble. She threw her head back, closed her eyes. Thank God.

“What about the painting? Do you even like it? *Do* you?”

Hermione opened her eyes, surveyed the cathedral-like expanse of the open atrium, saw the sun reaching through faraway windows breaching her peace like the sharp sound of Catalina’s persistent voice calling out as if from a speck by the elevator.

“The wheelbarrow, the chickens?”

Hermione hung her head. All she’d wanted to do was ask the woman out. She took a deep breath and shouted back. “Can’t say I do. No. Not a bit!” She glanced toward the security guards who had stopped talking among themselves to watch the public dismantling of her character. She smiled and waved, hoisted her shopping bag. They smiled and waved. They were always interested in what she bought, especially Bertie, more receptionist than security guard, who had a granddaughter about her age, an anthropologist in Ohio. Bertie described her as, “a little funny sometimes, but smart. You know what I mean?” Since Hermione’s mother described her in much the same terms, Hermione said she did. She squinted across the lobby and put a hand behind her ear to catch Catalina’s parting *riposte*. Wouldn’t dare want to miss it. The woman was insane.

Sure enough, here it came, lumbering through the air on wings of piety. “Think about it!” She cupped her mouth with her hand to get that foghorn action going. “It trivializes something!”

Something? *Something*? Like what? *A way of life*, maybe? Hermione, fed up and loaded for bear, fired back. “I get it!”

Catalina waved her off with both hands. “Can’t hear you!”

Hermione saw Bertie chuckling, heard her saying, “Lord, Lord,” and knew what she was thinking. Bertie had told her before straight up: white folks is crazy. Not are, is. There’s a world of difference.

“Can’t *hear* me, she says. No kidding, right? What is that?” Hermione had made the trek in rush hour traffic from her apartment in Southside, an old neighborhood of tree-lined boulevards, storefront restaurants, and kitschy shops all the way to Irondale, a solid

suburb summed up by its name where Janice and Bobby bargained wisely for property and raised sturdy children. She'd brought Harriet along to break the monotony of the drive and to make her feel better about herself. Now she was on her soapbox, "literally," as Bobby pointed out with the kind of glee you could only forgive in imbeciles or people you really love. Still, it was true. She was straddling an enormous box of Tide Super-Size from Sam's Club. Harriet was perched beside her, leaning against the refrigerator. "I mean really, Janice. What is that? I'm a liar, I'm shallow? She's on a mission?"

Janice allowed as how she didn't know. Hermione suspected she wasn't trying. Bobby was in the floor tearing down the dishwasher—"right *now*?" Janice had asked when he flipped open his tool box; "it's broken right now," he said. So Janice stepped over and around his legs as she moved from counter to counter, refrigerator to table, trying to prepare and fry halibut and French fries and hushpuppies. The kids, in the den watching television, shouted at each other to turn it up or turn it down or change the channel. Occasionally a "No way!" paved the way for the sound of blows and hilarity. Hermione said, "I am not a liar. I'm one of the most honest people I know." Janice, said she knew, but some people were just "like that." Harriet, grinning like an elf on a toadstool, said, "I know you are. That's why I like you. And I trust you."

Hermione mouthed, "We will never be lovers," but for a second she felt fairies dancing in her hair, so she added out loud, "I'm serious."

Janice said, "It's a serious business."

Harriet brightened as though she'd heard, "I'm yours."

Bobby came up off all fours swinging a mangled fork. He was a big man, blond and burly, solid and easygoing, just the way a telephone lineman ought to be, accustomed to heights and danger, and unfazed. Bobby said, "I'll tell you what the problem is." He looked everybody in the eye except Janice who had her back to him. "Something's wrong with her. That's all I'm saying." He closed his lips tight such that the upper lip formed a hood over the lower to create an air-tight seal. He pulled a chair out from the table, sat down almost knee-to-knee with Hermione. "I'll tell you another thing."

"What's that?" Hermione leaned close to hear. His this-is-how-it-is approach to problem-solving always tickled her.

“It don’t mean you have to take no for an answer.”

“It don’t?” she said. She loved Bobby.

“No, miss smarty, it don’t. And I’ll tell you why.” He sat back in his chair, rested hands bigger than Hermione’s face on his thighs. “Because everybody’s got something wrong with them. Everybody. Except Janice.” He grinned like he’d pulled a fast one, and everybody laughed, Janice the hardest.

“Mercy!” Janice cried. “That’s the first I’ve heard of that!”

”No, it’s not, either,” he said. He gave Hermione a solid pat right on the kneecap and stood up. He tossed the fork in the sink, took another look inside the dishwasher, closed the door, and gave it a pat, too. Janice lowered the basket of battered fish into the grease, then stepped back to let it sputter and crackle, spit and sizzle. “I don’t know about him,” she said, but she was smiling hard enough to break.

Hermione waited as long as she could. Then, like John Travolta beating a path to the disco, in step to the rhythm and heartbreaking, heart-pumping whine of “Stayin’ Alive,” she made her way directly to Catalina’s office. Three weeks of curt nods and how do you do’s were adding up to wasted time. She might’ve been right, she might’ve been wrong, but every time she saw Catalina, every time Willem said, “She’s a trooper, that one,” and gave Hermione a sideways look as if to say, “What’s the problem here?” Hermione felt the tug of unfinished business. As she swung round the doorway into Catalina’s office, she was brought up short by the appearance of Sherry, Catalina’s Administrative Assistance, crouched at the bottom drawer of a bank of filing cabinets grinding her teeth at the idiocy, no doubt, of attorneys unable to alphabetize.

“Get lost?” Sherry said.

“Lost?” Hermione said with a wink. “Not anymore.” She patted the door frame, leaned in to scan the queen’s palace. Black and white pictures of suffering; hungry children, desolate fields. Hermione had a three by five foot poster of a pink 1957 Thunderbird convertible on her wall. Above her desk she had a French print—a curly, red haired figure standing trim in Army green shorts and shirt, a jaunty cap, and high heels: *Mam’zell Boy-Scout, an Opéretta en 3 actes*. Looking at it always made her feel

lighter, more noble, as if she, too, would look smart standing in uniform on a hillside with an orange neckerchief square-knotted at her throat. “Catalina around?”

Sherry tugged at the hem of her skirt as she always did, as though she were trying to cover her knees, as if she feared Hermione might start slavering or, worse it seemed to Hermione, fail to. Indifference, polite or otherwise, seemed to rub her the wrong way, bespeak an unforgivable arrogance. “Right behind you,” she said, but *Big guy* hung in the air like a challenge, and Hermione turned around to show Sherry just how big a guy she could be. Already blocking the doorway, it was easy enough to stand her ground, make of her arm a living toll gate. She was cool. She looked Catalina straight in the eye. She cocked her head to one side. “So,” she said. She felt sexy, she felt dangerous, she felt *hip*. “Koo’ bä. Tell me about it.”

Catalina did not laugh the throaty laugh of the sexually amused. She slid cheese crackers into her jacket pocket and slipped under the toll gate. “Chickens in the street, child conscription, the periodic execution of dissenters.”

“Whoa,” Hermione said, feeling suddenly *à cheval* and at risk, yet darkly exhilarated. Frown lines flamed, angry eyes spit. To be near her, whatever the price in pride, was—Hermione felt sure—to be warm to the core. Or words to that effect. What she said was, “Wrong foot, wrong time. I came to make amends.”

Catalina sat down behind her desk, folded her hands into a church with an index finger steeple upon which she rested her chin. “Let’s do it.”

Friday night they went to The Alabama, the grand old downtown theatre, to see *Bound*, a film noir take-off with lesbian leads. Lesbian protagonists assure a lesbian audience; Hermione had thought of that, had planned a safe environment, safe for subtle moves and meaningful glances. She felt very much taller than her 5’6”, and every muscle ached. She was in love. Even stale fumes rising from the seats almost in a powder put her in mind only of dandelions. She glanced at Catalina. Is there anything sweeter, really, than a woman’s forgiveness? A child’s breath? Whose child? What circumstances? It’s a hard case to make. Hermione, however, was not thinking of children, and she had turned her eyes from Catalina’s squat little nose and tender, downy cheek to the tribe of lesbians spreading like militia all over the theatre. How wonderful

to be among one's own, but how different they can look—swaggering, lumbering, happily cavorting—when seen through the eyes of a beloved who, for all Hermione knew, had never seen lesbians outside of black-habited nuns with rulers bearing down on her as a child. She imagined Catalina in a little plaid skirt and felt both weak and protective.

“Are you okay?” she said. “Need anything?”

Catalina twisted around in her seat and braced herself with a hand on Hermione's shoulder. With every flex of her fingers, sparks ignited in Hermione's brain. Her voice ran like an electric current. She loved old theaters, she said, these movie palaces with heavy red velvet curtains and gorgeous gold-leafed balconies, the old fashioned private opera boxes, the crouching gargoyles dispelling evil spirits, the opulence, the abundance. “It's Byzantine,” she said. “Isn't it?”

Hermione leaned her ear closer. “Big screen?” The crowd was roaring, and she'd just spotted Harriet at the front of the theatre casually and obviously cruising everybody.

Catalina shook her head, smiled. “No,” she said. Hermione could taste her breath warm and darkly sweet as, perhaps—who knew?—a Cuban cigar. “By-zan-tine,” she repeated.

Hermione nodded. Ah. “You like that, do you?” How was she supposed to keep her heart in her chest?

Catalina propped her elbow on the armrest, her chin in her hand. “I love it,” she said.

“Good,” Hermione said. “That's good. I'm glad.” Hermione sat up taller in her chair because she had made available to Catalina something Catalina loved. However, she couldn't help wondering whether Catalina would continue to love it when the movie heated up, as the reviews promised it would, and the catcalls and whistles started flying. Feminism, it seemed to Hermione, had done well in modifying the behavior and attitudes of men toward women, but it had fallen far short in curtailing the frank lasciviousness of high spirited women out for a night among their own. Times such as these made Hermione long for the days of romantic friendships and Boston marriages, those gracious days of downcast eyes and sweet discretion. She thought her heart would burst if someday, in a carriage, she should unbutton Catalina's glove.

"Look," she whispered to Catalina, pointing toward the ceiling as the lights went down and the canopy turned velvety midnight blue, "stars."

Catalina gasped just as she was supposed to, just as Hermione had imagined she would, as though she had never been so surprised, had never seen a sight more beautiful.

"How do you think they do that?" Catalina asked. "With hundreds of tiny electric light bulbs or cut-outs in the ceiling with one huge light behind it?"

"I always thought they were real," Hermione said, refusing to lose the moment to hardware and circuitry.

"Real stars?"

"Well—"

"Oh, no, that's okay. I get it." Her eyes were laughing. "You're funny."

Yes, I am, Hermione thought. I am *hi*-larious. She checked her watch, straightened her trouser seams, and made ready to watch the movie and try to ignore the wrenching tenderness of desire compromised by conscience or, as Janice would say, good sense. As she'd left the office at five o'clock on the dot, as she stepped into the revolving door, she'd heard Janice call out, "Play it safe, Moonbeam." Moonbeam. The last time she'd been called that she'd been in college. Hermione scowled at the screen.

It had happened at Pepino's, even then an old fashioned pizzeria. Dark wood, candles in jars, checkered tablecloths and half-window curtains, student crowded, beer noisy. She had been with Samantha. No, her name wasn't Samantha, but it was an "s" word. Susan. Susan Browne, an older woman, twenty-six or so, with waist length wavy brown hair, parted in the middle and often tied at the back of her neck with a rubber band. Susan did not wear make-up, but she did wear the fatigues someone had left in her apartment. They met through mutual friends in the theatre department, Samantha, actually. Samantha was sweet, but bewildered, not quite ready. But now that Hermione thought of it, she might have been a better choice than Susan in the long run—Susan who talked to the actors about motivation because she was finishing a master's in psychology while Hermione, a sophomore, managed props and struck sets.

Hermione had explained to Susan over pizza that she was majoring in psychology, too, or sociology or anthropology, she wasn't really sure yet. But she was *fascinated* by social ritual and primal human nature kinds of, you know, instinct. Susan

had said, "I am, too, moonbeam." Then she ordered a box for the pizza and took Hermione home and had sex with her.

Hermione worried about the epithet for days. Samantha tried to console her. "Moonbeam, Hermione, *moonbeam*, not *moonface*."

Hermione, prostrate on her dormitory bed, cried, "Think about it, Samantha. A moonbeam is flat and round, always. Sophia Lauren would never be described as a moonbeam."

Even Susan tried to reassure her. As she struggled to get Hermione's jeans from around Hermione's rigid hips, she told her not to worry about it, that sex, which is what they were about, had nothing to do with cheekbones. Hermione did not believe that anymore than she believed, as Susan maintained, that the kick in sex came, not from love, but the freedom from love. When Susan was loading her car for Chicago two or three semesters later, Hermione left her a ribbon-tied bundle of rain wet flowers between the screen and front door. Three days later, traces of them were stuck to the steps, trampled evidence, it seemed to Hermione, of love rejected with a slap. Sitting on the steps, prying stems and petals away from cracked mortar and broken bricks, Hermione appreciated herself and the scene she had created: forlorn young woman fingering flowers in drizzling rain. She had wished a photographer would happen by. It was poignant, she thought, and her gesture had made it so. Sitting in the theatre with Catalina, Hermione was moved again by the tenderness of her own heart when it was young, impressed again by her willingness always to make the right gesture.

The heroines on the screen, one dolled-up like a 1940's bimbo dominatrix, the other grunged up like a neighborhood thug-cum-plumber, were locked fast in close negotiations. The beauty offered a tattoo on her breast for the roustabout's digital examination. As the fingers went from tracing to gripping to squeezing to pumping the breast, as the soon-to-be lovers opened their mouths only hot breath apart, the audience, unable to stand it, unable to wait, exploded. "Go for it! Take her! Kiss her! Kiss her!" And Catalina was laughing, rocking in her chair with her hands over her mouth, laughing. "This is a classic," she cried, "a classic!"

Hermione laughed, too, and thought, this is not her first time; she too has been

disappointed in love and awaits the coming of a heart sound and true.

Catalina leaned so close that Hermione could feel lips against her ear and a breast against her upper arm. "So, you fancy yourself a plumber?"

"A what?"

"I wouldn't be surprised," Catalina said and, in a gesture that Hermione was sure could have as its motive nothing short of torment, flopped back in her chair taking her breast with her.

In the final scene, the lovers are revving the motor of a brand new, bright red truck, about to make their escape—with the money. As they kiss, the credits roll, and Tom Jones sings "She's A Lady." The audience cheered.

In the parking lot, Catalina bounced across the gravel parking lot singing "'Well, she's all you'd ever want, she's the kind you'd like to flaunt, and take to dinner'."

Smooth as glass, Hermione sidled up next her. "You hungry?"

"Why?" Catalina laughed. "You want to take me to dinner?"

Hermione opened the car door, stood gallantly to one side. "I could be persuaded."

Catalina slipped into the seat, pulled her trailing skirt hem in after her. "I don't know," she said. "I guess not." She twisted her mouth as if the right words were hidden behind a molar. "You know."

No, Hermione did not know. No one goes home directly after a movie, especially not that kind of movie. It was weird and rude and unforgivable. Clearly, dinner to this woman meant, she didn't even know what. Sex? A U-haul? She hadn't been banking on either one. A spare toothbrush was a courtesy, not a demand. "Fine," she said, but it sounded petulant, bullying. She played it again with a lilt. "That's fine. Maybe some other time."

"Maybe so," Catalina said brightly, so brightly that Hermione heard the chirp of freedom in her voice, the warble of *not in this lifetime*.

When Hermione got in and started the car, Catalina pushed in a cassette that Hermione had specially compiled for the occasion and now regretted. The tape hissed for a second, then blared out "Kiss you All Over." Catalina turned sideways in her seat so

that her knee pressed against the gear shift. Light from the street lamp hollowed her cheeks, drew shadows beneath her eyes, made her lips look fuller, almost swollen. Hermione fastened her seatbelt, popped the car into reverse and, as she twisted around to look over her shoulder out the rearview window, she caught Catalina's eye and thought that on anyone else that look would say kiss me, but on Catalina it said I want you to want to.

As the car started to roll, Hermione heard pounding on the hood and turned around to see Harriet, with a band of laughing chums, sprawled on the hood grinning, waving, and pointing like twelve year olds.

Catalina said, "I bet she'd go to dinner with you."

Hermione said, "I bet she would."

At the company picnic a week later, Hermione came as close to sulking as she ever did. She had hoped to have a date. She had hoped the date would be Catalina. Instead, she sat by herself with Janice and Bobby. Even Willem had a date this time, Josh, who turned out to be quite a little ball player. Willem, it turned out, made a better cheerleader. He'd been squealing all morning, and the game hadn't even started. She made mush of her potato salad while Janice downed one chicken wing after another and Bobby started on his second ear of corn. When Catalina flitted by laughing with a baseball glove on her head, Hermione delivered a sharp smile and a mock salute and returned to her potato salad.

"Uh-uh," Janice grunted as she gnawed the bones clean. "Get your feelings hurt, you act like the world's out to get you."

Bobby, holding his corn mouth high, looked over his shoulder. "She the one in the baseball glove?"

Hermione nodded.

"Girl's a tease," he said, grinding into his corn. "That's what she is."

Hermione leaned over the table. "She's trash, isn't she?"

He wiped his mouth and leaned over to meet her. "Pure T slut."

"A whore," Hermione said, trying to think what other vile names she could come up with without abandoning all principles. "I wouldn't have her."

"There's a parking lot full of cars," Janice said. "Go kick some tires."

"Tires, hell," Bobby said. "Get your glove, Hermie. We got butt to kick." Bobby and Hermione swaggered like the Jolly Green Giant and Tiny Tim out to the softball field where teams were already divvying up. The Giant got tagged to pitch. Tiny won the catcher's spot. Catalina was called for the opposing team, but only, Hermione noted, as a shortstop. When Catalina sashayed into the batter's box, she tried to twirl the bat like a baton. Once a cheerleader, always a cheerleader, Hermione thought. Then she recalled that apart from their deeply pungent honeysuckle smell after two hours of practice, she really had no complaints about cheerleaders. None. But that was high school. Hermione was less forgiving now. Crouched low and close behind the plate, she said, "You hit me with that bat, I'm taking you down."

Catalina said, "Honey, if I hit you with this bat, you'll be down."

That remark, Hermione thought, showed strength of character. She backed up. With a dribble off the end of her bat, Catalina made it to first base. From there, she waved to Hermione and danced on and off the base as though she might have the gumption to try to steal second, as though she were daring Hermione to look away. Hermione didn't look away, and Catalina was tagged out with the next pop fly. It was the top of the sixth before Catalina got on base again. Hermione, meanwhile, had connected well with every at bat and had made it home twice. This time, Catalina got to third. The next batter hit it deep left, Catalina started running, and Hermione covered the plate. She raised her glove, she could see the ball coming. The ball slammed her glove, her glove slammed her face, Catalina slammed her—what a mix of emotions—pinned to the ground by the woman she loved and, not only that, the woman was out.

Catalina apologized repeatedly throughout the evening. She was too competitive, she said, and how was Hermione's knee, the one bent double beneath her in the tumble? And her poor face! Ear to jaw was swollen, but only the jaw was bruised. It was nothing, Hermione said. Lying on the blanket, surrounded by Catalina, Janice, and Bobby, looking too weak and disabled to push a straw into her mouth, she made herself brave. It was nothing, she repeated, that a cold compress wouldn't help or a cool hand. All her life—since she'd read it somewhere—Hermione had wanted someone, someone

kind and good who loved her desperately, to put a cold compress on her feverish brow. Or, in this case, jaw. Catalina scouted around and found a dish towel, filled it with ice, and pressed the bundle to Hermione's throbbing masseter muscle, the thick muscle that holds the jaw in place.

Janice yawned and stretched, looked to the heavens. "The question is, will she ever walk again?"

Catalina, holding the lemonade straw to Hermione's lips, frowned. "Oooh," she said.

Hermione mended well and quickly. She began doodling house plans and coming up with names for the pets she and Catalina would pick out, train, love, and bury together. Sometimes she wept as her pen scratched a name off the list, and she imagined them clutching each other in the rain beside a tiny gravestone. Life was too short, they should marry at once. Catalina said maybe they should date at once.

"What do you think," Hermione asked, "about Glockenspiel as a name for a dog, a schnauzer?" She and Catalina had just finished dinner at Dish, a sidewalk café with entrées that resembled toys or decorations. Hermione wore new khaki shorts, Birkenstocks, and an orange T-shirt. Catalina did, too, except that her Tee was red. They'd been to the mall together, and Hermione saw that as a milestone. It had been three weeks since their collision on the ball field. There had been no sleepovers, not a trace of couch time, but she thought now, strolling past the shops as the sun went down behind them and the air cooled to balmy, that they—together—must look in their red and orange like a summer sunset, and that must mean something.

"Glockenspiel," Catalina said. "I like it, but there has to be a cat, too, named Timpani, maybe a Siamese." She had stopped in front of Affairs, a campy knickknack shop that always had plaster monkeys or ceramic farm animals in the window alongside hand-painted china plates, palm tree candlesticks, lettuce leaf salad bowls or bunny rabbit salt and pepper shakers. Deco glasses—goblets or wine—were not sold in sets, but individually, and came marked with an admonishment to hand-wash gently in warm water. This time, mixed in with all the rest, were yellow chicks peeking over the rims of teacups, mother hens with drooping double chins—*wattles*, Catalina pointed out, *barbas*

de ave—bristly-haired, scruffy black and white cows in a family of sizes, and a cookie jar that could pass for a cauldron, the lid of which was encircled by pink apparently squealing curly-tailed pigs.

“A farm!” Hermione said. “We could have a menagerie!” And that fast she saw herself in cut-off overalls surrounded by friendly livestock, spit-shining her own bright red home-grown tomato, Catalina calling to her from the back door, coming down the steps, apron flying, flushed and smiling from farm-wifely exertions, pushing loose hair away from her glistening face with the back of her shapely hand. Mercy, Hermione could hear the screen door slam. “We could have a pig named Piccolo and a goat named Oboe!”

“Or,” Catalina said, “a goat named Piccolo and a pig named Oboe. And a cow named Tuba. Tooooba!”

Hermione’s head was spinning. *Chicks and ducks and geese better hurry, when I take you out in my surrey.* If only they could have a surrey with isinglass windows!

“Look,” Catalina said, grabbing Hermione’s elbow, pointing to the farthest corner of the window display where a peacock constructed of gardening utensils and feather dusters stood, its full plumage expanded like a giant shimmering turquoise fan. “Viola.”

Hermione caught her breath. “Yes,” she said. Melancholy, mournful, yet stunning, not unlike Catalina. “And a whole brood of chickens called—collectively—Maracas.”

Catalina laughed, turned away from the window dragging Hermione along by the hand. “I don’t know about chickens. My grandmother had chickens. Every morning of the world when I was a kid, she was out killing chickens. I know this was Cuba, but I expect your grandmother did the same thing.”

Hermione was unaware of having ever seen a live chicken at all, much less in her grandmother’s backyard. “My grandfather was a barber. They lived in town.”

“We did, too, I guess, but we still had chickens, lots of chickens, and dogs and cats and whatever else wandered in.”

They walked away from the lighted shops, bars, and restaurants, the Saturday night couples with ice cream cones, the sweaty-haired teenagers with skateboards, the blaring jazz from Blind Willies, and into neighborhood streets embowered by massive

old oaks. There, they moved carefully—a quick hand on the shoulder or arm, a “Watch out!” to warn of knotted roots or broken sidewalk that shifted underfoot and startled in the dark—and Catalina explained. Every Saturday—Saturday was market day—her grandmother, *mi abuela*, she said, would go through she didn’t know how many chickens, hundreds it seemed like. With one hand, she’d wring their necks, one hand! Then, sitting on the back steps, she’d pluck them clean in a hurry—feathers flew everywhere—Catalina chased them like bubbles, gathered them into hemp sacks. Then in the kitchen, the naked birds slung on the drainboard, her grandmother would “Whack!” with one slice of a big blade—no, Hermione, *not* a machete, a *cleaver*—straight through the neck, the bones; she was fast, all business. One morning a cat got inside, a little black cat, too frisky for its own good. It ran in circles between Grandma’s feet. Everywhere she stepped, there was *el gato*, clawing at her shoe strings, trying to climb her dress. She brushed him aside, but back he came, crying and clawing, leaping on the chairs, on the table, on the drainboard, always nosing around, and Grandma pushed him away, pushed him away, but back he came. Still, she continued her work, stringing the chickens, swiping away the cat, chopping and chopping, but *el gatito* kept mewling, scratching, circling back, staring from the floor to the drainboard, the chickens.

Hermione’s eyes were so wide her head hurt. She stopped walking, took hold of a guy wire that stretched from earth to power pole as if illusion and wishful thinking, more than physics and luck, could keep anything standing.

“Then,” Catalina said, “the cat jumped again, slid against the chickens, and quick as a flash, he was flat on the drainboard and ‘Whack!’—“

“What!” Hermione’s head pounded. “No!” The shout was just noise, sudden and involuntary, but behind it refusal ran wild. She pulled her hands to her chest like a pledge or a plea or a slow, steady bellows, and pressed hard.

Catalina chuckled, looked up from the sidewalk, eyes shining. “We don’t play, Hermione.”

“I know, but my God!” What kind of woman would do that? What kind of child could survive it? Hermione tried to steady herself with the guy wire, but at this point it didn’t help; the wire might snap, lash around her throat, and kill her. Anything could

happen. The shrubs perfect and still against these perfect houses might grow legs, tear free from the earth, and march en masse to smother all their human oppressors.

“It was her livelihood, Hermione. Our livelihood.”

Hermione heard the voice, but it blended with the sound of tires spinning over pavement. She smelled grass and wild onion. She felt her arms and knees bare and prickling into goose bums. She saw Catalina waiting, then Catalina with dirty hands and knees, running, spinning round and round on hard earth, waving her arms, chasing flying feathers. And, as from a distance, the echo of Catalina’s laughter rolled toward her like the bright bell tones of crystal wind chimes, and then closer like shattered glass tumbling down a metal chute.