

Moon Mars Wyoming

There had been moments during the interview process when Felecia was convinced she had no chance of landing the job. There were moments following—that she wished her previous assumption had been correct.

Slides of her students' work flashed across the screen as she explained, successfully she felt, the design principles addressed by her assignments. But by the time her own pieces glowed on the projection screen, the three men at the conference table had begun fidgeting or doodling with obvious impatience. These were the perils of an all male audience whose behavior was not unlike Gen Ed students nearing the end of one of her Art Appreciation lectures.

With the exception of the department chair and the two search committee members, no other representatives from the faculty could attend her presentation. Carolyn, the photographer, was at a conference in Minneapolis, and Marjané, (printmaking) who along with her three children and husband in the English department, comprised the entire black community of Basalt County, had soccer duty (Marjané, claimed). To make matters worse, someone was washing dishes on the opposite side of the too-thin sheetrock. She was forced to compete, in her small voice (which her ex-fiancé said made her sound like a twelve-year-old) with these distracting noises.

Now she runs water. Now places dish in rack. Now scrubs pan. Now runs more water.

She wanted to scream 'what the hell is going on here?' but none of these men seemed in the least perturbed by these sounds. She braced herself and continued to describe her technique of varnishing printed fabrics until slick so that subsequent layers of dripping, translucent images formed a slumpy backdrop for her disemboweled soldiers and tank silhouettes—to the tune of kitchen work.

Byron Champski, ceramics, held his head in his hands and examined the floor tiles while thick-necked Pete 'Bull' Carter, the loutish, smelly sculptor, (she had ridden in the elevator with him) actually put his head down on the table, occasionally looking up to heave an exaggerated sigh.

Dr. Fredrick Spencer, who, being the only academic in a department of studio artists was adamant about *doctor*, kept checking his watch by the light of the projector beam. She knew from her Internet research of the faculty, that Spencer had been born and raised in Lexington Kentucky. Nevertheless, the owlsh art historian and chair of the small department spoke with a psuedo-British accent, talking about her *shedule* and advising her over the phone to take the *first turning* into the parking lot.

“I suppose you think you’re going to have time to make more of this . . . stuff,” Bull Carter said, allowing the shadow of his hand to flicker across the screen, “after your twelve-hour day of classes and committee meetings?”

According to the departmental website, Pete Carter had been at the college for thirty years and had produced exactly fifteen works of art, one for each biennial faculty show. She had seen *everyone calls me Bull’s* work, posted along with his vitae—brutish figures wrestled out of limestone, perfect compliments to his own crude persona.

“I believe it’s important to practice what we preach,” she said, trying to project over the machine’s cooling fan and the dishwashing. “Our students need to see that we’re artists first, even if our jobs challenge us to find time to work.”

She gave him a look whose meaning must have been apparent as he bent to the doodles he had started during her presentation. Suddenly, after a glance at his watch, he slammed his hand on the table.

“For god’s sake, let’s hire her and get out of here.”

“I’ve been here since seven AM and I haven’t eaten. Marsha’s already called twice. It’s tuna casarole night.”

“Well,” Spencer said, giving Bull a look. “As you know perfectly well, it doesn’t work that way. Also, I’m not sure we want to leave an impression with Miss Walters that could cause her to reject any offer we might make.”

But by the time Spencer’s admonishment had faded into the tense atmosphere around the table, the hungry sculptor had pushed his chair away from the table with an extravagant flourish and—in the end—it had, in fact, worked that way.

The college was tucked into a notch gouged out of a creosote bush-dotted hillside—an old strip-mine relieved of its coal. It was completely separate from any of the nearby communities it was meant to serve. The mining operation had left a conveniently cozy scar, just big enough to embrace the school's collection of Quonset huts and pre-fab buildings and to shield its inhabitants from the constant winds. Over the years newer buildings had been added as needs arose with little regard to aesthetic compatibility with earlier structures, not that they had any aesthetics to begin with. Landscaping was appropriately unimaginative: a smattering of pine trees—some dead from chronic drought—and low junipers of the type that in her childhood back East, she and her friends had called bagworm bushes, although upon investigation, she had found no bagworms here.

The students she had gotten to know over the first few weeks, although quieter, and less diverse than those back in Carolina, seemed equally skilled and at least as motivated. Perhaps in time, some rural nugget would sift out of the gravel to gleam in her pan. They were the sons and daughters of ranchers and gas field types who upon finishing up their course work, (according to Bull) usually returned to the ranch or the gas fields following a brief tour through other states and other jobs they may have qualified for through their attendance at *Coal Scar U* (as her new friend Carolyn referred to the school that provided their employment.)

The earlier trip out seemed like a dream. Had it really been two months since her interview? Even with the flight across three time zones—Raleigh to Atlanta, Atlanta to Chicago, Chicago to Salt Lake, Salt Lake to Buffalo followed by a three-hour drive in a rented Hyundai Cricket or Hyundai Rodent—some kind of pest—it had taken only two days. In her own Subaru it had taken a week. She had carried with her, all the belongings worth salvaging from her failed experiment in co-habitation—if you didn't count the little trailer filled with art supplies, which taxed the toy transmission beyond its intended maximum, necessitating a two-day stay-over in Knob Noster, MO where the repair bill had wiped out eighty percent of her meager savings.

She had hoped to disappear into the snapshot carried in her head from childhood—Travels with Mom and Dad. Then again, maybe she had slept through this part. This wasn't the landscape of mountains and rivers, elk herds and buffalo that she had pictured when she answered the ad in the *Chronicle*. The Tetons were still a hard day's drive from this hardscrabble hellhole.

She had imagined a little cabin in the trees but (a) there were no trees and (b) the closest thing to a cabin for rent was a five-thousand square foot log vacation chalet fifty miles from town and twenty-five hundred over her monthly lodging budget. She'd done her best to turn the living room of her mobile home into a small studio although the limited space meant she had to downsize her work, which seemed unfair in this land of boundless vistas. She already had the title for her new three-foot by five-foot canvas. It had come to her the moment she crossed the state line and she had repeated its mantra, *Moon, Mars, Wyoming* until she pulled up at the building housing art and music. The similarity of the shapes and colors to those of pictures transmitted by the Mars rovers were striking. The sky in both views was pink, as was the ground. You could see the change coming from the platform of Colorado's tawny plains, the shift in states marked only by the uplift of striped, eroded hills, no 'welcome to' sign to indicate the change of venue. It reminded her of her own native West Virginia in a way. Someone had drawn a line around both places to separate greener and richer lands from worlds that seemed to say "dig here."

Weekends were harder than the workweek in this place. Forty-eight hours of fill-time. Looking back across the no-man's-land of sparse gravel and mud, she could see the rear of one of her new town's two bar/restaurants. Occasionally, a tumbleweed sauntered across the dismal football-field-sized parking lot which constituted her front yard, to join ranks with hundreds more like itself, transforming a wire mesh fence on the opposite side into an unkempt hedge. Although it was only September, an unsympathetic wind teased tiny whitecaps from the shallow lagoon at the lot's center.

She blundered into the same puddle she had promised herself to watch for the last time she blundered into it, before mounting the two pre-cast concrete steps to her aluminum front door. She had just come from the restaurant with her Styrofoam coffee cup, inappropriately festooned with happy little geometric designs in primary colors. On

her way out she was obliged to shoulder her way past a line of dirty gas field workers, busily emptying their wallets into video games or rotating trays of currency and fake Rolexes. On the restaurant's back steps, she had to excuse herself to the short order cook and waitress who sheltered there against the wind—sucking down Marlboroughs as fast as their ten minute break would allow. Apparently, the indoor smoking bans of the civilized world had found their way to this backwater.

After her dinner of stir-fry veggies she put the phone back on its cradle and it rang immediately. What the hell, she thought.

“Ye-es?” She dragged the word out, disapprovingly.

It was Byron Champski, whom Carolyn called *Lord Byron* behind his back.

Champski had some kind of proposal for her and it was something that couldn't wait until Monday, he claimed.

“I know where you live,” he said. “I had Margaret look it up for me.”

Margaret was the sad creature who spent her days at the front desk of the departmental office and nights feeding and caring for most of the stray cat population of Basalt County.

“I could drop by on Sunday if you have any time.”

After she hung up, she unplugged the phone again and started on the dishes. She studied her reflection in the window above the sink. What if the kitchen help at the restaurant *could* see her?

“*Don't worry about what other people think,*” her mother had often advised her.

Felicia usually tried to follow this bit of wisdom; nevertheless she *did* worry. After all, she must surely look a bit odd, but she only wore the thing as a kind of self-effacing joke.

The woman and her daughter had bought the wedding dress from her yard sale without hesitation.

“Sorry, I'm keeping the veil,” Felicia said.

No problem.

At twenty-five bucks, the Chistian D'Or was an undeniable bargain, requiring neither veil nor proper fit. They could fork over another hundred fifty for adjustments up in Raleigh and still come out ahead.

Scrubbing the wok in which she had seared her evening meal, she smiled a mock newlywed's smile at her reflection despite the sadness it threw back at her. She remembered how, during the interview, Champski could barely keep from staring down her blouse when she bent to adjust the projector. For a moment she thought her form-fitting business suit may have been a mistake but she was only twenty-eight. How many more years did she have to look the way she looked? She felt a certain amount of guilt at entertaining the thoughts she suddenly found herself entertaining. Champski was married, of course, and older than she but not bad looking. And even though Carolyn had filled her in on Champski's reputation as a womanizer, she had needs of her own.

Sometimes she wished she could be more like her friend Nicole back in Carolina. Nicole was happily involved in her work and seemed to have no other desires. She was practically asexual, perfectly content to garden or sit for hours at her computer, scanning and burning CDs of her photomontages, requiring no human touch or contact other than the occasional dinner out with friends. Obviously, Nicole had no room for children or serious relationships in her life. After Tyler, Felecia was not certain she did either although she would never know for sure unless she had one or produced a child of her own. But once you went down the one-way street of parenthood, you couldn't turn back if you found it led to an unwanted destination.

"You've already seen that you can't trust men," Nicole said to her before she headed west. "Maybe you should try women."

Nicole had made her throwaway comment as though it made perfect sense as she plunged her spade into the rich earth of her flowerbed. Men were unreliable. Just switch to women if it's so important to you to take someone into your bed. But Felecia didn't really think things worked that way. She tried conjuring up a scene with Rebecca Allen, her most attractive friend from grad school but it didn't work. You couldn't just turn lesbian out of the convenience of it could you?

She adjusted her veil, smiled a new bride's smile at herself, and drained the last of the Champaign Carolyn had brought over to celebrate her arrival. The reflection in the window returned its ironic smile as she rinsed her glass in the sink.

She fought to stay awake until ten thirty, grading papers and finessing a few sketches in her journal. They were just quick studies of her unfamiliar landscape, but she

thought they might be useful as kindling for a new series. She intended to explore the visual possibilities of her surroundings while avoiding the clichés of mountains or what Easterners expected the local wildlife to be— moose, elk, buffalo—which you never actually encountered unless you crawled along behind a train of Winnebagos up in Yellowstone. Nor did she wish to contribute more Georgia O’Keefe clones like the ones you saw everywhere in the local galleries, painted on Hobby Lobby canvas boards by housewives or retirees with too much time on their hands, people who didn’t have a clue about organizing pictorial space. (Carolyn said their artistic licenses should be revoked.)

Even though classes had started back in August, she had still not made the complete biological adjustment to the two-hour time difference. Altitude was no longer as much of a problem during her daily run, but *time* still threw her. When the news went off at six, it always seemed like eight. On nights when one of her two snowy channels showed a movie instead of one of the ubiquitous reality cop shows, she would allow herself the luxury of watching it, intending to work afterward. But when the movie ended at eight it seemed like ten and she usually snapped back into consciousness in front of the TV with a spilled wineglass in her hand. Time was her most abundant commodity. She fought her way through its plentitude each day until she could finally make some kind of truce with it, slipping into bed to free herself from it until morning when it always seemed to start right up again.

If she didn’t absolutely force herself on weekend mornings, she could easily stay in bed until noon. No one in her family had ever been depressed, but wasn’t that one of the signs? Still, it wouldn’t be like one of those chemical imbalance depressions. Hers would be *justifiable*.

She leafed through her portfolio of nude self-portraits. Because the faces were hidden you couldn’t tell who it was, and the figures were rather modestly portrayed: side views mostly, folded in on themselves. She had a fascination with the human form and her own form was readily available. She had not revealed the identity of the model to the search committee when she showed slides of these drawings but Champski had asked her to leave slides of these drawings after her interview. He been around long enough to know that they were probably self-portraits and she pictured him jerking off in front of his projector. The drawings certainly displayed enough skill to teach ranch kids how to

render the human form. She would do in a pinch and the pinch had come when the previous painting instructor, also a young woman, had resigned a month before the beginning of classes.

When Sunday rolled around she found that she was looking forward to eleven AM with an embarrassing anticipation of something, although she didn't know exactly what. Champski, although originally from Philadelphia, had taken on that lean, rugged look of the West that she found attractive even in the grubby gas field workers lined up at the Rolex trays who tipped their hats or nodded in that peculiar cowboy way that is somehow endearing. Despite their politeness, at day's end they were filthier even than when they had set out at daybreak for the nearby pink highlands, which rendered null whatever appeal they might have had.

Champski was probably in his early fifties. He wore little round wire rims that gave him the appearance of an aging John Lennon if the great singer had been allowed to age. His long hair was graying at the temple and he usually wore it tied back in a ponytail that Bull Carter said made him look like 'a fruitcake' but she found it rather appealing. She had suggested to Bull at the time he made his remark that such an accoutrement might improve *his* looks, causing him to storm off.

She went for her usual morning run which took her quickly beyond the town's limits, into the pink hills. Mornings were always crystal clear and bracing. Some animal, she couldn't tell what without her contacts, which she didn't like to wear while running because the wind dried her eyes out, jumped high above her from one band of eroded rock to another, disappearing into the notch between the hills.

She knew she wasn't crazy yet she had this one crazy habit that she had picked up when she first started running many years earlier. When she reached the halfway point, she abandoned the tune of the day—synchronized in her head with her steps—and began counting strides all the way back to her door. But some days—and this was one of them—she promised herself she wouldn't count.

When she made the turn she began counting. It usually took one thousand seven hundred and fifty steps back to the trailer, give or take a few steps. This morning she

made it back in one thousand six hundred and eighty steps, which could be a problem, as that number would now stand as a new benchmark.

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Her embarrassment was complete when she realized she had tried on and discarded three different outfits before settling on jeans and a leather vest over her interview blouse, and that she had left the top button, casually unbuttoned. She surveyed herself in the full-length Wal-Mart mirror screwed to her closet door and had all but decided to change into something else when she heard the gravel popping under Champski's tires. She resisted the urge to open the door before he was even out of his car, instead hurrying to seat herself in front of her easel, pretending to be hard at work. But then she caught a whiff of the Chanel sample she had removed from a magazine to rub over her wrists. Why was she acting like a schoolgirl prepping for her first date? She wished there had been time to rinse but his footsteps could already be heard ascending the concrete steps, and now the aluminum of her front door lightly resounded with his knock.

"Hey," he said when she opened the door.

"Hey."

Champski stepped in, looking around at the clutter that could not be concealed in such a small space.

"Coffee?"

"Sure, that'd be great. 'Course I've already had six cups," he said.

"Coffee's good for you," she said. "They say it may help prevent Alzheimer's."

"I hadn't heard that," he said.

Why the hell had she said that? She could feel heat rising through her too exposed chest to her face, so she kept her back turned to him for as long as possible while slowly removing two cups from the cabinet and asking, without turning, what he took in his coffee, hoping he would say both milk and sugar which might take long enough to allow her blush to subside but—just as she knew he would—he replied black and there was no way to backtrack without sounding like she was trying to worm her way out of the implication of her Alzheimer remark so she merely willed herself to suppress the blushing—which only succeeded in amplifying the heat of her cheeks.

She brought the cup to him, all the while more aware of the Chanel as its chemistry cooked under her body's own unwelcome fire. She directed him with a gesture toward her only easy chair, a beat up old thing she had picked up at a yard sale in Baggs.

"Sorry," she said, "It's just a beat up old thing I picked up at a yard sale in Baggs. I cleaned it up though."

Champski lowered himself cautiously as if he thought contact with the yard sale item might contaminate him.

She settled into the director's chair at her easel.

"Looks like a good start," he said, in reference to the first hints of *Moon, Mars, Wyoming*.

"Thanks. It's got a long way to go."

She sipped her coffee, which she immediately regretted having done as its heat added to her own.

They were silent for an awkward moment, during which she thought he might be thinking how he was going to broach the subject of fucking. He stood up and walked to the table with her portfolio of drawings, opening it and leafing through the nudes. He pulled one out and looked it over, glancing at her, probably, she thought, making a comparison to the body he saw before him but if so he didn't say.

"These are the ones you showed slides of. Nice," he said.

"Thanks."

"Oh, I still have the set you left. I'll get them back to you."

She nodded.

He slipped the drawing back into its portfolio and returned to his chair. He leaned toward her.

"What I wanted to talk to you about is a request."

She looked at him with something like a smile on her face, although she hoped it wasn't exactly a smile but more an expression of inquisitiveness as though she were merely waiting for what would come next, to give it her full consideration, which in fact, was what she *was* doing.

"We have a request from the local jail," he said.

These words were not even close to any words she had been expecting.

“The jail?”

“Ye-es.”

He sipped his coffee, looking around for anything to rest his eyes upon other than her face.

“They have a ... an inmate ... who has expressed an interest in art. And ... and they’d like someone from the department to ... to look at his work and advise him. Advise him on what he might do with it, like as in exhibiting or improving it. Something like that.”

Champski was probably getting something from Spencer for doing his dirty work for him. He already had release time that Carolyn, Bull and Marjané resented. If he could pull this off it would probably buy another class off his load.

“Why me?”

“Well, Dora, the woman you replaced was going to do it ... before she ... before she quit I mean. I mean, she had agreed to do it. She even met with him once. She said he had some ability ... but ... well, you know, she quit and moved to California. It was pretty abrupt and the guy was really like ... disappointed. And well, they thought maybe we could get somebody else and I thought of you because you’re our painter and Carolyn’s photography and Marjané’s got all those kids and Carter, well he’s Carter ... et cetera et cetera.”

“What did he ... I mean, what’s he in for?”

“Carter? He ... oh, you mean the *guy*. Well ... it’s ... I mean ... well ... um ... *murder* ...but ...”

“Murder!”

“Yeah but there’s some question as to those charges. It was more like manslaughter ... er ... like the guy he ...killed ...”

Champski put *killed* in air quotes.

“ ... the guy our guy killed was like ...”

He’s our guy now, she thought. Like *Our Man in Havana*. Our Man in the Local Jail.

“...well there were extenuating circumstances. The guy was caught in ... in a compromising position with our guy’s wife if you get my meaning, and he hit him over

the head with something. They're not even sending him to the pen or anything. They're keeping it all local. Six months to a year or something like. He used to be one of our students in something ...not art ... but he had to quit school when he got called up and he's like...too smart and bored to be in jail and they figure if he could get a little encouragement things might go better for him when he gets out. He's like a really nice guy ... they say. He's drawn portraits of the sheriff and some of the other prisoners and I guess they're all really impressed with his talent. He's really *popular* with the jail crowd. Anyway, everything would be perfectly safe. There'd be like someone from the jail...like some guard or somebody ... like *with* you the whole time. Or like ... you know ...just outside the door. And if you'd do this I could probably get you some like ... released time ... like you know, maybe one class reduction a year.

So ... whad'ya think?"

She *had* been willing—she had already imagined it—to take Champski into her bed. Giving in to neediness and lust was pitiful and unworthy of her professed feminist beliefs. Still, she felt almost insulted by what she saw as her rejection as well as ashamed of her own weakness, and equally conscience-stricken by her total disregard for Champski's wife's feelings. Taking on this request would be suitable punishment for her near indiscretion and pathetic failure as a human being. Perhaps this would give her some kind of absolution.

"OK," she heard herself say.

The jail was not what she had imagined. It was the newest, cleanest place in town. Everyone was polite, calling her ma'am and bringing her coffee. She had abandoned her revealing blouse and ditched the Chanel in favor of a flannel lumberjack shirt over jeans and hiking boots. She had considered a business-like look, skirt, blouse, briefcase etc. but she didn't want to be mistaken for a lawyer. Under the shirt, her running bra flattened her breasts to a rather boyish physique, which seemed appropriate for the circumstances. Instead of the briefcase, she carried a daypack that the guard checked (for shivs or chisels she supposed.) Her medium length, dirty blonde hair was tied back in a ponytail, pulled through the opening in the back of her Chicago Cubs cap. Tyler had taken her to a few Cubs and Sox games when they were grad students at the Art Institute. She had jettisoned

the Sox cap while ridding herself of belongings, preferring the cleaner design of the Cubs logo, but she retained a soft spot for the Cubs' status as perennial losers.

She had pictured herself sitting in a barred cell across from a criminal who would look something like Tom Selleck. Instead, Ronald Reagan—that was his name—was a five foot eight slip of a boy, probably about twenty-two or three although he looked fifteen, and they were not in his cell, which as the sheriff had proudly shown her during a quick orientation, had no bars. They were seated across from each other in a brightly lit conference room with a fake walnut Formica-topped, table.

“So,” she said, “I understand you’re interested in art.”

“Yes Ma’am.”

He stared at her sullenly. In front of Ronald Reagan lay a manila folder containing, she assumed, his collection of drawings of the jail staff and fellow inmates.

“May I see?” she said, pulling the folder to her.

Ronald Reagan shrugged.

She was immediately ashamed of her disappointment, which she hoped didn't show. What had she expected? Some budding Jackson Pollack? It was the same sad collection of flat portraiture that she had seen a thousand times in high school portfolio reviews designed to rope in prospective students and their parents' money. Ronald Reagan possessed undeniable skills that over time could yield anything from another local participant in the annual art show at the now vacant grocery store on Main Street to a graphic designer, carting his portfolio to business meetings on the streets of Denver or Cincinnati or Chicago. Anything beyond the grocery store would require at least four years of training and many hours of undoing bad habits and provincial ideas.

“You scared?” he said.

“Of these?”

“Of me. Don't you want to know what I done?”

“They ... I've been told about your situation.”

“You think I'm guilty of murder?”

“How could I have an opinion on that? Besides, it doesn't matter what I think. I have nothing to do with the law you know. I came to look at your work, to see if I could help you.”

He seemed to consider this.

“My *work*?”

“Your ... your pictures.”

“Everybody says I draw real good. I thought you were going to see if you could sell them for me. What do I need with your help, lady?”

Ronald’s face was smooth—comprised of the same hard-edged plane of cheek and chin that she had identified as the western *type*^{3/4} which time, the unfiltered sun and dry air, would harden into the wiry, gas field cowpoke of her trailer park. But for now, he made her feel old, with his smooth skin and his *ladys* and his *ma ’ams*.

“You have ability,” she said.

She never used *talent*. Everyone thinks talent is that god-given commodity you either have or you don’t. Artists are born—is what they think—what Ronald Reagan thinks. It has nothing to do with reading or learning to *see* or thinking or hard, fucking work!

“I can help you, if you want to be helped.”

“I can already draw good. Just look!”

She had touched a nerve. Why couldn’t she see what a great artist he was already? Everybody at the jail could see that. Maybe he had bludgeoned the guy because he had criticized his drawings. She thought about backpedaling, as she had always done with her prospective students, telling them how much promise she saw and how much their work would improve after Design I and II and Drawing I and II and Art History I, but there really wasn’t time for all that. She didn’t need this. She decided on the spot, either to discard him like a flawed seashell or make him her project.

“This is crap,” she said, waving a hand over the stack of volumeless pencil studies.

Ronald Reagan actually recoiled from the word as if struck. It was clear you didn’t talk to him like that and walk away without a bruise—in an ordinary setting. But she felt safe in that she needed only call out and one of the deputies, or whatever they were, would be in here pronto and Ronald would be back in his barless bright cell.

Instead of lashing out, he actually stuck out his girlish lower lip, folded his arms and pouted. When he leaned back in his chair he crossed his legs and a flash of something

metallic glinted at his ankle. She tried not to stare, but found her eyes drawn to the titanium leg extending into his canvas running shoe.

He caught her glance and put his foot back down on the floor, allowing the soft material of his jail-issued jumpsuit to fall back over the prosthesis.

“IED,” he said, softly. We were on patrol in Takrit. Got ambushed.”

She did not want to meet his eyes.

“You don’t have to talk about it,” she said.

“I just did.”

She thought about touching him on the arm but decided that might be risky as well as unprofessional. She wished she hadn’t said *crap*.

“Can I show you something?” she said, softer now. “Would it be alright if I made some marks on one of these?”

She indicated the drawings in his portfolio.

“Pick any one. One that you’re not, like—married to.”

She immediately regretted using that term but he picked up the drawing of the sheriff and pushed it toward her, followed by a be-my-guest gesture.

She took a 5B and a 6B pencil out of her daypack, placed the drawing over the others to soften the backing of the hard table, and began to work on the sheriff’s face. As she did so, she explained what she was doing and why.

“Your drawings are *flat*,” she said. “They have very little value range.”

She knew he had no idea what value range was but would understand shortly. She took the liberty of adding shoulders to the disembodied flat head, increased the level of darks, lights and medium tones, added some darks to the white background of the paper, and in a little over five minutes, the sheriff had morphed into a human form with apparent three dimensions, existing in a convincing space.

When their time was up the deputy came in and took a look at the new drawing proclaiming, “Geez, Ronnie. We thought you was good already, but this lady has really got you drawing now! Sheriff Joby, Come look at this!”

By her next visit, Ronald Reagan had a new expression on his face. The haughtiness was gone, replaced by a nervous hopefulness. The same manila folder lay

before him and she knew she was going to have to look. She prepared herself to have to deliver further bad news, but with the intention of a more soft-sell approach.

She opened the folder to the same group of drawings with the exception of the sheriff's, which now occupied a place of honor, taped to the front desk beneath the sign declaring "Sheriff Fred Joby." Each head now rested on a set of shoulders. The backgrounds were darkened—abstractly in some, while in others complete rooms had been added with shaded lines for the concrete block walls. In one, a houseplant that Ronald had copied from a magazine photo, loomed surrealistically behind the figure, seeming to suggest a jungle setting. The faces were lighted by a single, invented source. They looked human and volumetric. The only thing missing was the level of dark and light, which he could not possibly have achieved with the number two, standard writing pencil available to him, so she vowed to leave the 5B and 6B for further experimentation.

"Very nice," she said.

Ronald beamed.

"Now," she said. "Linear perspective."

In the weeks that followed, she continued her visits to the jail where the sheriff and deputies seemed happy to see her. She had complained that the local coffee was weak and tasteless, not just at the jail but at the restaurant, and Gerald Furstman, an oversized but baby-faced deputy who held his hat in front of his big gut, blushed and pawed the floor whenever she came around, had started brewing Starbucks Columbia.

Sometimes she caught glimpses of the other inmates—three days here for drunk and disorderly or three weeks there for bad checks—looking at her wistfully, probably wishing they possessed some special gift that would bring in someone like her for life lessons of their own, but two weeks later they would have been replaced with some new drunk or bad check writer.

Ronald Reagan no longer argued when she made some critical comment or set him about some new task. Their lessons had progressed from skill development to the world of ideas. He had begun using her language to describe what he was trying to do, terms like *value range*, *asymmetrical balance* and *rhythm*. In fact, Ronald had advanced beyond most of her students at the college. She wondered if it was because he had

nothing to do but practice his craft, or if he actually *was* more of a ‘born artist’ than they or if he had more to prove—to her.

Meanwhile, Champski had been sniffing around more and more. He would show up, usually popping in when he was ‘in the neighborhood’ for a few minutes or maybe an hour or two until he finally made his move one evening. He had brought a bottle of wine and now that cold weather had settled in, it was nice to sit next to the electric heater with someone she could at least talk serious art with. *Moon, Mars Wyoming* was finished and hanging over the spot, where in a normal trailer the couch would be and a new landscapish abstraction had taken its place on her easel.

Despite her earlier self-loathing over her unworthy desires and unhealthy willingness to further sully Champski’s already bad rep, she found that the pleasure of his company was all too easy to accept.

“What about your wife?” she asked him after their third or fourth time between the sheets. They had both steered delicately around this subject until she felt that one of them should have the balls to bring it to the table. Although she didn’t really want anything from him, at least nothing beyond what she was getting, she had been feeling uncomfortable and guilty.

“What about her?”

Felecia had met the wife a few times at openings in the college gallery. Grace Champski must have been a beauty fifteen years and two children ago, but was somewhat matronly now. Felecia was under no illusions that Champski intended to make her the new Missus nor did she want anything of the sort. This had been a pleasant enough diversion but she was becoming worried that it was apparent to her colleagues, even though at school they made almost too much of a point of ignoring one another or appearing to be hostile, arguing through committee meetings about the future *direction* of the BFA program.

“Do you think she suspects?”

“No.”

“I can’t imagine why not. I know about you and Dora.”

He was silent, reaching across her bare breasts for the wine bottle.

“It’s all right,” she said. “I’m not jealous—or ...”

“Why did you bring it up?”

“I ... I’ve been thinking maybe we should give this a ... maybe ...”

“You’re dumping me,” he said.

She hadn’t been back to the jail in a while. On her last visit, Ronald Reagan had returned to his sullen ways even though his drawings had become downright sophisticated. She had provided him with real artists’ materials—Rives BFK paper, a box of expensive pastels, some half-used tubes of acrylic paints and brushes that he had shunned in favor of spreading the paint around with credit cards. He had convinced the jailers to bring him cut up cards of their own or the fake ones that came in junk mail. His ideas were inspired by paintings in a book on *New American Painting* that she had turned over to him after scouring it for her own inspiration.

The jailers didn’t like his new work, preferring the realism of his portraits or the animal drawings that followed those or his first landscapes with their disintegrating barns or broken-down cars and trucks. His big breakthrough had come after she pointed out that you didn’t always have to do the *outside* of the barn. He had questioned this at first but on her next visit he presented her with a painting of the *inside* of the barn. The picture was mostly black, a richer black than he would have made before, composed of blues and reds and browns. Light pierced this darkness, penetrating the slots between the siding boards and casting stripes along the interior floor, up and over an old truck stored inside the structure, revealing itself in the passage of the sunbeams over its irregular surface.

When she tried to complement him on his progress he turned away. He might easily be taken for a rebel with an artistic personality but she knew it was something else. Sometimes when she looked at him, he would quickly turn away, blushing. He had taken to stammering and ignoring the subject at hand, in favor of asking her personal questions. She knew he didn’t like the non-answers he got in return.

When she showed up at the jail in her jeans and hat and lumberjack shirt after a two-week absence she was greeted by the old familiar stench of burned Hills Brothers rather than the aroma of Starbucks Columbia.

“He’s gone,” Gerald Furstman said.

“Gone?”

“Yup. Let him out a week ago—thought you knew. Didn’t expect you back.”

This explained the return to Hills Brothers—much less costly and easier to come by than Starbucks. (Furstman told her once he had to drive to Rawlins for the Starbucks). Hills Brothers was probably what they all preferred anyway.

“His lawyer cut a deal. Got ‘im off for time served.”

She had not considered this possibility. She had more or less counted on Ronald to always be available as a sort of project—a hobby almost, and now that she had ‘dumped’ Champski, as Champski put it, at least Ronald Reagan had been there for her and Ronald was after all, easy on the eye.

Keep checkin’ though,” Furstman said with a grin. “He’ll be back.”

She started to turn toward the door.

“I seen you runnin’ out on county 318,” he said.

She gave him a sort of absent smile.

“Been a mountain lion out that way, up in them stripy hills. We got a call about some sheep killed. Better be careful. Big cats eat little ladies.”

She nodded.

“By the way,” Furstman said, “that kid’s drawings really went south on ‘im lately.”

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After a long day at school, she arrived home to find a package leaning against her door. It was wrapped in brown paper, about a foot and a half long and an inch thick. She opened it to find five drawings sandwiched between two pieces of cardboard. The first four were landscapes; drawn and painted over collaged materials, wallpaper samples, newspaper articles and the like. Translucent splashes of acrylic color had been randomly spread over the collages and over that, striated hills like the ones she saw every day were overlaid in charcoal. The last was a pencil portrait. It was pretty darned accurate considering that it must have been done from memory. Just head and shoulders.

She had on her Cubs cap with the ponytail pulled through.

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She was working at her easel one evening when someone knocked. She looked out the window above her sink but the view of the front steps only allowed a glimpse of

male elbow. She didn't recognize the car. Champski, after a half-hearted effort at re-firing their affair, had grudgingly signed off. Rumors were he had his eye on the new young librarian in special collections and Furstman had told her that Ronald Reagan had taken a job in a hardware store somewhere in Colorado.

"Who is it?" she asked through the door.

"Tyler."

Reluctantly she unlocked the door and let him in. She allowed a kiss on her cheek while keeping his body at arms' length. She offered him a beer and polite but cool conversation.

"How did you find me?"

"It wasn't that hard."

These days, of course, you could find anybody who had a telephone or a computer or who hadn't taken the identity of a dead person, which she had considered but didn't know how to go about. All she had done was shift her identity twenty-five-hundred miles to the west and a mile into the sky.

He hummed and hawed his way through yet another apology like the twenty he had offered back in Carolina. He felt really bad about what he had done and hoped that she had forgiven him and it was all a big mistake.

"What about you and Heather?"

Heather—the little bitch—had been Tyler's grad assistant. It was their indiscretion that had resulted in the end of their relationship. Despite his pleading and promises, it had forced her into exile although now she felt no superiority in that regard, having taken an equally low road herself.

"That ... it's over. I ended it. You know ...I ..."

He looked down at his hands.

It had probably been the other way around but it didn't matter. She could see that even *he* could see, too much had intervened, not only Heather and Champski, whom he could know nothing about, but time, distance and life. She was finally able to convince him that the journey out was a waste of time and gasoline and upon returning from a trip to the bathroom, he was gone. She looked out her window just in time to see his taillight blink, signaling his turn onto the highway.

As she stood watching the red lights fade in intensity, two pronghorns ambled through the parking lot. It wasn't until a few days later that she realized that Tyler had taken Ronald Reagan's portrait when he left.