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Filter House*

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— Ursula K. Le Guin

“Nisi Shawl uses the tools of future and fable, usually used to explore the other, the future, and the mysterious, to magically reveal what and who we all are here and today.”

— Tobias Buckell



## *Our Fruiting Bodies*



# *Our Fruiting Bodies*

*short fiction by*

*Nisi Shawl*



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This book is fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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*Dedicated to the new ones.*



## *Contents*

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Introduction: What Soft Power Creates/Destroys..... | 1   |
| An Awfully Big Adventure.....                       | 5   |
| Women of the Doll .....                             | 9   |
| The Tawny Bitch.....                                | 43  |
| Luisah's Church.....                                | 69  |
| Cruel Sistah.....                                   | 95  |
| Big Mama Yaga's .....                               | 107 |
| Street Worm.....                                    | 111 |
| Queen of Dirt.....                                  | 131 |
| Conversion Therapy.....                             | 151 |
| A Beautiful Stream.....                             | 171 |
| I Being Young and Foolish .....                     | 191 |
| Looking for Lilith .....                            | 219 |
| Vulcanization.....                                  | 229 |
| She Tore .....                                      | 245 |
| Salt on the Dance Floor .....                       | 263 |
| Beyond the Lighthouse .....                         | 281 |
| To the Moment .....                                 | 295 |
| Just Between Us.....                                | 301 |



*Introduction*  
*What Soft Power Creates/Destroys*

*by Linda D. Addison*

I fell in love with Shawl's writing before meeting them in person. When I write fiction, I keep their work nearby for examples of characters that instantly connect and high energy stories that hold the reader's interest. When I had the honor of sharing a room with them at a conference, I was dazzled by their humor, compassion, and focus. I value the friendship that came out of the time we spent together. Getting to read this collection before anyone else is like winning an award I didn't know existed.

I like short stories in general, because they allow me to experience the beginning, middle, and end of a story in one sitting. I love Nisi Shawl's short stories in particular because they totally transport me to wherever they choose to take me and enjoy (or rightfully ache) every step of the journey.

As I expected, there was no reading just one story in a sitting. I was completely drawn into each one from the first line to the end and then carried through to the next story. Each opening took me into the soul of the characters and the intriguing stories by way of the powerful music of Shawl's language!

The opening story has a whimsical title, "An Awfully Big Adventure," but I quickly found that the adventure is not as playful as the title suggests. This is Shawl doing their masterful

## Our Fruiting Bodies

thing, carrying me through a story that is sad but so beautiful and chilling in the way they tell it that I simply went up and down with the character. At the end of the story, the poet in me took a moment to sit and marvel at the poetic prose.

The second story, “Women of the Doll,” begins with a poetically beautiful opening to the sensuous magical journey of Josette, who is never alone and is now protected from a past that could have shattered her soul.

The rest of the stories continue to mesmerize, giving us realized and unrealized sorceresses discovering the power to protect their own and others or to avenge violence done in the name of greed, racism, or religious discrimination.

Some of the stories are written in different formats, or using familiar characters, but told from new, striking points of view. For example, “The Tawny Bitch,” is a riveting tale told in the form of letters discovered in an old house, written by a young woman kidnapped from a comfortable academy and held captive in a sparse room for reasons involving greed and her being one quarter Black.

There are two pieces inspired by biblical references. “Cruel Sistah” tells of two Black sisters, Dory and Calliope, and how one sibling’s jealousy (in the way of Cain and Abel) was more than cruel and made my heart fracture a little from the first line to the end. The meaning of the one sister’s name, Calliope, as beautiful voice/instrument, became a haunting part of the story.

The second tale, “Looking for Lilith,” is the quest of “a light-skinned girl,” whose name isn’t revealed and doesn’t matter in this dangerous, magical expedition to find Lilith because in Shawl’s powerful imagination we learn that the answer to a question isn’t the final goal.

Merlin, a magician, and a king are in the story “I Being Young and Foolish,” but more importantly, Nia, a remarkable sorceress arrives from another land to learn from Merlin. I fell in love with her as she ate some of the fungal lace in the woods

to link into the flora's web. The magic and nature-filled rituals of Merlin and Nia filled me with joy.

"She Tore" puts us in the middle of an adventure with a machine-gun-carrying grown Wendy and a drowsy Tink on a rescue mission without Peter Pan. This exciting venture is not for children, but just as much fun for this adult, with life lessons to match.

Three stories, "Street Worm," "Queen of Dirt," and "Conversion Therapy," follow the evolution of a character, Brit, a teenager who uses Ebonics to piss off her professional-class parents and discovers she has a power that allows her to see things that no one else can, dangerous non-physical entities. When Brit uses her power to make the vicious invisible entities visible to others, Shawl expertly builds on the scientific definition of real worms, bees, carpenter ants, and Zombie Fungus to create the menacing organisms in these stories. It was thrilling to spend time with Brit as she acquires a mentor and learns how to use her power to save others as well as to teach talented kids. I could read more about this world and Brit. (Just saying.)

Shawl's characters struggle to embrace their strength and power, both soft and hard, to define a place in their world by destroying (and sometimes creating) barriers. Some tales take us back in time to the harsh days of slavery and some forward into strange, surrealistic futures. The nerd in me was completely psyched by science references to real life forms.

The stories that refer to known deities reminded me of how fascinated I am by the various ways cultures from around the world interpret feminine energy through different goddesses, as well as gods that embrace masculine and feminine identities. Each culture provides fables that represent these deities as both death and creation, and as being both protective and dangerous. It's an interesting counterpoint to the fact

## Our Fruiting Bodies

that women on this planet still struggle to be treated equally, to have their intelligence, strength, and power acknowledged.

Shawl's writing is mindful; every word has a purpose. So, after reading the collection, I Googled *fruiting bodies*. Reading about the fruiting bodies of fungi, I discovered that they are plant organs (aka mushrooms) created specifically for reproduction. Mushrooms are created from tiny threads that make up most of the fungi. A network of these threads, known as a mycelium, extends in all directions through the soil.

This fantastic collection unveils fruiting bodies and a network of feelings and images extending through the characters and stories. It will join Shawl's other books that I keep near me as lessons for my ongoing evolution as a writer.

My fruiting body, perfect and imperfect, no longer can reproduce, but I feel the connection to earth and living beings through the network of my life force. I was lifted and expanded by the poignant journey Shawl's stories took me on. What a gloriously big adventure!



## *An Awfully Big Adventure*

I'm going first. I'm the last girl to be born, and what's left to pick by then? My oldest sister already gets to be the smart one, and the middle girl, everybody decides, must be the most imaginative. So I'm the brave one. Usually—except for being born—that means that I go first.

And this is why, if there has to be a reason. I go first. I don't have to know what I'm doing. Don't have to know how, why, where. I'm the first. I'm the brave one. This is an adventure. Like life. I'm going.

It all begins with a short stay in the hospital, barely overnight. Stress test in the morning, but all I can think about during that is where's my gold tennis charm necklace. My mom and my sister look everywhere, but it probably got stolen.

My tests don't prove nothin. The health care providers decide I've been experiencing anxiety attacks. Counseling is prescribed.

Couple years pass by. Turns out there's a growth on my left adrenal gland. The doctors plan on taking it out. My oldest sister talks about the friends she'll stay with in the town where they say they'll do the operation. Then something more urgent comes up: breast cancer.

It's early. Stage 0. Still, the providers decide they have to deal with that before anything else. They schedule my mastectomy.

Anesthesia. I tip into the dark. Like falling out of a canoe. The me I'm used to has been dry, always, crackers or toast; now everything I am is soaking wet. To the core. Melting apart.

## Our Fruiting Bodies

I bob to the surface of the darkness. There's my sister. Nearby a woman sobs and cries about how she can't breathe. For an hour.

Finally I'm wheeled back to my room. There's dirt in the corners.

Blood keeps draining from my incision, fast and steady. We have to empty the plastic bag where it gathers every twenty minutes. The nurse lies to me and says my surgeon's not around. I get up to pee and drop through the surface again. Down under the light and air and feeling. Down. Then back up again to my mother, and back down, put there on purpose this time, to sew up the uncauterized capillary that has been pouring out blood to soak me and sink me.

Up. Light. Food. I'm home in time for Thanksgiving. I will even eat lima beans. Even beets. Coconut. Anything. Never going to turn away any blessings I'm given ever, ever again.

But I no longer trust the light the air the feeling. They went away before; I got no reason now to believe they're here to stay.

Another year passes. Time's trying to lull me. It does. I wear halter tops, tell lopsided jokes. But one day playing on the courts with my son I pull a muscle, I think. I lie down on the living room couch. Low to the water. Ripples of pain spread out from my back, lapping up against me. One hand hangs over the boat's side, trailing through the darkness, dipping in. I could sleep so long. I could sleep for always and still feel this tired.

I fight my way back to dry land. I go to the store. I talk on the phone with my oldest sister far away, ask her what remedy to take. Confess I'm out of strength. For the first time in my life. For the last.

Tell her I love her.

Don't wanna be in the hospital again, but my mother takes me anyways. The dirt in the corners is piling higher,

thicker, crowding out the light. They send me home from the emergency room; they say there's nothing wrong. But there is.

A few hours later I return and the new shift realizes I have several different kinds of cancer now. One extremely rare. No good chance of a cure. They explain that, and then they carefully lay me out on the operating table, gently lowering me down.

Down. My heart has hardly been beating for weeks, they say. They want to make it beat even slower so they can work their way inside to fix things.

They can only fix them for a while. They're honest about that.

They put the sensing ends of machines on me to watch while I think. They put in drugs.

The water surges up to carry me away. To hold me under. Hold me tight. Hold me.

I'm usually the first among us three girls. Us sisters. I understand I'm the one going on ahead this time, too. Into what? Into what we don't know.

Slowly I sink down. Like before, it's way too cold. Numbing me. I don't feel. No longer. No light. Don't see. No direction. No up no down no in out forward back nothing but nothing but nothing. But.

But I remember being small and closing shut my eyes and shutting them so tight, squeezing them so hard, to make the colors come and here they are and are they real and is this real is anything and am I real and am I real—

And yes.

And yes. I am. And I am going.

Under. Down. Deep.

Going.

Gone.



## *Women of the Doll*

The countertop was black marble, veined with green. Josette admired its sheen while she waited for the clerk. Like endless Niles etching dark and fertile deltas, she said silently to the stone. Like malachite feathers resting on a field of night. The reflection and the surface were interrupted by a white rectangle sliding toward her: the charge slip for her room. She signed dutifully. It would get paid; it always did.

The clerk had hair like black rayon. Her smooth, brown face was meticulously made up, copied exactly from some magazine. “1213,” she said. “Elevators are across the lobby, to the left.” Then she noticed. “Oooh, how cute! Does she have a name?”

Automatically, Josette tried to tuck her doll down further into her handbag. She wouldn’t go.

“Viola,” Josette told the clerk. She settled for pulling the bright blue scarf over Viola’s long, woolen braids. The painted eyes stared enigmatically from a cloth face caught midway between sorrow and content. “I love her very much.”

“I’ll just bet you do. Can I hold her?”

Josette didn’t want to be rude. She ignored the question. “What time does the gift shop close?”

“6 p.m.”

Plenty of time to get rid of her luggage first. She wheeled it around and started toward the elevators, crossing alternating strips of that same wonderful marble and a whispery, willow-colored carpet. “Enjoy your stay,” chirped the clerk.

## Our Fruiting Bodies

Mirrors lined the walls of the elevator. Once that would have been a problem, but Josette had reached the point where she could make an effort and see what pretty much anyone would have seen: a woman with a soft, round, face; short, coiling hair; a slim, graceful neck. Breasts rather large; hips, waist, and legs like a long walk through the dunes. Blue cotton separates under a dove-grey woolen coat; knits, so they wouldn't wrinkle. Golden skin, like a lamp-lit window on a foggy autumn evening.

There was nothing wrong with how she looked.

Room 1213 faced east. Josette opened the drapes and gazed out over parking lots and shopping malls. Off in the distance, to her left, she saw a large unplowed area. A golf-course? A cemetery? The snow took on a bluish tinge as she watched. Dusk fell early here. Winter in Detroit.

There was a lamp on the table beside her. She pressed down the button on its base, and fluorescence flickered, then filled the room. A bed, with no way to get under it; less work for the maids, she supposed. An armchair, a desk, a dresser, a wardrobe, a TV, and a night stand. Nothing special, nothing she hadn't seen a thousand times before.

She sat on the bed and felt it give under her, a little more easily than she liked. Her large handbag, which doubled as a carry-on, held a few things she could unpack: a diary, a jewel case, handmade toiletries. Bunny was scrunched up at the bottom. She pulled him out and sat him next to Viola on the pillow. He toppled over and fell so his head was hidden by her doll's wide skirts.

"Feeling shy, Mr. Bun?" she asked, reaching to prop him up again. She knew better than to expect an answer, with or without the proper preparations. Bunny was a rabbit. Rabbits can't talk. Anyway, he wasn't really hers; he belonged to Viola.

The clock radio caught her eye. Three red fives glowed on the display. Oh no, she thought, and rushed out, leaving her

doll behind. Probably Viola wouldn't care. She might not even notice. Certainly she'd be safe alone for just a short time.

Josette made it to the gift shop with a minute to spare, but it was already closed. Frustrated, she stamped her foot, and was rewarded with a stinging pain in her ankle and a lingering look of amusement from a passing white man. She ignored both and quick-stepped back to the elevators.

There was a wait. The lobby was suddenly filled with people, mostly men, mostly white, mostly wearing name tags. A convention of some sort. She let a couple of cars go up without her, but when the crowd showed no signs of thinning, Josette resigned herself to riding up in their company. The amused passerby joined her load just as the door began to close.

The elevator stopped at nearly every floor. The men all stared at her, surreptitiously, except for the latecomer, who smiled and was quite open about it.

There was nothing wrong with how she looked. She stared right back.

He was tall. And thin, not all slabby like over-bred beef. A runner's body, nervous and sensitive. He wore black sweats, actually sweaty sweats, she noticed. His unusually long brown hair hung in curls over one shoulder, held loosely in place by a rubber band.

His smile broadened. He thought he was getting somewhere. They were on the tenth floor. All the other passengers were getting out. "Join me for supper?" he asked.

"I'm sorry, I have so much work," she murmured politely as she edged through the closing doors. She located the stairwell and walked up two flights to her floor. He was attractive, though.

Everything was just the way she'd left it.

She opened up her tool-kit on the bed and added recently scavenged supplies: rum from the airplane, salt packets from

## Our Fruiting Bodies

various restaurants. From her handbag she took the small jar of urine she had collected that morning. She was ready.

Salt first. Between the bathroom and the bedroom, there were surprisingly many corners. Josette put a square of toilet paper in every one, and dumped a packet of salt into the center of each square.

Next, she swept down the walls above the squares with her rum-sprinkled whisk-broom. Little bits of dirt and straw and flakes of dislodged wallpaper fell into the salt. She picked up all the debris and flushed it down the toilet.

She turned on the tap at the washbasin, splashing her fingers through the water till it ran as hot as it was going to get. Which wasn't very. But she was used to that. She let the sink fill while she added her other ingredients: brown sugar, melting in the warm water like sand into glass, golden piss, and a swirling white cloud of perfume.

She soaked a hand-towel in the mixture, wrung it out to dampness.

“Oh, my young man, oh, he is so fine,  
Sweet Rosemary did say”

Her voice was high and clear, and sweet as the scent of her wash-water. Getting down on her hands and knees, she began to sponge the room's royal blue carpet, continuing:

“She gathered flowers and she sang,  
All about her wedding day...”



She built her altar in the center of the room. It didn't take long. She used a round table from in front of the window, covering it with her shawl. Between the printed wreaths of lilies, roses, and forget-me-nots, she laid out the stones: a moss agate from Mexico; a white egg-shape covered with barnacles, from Whidbey Island. Polished, flat, black, red, rough, round, brown, the stones and their stories circled the cushion where



Viola sat, a new white votive candle at her feet. A bowl of water before it trembled with light as Josette struck a match. The candle spat and crackled, flaring up, dying down, then steadying as the wick pulled up the melting wax.

“Is it safe?” Viola’s voice was dry and whispery, cloth rubbing against cloth.

“Yes, honey, I promise. It’s as safe as I can make it,” Josette answered her.

Viola had no neck, and her stitches were tight, but she managed to turn her head enough to survey most of the room. “Hi, Bunny.” She waved to her toy where he waited on the bed.

The pearls dangling on the doll’s flat chest gleamed as she twisted her stocking-stuffed body, still looking for something that wasn’t there. “What about the flowers?”

“I, uhh, I couldn’t get any yet, Viola, honey. I’m sorry...”

“But you said we were gonna have flowers this time.” The painted face showed bewilderment and betrayal. “Can’t you just go out and pick some?”

Josette sighed. “No, darling. See, it’s winter, and we’re way up North, and—” She broke off. It was so hard, Viola was so *little*... If she’d gone to the gift shop first instead of dawdling in her room, she wouldn’t have had to try and explain all this.

She checked the clock radio. It was 8:30, not terribly late. “You wait here, honey, and I’ll go get some flowers for us.” Somewhere. Somehow.



Josette tried the bar first. From the moment she walked in, though, she knew it was not that kind of place. Grey plastic upholstery, murky purple neon. Artificial twilight trying to pass for atmosphere.

She glanced around at the tabletops. They were decorated with some sort of oversized Crazy Straws or something. No flowers.

## Our Fruiting Bodies

She turned to leave. Someone was blocking her way. The man from the gift shop, from the elevator. He was smiling again. “Join me now?” he asked.

“I was just leaving.” She stepped around him and out into the hall.

“Right. Me, too. Check out the restaurant together?”

She surrendered. “Sure.” It was probably about time for another client, anyway, and he looked likely to come up with a valuable offering.

“I think it’s quickest if we take the escalator,” he said. “My name’s Danny Woods, by the way.”

“Josette,” she told him, without waiting to be asked. She made sure he stood above her on the escalator and kept a couple of steps between them. Standard operating procedure. He was wearing black, again, slacks, with a dark, piney-looking green plaid shirt. As he turned to smile down from the top, she noticed with surprise how broad his shoulders were.

The restaurant’s entrance, swathed in pink-and-gold lace, looked promising. But when the hostess had conducted them to their table, Josette saw that the flowers were false. Scrap silk and wire, sewn with sequins. She made a show of examining the menu. Dramatically swooping script filled the pink cardboard pages.

Her eyes met Danny Woods’. “See anything interesting?” he asked her.

“Yes,” she admitted. “But nothing that I really want.”

He grimaced, but his gaze stayed steady. He folded up the menu and laid it on the table. “You know, this—” he tapped the pink cardboard “is just a list of suggestions. You’re not bound by it, not by any means. If you know what you want, you should just say—”

A young woman in a pink uniform and shimmery gold stockings came up. “Good evening, and welcome to Chez Chatte.” Her voice squeaked and see-sawed, like a five-year-

old in high-heels. "I'm Dee-Dee, and I'll be your server this evening. Have you made your selections?"

"I'll have your Caesar Salad and a bowl of the minestrone soup," said Danny Woods.

"And for the lady?"

"Flowers," said Josette calmly.

"Flowers?" repeated Dee-Dee. "To eat? I'm not sure I— Where do you see that on the menu?"

"I don't," said Josette. "But I would very much appreciate it if you could bring me some."

Dee-Dee backed away from the table. "I'll have to ask," she explained apologetically, then fled to the kitchen.

Danny Woods smiled a quick smile. "What's that make you, a floratarian?"

"No. I'm just not hungry is all. Jet-lag. I'll order out later."

"Where you from?"

"All over. And you?" she added quickly. It was a little harder than usual, but she managed to get the client talking about himself, his aims, pursuits, goals, methods of achieving them. Danny Woods was a building design engineer, which as far as she could tell was an architect, except that architects were to be despised. He was here for the conference on appropriate technology. He had a presentation to make, a red Camaro, at least three credit cards, and a secure position with a Boulder-based consulting firm.

He seemed genuinely interested in finding out what she did for a living. She told him fund-raising. Freelance.

His soup came. He ate it quietly, and she slowed the pace of her questions to let him. He offered her bread, buttered it for her, touched the inside of her wrist somehow as he handed it over. Warmly, deliberately. He wanted her.

She decided he would do.

Dee-Dee brought her flowers with his salad: three red roses in a crystal bud vase, placed with professional aplomb

## Our Fruiting Bodies

upon a white dinner plate. Viola liked lilies better, but these would certainly serve to fulfill Josette's promise. "Thank-you," she said. "They're lovely."

Dee-Dee beamed. "From the breakfast trays for tomorrow," she explained. "Are you sure there's nothing else I can get you?"

Josette shook her head, but Danny Woods was nodding yes. "Actually," he said, "I think you ought to just wrap this salad up to go and bring me the check." He turned to Josette. "That all right?"

"If you pay for it? Sure, thanks."

The rest of the second floor was deserted. As they passed the empty function rooms Josette caught glimpses of the shallow arcs of gleaming chairbacks, scalloping the darkness, of ghostly white tablecloths beneath hollow urns.

He pressed the up button, and they waited silently. He touched her wrist again just as the elevator chimed.

Inside, there was no one, except for their reflections. She didn't look.

He was reaching for the controls. Josette put her hand over his, pulled it away from "10" and made it push "12" instead. "You can see me to my door," she told him. Probably that would be all right. But Viola wouldn't want him to come in.

"Yes," he said. He raised her hand to his mouth and lightly grazed her fingertips with the edges of his teeth. Then he continued down the side of her index, gently scraping against her skin, his warm breath a whispering echo of this caress. At the juncture between two fingers, he touched her with his tongue.

Josette was very still. Seconds passed, and she remembered how to inhale. She got in a couple of hurried breaths, and then he kissed her. His lips were soft, barely brushing her passive mouth, then inquiring into the corners, sweet and strong and

sudden and sure, sure that she would accept his offerings and take him, take him away from himself. And she could, she could do that...

His hands stroked the wings of her shoulderblades as if they were covered with angel feathers, and she shuddered against him, and let go of the vase. It thumped down onto the elevator's carpeted floor and tumbled away, making soft, bumping sounds. The bell chimed, and the doors rolled open. Josette stepped back from Danny Woods. There was no resistance.

According to the indicator, they were on the eleventh. A short man in a beige suit got on. "Banquet level," he said, facing the front.

"But we're going up," said Danny Woods. Josette knelt to rescue the flowers. The short man watched her. She could tell, even with her back turned. The doors slid shut and they started back up without a word from him.

The vase was unharmed. The roses were still so tight, almost buds, that they were none the worse except for a little lint. If she got them in some more water soon, they would be fine. She stood. The beige suit man looked away.

The bell chimed for the twelfth. Josette got off, with Danny Woods following. "Oh," said the suit to the closing doors, "this is an up car, isn't it?"

They walked in silence through two turns and a long, straight stretch. At the door to 1213, Josette turned and spoke. Firmly, she hoped. "I'd better not invite you in."

"No?" The self-assured smile got backgrounded.

"No," agreed Josette. She wanted, for the first time, to tell a client the truth. "I have—" She hesitated, and he finished for her.

"—a lot of work to do. I understand. Me, too."

Josette nodded. It was easier than trying to explain.

"You still gonna be here tomorrow? Tomorrow night?" asked Danny Woods.

## Our Fruiting Bodies

“Sure. We could get together then.”

“There’s a banquet—”

“Oh, no,” said Josette. “I have other plans. But afterwards would be nice; say, nine o’clock?”

“Okay, I’ll say nine o’clock.” The grin was in the foreground again. “Where?”

“Your room.”

He gave her the number. He was going to kiss her again, but she already had her key out, and she was inside closing the door before he could do more than decide to try.

The white votive burned steadily, putting forth an even globe of light. Viola leaned forward as Josette walked towards the altar with the roses. “Oooh,” the doll said. “How gorgeous! Are they soft? Let me touch them.” She reached out one stocking-stuffed hand, but Josette reached past it and rubbed the red roses against Viola’s cheek. “Mmmm,” she said. “Those are nice. Thank you, Aunt Josette.”

Josette refilled the vase with warm water. She re-cut the stems, too, with the knife from her tool kit.

When the flowers were in place on the altar, it was time to think about food. Almost 10:30. She called room service and ordered “basketti” for Viola and a salad for Bunny and herself. As an afterthought she asked them to include a copy of Sunday’s paper if any had come in yet.

She finished unpacking. Viola was in a talkative mood. She had made up a story about the house they were going to live in, and the garden they were going to grow, and all the toys and books she would have once they finally settled down.

“I have to work tomorrow night,” Josette announced. Viola was suddenly silent. The votive candle crackled, the flame spurting high then dwindling to dimness. “I *have* to, Viola. It’s been weeks since we turned in a new account number, and the last two didn’t have anything worth putting in a flask. Besides, I think he’s really nice.”

“Ok-a-a-ay,” the doll said slowly. “But you’re not going to do it here, are you?”

“No.” Josette winced to think of the one time she had tried that. It might be better for her own security, but it had scared her doll stiff.

“You like him?” asked Viola after a minute.

“Uh-hum. He’s cute. His name is Danny Woods.”

“What does he do?”

“Makes houses. Not builds them, but he makes the plans.”

“He could make one for us, then. With secret passages!” Viola bounced a little with excitement at the thought. It was going to be all right.

The food came while she was standing in her flannel night gown, washing out her bras in the sink. The waiter was a slim man with a moustache. He looked Hispanic, so she didn’t bother trying to hide her set-up. Odds were he’d figure it for some sort of Santeria, as long as Viola stayed still. Nothing that might necessitate calling a manager. Anyway, there wasn’t going to be any trouble here, not of any sort. She’d spent the evening making sure of that.

She looked at the paper while they ate. The salad was good, romaine and spinach and buttercrunch, with a honey-dijon dressing. She had to remind Viola several times not to slurp her noodles.

“But it’s fun,” the doll protested. Her dry voice was querulous.

“But it’s *messy* fun,” Josette told her. “You’ll get stained.”

The want-ads contained a number of good-looking prospects. Josette circled them to check out tomorrow. She glanced at the clock-radio. Make that later today, she thought. It would be wonderful to be able to adjust to one time-zone.

“All right, squids. Bedtime.” She sponged spaghetti sauce from Viola’s mouth and dressed her in her flannel nightie, a

## Our Fruiting Bodies

diminutive twin of Josette's own. She tucked her doll into her half of the bed, with Bunny at her side.

"Leave the candle on, please, Aunt Josette?" asked Viola.

"It's the last one. I'll have to fix another tomorrow night, when I get back."

"Oh. Okay. Well then, goodnight."

"Goodnight, baby." She kissed her doll on her soft forehead and Bunny on his fuzzy nose, and then put out the light. After a while, she slept.



Josette woke several times during the night. At last, at nine a.m., she decided it was late enough to get up.

On her way to the exercise room she found the maid, a woman barely taller than her service cart. Korean, Josette decided.

"Cheon-ibaegsibsamhoneun cheongsohaji maseyo. oneul-eun meideu seobiseu pil-yo eobs-seubnida."

"Ne eomma."

There were separate facilities for men and women, which was a relief. Mirrors again, of course, but she knew what she looked like. What other women saw. What men saw, too, even the ones who stared. They didn't do that because of her appearance. It was something they smelled, or sensed some other way. Something they wanted and sometimes got.

She took her time with her asanas and showered briefly. She wasn't even a tiny bit worried about Viola and Bunny, alone up in the room. It was clean and safe. If her instructions to the maid hadn't stuck, her guardians would certainly be able to prevent any intrusion. She even stopped at the Chez Chatte on her way back up. They had a Continental breakfast buffet. She helped herself to a plateful of boiled eggs and muffins, and carried it up to the room.



It took a while to get everyone ready. They didn't really have any winter clothes, so they had to dress in layers. Of course Bunny didn't have anything to wear. Josette decided to leave him there. "Rabbits aren't that interested in houses anyway," she explained to her silent doll.

Josette called a cab and they went down to wait in the lobby. The black and green marble floor had been newly buffed, and shimmered with resplendence. Josette lost herself exploring the branches of stone rivers, of jade-filled chasms, of sap-filled veins in forests of onyx.

A blaring horn brought her back. It was the taxi. The driver, for a wonder, was a woman. A bit butch, in denim and nose-rings. White and plump as a pony beneath her denim cap. "Hi, I'm Holly," she said, introducing herself. There was a plastic partition between the front seat and the back, but it was open. "And you two are—"

"Josette. Viola." She waited nervously for Holly to ask to hold her. Instead, the cabby sat without comment while Josette strapped her doll onto the seat next to her.

"Ready?" At Josette's nod, Holly put the cab in gear. "Where can I take you folks today?"

Josette handed her marked-up classified section through the partition. "We thought we'd take a look at some of these places. I've got a map, but maybe you know the best way to go to hit them all."

"Sure, Josette. This here's my turf."

Holly drove fast, braking smoothly when necessary, accelerating and turning as if dancing with herself. The deconstructed landscape of light poles and parking lots soon gave way to an actual neighborhood. Frame houses, mostly painted white, tried unsuccessfully to hide behind young, spindly trees.

"Used to be all elms," Holly explained. "Some places they try to keep em up, inject em with fungicide every spring. Down

## Our Fruiting Bodies

on campus they do that, feed the stuff in through these plastic hoses. Goddam trees look like giant junkies, noddin out.”

There were three addresses in close proximity. Josette told Holly just to drive on by.

She got out of the cab for the next stop, a fieldstone bungalow with no yard to speak of, just so they could catch a breath of air. But most of what she'd circled in the paper they rolled right past: the wrought aluminum porch rails, the train-crossing frontage, the sandstone split-level shoved up against a fried fish stand.

Late in the afternoon they came to an area of red-brick houses. Josette's heart warmed itself in their glow. But there were no trees, not even immature ones, here. And one place was next to a convenience store, the other right across the street from a body shop with a chain link fence and a big, gaunt dog. The dog barked nonstop as Holly used the driveway to turn the cab around. The angry sound followed them down the block.

They crossed a boulevard, and suddenly everything was quiet and rich. Maples laced their twiggy fingers overhead. The lawns were longer, the streets and sidewalks completely clear of snow.

Holly pulled up before a beautiful house: two stories, brick, with a one-story white frame addition and attached garage. “Are you sure this is it?” asked Josette.

“Well, yeah, and there's the sign says they're havin an open house today, even.”

“Wait here, then, please, while I check it out.”

“No problem.”

Josette tucked Viola inside her sweater-coat just to be sure she'd stay warm, then stepped out of the cab and walked up the winding brick pathway to the house.

Beside the door she found a round, black button, a crescent of light showing where it had not been painted over. She pushed

it. Faintly, from within, came the sound of a silvery gong, two-toned. Then silence. She tried it again. More of the same.

She opened the storm door to knock, then realized how useless that would be. The bell was working; she'd heard it. As she shut the storm, though, the door itself swung slightly open. "Hello?" she called. No one answered. Hesitantly, she pulled the storm open again, and the door was sucked back into place. She touched the white-painted wood gently, and it opened with a soft swish, brushing over light-colored carpet. "Hello?" she called again into the dark, still house. No answer.

She stepped inside and heard the storm's latch click shut. Instantly its glass clouded with condensation. She stood in a small foyer. A wooden table shared the space with her, and an oval frame hung from the pale grey wall above it. Inside the frame was grey, too. A mirror. She would have to pass it to see the rest of the house.

Easy enough. It was a lot smaller than the ones in the weight room or the elevator. But the dimness... Dark mirrors, especially, sometimes showed her other things...

She closed her eyes. Maybe she could get by like that. But then, that would be cheating. She wasn't a cheater, and she didn't have anything to be afraid of, anymore.

She left the door and faced the mirror, which had become slightly fogged with the cold air. Through a faint mist she saw herself, looking no different than anyone else. Because what had been done to her didn't show. No one could see whether it had hurt or whether it had felt good. Or both. No one could see who he was, the one that did those things. She knew that now, she really did. She didn't have to see that when she saw herself, either, if she tried.

If she tried, what she saw in the reflected dimness was what came after that, the memories that she had made, the life she'd learned to live since, as an adult. With the help of the Women of the Doll.

## Our Fruiting Bodies

She had heard about them in a magazine. She wrote the magazine, and no one there knew anything. The author was a pseudonym, a cancelled P.O. box. But that was all right. Everything was all right, would always be all right, as long as she just stayed still.

How did they find her, eventually? Not through any move she made. In a bookstore, in a coffee bar, the woman waiting on her said “You look like you could use a little extra help.” At first the help was talk. Then music, dancing, pretty things to wear. Then baths, and baths, and bells, ringing and ringing, and more baths. In salt, in milk, in chalk, in honey.

In the oval mirror Josette saw a steaming tubful of gardenias, surrounded by women, arms reaching, hands dipping up fistfuls of soft, wet flowers. She saw herself, standing in the center of their circle, clothed in nothing but the heavy, heady scent, the heat, the sweat, the songs they sang as they scrubbed and scrubbed and scrubbed her skin with flowers, with white, with innocence. She saw a mirror in the mirror, the one they held so often to her face, asking her to tell them what did she see, what did she see.

Hers was the Whore’s Story, and they’d shown her what to do with it, how she could sell her body and still keep her soul alive. Her soul was in Viola now, all the time. And Viola was safe, she knew how to make her doll safe and keep her from being touched.

Josette looked in the mirror and saw what she decided she would see. There was a wall behind her. She could feel it when she leaned back. She knew that it was grey. She followed the grey paint into the next room, which was carpeted in a dusty green, like lichen. Sudden sunlight fell in thick strips between venetian blinds. “Look, Viola,” Josette said, pulling back her sweater so her doll could see. “Look, a piano!”

It was a baby grand; dark, maybe mahogany. Josette took Viola out and scooted her over the top to show how smooth it was. The doll left no trail; it was a well-dusted place.

Steps rose to the right, two carpeted flights with white railings and dark, silky banisters. But Josette turned left, through an archway, into the living room. Or maybe it was supposed to be a library; empty shelves stretched floor to ceiling. There was a fireplace, too. Flint, though. Viola preferred fieldstone.

There were prints on the walls representing something wan and ghostly. Josette couldn't quite make them out in the room's dimness. She searched for a switch to turn on the chandelier, then gave up and walked out through a different door, into another empty room with bare, bright windows. There were four buttons on the far wall: two ebony circles beneath two protruding cylinders of pearl. She pushed the pearl stubs into the wall and the two ebony buttons shot out. And brilliance swam overhead, a whole party's worth of sparkling lights. She could see the prints quite clearly now from where she stood, lighted by the library's smaller chandelier. They were intricately frilled orchids with wide, speckled mouths.

Cream carpet, cream silk curtains, cream ceiling, arched and florentine with cherubs. The room was saved from its single-mindedness, though, by the leather covering its walls to the height of Josette's chin. Darker cherubs flourished there, amid tobacco-colored curlicues and sober squares.

"What do you say, Viola?" Josette asked her doll. "Me, I'm just not sure..."

She had turned left into the library, right into this place, which she decided must be the dining room. A door with a push plate led off to the right again. The kitchen?

Yes. Yellow like a daffodil. A cookstove, white porcelain steel topped in gleaming stainless. A sleek, slumberous freezer and a stodgy, upright refrigerator, both once-white,

## Our Fruiting Bodies

currently-ecru. But the counters appeared to be composed of compressed eggs, lightly scrambled. In butter. And the walls glowed cheerfully, electric saffron. And the glass-fronted cupboards, and the drawers below, and the linoleum below that. The color of morning, the color of our sun. Josette smiled. “I think,” she told Viola, “I think maybe—”

A keychain jingled loudly. From where the linoleum descended in narrow steps came other metallic noises: The springing slide of an aluminum door closer, the heavy, brassy tumble of an opening latch. A woman’s voice started out muffled and grew suddenly clearer over the sound of an opening door: “—ay in the van, sweetie, I’ll just be a second, all I have to do is turn off these lights I left burning...” Footsteps scuffed quickly up the stairs. Then a woman stood at the top, auburn head bent as she dug in her purse. She hadn’t seen them yet. “Don’t be scared,” said Josette. “Hi.”

The woman froze, then peered up through fine red hair. “Uhh,” she said. “O.K., I’m not scared. Especially since I’ve got a 9 mm Sig Sauer in here, and it’s loaded, and my boyfriend’s right outside in the van. So I’m not scared, thanks. So let me ask you what the hell you’re doing in here?”

“A gun?” Josette hugged Viola tighter. “I—I was just looking. The door was open, and I’m interested in buying—”

The woman flung her head back and smacked her forehead with one hand. “Baby-jesus-son-of-mary!! *That’s* what I forgot. I thought it was just the lights. I left the goddam *door* unlocked.” Josette backed away as the woman walked briskly through to the dining room. “Excuse me but I—” Her voice became too faint to hear as she moved towards the front of the house. Josette followed slowly. “—dinner with his folks, and we’re already late. Get that switch for me, will you?” she said, coming back into the dining room.

Josette nodded and turned off the chandeliers. A snowy twilight replaced the glare, gently washing away all contrast.

Josette decided she liked it better this way. Although maybe candles would be best. “How much do you think they’ll settle for?” she asked, trying to sound casual.

“Didn’t you just hear me saying? It’s sold. Closed yesterday morning. But the ad was in, so I left the signs up and had the open house anyhow. Good way to meet people.”

Josette felt her flimsy hopes crumpling like foil. “They closed? On a Saturday?” Her voice sounded high and tight. “Don’t you still have to get the mortgage approved and the title searched and—and stuff?”

“No mortgage. Cash.” The woman rummaged through her bag again. “Here’s my card. Julie Saunders.” She handed it over. “Sure, there’s a chance things will fall through, but I wouldn’t waste my time holding your breath. Maybe I can help you find something else, though. Give me a call.” She noticed Viola and eyed her suspiciously. “You got kids?”

“No.”

“Good. Makes it easier. Well—” She paused meaningfully.

“O.K. Thanks.” Josette turned and walked through the cheerful yellow kitchen, down the four steps to the side door landing, and out. This was not going to be their house. Her eyes hurt, and walking down the concrete drive made tears spill over and fall out, warming her face. She had a pack of kleenex in her bag. Back in the cab, she dug it out and scrubbed away at her cheeks, still weeping. “It’s sold already. Let’s go.”

“Hey,” said Holly. “Hey, listen. It wasn’t the right one.” The cab was in motion. The house was already behind them, out of sight. “I mean it. I mean, if it hadda been the right one, you guys woulda got it, right? But it wasn’t. Really. Honestly, now, was that place, like *perfect* for you?” She waited long enough for Josette to realize she ought to answer.

“No.”

“-Course it wasn’t. Cause there’s some place better, better for *you*, somewhere down the road.”

## Our Fruiting Bodies

“You don’t—you can’t even begin—” Josette cut herself off before she said something inconsiderate. Holly was just trying to help her, with that tacky taxicab philosophy.

“Oh, yes, I can.” Holly pulled up at a stoplight and turned around to face her, dim and multi-colored in the sodium and traffic glare. “See, my ex is just about done with her doll. Housemaid’s Tale, that’s what *she’s* got. We’re still friends, and she’s been telling me stuff... I’m gonna miss her when she goes...”

Another initiate. Only the fifth she’d met since leaving the temple—well, heard of, anyway. “Oh, Holly, oh, that’s wonderful. I’m sorry—”

“No, it’s cool. But see—” The light changed and she swung around to drive. “—see, you gotta *know* it. You’re gonna find your place, Josette, and it’s gonna be kickass, just absolutely swollen... How long you been on the road?”

“Four years.”

Holly absorbed that in silence for a short while. “Right. So you’re closin in on it now, see?”

Josette tried to see. Then she gave up and just looked out the window.



The candle guttered, burning low. spurts of sooty smoke rose and disappeared. Josette’s skirts swished silkily against her bare legs as she spun before the altar. “Ooh, pretty,” Viola said. “Do it again.”

“Not now, there’s no time. We’ve got to get you tucked in before I go.”

“Please?” The doll’s sad, painted eyes were hard to resist. Josette twirled once more and her skirts swirled out: crimson, amber, viridian, waves of ocean blue. “All right, Miss Muffet,” she said as she stopped, “off your tuffet.” She swooped Viola up in her arms and waltzed her to the bed. Gold tissue floated



from her head, caught and wrapped and tied around her arms and breasts in careful knots.

Her doll was unusually silent as she helped her into her night gown and tucked her in with the already somnolent Mr. Bun. Josette thought at first this was because of the candle. It was just about out.

But as she bent to kiss Viola's cheek, she saw a fold, a worried wrinkle in the spot between where her eyebrows ought to be. "What's wrong?" she asked.

Viola's soft red lips twisted. "Auntie Josette," she said, her dry voice filled with dread, "you're not going to let him *hurt* you, are you?"

"No, darling. I'll never let anyone hurt me. Never, ever again."

"That's good." The doll settled back on her pillow, and the flame went out.

Josette glanced at the radio. Eight minutes to. She liked to be reasonably prompt when dealing with clients. It made it easier to keep things on a professional footing. She picked up her tool-kit, slipped her sandals on, and headed out the door to work.

Danny Woods' room was on the sixteenth floor, three stories up. She took the stairs to avoid crowds. And so that she could stand on a landing and sing:

"I wish I were a little bird,  
With wings, that I could fly;  
Then I would fly to my own true love,  
And when he'd speak, then I'd be by..."

The echo was surprisingly mellow, for all that concrete. Not to mention metal railings.

"My heart would flutter like the wings,

## Our Fruiting Bodies

To see my own dear one;  
And pretty words I'd like to sing,  
All beneath the morning sun..."

She opened the fire door and there he was, waiting, a silhouette that loomed against the dim hall light. His hair was loose and fanned out in long curls, past his waist. Josette smiled coolly and walked forward. It was like moving into the shadow of a fir tree on a moonlit country road. Keep going, she told herself. That's how you reach the light.

"I heard singing, and I thought it must be you." He turned so they were standing side by side and started down the hall. She could see his face, the grin.

"Am I late?" The door to his room was propped open, and they went in.

"No, I got back early. Didn't want you to have to stand around." He nudged a green cushioned stool out of the way, and his door slammed shut. "Want the heater on? Window open?"

"I'm fine, thanks." The room was a double. A brown hard-shell suitcase and a camera occupied the far bed. Josette sat down on the end of the near one, and set her toolkit near her feet. The spread and carpet almost matched. Rose and burgundy.

This was always the hardest part. Sometimes the client knew exactly what he wanted. Sometimes he even knew he would be paying for it, though usually not how much.

At least Danny Woods had heard of the Women of the Doll. Josette brought them up right away, while he poured her out a glass of pineapple juice from the vending machine. She sipped the sweet, tinny stuff politely and listened to him trying to explain.

"They're a secret organization—" he started out to say.

"No. Not secret. Hidden."

He sat on the footstool and cocked an eyebrow at her. “There’s a difference?”

“A secret is something you can’t tell. By definition. If you can tell it, it’s not a secret. Never was.”

“Whereas hidden just means hard to find. I can appreciate that. Okay, so they’re hard to find, and they help women in some sort of trouble, different kinds, I guess. And the women they help—do things for other people. For a—um, consideration.”

“Donation,” Josette corrected him.

“And we’re talking about this right now because you’re—”

“It’s tax deductible,” she told him. “501(c)-3. Religious and charitable.”

“But, Josette—” He reached for her, then stopped himself.

“Danny. In return I promise I’ll give you *everything*. Whatever you want.” Except her suffering. She would not be made to suffer, ever again.

“Everything’—in return for what?”

She opened up the kit, got out the terminal. “I run your card through this, and you sign a blank authorization form. Just like they do here at the hotel.”

“But Josette, that’s—that’s stupid, I can’t do that!”

“Sure you can. Think how proud your accountant will be.” She patted the bed beside her. “If you don’t think it was worth it, when the bill comes, tell the bank it was a computer error. Give them a different figure. We won’t protest it.”

“Never happened before, hunh?” She shook her head. Her veil rustled. The sound seemed to draw him. He reached into his pocket and brought out a worn leather wallet. “I must be crazy,” he said, handing her his Visa. His hazel eyes pleaded with her to tell him he wasn’t. He had an awful lot of fight in him, to be thinking even semi-rationally after this long in proximity. Josette wondered where it came from. She took his card with a casual scrape of one short nail against his palm,

## Our Fruiting Bodies

and still he stared at her, unbelieving. “Am I really doing this?” he asked.

“You won’t regret it,” Josette promised.

While waiting for account to clear, she tried to get an idea of what he wanted. Often it worked best just to ask. He seemed reassured by her question, and answered it with another of his own. “Simple version or the complicated one?”

“Either. Both.” She set out her work candle and lit it. Then the incense.

“O.K. The simple version is I want you, as much of yourself as you’re willing to share with me at this time, in this place.” Viola, she thought in sudden panic. He wanted to get at her doll. But he didn’t, couldn’t know. He went on. “If this is how it has to be for now, that’s fine. It’s a limited setting, but a definite improvement over the escalator at O’Hare, or the limo stand outside that place in Berkeley, the hotel with the Edwin Hopper hallways. Or that florist’s in Madison, or—”

“You’ve run into me before.” Had he built up some sort of resistance over time?

“Right.” He held his hunger back, clasped it in with arms crossed below his knees. “The complicated version—I can’t—can I touch you? Or do I have to use only words?” He held out one hand, kept it fairly steady in the air.

“All right.” She wasn’t going to figure him out any other way.

He stood closer and ran his palms lightly over the silver veil. “I want to, I want—” He tugged the veil back and bent to kiss her hair. His breath circled gently in, gently out, whispering among the tips, warming the roots. Hot on her crown, then spiraling down to her forehead, feathering the fringe. The slightest touches of his tongue drew points of light along her brow and outward, vanishing. Then his lips were firm, pressed full on the center.

“Ahh,” she said. A sound like a snowdrop, blooming early.

“That, that,” he murmured. “Yes. Josette...” He sank down beside her on the bed, and used his chin to brush aside the fabric where it drifted around her neck. A river of delight ran down to the hollow above her collarbone and collected there. He lowered his head and lapped it like a deer. She sighed and melted against him, soft as heated honeycomb. “And this, Josette—” he whispered in her ear. He swept his tongue out and around in a circle behind it, searching. He found the spot and washed it patiently, faithfully, through her hisses, cries, and trembling sobs. She came, her voice arching high, trying to describe to someone, anyone, the pitch of pleasure’s peak.

“That,” he said, lowering her gently to the bed. “That’s what I want. In a moment, I’m going to want you to give me more.”

Josette stirred weakly on the rosy coverlet. He’d received some of whatever he was looking for, yes, but unless she got him to make an offering the temple labs could accept, she’d have to bring about a really spectacular healing. No other way to justify charging more than her expenses. Usually she was able to cure her clients of some unintentionally inflicted childhood wound. That’s why they never argued over her rates. Only how could she concentrate enough on him to sort out the source of his troubles, while serving up the kind of responsiveness that would keep him satisfied?

She watched him while he untied her bodice knots with patient hands. The fingers were surprisingly strong, the knuckles scarred white in the midst of his uneven tan. Her golden tissue unwound in satiny profusion around her on the bed. Her breasts, fully exposed to her client’s gaze, waited stoically for his touch. Instead, his hands slipped around her waist, resting comfortably in its curves. “Ready?” he asked. She nodded, and his hands slid under all four waistbands, then spread to stretch the elastic. They cupped her buttocks as she lifted them, obedient, and let the filmy colors slide below.

## Our Fruiting Bodies

Carefully he raised her sandaled feet and freed them of the fallen skirts. "I wish you could see yourself right now," he said as he knelt before her on the floor. She didn't tell him that she didn't need to. She knew what she looked like. Mirrors. There was one right now on his closet door.

Her sandals were coming off. That was it; nothing left. Now he could fuck her. But Danny Woods stayed where he was. He lifted her left foot and sucked the bone of her ankle, so hard, so vulnerable, her whole life so forlorn.

Like leaves his fingers brushed up against her calves. He spoke. "Can I get you to turn over? And you'll probably want to move a little higher on the bed." Those were the last words he uttered for an hour. She had an orgasm in the back of her left knee, another, longer, in the right. Another one six inches up from that. Mounting to heaven like a lark in the morning, each height feeding and leading to further exaltation. Of which she sang.

When he stopped, the spread beneath her was sodden, dark as the carpet. "Thank you," he said. "My dear."

Soon she was able to move again. She turned on her side, facing him. He was still half-dressed. Beyond him, the candle burned steadily at half its height. In its half-shadow, she saw his shy grin, dog-teeth gleaming.

What should she do? Asking hadn't worked, and she wasn't getting anywhere this way, either. She smiled back sleepily, let her eyes flutter shut and turned away, nestling her shoulders against his broad, bare chest. He hesitated hardly at all, then wrapped his arms around her, cradling her toward him.

Keyed up the way he was, feasted on her arousal, it took her quite a while to bring him down. Bit by bit, though, he relaxed around her. She timed her own breath, shifted the intervals slowly, lulling, set her heart beat rocking both their bloods, stilly, stilly, stepping over seconds stretching longer, longer...till at last, her client slept.

Cautiously, she opened her eyes, then shut them back up tight. The mirror on the closet door; the lights were off, and her work candle burned low. But maybe the dark reflections could help—she'd never tried before, but maybe they could show her someone else's story, the story of Danny Woods.

She slid off the bed quickly, so as not to break the slumber. Slipping around to the far side, she peered over her sleeping client's shoulders, into the shadowy surface confronting her. In there he was young, very young. Only a little boy, with a look of stubborn, customary loneliness. Around him the room's dimness swirled in shapes like angry screams. Nothing more specific showed itself, and she gave up, resuming her place on the bed.

Rough childhood, Josette thought. But there's a fair chance he knows that much himself. She wasn't going to get away with more than a couple of hundred for tonight, and no offering. Not even enough to break even. Not unless she at least got her client's pants off for him.

She let loose of the slumber. Her client stirred, but didn't waken. Resistant, was he? Perhaps she'd been too sophisticated in her approach. She focused, made adjustments upward. Her sweat sharpened, breath hardened—not with delight, but with dirt-simple demand. A calculated grind brought her the contours of good news: through sleep's light draping, Danny Woods had responded.

Suddenly his hands held her shoulders, twisting her clumsily, face down. The too-soft mattress shifted as he came to his knees, bore left and right as he stripped the denim off one leg, then the other. Then he was on her, kneading and nipping, urging her haunches higher. The sheath, she had to check the sheath, make sure she still had it in place. She freed one hand, felt the rolled rim, numb among her sensitive wrinkles, and braced herself once more, barely in time.

## Our Fruiting Bodies

Without a word he thrust inside and worked away. Fierce, not fancy. Without a word, but soon not silently. Strange, muffled grunts, snuffles, snorts, and growls came from him as he rose and fell, rose and fell. The pace increased, as did the noise, and Josette risked another look into the closet mirror. Her heart jumped shut as she found and met them there, those yellow, glowing eyes. Held them, poised for flight or fight, those wild eyes of the beast. And stayed still, gazing as her blood slammed back through, opening its accustomed gates. Pulse pounding, she considered pretending not to notice the eyes, with pupils slit, not round, and the fur roughening her client's silhouette, already pretty vague within the mirror's frame. And without, his skin still seemed smooth and relatively hairless to her touch. It—he—obviously didn't expect he would be seen this way. After a short, puzzled pause he went back to his business. He made his offering and collapsed with her in a fairly graceful heap. From there he fell into another sleep, this time his own.

She lay and rested on her back a while, feet up, knees held loosely to her chest so she wouldn't lose a drop. Throughout it all she'd felt no threat. Once she'd checked to find him unchanged outside the mirror, the fear, like dry ice, had evaporated, leaving no residue except an odd chill, and a lingering curiosity.

She glanced at the work candle. It still had a little more to burn. Should she tell her client about encountering the beast? She wasn't exactly sure of their relationship. Was the one the other's curse? Or animal emblem? Was Danny Woods possessed, or just lost in a story he had no idea how to tell? A sudden tide of liquid wax swamped the candle's wick and snuffed it out, deciding her. She had done enough for one night.

She rose, picked up her tool kit and felt her way into the bathroom, where she carefully removed the sheath. Singing softly. It had, after all, gone fairly well.



“Oh, when I was a lass at school,  
I looked up at the sky;  
And now among the woodlands cool  
Gathering sweet primroses, I...”

She took her oversized tee and orange tights from her toolkit’s bottom tray and sat down on the stool to pull them on. Leaving the door ajar for the light, she came back out to the bedroom. Her skirts were on the floor, still. She picked them up and smoothed them out, letting them hang over one arm.

“Josette—”

She turned. Danny Woods was awake. He had propped himself up on both his elbows. His hair swam over his bare shoulders, tangled currents running down the hollow of his back. “What?” she said.

“Nothing. Just—Josette.”

She found the veil and rolled the skirts in it. Stuck the candle remains in a small brown paper bag, ready for disposal.

She paused at the door. What would it be like to stay with him, to hear his tale and tell him hers? A white man, but he hadn’t committed any racist stupidities, at least not yet. The beast, though...and Viola. They might not like it, either one.

“Good-bye,” he said, turning away.

“O.K.” she said. She left.

The hallways were as murky as ever, night and day and night and day again. Outside some doors pairs of shoes stood, waiting to be polished, or stolen, or ignored. She called the elevator. It came quickly. They always did around four in the morning, convention or no.

Back in 1213 she drank a couple of glasses of tepid tapwater, loaded the sheath’s contents into a cryoflask and checked out Danny Woods’ credit info. The card he’d given her had

## Our Fruiting Bodies

thirty-three hundred available. Low. Must be the one that he'd been travelling on. She took a third, but left the line open, undecided. Maybe it ought to be more...danger pay. But had she really been in danger?

She didn't know. She was tired, and so she shut it down.

It had been a long, long night, but she got out the candle fixings anyway: lavender and lotus and mugwort oil. Baby powder. Clover seed. A pinch of earth from Milham Park, in the town where she was born. And a blue ceramic bowl to mix them in.

She thought again about the house that afternoon. The wrong one, obviously. Holly had been right. Only, it was so long now since they had started looking. And Viola needed a home of her own so desperately.

Josette's eyes blurred. She blinked and shed quick, hot tears into the blue bowl.

Mix wet and dry ingredients with rapid strokes. One more thing, she thought, and lowered her head to the bowl. In, out, in again, she breathed the sweet, musty aroma. There.

She was in the middle of anointing the votive when a knock came at the door. She glanced at the radio. 5:45 a.m. She hadn't ordered any breakfast. She ignored the knock and kept working. It came again, a short while later. This time a white sheet of paper followed, sliding under her door.

The water on the altar looked a little cloudy. She changed it, then lit the new candle.

Her doll slept peacefully. Her small chest rose and fell steadily now, in the light of the low flame. It seemed a pity to disturb her, so Josette packed as much as she could beforehand. Then it was almost seven. That would be a good nine hours.

She called a courier for the cryoflask, then picked up the phone again to order a cab for 8:30. The dispatcher put her on hold, to the tune of Sammy Davis, Jr.'s "The Candy Man." While she waited, she gave in and read the note. Several times.

It was short; all it said was “I love you.” No signature. The handwriting belonged on a blueprint, even and precise.

The line clicked and the dispatcher was back. “To Metro,” she told him. “My flight leaves at ten-thirty. AM.” She gave him the hotel’s address, then asked, “Is Holly driving this morning?”

“I don’t know. I can take a message for her, if you like.”

On the bed, Viola stirred and pushed sleepily at the covers. “That’s all right. Thanks.”

“Thank you for calling Rite-Ride.”

Josette went and sat on the bed. “Hey, squids, you ready to motivate?”

Viola smiled and stretched her short, fat arms. Josette loved to watch her wake up this way, with the candle going. The doll’s face shone with joy.

But when she saw the suitcases, she sobered up a bit.

“Do we *have* to go already, Aunt Josette?”

“I’m afraid so, darling. There’s no place for us here.” She paused in buttoning up Viola’s pink cardigan. The buttons were white and yellow daisy shapes. She twirled them around in her fingers while she spoke. “I think, maybe, yesterday was a good lesson.”

“I was sad we couldn’t get the house,” Viola said.

“Yes, but...it wasn’t right, it belonged to someone else. If we’re going to start another temple, it has to really be our own. I think we’re going to have to just make it. From scratch. From the ground up.”

“Is that going to be a lot of work?”

“Probably.” Josette pulled her blond mohair sweater over her head. It was big; it came down to her knees. “So we better get going. We’ve got enough saved up to buy some land that’s really *beautiful*, maybe on a lake, even.”

“O.K.”

## Our Fruiting Bodies

“What’s the matter? You don’t seem too enthusiastic, Viola.”

“Auntie Josette, are you ever sorry you made me?”

She picked her doll up, cradled her in her wooly arms. “Oh, darling. *No*. Never. Before I had you, everything was horrible, just awful. I never got to smile or play, or anything. It was like I was dead, Viola. But now I’m alive, honey. Cause you’re alive. And why would I be sorry about a thing like that?” She kissed Viola’s long, black braids. “I love you, you silly squid!”

“And Bunny too?”

“And Bunny too. Now we better get you in the purse or we’ll miss our ride to the airport.” She got her doll to sit down in her handbag, with Bunny on her lap.

The stones were packed away. Only the votive and water remained. She snuffed the candle, emptied the water in the sink, stuck the still warm votive in a wax bag in her coat pocket. Wheeled her bags out into the hall.

One last look around. Nothing left behind, she thought, and closed the door on 1213.

Down to the lobby. She was going to miss this floor.

The same clerk checked her out as in. Her eyes were red-rimmed now, from tears or smoke or lack of sleep, Josette couldn’t tell. But her perky smile was identical. “Did you enjoy your stay?” she asked, trying to disguise her curiosity. The cryoflask gleamed cryptically on the beautiful, dark counter between them, waiting to be picked up.

“Oh, yes. Can you tell me, has the party in 1610 checked out yet?”

“Doesn’t look like it. Want me to ring them?”

“Oh, no, it’s too early. Just see that he gets this.” The card was embossed, pearl on white. “Women Of The Doll,” it read. “Tell us what you want.” No address. Just a phone number, prefix 1-900. She was sure he would be using it. Any messages would be forwarded to her.

A car horn sounded outside. "Come again!" chirped the clerk as Josette hurried to the door. As she stooped to ease her luggage wheels over the threshold, she noticed a place where the marble floor was cracked. It looked loose. She pried up a small section and put it in her pocket. Bit by bit, she would build it, her own place. She and all the others. Piece by piece.