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Trudy Lewis

Old Wives' Mail:
a short story

Carol brought in the mail-- always-- and this was just one of the many tasks Doug inherited when she died of a brain aneurysm in mid September in the sixth year of their marriage, no warning, just one day she was cutting up a pear for their son's breakfast as Doug left for work, her feet bare and her faded blue underpants showing beneath a stretched-out T-shirt, and the next time he saw her she was lying on a hospital stretcher, her hair still wet from her morning shower, her shredded nylons twisted around her skinned but shapely calves, a broken string of pink spit slung across her half made-up face. Cal had been with her at the time--she was scheduled to take him to the babysitter's at nine-thirty-- and thank God at least he knew enough to run over to the neighbor's, whom Carol had never particularly liked because the lady made a point of staying home full time with her daughters, doing meticulous yard work, and not allowing junk food or the cartoon channel in the house. Such a woman, Carol said, obviously had no inner life. Doug, for one, didn't know that he missed it, especially when Sheily wore a particular black-and-red swimsuit to trim the hedges and he sat nearby on the deck with his palm pilot waiting for her to reach the lower boughs. Still, he hated to have the soulless bimbo be the one
to find Carol in that state, not to mention the house-- the damp magazines stuck to the bathroom counter; the half-finished train curtains twined around the kitchen table with the junk mail, three discarded juice boxes, a nail clipper, and an open crate of crayons mixed with the remaining chunks of pear; the laundry stacked up on the snagged green sofa stained with mustard; blocks jammed into the open mouth of the VCR, videos stashed in the pots of the house plants, library books lying open on the chairs and floor offering free beaver shots to anyone who cared to look, and the dustpan, still filled with odd scraps of paper and the bright pieces of a broken toy, perched like a bird of prey on top of the t.v.--all the things of which Carol was so protective and simultaneously so ashamed.

That was Evil Thing One.

Evil Thing Two: he and Carol had not been getting along. For maybe the past six months she had been angry all the time, her narrow tanned face contorted, her once expressive movements jerky: cutting fruit or cheese, gathering up clothes for the laundry, banging on the computer keys in the old walk-in pantry she'd claimed as an "office." Even her smell, a kind of mint tea tang which he had always loved, turned acid, went south, took on an aftertaste of dill and lime. What was wrong? The mail was late. The part in Cal's hair was crooked. She couldn't access her Netscape. The burners on the stove would never be entirely clean, ever. She needed to be alone.

Well, you have your way now, bitch, he couldn't help thinking.

Which always ultimately led to Evil Thing Three: the last time they'd had sex, he hadn't been his usual self. They had been in the basement assembling a fort for Cal's birthday, fitting together the prefab pieces while trying to decipher the rocket science instructions, and something about the motion, the unaccustomed teamwork, the heft of Carol's hips inside her white cargo shorts, the whiff of frustration coming out from her imperfectly shaved armpits, cranked up his libido to such a degree that he actually risked rejection and went for the groin.

"Why not?" Carol said. "It's your turn--or is it? I can't remember anymore."

He'd barely levered her up on the pre-Cal futon, which now served as an in-home bar and lounge for the weekly round of domestic drinking, and gotten inside, when he felt the pressure surge and had to start visualizing unfinished home repairs. Ten strokes, fifteen. The clog in the garbage disposal, the caulking in the shower. Anything under fifty wasn't even respectable. The drip in the laundry room, the weatherproofing wearing off the deck, the cracked plaster over Cal's bed. Any less than that, he certainly wouldn't be getting up to bat again any time soon.

Carol, who was wet as a rained-out baseball diamond, must be feeling something. But with a woman-- or so she told him-- the physical cues meant next to nothing. Hard-tipped nips could be attributed to cold or fear; vocalization said more about her dramatic capabilities than her orgasm tally, lubrication had as much to do with the time of month as the level of stimulation.

Doug gave in at fifty-five, with a shout and a quake, as if he were skidding into home plate and part of his body just kept on sliding right past. That was it-- finished-- the last drop of his ego drained from the keg.

Then Carol died, her mother and his arrived to make the arrangements, Doug spent three nights sleeping in Cal's room while the boy kicked and cried and screamed "I want Mommy," over and over again, in a mindless mantra that eventually wore an ulcer into Doug's gut. At four, Cal had been toilet trained for almost a year, but Doug woke every morning drenched in piss, smelling of regurgitated orange juice and worse. He knew it was wrong, but when Cal went on like that, he had a sadistic urge to tell him the real truth--his mother was just gone, nothing left, her body already decaying under the undertaker's careful lacquers, all the secret parts that she had denied her husband rotting in their own liquorish juices, her hard heart of a cervix caving in on itself for good. Then he looked at his son's wet eyes in the darkened room and the wave of evil passed. He was a good man again, he acted the loving father and stroked the boy's coarse and curly hair. Cal looked, it was said, like his father, which was gratifying for them both. But Carol was there, always lurking, in the sharp corners of the eyes, the overlarge underlip, the high forehead framed by random spit curls.

After everyone left, Doug apparently forgot to check the mail for several days, because by the time he remembered the box was full. What came by mail anymore but catalogues and bills? Now, of course, there were the condolence notes, which arrived in a big dump immediately after the funeral and then dribbled on for weeks. Black-edged stationary and inspirational verses; folded hands and crosses for the traditional set; sunsets and rainbows for the cover-your-butt agnostics. The friends and family were about evenly divided, his family a mass of variously staid and straying Catholics, hers a loose band of Methodists, their mutual friends a collection of adamant secularists and virtuous New Agers. Doug himself was just shy of atheistic, although he kept his dead father's Saint Christopher medal hanging from his rear-view mirror, just in case.

Carol, apparently, had been well loved, and the notes indicated that she'd made an impact in her thirty-four years. Whether that made him feel worse or better, he didn't know. Maybe he was the only one to milk the particular sour strain of her disposition which had dominated in those final weeks. Friends from her part-time job at the hospital commented on her cheery attitude with the mostly terminal patients, her sly sense of humor, the collection of bizarre news stories and she kept posted at her work station. His coworkers at the distribution center remembered her pea salad with water chestnuts and the attention she paid to their children at the company picnics. An old friend claimed she found him the job he'd had for over a decade. Shelly, the next-door neighbor, wrote that she was sorry
they never got to know each other better, Carol seemed like such an involved mom.

One day, coming home from a particularly bad team meeting, Doug dumped Cal and his backpack on the porch, reached into the box, and pulled out a big pile, catalogues discreetly folded over the envelopes, as if to conceal any personal communication which might have managed to slip through. Another death note, a charity plea for Carol--he was used to that by now--a credit card bill, and something else actually addressed by hand. Of course, this could be a trick employed by the most brazen of the mass mailings--even his own company was known to indulge. But this hand was familiar, the high stems of the letters, the tiny hooks and eyes, the mean impatient lean to the right.

Carol Drummond, plain as the signature on her last unmailed car payment.

Cal was squatting down at the foot of the steps and poking at the cement with the strap of his backpack. Around him, the leaves shuffled and resettled. "Go to your home, you woolly worm," he said. "You gotta have your snack."

She had addressed a letter to herself. Why would she do that? Doug had heard of such a practice--writing a letter to your future self, reminding the older version of your youthful resolutions or dreams. But it seemed like too long-term a task for Carol--who was always in the middle of several projects--to complete. Besides, the envelope was awfully light to sum up a life. In the afternoon glare, he could see that the enclosed paper, whatever it was, didn't even fill the business-sized envelope. And it looked to be an abrasive shade of lime green, something too distracting for anything but a flyer. What were the pertinent privacy issues here, post mortem? Didn't he own her memory, after all? He inserted a finger and ripped through the envelope so hard the paper fell out, floating slowly enough to evade his grasp, and landed face up among the leaves, where Cal picked it up as if he'd been waiting for it all along.

"Here's your grocery list, woolly worm. You got ice cream, you got noodles, you got hot dogs and grapes and peas."

Immune to the critique of his thrown-together meal plan, Doug squatted down and snatched the paper away from his son, then stayed there crouched uncomfortably in his work khakis and his hard shoes, reading.

HOT ICE REVIEW, the letterhead said, next to a line drawing of a melting cube dripping onto an open flame.

We regret to inform you that your poem, story, essay, other does not suit our current needs. We receive over 2,000 submissions per year, and we can only print those pieces which fill our veins with a savage cocktail of molten lava and ice water and make our eyelashes uncurl.

Thanks for your interest in HOT ICE. Please look for our upcoming issue on gardens and streams.

The Editors

On the spare two inch margin at the bottom of the page, there was an addition in handwritten script--definitely not Carol's. In his heightened state of awareness, Doug imagined that the lush overlapping loops must belong to a big man with a small workstation and an intense nail-biting habit. "Too many nipples for us. But we liked Lonnie and her medical dilemma. Try again sometime."

He knew Carol had been screwing around with the computer--"processing" she called it--but sending her garble out to strangers, that was way beyond the harmless hobby stage. His trick knee buckled and he grabbed onto Cal's shoulder for balance, just as the little boy turned, his face horribly transparent in the afternoon light, and asked, "Do mommies see woolly worms in the ground?"

To which Doug replied he didn't know what they saw, but he sure as hell was going to find out.

Later, after a dinner of canned pasta and a dramatic reading of the sports page, Cal went down in his own bed without the usual struggle and Doug wandered into the old pantry to do some research. Carol had wanted the space for her own, but given the prohibitive price of hardware, they had to share the desk, the phone, the fan, and the IBM knockoff which Doug, with his newly reduced income, would be paying off for at least another year. Doug used the computer for games, mostly, although he often searched the Internet for sports trivia, music news, and travel information, not to mention the occasional blast of sorely needed pornography. Here, among the shelves stacked with cans and reference books, the almost tropic array of houseplants, the desk covered with troll dolls, arrowheads, sea shells, and a hive-shaped honey pot filled with paper clips and pens, Doug had sodomized redheads, golden-showered blondes, menage a troisié with the best of brunettes.

If Carol knew, she never let on. In fact, she seemed more concerned about her own privacy, with which, he always assured her, he had no interest in interfering. But now he searched the files in a panic, looking for anything suspicious. He opened a "Finance" file and saw, as he had already discovered through other means, that she was keeping a separate account for Cal, and that she was further behind on credit card debt than she claimed. He opened a "letter" to her sister and saw himself portrayed as a fond husband and doting dad, repeatedly taking Cal out to the skating rink, which he had done only once in his life, and insisting that Carol keep her hours to a minimum until Cal entered school--her idea, as he recalled. He opened a Recipe File and learned the secret ingredients of the one-pot meals which seemed slightly more appealing after a month of frozen pizza and take-out barbecue.
Too many nipples? The thought was ludicrous.

There was only one explanation: the computer had been cleaned out. There were only a couple dozen files, total, and over half of those were his. Who would erase Carol's memory? It wasn't exactly a case of international espionage.

Doug placed a call to his mother, who claimed no knowledge whatsoever. He placed a call to Carol's mother, an insomniac on a losing streak, who used the occasion as an opportunity to review all of her daughter's endearing traits

Doug couldn't help it, he wanted to blast her. What she was going through was nothing, compared to him. She'd lived with Carol for the allotted number of years, she had the photos to prove it, the prom dress, the soccer uniform, the wedding napkins upon which she had so vehemently insisted, the adorable grandson to complete her credentials as respectable grandmom. But Doug, in the middle of life--saddled with debt, child care, and sexual needs--could hardly afford to lose his life partner, even if she was rude, inadequate, frigid, and mean.

"Hate to interrupt the weepfest, Grammy, but did you happen to log onto the computer while you were here?"

"Now you know I don't have any idea about those things."

"I was just wondering because Carol seems to have left some unfinished business."

"Oh? Well I'm sure you can handle it, dear. Just remember, she always wanted the best for you and Cal. She used to call over here, crying, when she thought she'd put you in the wrong."

Carol crying? What did she have to cry about? Doug had been a good husband--or at least--better than most--as he was able to garner from the women's magazines which accumulated in the bathroom and detailed male failings with hormonal gusto. He washed the dishes every other night, he picked up Cal at the end of the day, he religiously put down the toilet seat. He'd never even had an affair--although tempted--the most he'd done was cop a feel in a bar on a night when Carol was visiting a friend out of town and he'd snagged a babysitter at the last minute, called his buddy Jeff, and headed for the seamy side of town, which had only grown seedier since he'd abandoned it less than a decade before.

"Yeah, sorry to bother you, Grams. Try to catch somes Z's, O.K.?"

But as he hung up, he felt a tap on his shoulder and the long arm of a houseplant dropped directly into his face, its fuzzy tendril bearing an uncanny resemblance, in fact, to the woolly worm which had absorbed Cal's attention earlier in the day. Doug pulled at the tendril and its weight fell off one shelf, then another; he traced it, finally, to a house plant potted in an industrial spool on an upper shelf and yanked the thing up by the roots.

The next day, Doug called Jeff from work and said he was ready to get back on board.

"Took you long enough, old guy."

Jeff, who'd married young, produced three children, and then divorced before the age of thirty, was on the opposite end of the male 7-year cycle. While he changed diapers, Doug had chased tail. While Doug adjusted to home life, Jeff learned the new rules about condoms and custody rights. Now, perhaps their paths would finally meet.

On the way out that Friday, Doug passed Shelly, wearing a tennis skirt and leaning over her plants with an actual watering can, looking like a character from Cal's book of nursery rhymes.

"Hey, Mr. Seldom Seen. What's up?"

Doug was embarrassed. What do you say to the attractive woman who's found your wife dead on the bathroom floor?

"Just going out for a little R&R with my pal."

"Enjoy. And let me know if you ever want to talk about--well, you know, things.

Doug was surprised, really, at his reluctance to leave Cal, even with the brightest and most responsible of the teenage babysitters he and Carol employed once a month or so when they ran up against an unavoidable social obligation. After a brief respite, the boy had taken to sleeping in the king size bed which filled most of what he still insisted on calling "Mommy and Daddy's room" and whose drawers and sub-compartment contained all of the relics of a wrecked marriage: the sticky residue of hippie love juice in a stoppered bottle, time-expired condoms, rags and shrivels of twisted lingerie. This was one space Doug couldn't allow the mom team--TweedleMom & TweedleMum--to clean out, and he certainly wasn't ready to do it himself. Still, the uncompleted chore nagged at him. At night, he could feel the detritus swirling underneath him; he woke up with muscle memories of the outrageous contortions of their pre-marital sex, woke up to the news of her death, as if just announced, and then couldn't go back to sleep. But with Cal next to him, he was less afraid. He felt his son's head lolloping against his; he smelled the sweet baby shampoo and the evil acidic sweat of bad dreams. Then he pressed his forehead to the boy's shoulder and head-butted his way back into sleep.

With Doug out for the evening, who would know how to cut fruit for Cal's snack the way that he liked it? Who would remember about the grownup shower which eliminated much of the shampoo-in-the-eyes trauma at bath time or the guaranteed privilege of fiddling with dad's digital watch for five minutes before turning off the light? Doug had lingered at the door, quizzing the babysitter, whose young body wasn't even much of a distraction in its midriff top and tight jeans. But once he made it out into the yard and encountered Shelly, his resistances were down to zilch.
"Maybe we could get the kids together for a play date," he suggested.

"Busy this weekend?"

And Shelly just winked as she bent down for another go at the potted plants on her porch. Underneath her tennis skirt, the seat of her meant-to-be-displayed panties sparkled in the eerie pink dusk, and Doug felt his desire pulled two ways by the memory of that last sight of Carol in her worn underwear.

At the only respectable bar in town, Jeff was already downing a black and tan and eyeing a blonde.

"How's that for a hottie, guy?" he said, raising his drink toward a twenty-year-old in a tied-up black blouse and leopard-skin pants. "Bet you'd like to get into some of that."

Doug had been married too long; a hottie sounded like a child's candy or a cartoon character to him; he preferred a real knock-out or a babe. Besides, the woman in question had buck teeth to match her pronounced hips and outrageous tits, as if the whole package were one vast expanding universe on the make.

In addition to which, Doug probably wouldn't have a chance with her anyway.

Jeff, now, was a good-looking guy: tall, reasonably fit, with most of his sandy hair still in the nest. Doug should be so lucky; looking in the full-length mirror on the back of the bedroom door, he'd made an inventory: a thinning monk's cap of straight brown hair, skinny legs, chicken chest, a small but recognizable gut he didn't know whether to prop up with his fingers, strong and even teeth. He felt like a woman getting ready for a date. Worse-- because he didn't even have a date--just an agreement to get together with another loser and leer.

As he watched Jeff scout the scene, he wished he were at home with Cal. The new industrial music sounded like disco in heat, the tracks were interchangeable as legos, one locked into the next without variation in pacing or melody, just as the women on the dance floor blurred into one another with their polyurethane sports clothing and their ripped and oiled bods.

"Too many nipples," Doug thought, as he tried to get Jeff's attention by placing a hand on his shoulder and pointing to the t.v., which was tuned, not to the Bears, not the Giants and not to the Cowboys, but, heretically, it seemed, to M.T.V., where a white kid in dirty blond dreadlocks picked at a ukulele with his teeth.

After dancing with three women, Jeff went home with the least attractive, a knuckle-biter with frizzy hair and a big chin. "Always choose the one who'll be too grateful to expect a big follow-up," he told Doug. "You'll thank me in the morning, guy."

Sometimes, Doug thought, it would be nice to hear another person actually use his name. Disillusioned by his prospects, he just sat at the bar and drank with an obscenely freckled girl who claimed to be researching a class paper on phatic communication in a public space. They compared gross-out stories, played football, elementary style, with a bar napkin folded into a triangle, tried peach vodka just for fun. At the end of the night they parted with a drunken air kiss and Doug sincerely hoped they would never see each other again.

Saturday he woke up with a hangover and tried to get Cal to watch videos in the living-room while he napped on the couch. I really need a babysitter for the morning after as well, he thought, then he remembered Shelly's offer and considered suggesting what-- an afternoon at the park, a stroll to the public library, a trip to the petting zoo?

He peered out the door in his T-shirt and boxers to determine that her husband's truck was gone, off to the shooting range or shop as usual. The graying but frisky entrepreneur, called "Ram" by even the most casual acquaintance, was a definite threat, with his punching bag shoulders and his short and sweaty legs. True, before her death, Carol had intimated that a separation or divorce was in the offing, but you could never be too sure. Doug noticed that the mailbox was full again, pushing the serrated lip of the black lid up like the mouth of a dragon. He reached in, looked around for Shelly, and casually skimmed through: four catalogues, three solicitations, a hand-addressed birthday party invitation for Cal, a late notice from the public library, and a utility bill. Then, another letter to Carol Drummond addressed in her own uptight and ghostly hand.

This time, he ripped in without hesitation and pulled a blue half-page out of the envelope.

**SKY MARTIALS**, the letterhead read, Your source for the pulse of the upper limits of the imagination.

Above the words, a helicopter scattered birds and clouds. Beneath, a solid block of print was broken with various inroads in pen and ink.

Dear Contributor (crossed out),

Dear Ms. Drummond

We are sorry to report that we are unable to use your story (Flank Steak for a Dry Streak) at this time. However, the editors found your work to be marginally superior to the mass of unmediated crap and pulp to which we have become accustomed. In the event that you have other fictions in the making, you might consider sending them our way. Some bold and brutal characterization here. But finally, Guy is just too rank for our taste buds.

The Editors

Shelly moved into view, carrying out her neatly tied garbage in a silky...
robe and tap pants which seemed to have been designed exactly for that purpose. Her hair was braided in a loop on one side of her head, just asking to be gripped hard for a ride. Doug stepped back into the doorway, folded the rejection slip and slipped it, like a check for overdue church dues, into a pottery cream pitcher on the bookshelf, where he'd also stashed the last one in his confusion as to whether it should be saved or not. *Too rank for our tastebuds.* He could think about that later.

In the living-room, Cal was cramming another video into the VCR, wearing the sleeve of the Winnie-the-Pooh box in an armband which covered him from shoulder to elbow—a strange kind of mourning for a scattered kind of mom.

"If you watch the movie, you've got to eat your apples. If you eat your apples, you've got to drink your milk. And what do you say, dinosaur? Don't spill your coffee, dinosaur." His voice tilted up at surprising angles that reminded Doug of the hints and needles hidden in Carol's habitual speech.

"Cal, hate to interrupt, bud, but why don't you get dressed now and we'll go see if Shawn and Sarah want to play."

"I don't want to," he said, bringing the boxed arm down on the coffee table with a slam.

"Come on, you've been watching videos all day."

"I don't want to. I don't like their mom. She's scary."

"Scary? Shelly's about as scary as a walk in the park. What's wrong with you, kid?"

"She made me go take time out in my room. She let them take my mom."

And then he removed what little clothing he'd been wearing in the first place, stuffed it under the sofa cushion, and lay face down, naked, on the bare and sticky floor.

That just about did it for Doug, who lifted Cal up and dropped him onto the bed in the boy's room, letting the kid crash and burn there while he rummaged through the impossible dresser drawers, looking for something that wouldn't make him look like the pitiful orphan that he was.

"Here. Socks, shirt, sweatpants, underpants. Put them on and go brush your teeth, we've got to get out of the house, blow off the stink."

"I don't want to get dressed. I don't want to brush my teeth." He wiped at his nose with the sweatpants, then seemed to become absorbed with the turtle design on the shirt. "These are the wrong pants. I wear green pants with the turtle shirt."

Doug felt his pulse beating in his neck. Guy, guy, guy, dick. That's all he was to anyone around here.

"Put on the god damn pants. I don't care if they're purple, green, or pink. I'm the only parent you've got left and you'll by God do whatever I say." As he spoke, he held onto Cal's shoulders and pressed him into the bed, bouncing him up and down for emphasis. Although it couldn't hurt, he knew Cal was scared by the way his eyes widened and his heavy underlip curled inward, too paralyzed, for the moment, to come out with another wail.

"Holy fuck." Doug said, stopping in the middle of a bounce and flexing his hands as if they belonged to someone else. "I'm sorry, little guy. I've got to take a break."

He left Cal crying on the bed and wandered into the living-room decked out in three days of newspapers, through the kitchen with its crowded counters and open dishwasher, and into the cool air of the office, where he could be alone.

Everything was out of control. His wife was dead, his son was catatonic, he was becoming a terrible man, someone who shouldn't be allowed to draw a paycheck or discipline a child. And who knew how many stories about him were out there, circulating. Being sucked in and spit out by wine-tasting, dictionary-humping dweeb's in their little black jackets and effeminate boots.

He turned on the computer, gripped the sides of the terminal, sat down and let his face fall into the keyboard. The machine made a sound like breathing, there was a definite vibration, an electronic buzz. Doug remembered the day after Carol's death, trying to get up out of bed, and thinking of one positive thing to get him going. The fall air came in through the half open window; it smelled of gourds and grass and burning leaves, opened his nasal passages and left a marshmallow taste on his tongue, infiltrated his lungs and made him want to breath in big bright gulps of sheer octane. That was going to be it for a while, he thought. That would have to be enough.

Now he heard the computer breathe with him, he felt the keys giving under his forehead, heard their gristle under the weight of his skull. The smell of her armpits, the thumbprint whorl where the curls escaped from the part at the back of her head, the wet sound in her speech when she spoke of something delicious, the grinding of her teeth the moment before orgasm, the cellulite dimpling her ass like warm tapioca pudding and making him long for a spoon. And then, something he couldn't identify, whatever had spun out of the computer and been released at random into the world.

Spinning in the computer chair, he felt his limbs go brittle, felt a boner taking root at the very base of his being. He wanted to touch the source, but he couldn't get there fast enough, couldn't find the secret spring of the full grown erection leaning toward the light of the computer screen, and wobbling there between coming and going in his lap. He thought back to his porn sessions, the long breasts tumbling out of the leather corsets, the girls straddled over the pommel horse, pale butt cheeks repeatedly parted and penetrated by a black corrugated dildo, a woman's mouth moving up and down a long elegant joystick and leaving a lipstick stain on its head. He put his hand to his fly and pulled out
his own. But there was static in the way, something something something tail; something something something mail. The computer seemed to sing in its box. The plants rustled overhead. His woody bloomed and wilted, wilted and bloomed. He had to pull out the oldest fantasy from its file drawer, the one where he caught a girl with her pants down masturbating in the bathroom and began punishing her for it, spanking her with the toilet brush, doing her with a hairbrush, pinching at her nipples with a pair of tweezers. But when he finally got the familiar image out where he could see it, something had definitely changed. The girl was older, her hair was streaked with a band of white down one side and her whole body was luminously naked under the fluorescent lights. She straddled the freestanding washtub and let the running water flow over her crotch, leaving her hands free to operate her considerable tits, which swung with the slow grace of heavy machinery. Doug stood behind her in the mirror, as close as he could get without touching. He saw his face go slack as her nipples erected themselves, and sprayed straight into the glass, wiping out his reflection in a wash of milk. And then it was as if his whole body was one erection, flaming toward something he couldn't comprehend.

He plugged and plugged until there was nothing to plug into anymore. And then he shot off into space, into the dark, into a whole galaxy it seemed, seeding the universe with his stars.

When he recovered, his hand was covered with spunk. But it wasn't the pleasantly disgusting locker-room substance it had been, the stuff of jokes and circle jerks and orgies. It was just mother's milk mixed with a little egg white in his palm, cake batter fresh out of the bowl. He put his hand to his mouth and tasted it, thinking of the many times he'd made Carol eat herself in the course of their love-making, bringing his lips and fingers from her vagina to her mouth and back again, and wondering why he'd never bothered to taste his own product. Too gay, maybe. Too gross. Too rank for our tastebuds, as they said.

During the following week, October began to show its colors. The tree in the back yard turned from lima bean green to raincoat yellow, leaf by leaf; in front, magenta dominated the earth tones. There were so many leaves on the ground you wouldn't know they'd planted a lawn at all. The weather turned over too, revealing its underside of silver frost, and Doug had to nose out the box where Carol had stashed Cal's winter clothes, the cartoon character sweatshirts and snowflake sweaters smelling of must and rust, the corduroys and denims that looked so diminutive they made him want to cry. Soon, Doug would have to start buying the boys' clothes himself; soon, Cal would outgrow everything with which his mother had ever attempted to cover him. And while Doug steeled himself for the inevitable first trip to the mall, he received several more rejections in the mail, via his dead wife. Crystal Sniffer found the language too clotted; Flatbranch Quarterly worried about the assaults on realism--really, a six-breasted RN?; City Rat wanted more justification for the character's violence. As the notes arrived on their colorful half slips of orange and yellow and pink, he tucked them into the cream pitcher, wondering what he was saving them for. Meanwhile, he held a series of conferences with Cal regarding his Halloween costume--Spiderman or an X-man?-- and tried to get a minute alone with Shelly, who had been more covered up lately as she re-potted her plants and raked her leaves.

"I can do yours too if you want," she hinted, looking tempting even in baggy Chinese gardening pants and a pair of ducklike rubber boots.

But Doug didn't think he could stand to see the bare lawn underneath. His mother-in-law called with good news; during her nightly rounds through the incredible pack rat nest of her apartment, she'd discovered one of Cal's old stuffed toys, a poodle with a pouch on the belly, meant to serve as a secret compartment for pajamas on the occasion of childhood sleep-overs. But when she opened the zipper, she found two computer disks in a blue plastic case. TweedleMum had no computer, and wasn't savvy enough to rent out a console at the local Kinko's. But she thought Doug might like to see them. Should she send them through the mail?

Doug acted uninterested, but said that she might as well. He cleaned out the office, packing all of Carol's knickknacks in a box for Goodwill. He bought new software for the computer on credit and spent hours playing with it while Cal made Play-Doh dinosaurs and snowmen at the kitchen table, pausing every so often to come in and offer his father a snack or ask him to reconstruct an eye or ear. The boy was losing the last layer of his babyhood; he no longer talked to himself or cried for his mother. He brushed his teeth without prompting, refused to be read to, slept alone without complaint, and picked out all his own clothes. Doug was relieved. He didn't have the energy to baby the kid or to shake him out of it either. But, somewhere at the base of his brain, he noted Cal's independence as another passing, another loss. He could see the boy growing up, every night a larger presence under his camouflage sleeping bag. And, simultaneously, he saw the house falling apart: the cracks on the ceiling deepening, the peeling paint on the window sills flaking off in huge chunks of dirty dandruff, the doors hanging so crooked on their jambs that they wouldn't shut without the use of force and then swinging open again at the slightest suggestion of movement on the premises. In his imagination, the two phenomena were tied, as if Cal's giant proportions, his widening shoulders and his towering head, would break the poor frame of their old house in the end.

That's why he wasn't particularly surprised when Cal insisted on the costume he found in the foldout bargain section of the local paper. It was a horrific mass market Dracula complete with cape and bloody fangs. Carol had always taken care of Halloween, usually transforming some ready made product, a pair of pajamas or overalls, into a cock-eyed fantasía of her own design with the use
of needles, thread, glitter, magic marker, and glue—a clumsy approximation of the professional seamstress models which Shelly turned out every year. So Cal was by turns a leopard, a race car driver, a Canadian mountie, and an Arabian sultan. Nothing scary, Carol always insisted, nothing based on a television show. But always, she took on more than she could handle. Always, she was still tacking on a patch or badge when the first trick-or-treaters arrived at the clutch of dusk and broke her concentration, so that her pen or glue stick or needle fell on the floor in a tantrum of curses.

Doug didn't know what else to do, he went ahead and bought the atrocity, the boy deserved a for a kid's party, which she found on a five-year-old approach. But Doug always, as if it mattered to anyone anymore. He got nothing scary, he got his own finger with some women's haircut, and

He raked the lawn: a sexy girl scarecrow in designer jeans and a polka-dot halter lounging on a bale of hay, witch hats settled on the peaks of the bushes, orange and green pumpkins carved to resemble tragic and comic masks, a black cat puppet on a string.

Doug guessed he'd better do something about his own wreck of a yard. He raked the leaves one day after work and found several items he hadn't seen for weeks: an obscene pink frisbee, a green curl comb that was always dropping out of Carol's purse, a plastic Viking warrior with its sword covered in dried mud. Jeff had been after him to try the bar again; his boss was pushing the counseling approach. Doug himself felt more optimistic than he had since the funeral. He got Cal's hair cut, and while he was at it, followed up with his own, the twenty-five-year-old beautician fussing around his ears like a humming-bird and inquiring whether he parted his hair on the left or right and did he want a fade or a fringe, as if it mattered to anyone anymore. He felt her hard, muscled breast brush his cheek, noted the prickle of loose hair under his collar, as he watched Cal pinching his own finger with some women's implement of torture—an eyelash curler, he remembered—and smelled the embalming fluid of the hair gel on his scalp.

On the day before the party, he got his mother-in-law's package in the mail, patched together with the sad masking tape of old age and marked FRAGILE all over in red pen, in a handwriting nearly identical to the one that haunted him. The disks were folded into a scratchy, offsize boy's sweater, as if TweedleMum just couldn't stand to send the bare evidence without some sort of appeasing gift. Doug immediately tossed it on the couch along with the discarded wardrobe of two days and headed back to the office with the disks, forcing the first one it into the computer until he heard the obliging click.

"Flank Steak for a Dry Streak"
"RN Update"
"Missing from the News"

Doug cupped his hand over his mouth and pinched at his upper lip. Then he made a choice and opened Flank. In the interim between command and completion, the computer buzzed: Flank Plank Stank, Rank. He held his hands over the sides of the console, feeling a tickling in his palms as he gripped the box containing the emerging screen.

Then Doug saw the row of unidentifiable figures, most of them not even featured on his keyboard, the row after row of high-tech hieroglyphics crawling and padding and plunging down the page, as if toward some horrible source of the zero and the one. He could try to fix it, of course. He could spend another sorry session of his life fiddling with the repairs, trying to salvage even a little meaning from the general wreckage of his existence. Instead, he expelled one disk and tried the other.

Same file. Same stroke. Same foreign row of figures.

Same straining pulse in the neck and same rage.

He ejected the second disk and tore off the clip, taking the same pleasure as if he were declawing a particularly vicious cat. But the information was still there, stored in its invisible cells. How do you destroy a disk? Drown it? Electrocute it? Trash-compact it till it gives?

Doug wasn't guessing. He went to the living-room and found the pottery cream pitcher on the bookcase, emptied the rejection slips into his hand, then took them into the kitchen and dumped them into the frying pan along with a couple of shots of Jim Beam. On top, he dropped the two disks. When he set the paper on fire with a lighter, it flamed higher than the baked Alaska they'd ordered, for the first and last time, on the Caribbean cruise where they celebrated the decision to marry after all, against all odds and against all reason, swearing to get serious and stop breaking up every three weeks; to buy a house, join a church, raise two dogs and four kids; to sleep together in a sticky cocoon of their own bodies' making every night, no matter what the time of month; to retire and die together in a cabin in the mountains where they could hear the snow melting into waterfalls every spring.

The paper curled into ash, the disks melted into rubber. Doug savored the ugly smells, relished living the worst that could happen to him.

Then he remembered Carol's advice: baking soda on a kitchen fire. He grabbed the box out of the cabinet and slung it onto the frying pan, in a rain of white powder and fresh air.

The next day after work Doug looked in Cal's room for the Dracula costume and found it balled up in a nest of dust bunnies next to the puppet theater. He wondered whether he'd have the time to wash and dry the thing. But once it was actually in his hands, he realized the problem was even worse than what he'd thought. Huge hunks of the cloth had been torn out with a pair of dull scissors; the cape was shredded into rags.
“Cal, come here. What in the frigging Sam-hell did you do to your costume?”

Cal appeared in the hallway with his toy wrench, wearing nothing but a woolen cap and a pair of cowboy boots. “I fixed it,” he said. “Like Mommy always does.”

So they arrived at Shelly’s in father-son makeshift, two cowboys in apologetic hats and boots. As Doug released Cal into the crowd of Power Puff Girls and X-men and Pokemons, he felt a pull in his solar plexus: that’s what happened to a kid without a mother, he had the most pitiful costume in the crew. Shelly’s girls were disgustinglty adorable in their handcrafted Snow White and Cinderella getups, real teases-in-training: painted fingernails, baby lipstick, tiny patent leather shoes. Shelly put a hand on Doug’s shoulder and led him into what in his childhood had been called the rec room, but was now probably a home entertainment center. There he stood dazzled by the view—the papier mache witch holding up a black vat of candy, the glowing jack-lantern lamps, the playhouse covered with construction paper cats and crepe paper spiderwebs, the plastic swimming pool filled with orange jello cubes—and tried to decide whether to take off his hat. Without it, he was barely costumed.

He should be happy, he thought, he had what he wanted, he was finally inside.

Shelly herself was dressed as a mermaid in a bikini top and a long green sequined skirt, its train forked into a definite tail. She had twisted her reddish brown hair into a slick bun and clasped it with a fishbone comb. Up this close, he could see the sparkles in her makeup, the careful wrinkles by her eyes. The husband was no where in sight. What was it with this woman? Didn’t she ever think?

He watched as she led the children in a game of pin-the-nose-on-the-witch, then a round of bobbing for apples amidst jello cubes. He thought of jello wrestling in his youth, two women going at it in a vat of fluorescent goo, so that all a guy had to do was sit back and watch to see every possible angle of entry.

While Doug watched, a little boy inserted a kernel of candy corn into his nose. A little girl dropped her Power Puff wig into the punch. Cal made a quick foray into the jello pool and came out with a Macintosh locked in his teeth. Finally, Shelly handed out plastic pumpkins and described the rules for the trick-or-treat. She’d hired neighborhood kids to stand at the various doors of the upstairs bedrooms and hand out candy. As the children headed up the stairs, she fisted up her tail and collapsed onto the black leatherette sofa. Doug stood above her, wondering where to look. Her breasts squirmed, lopsided inside the bandanna tie of her bikini top. Her skirt showed the exact outline of her exercised thighs.

“Trick or treat,” she said. “What’s your pleasure?”

“Excuse me.”

“Trick or treat.”

Doug picked at a button on his shirt, considering. While he waited, Shelly stood up, grabbed his hand, and pulled him into the laundry room. There, the muck of the household had collected: cereal boxes to be recycled, rags stained with paint and turpentine, dirty laundry sorted into white and colored on the floor.

Stripping off the mermaid tail, Doug saw that Shelly’s body was in fact beautiful—not perfect—the calves stippled with dark hair, the meat loose on the delicate thighs, the pudendum too large and the labia red and oversized, like baloney folded over inside a sandwich. He pushed his tongue inside and tasted the grainy brine. His whole face was slathered in it, he couldn’t see anything outside.

She’d loved him, she hadn’t. He’d failed and she’d died. He couldn’t get much further than that.

So he lifted his head up and went back in for the kill.

Shelly’s body fitted to his differently; when he mounted her on top of the laundry, her breasts hit just under his solar plexus, where the sharp nipples tickled against his ribs. She was so soft he could make eye contact only on the downbeat of each stroke, when she’d flex the rings of her irises, increase the pressure and give him one more thing to think about: Fuck, puck, muck, luck. At first he banged away with abandon, knocking against her pubic bone, knocking the lid of the coffin, knocking the bloom off the rose. Then something gave—her cervix became saturated, his nasal passages widened, the hard knot of hate under his forehead softened to a malleable pulp—and a new space opened, like he was fucking a whole world into being, more and more of it, the kitchen and the bedroom, the deck and the ceiling, the halls and the trees; a bigger world, with room for a whole houseful of children, a more forgiving world, with time for home repairs and ice skating, an unimaginable world, where you could afford to love your enemy, even if she was your wife. He was moving faster and faster, he was going to get there if he could, because now, at the very tip of the reservoir, he saw Carol, in a judge’s robe, high heels, and black stockings, shaking newsprint out of her curls.

“Why’d you do it?” he said, long after he stopped counting, when he was finally done. “I’m not a homewrecker, you know. I didn’t come over to get inside your tail.”

“You looked like you needed it, guy,” Shelly told him, holding her fishbone comb between her teeth and reaching back, her bare breast lifted, to readjust a long scarf of bright hair. “Besides, Carol told me how you were.”

The next March, Carol’s final rejection arrived. It was a full sheet this time, folded and typed on pale green stationary, with a Neanderthal man playing a flute.
Dear Ms. Drummond:

The editors of *Pan's Pipe* sincerely apologize for the inordinate length of time we have detained your manuscript. We initially read the story with pleasure and decided to save it for further consideration. Subsequently, *Flank Steak for a Dry Streak* was lost in our voluminous files. On a second reading, we discovered that the story was not quite as piquant as we had remembered. Either that, or over the interim, our tastes had undergone a sea change. Would you consider shifting the point-of-view or cutting some of the more lurid scenes of domestic squalor and abuse? In any case, we hope that our tardiness will not prevent you from trying us again.

Best Regards,
The Editors

Doug held the letter up to the light and saw right through it. The stamp of the letterhead, the rag content of the recycled paper, the strokes where the printer had beaten the wood pulp to its will. By now, he was dating a woman he'd met at the local Catholic church where he'd been taking Cal to ten o'clock mass. Teresa was still young, just under thirty, a pretty redhead with pink-tinted eyelids and large but shapely thighs. Her engagement had fallen through at the last minute, when the groom broke down and admitted he was gay. There was a terrible scene involving priests and psychiatrists and gay activists; there was stint in group therapy, an uncommitted boyfriend, a computer dating service, a singles-only Bible study. When Doug touched Teresa's white breasts slung high in their lacy elastic bras, she didn't yet fend him off with her elbows. When she complained about her co-workers or started crying in the middle of a completely normal conversation, he didn't retreat to his pornography hut. She would be hinting to move in any week now, to make a new man of him. Doug looked into Shelly's yard fringed with pale green grass blades and stabbed with a "For Sale" sign. He smelled the pollen and paint chips on the wind. Then Cal came around the corner of the house on his new red bicycle, a two-wheeler at last, to scatter the dried bodies of the remaining leaves.