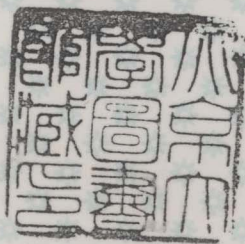


LAVENDER MANSIONS

— 40 —

Contemporary
Lesbian and Gay
Short Stories

edited by
IRENE ZAHAVA



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VALERIE MINER



INTRODUCTION

THE EXPERIENCE OF READING *Lavender Mansions* is like that of getting a sublet in an apartment house where all the tenants are Lesbian or Gay. At first the other residents of *Lavender Mansions* may appear startlingly similar and, depending on your predisposition, this may make you comfortable, uncomfortable, or simply curious. As the days pass, differences emerge. Listen, for instance, to the music seeping from under the doorsills: Sweet Honey in the Rock, Bette Midler, the Kronos Quartet. You begin to distinguish who lives in the penthouse and who resides on the front step. You see older people chatting at the elevator and younger ones carrying their racing bikes down the back-porch stairs. You sit in the lobby on the mock leopardskin couch—pretending to wait for an absolutely crucial package—and you notice how the differently complexioned residents speak in a variety of accents and languages. You kick back and enjoy the fashion show: cross-dressing dykes, campy queens, joggers in sweat suits, executives in business suits. Even the ubiquitous red ribbons are individually knotted.

Before exploring *Lavender Mansions*, you may want to go down to the basement archives and read the rolls of former residents: Henry James, Herman Melville, James Baldwin, Hart Crane, Langston Hughes, Gertrude Stein, Willa Cather, Lorraine Hansberry, Djuna Barnes, Pat Parker. On a wall by the stairs you'll find a yellowed newspaper clipping about how when Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* first appeared, the San Francisco publisher was arrested for selling the book and the author was brought up on obscenity charges. Tacked next to it is a more recent article revealing that James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk* was removed from a St. Paul, Oregon, library in 1989 because of the book's

"obscene language" and explicit representation of sexuality. And a letter posted beneath documents how May Sarton's work was expunged from an academic anthology not because it was sexually graphic but because she was known to be a Lesbian writer. Half the basement is filled with bookcases of well-thumbed novels and story collections. Although Lesbian and Gay literature is often censored in this country, and many homosexual writers have passed as straight, it is useful to remember that the forty stories in this book would not have been possible without the writing that preceded it: work that provides inspiration, provocation, permission to contemporary storytellers. We all owe a debt to those who lived in Lavender Mansions during the times of literary quarantine and frequent, random police raids.

This is a friendly place, so you can get acquainted with "the community" in any way you like. You may want to begin on the first floor, reading the stories in order. Editor Irene Zahava has located the fictions into eight open-ended themes, as if she were charting Lesbian and Gay existence from childhood through old age and death. Since everyone likes secrets, you may want to begin with the "Coming Out" stories. If you're having trouble at home, turn, perhaps, to the "Families" tales. You can ignore the editor's categories altogether and visit old friends first, reading stories by your favorite authors before making new acquaintances. You may decide to read the men's fictions first and then the women's. You may begin with the last story. There is no protocol here: These are narratives about breaking the rules. Read the anthology in whatever way makes you feel at home.

No matter what route you take, you'll find interesting coincidences and parallels in the stories. The sibling feelings between Lesbians and Gay men are explored by both Paul Monette and Rebecca Brown. As Jim says in Brown's "A Good Man," "You may like to think of us all as a bunch of unbalanced, volatile perverts, but every single screaming fairy prancing down this boulevard and every last one of you pissed-off old Amazons is my family. My kith and my kin and my kind." Meanwhile, Tommy in Monette's "Halfway Home" feels closer to his friend Mona than to his own biological family. "Mona's like my sister, she doesn't have to call first."

Both Jaime Manrique and Christopher Bram consider the way a legendary woman can act as catalyst for male intimacy. Christopher Bram's middle-aged government official wins favor with a younger man by agreeing to introduce him to the legendary Filipina: "'Let's go meet Imelda,' he said and grabbed Doug's arm. He led him across the room, wanting to get this over with as quickly as possible so he could be alone with the boy." And after Manrique's protagonist meets a famous film star, he observes, "In my short memory, I had thought running into Carmen Maura was the most fortuitous coincidence that could have happened before meeting my old friend."

The guilty pleasures of infidelity are discovered in stories by David Leavitt and Sandy Boucher. Andrew, in the last scene of Leavitt's "When You Grow to Adultery," finds himself tracing the name of a new lover on his partner's back. "'Jack Selden,' Andrew wrote next. 'I love Jack Selden.' His heart was racing. What if those messages, like invisible ink, suddenly erupted in full daylight for Allen to read? ... Andrew gave himself up to this wild and villainous writing, the messages becoming longer and more incriminating even as Allen moved closer to sleep. ..." Boucher's protagonist in "Humming" declares: "And I like the safety of marriage, the comforting routine, the coziness. My mother encouraged me to develop a practical attitude to life coupled with a vivid appetite for its pleasures. Jeanine cares about Ralph too: she does not want to hurt him."

Mapping the Neighborhood

It's interesting to revisit the original homes for these stories. Before coming to Lavender Mansions, many of these authors were first published by Gay, Lesbian, and feminist presses. Indeed, a number of these writers would not have been published at all if it were not for the welcome they found at alternative houses like Crossing, Seal, Firebrand, Naiad, and Alyson. Of course, authors have all sorts of reasons for publishing with particular presses: economic, aesthetic, political, whimsical. But some writers have more options in housing. If it often seems harder for Lesbians to publish with mainstream houses, that reflects the fact that American Lesbian fiction is notable for focusing on the social and philosophical implications of individual experience, dangerous stuff in a publishing scene hostile to the intersection of art and ideas. In the book industry, Lesbian fiction is also subject to the broader sexism that transcends sexuality.

I am excited to find all these stories collected by an academic press in a volume meant for classroom use. Given the inclination of conservative state textbook boards to ban alternative materials from schools, this anthology is not only a celebration of good writing but also an act of resistance. While the homosexual purges of Joseph McCarthy and Adolf Hitler may seem historical footnotes to some readers, it's not much of a memory stretch to recall the campaigns against gay rights in Colorado, Oregon, and other states. Last year in Oregon, two activists, a black Lesbian and a white Gay man, were murdered for their work against a homophobic law. Similar right-wing campaigns against the civil rights of homosexuals are currently being waged in nine states. In 1988, the British Parliament passed Section 28 of the Local Government Act, which forbids councils to "promote homosexuality." This has caused some officials to remove from public shelves literature that has homosexual references.

When I was teaching at the University of California at Berkeley in the 1980s, a nine-campus survey of the University of California system showed that 36 percent of the faculty refrained from doing research on Lesbian and Gay topics for fear of negative response from colleagues. As many as 41 percent decided against including such material in their courses. Therefore, writing and reading these stories is a frontline experience even for—perhaps especially for—those engaging Lesbian and Gay literature in the ostensible Demilitarized Zone of academic discourse.

Reading Outside the Classroom and Inside Out

For the general reader, *Lavender Mansions* can be a familiar bedside companion or a seductive initiation into a new literary territory. Students and teachers will find it useful in a variety of courses, including English, queer studies, gender studies, and women's studies. They may want to view some pieces in light of Sapphic modernism, Pacific naturalism, postmodern fragmentation. They may dwell on the construction of narrative in various forms: epistolary, diary, biomythography. These stories explore the joyful aspects of Lesbian and Gay life as well as the trials of dealing with homophobia in relation to other, interlocking forms of oppression such as racism, anti-Semitism, classism, and imperialism. Roey Thorpe dramatically names patriarchy as one of these oppressors in "Growing in Defiance":

Two weeks later, I am almost asleep in a room I share with Tammy, one of my housemates, who is sleeping in her bed. Suddenly, a man is on top of me. It is Tammy's friend David, who is supposed to be sleeping on the couch downstairs. David is a born-again Christian, and as he tries to pull the covers off me he is saying that God wants me to experience a man, because homosexuality is a sin.

The diversity of Lesbian and Gay experiences is matched by a diversity in literary theme and aesthetic sensibility. In *Lavender Mansions*, people talk about otherness, invisibility, and multiple identity. They present themselves with lyricism, sober realism, and high campiness. In the end, this volume will be successful when the specialized reader becomes the general reader. *Lavender Mansions* shouldn't get filed away under the scholarly rubrics of sociology or cultural studies. Rather it should land on that shelf of meaningful books that we lend to friends, that we go back and re-read ourselves from time to time. I hope these stories will haunt you. As Eugenio Montale said, good literature is measured by the way it revisits us a week, a year later. The true test of writing is in that "second life of art."

Checking the Utilities

Just as an apartment building doesn't function if it isn't a haven of shelter and warmth—a place where doors open and close and the lights work—a book of good stories must metaphorically provide basic artistic needs such as evocative setting, acute characterization, authentic voice, and sensual description. Because of the way in which Americans publish books and organize classes, we tend to distinguish between modified literature (women's writing, Asian-American writing, Gay writing) and the real stuff (rarely named as white, heterosexual male writing). This is not a modified book, but rather a collection containing elegant, hilarious, profound stories, some of the best writing this country has to offer.

Splendid description of place is found in Judith McDaniel's "The Juliette Low Legacy," and Louie Crew's "Ben's Eyes." Here is Norman Wong's "Cultural Revolution":

People scurried out of the ricksha's way. A thin sheet of dust hovered above the dirt road. Shops—groceries, bakeries, drug stores—occupied the first floor of the buildings. Above, families were crowded in two-room apartments; children hung out of windows, while their laundry blew lifelessly on the line, bleached shirts and trousers. The ricksha drove between the buildings, down an alleyway. Wooden stands sold local delicacies: wilted greens, hanging roasted ducks and dogs, and frogs in straw baskets, climbing on top of each other. An old woman sat on a stool, twisting a live chicken's neck.

I appreciate the inventive, idiosyncratic characterization in Ruthann Robson's "Kissing Doesn't Kill" and Richard McCann's "My Mother's Clothes: The School of Beauty and Shame." Jewelle L. Gomez imagines Billie in "Don't Explain":

Once convinced, Billie became the show again, loud and commanding. She demanded her food be served at the bar and sent Mabel, who insisted on waiting on her personally, back to the kitchen fifteen times. Billie laughed at jokes that Letty could barely hear as she bustled back and forth between the abandoned kitchen and her own tables. The sound of that laugh from the bar penetrated her bones. She'd watched and listened, certain she saw something no one else did. When Billie had finished eating and gathered her entourage to get back on the road she left a tip, not just for Mabel but for each of the waitresses and the bartender. "Generous just like the 'business' girls," Letty was happy to note. She still had the two one dollar bills in an envelope at the back of her lingerie drawer.

Throughout the book is heard a concert of richly individual, everyday

voices, such as in Douglas Sadownick's "Sacred Lips of the Bronx" and Terri de la Peña's "Mujeres Morenas." Listen to Becky Birtha's "In the Life":

I never had time to paint that fence back then, neither. But it didn't matter none, cause Gracie had it all covered up with her flowers. She used to sit right here on this swing at night, when a little breeze be blowing, and say she could tell all the different flowers apart, just by they smell. The wind pick up a scent and Gracie say, "Smell that jasmine, Pearl?" Then a breeze come up from another direction, and she turn her head like somebody calling her and say, "Now that's my honey-suckle, now."

Lavender Mansions succeeds if you find yourself re-reading stories for the erotic texture of words, such as in William Haywood Henderson's "Myths": "Then, for a moment, the touch of flesh, the warm air drifting across us, the rhythm of breathing, my nose pressed into the hollow of his neck, light enough on his face above me that I knew it was Ray, knew suddenly the smell of him, knew he would settle into me, slowly, and we would laugh, and his voice and skin and his life would be close to me." Another sensuous coming together is offered by Donna Allegra in "Buddies": "I guide her around my center like a lullaby, kiss her forehead as earlier she'd reached out for me. I find her neck, her cheek. Her mouth is mine to open and I dip in, searching. I don't care who sees us. This is my dance and I don't let her pull away. I hold the woman I've asked, keeping her close."

Laughing and Crying

These forty stories raise real questions about how to relish life, where to be generous in love, when to be enraged by or serene about death, and how to expand our range of compassions for other human beings. It is wise to keep open the windows and doors onto homosexual life that these stories provide, for surely in the next large wave of censorship they will be slammed shut again and homosexual stories will return to literary quarantine.

But today out these windows, you hear a lot of laughter. Humor—especially irreverence—is a highly prized trait in *Lavender Mansions*. The wit of these writers results from years of eyeing the world from the margins. The critically intelligent, off-center comedy is often practiced here with subtle psychological nuance and elegant timing. Some of this humor is self-mocking, joking about internalized stereotyping, as in Jess Wells's "The Dress":

So, I'm in the thrift store after work; I'm smudged up with ink and my back hurts from running a printing press all day. Shopping has been mildly successful: I've

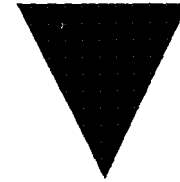
found a wool sweater from Italy, a shirt for my lover and a 100% cotton bathrobe for myself. As I'm unloading my finds onto the counter for this dyke with a mus-tache and eye make-up to tally, I look up. There is this dress ... hanging there (my neck freezes in a tilted position) ... an incredible dress. ... Well, I'm glad it costs that much: I'm hardly going to spend 20 bucks on a dress.

Michael Schwartz uses wit to respond to external prejudices. "There's a slightly better chance that he'll scream, 'Faggots! They're gonna give my kids AIDS!' And then everyone will form a circle around us and stone us to death with Chicken McNuggets." And some of the humor is poignantly ironic, as in Lesléa Newman's "A Letter to Harvey Milk": "Dear Harvey: You couldn't let somebody else have such a great honor? Alright, alright, so you liked the boys, I wasn't wild about the idea. But I got used to it. I never said you wasn't welcome in my house, did I?"

If this is a book of laughter, it is also a book of mourning. An entire section is dedicated to people living with and dying from AIDS. Irene Zahava includes accounts told from the point of view of those infected with the disease ("Despair: August 1987," "Halfway Home," "Portland, Maine: An Essay," and "Running on Empty") as well as tales highlighting the experience of close friends of those with AIDS ("The Angel of Death on the Provincetown Ferry" and "A Good Man"). Sadly, several of the contributors to this anthology have recently died. George Stambolian and John Preston were casualties of AIDS, and Audre Lorde was lost to another epidemic, breast cancer. Not only were they fine storytellers in their own rights, but they were generous supporters of other people in the Lesbian and Gay writing scene.

I cannot conclude this tour of *Lavender Mansions* without thanking the architect/proprietor/superintendent. Irene Zahava reveals considerable skill and grace in her work of selecting and arranging these forty pieces. Anthologizing is a complex, arduous process involving hours and hours of reading. It requires acrobatic prowess in balancing stylistic, topical, and cultural representation. No doubt Zahava cultivated her choreographic talent during the twelve years she has operated a bookstore in upstate New York and while editing seventeen previous anthologies. Anything but an absentee landlord, Irene Zahava is passionate about her work and eager for reader response.

AUDRE LORDE



FROM

ZAMI: A NEW SPELLING
OF MY NAME

WHEN I WAS AROUND the age of four or five, I would have given anything I had in the world except my mother, in order to have a friend or a little sister. She would be someone I could talk to and play with, someone close enough in age to me that I would not have to be afraid of her, nor she of me. We would share our secrets with each other.

Even though I had two older sisters, I grew up feeling like an only child, since they were quite close to each other in age, and quite far away from me. Actually, I grew up feeling like an only planet, or some isolated world in a hostile, or at best, unfriendly, firmament. The fact that I was clothed, sheltered, and fed better than many other children in Harlem in those Depression years was not a fact that impressed itself too often upon my child's consciousness.

Most of my childhood fantasies revolved around how I might acquire this little female person for my companion. I concentrated upon magical means, having gathered early on that my family had no intention of satisfying this particular need of mine. The Lorde family was not going to expand any more.

The idea of having children was a pretty scary one, anyway, full of secret indiscretions peeked at darkly through the corner of an eye, as my mother and my aunts did whenever they passed a woman on the street who had one of those big, pushed-out-in-front, blouses that always intrigued me so. I wondered what great wrong these women had done, that this big blouse was a badge of, obvious as the dunce cap I sometimes had to wear in the corner at school.

Adoption was also out of the question. You could get a kitten from the corner grocery-store man, but not a sister. Like ocean cruises and boarding schools and upper berths in trains, it was not for us. Rich people, like Mr. Rochester in the movie *Jane Eyre*, lonely in their great tree-lined estates, adopted children, but not us.

Being the youngest in a West Indian family had many privileges, but no rights. And since my mother was determined not to "spoil" me, even those privileges were largely illusory. I knew, therefore, that if my family were to acquire another little person voluntarily, that little person would most probably be a boy, and would most decidedly belong to my mother, and not to me.

I really believed, however, that my magical endeavors, done often enough, in the right way, and in the right places, letter-perfect and with a clean soul, would finally bring me a little sister. And I did mean little. I frequently imagined my little sister and I having fascinating conversations together while she sat cradled in the cupped palm of my hand. There she was, curled up and carefully shielded from the inquisitive eyes of the rest of the world, and my family in particular.

When I was three and a half and had gotten my first eyeglasses, I stopped tripping over my feet. But I still walked with my head down, all the time, counting the lines on the squares in the pavement of every street which I traveled, hanging onto the hand of my mother or one of my sisters. I had decided that if I could step on all the horizontal lines for one day, my little person would appear like a dream made real, waiting for me in my bed by the time I got home. But I always messed up, or skipped one, or someone pulled my arm at a crucial moment. And she never appeared.

Sometimes on Saturdays in winter, my mother made the three of us a little clay out of flour and water and Diamond Crystal Shaker Salt. I always fashioned tiny little figures out of my share of the mixture. I would beg or swipe a little vanilla extract from my mother's shelf in the kitchen, where she kept her wonderful spices and herbs and extracts, and mix that with the clay. Sometimes I dabbed the figures on either side of the head behind the ears as I had seen my mother do with her glycerine and rosewater when she got dressed to go out.

I loved the way the rich, dark brown vanilla scented the flour-clay; it reminded me of my mother's hands when she made peanut brittle and eggnog at holidays. But most of all, I loved the live color it would bring to the pasty-white clay.

I knew for sure that real live people came in many different shades of beige and brown and cream and reddish tan, but nobody alive ever came in that pasty-white shade of flour and salt and water, even if they were called white. So the vanilla was essential if my little person was to be real. But the coloring didn't help either. No matter how many intricate rituals and incantations and

spells I performed, no matter how many Hail Marys and Our Fathers I said, no matter what I promised god in return, the vanilla-tinted clay would slowly shrivel up and harden, turn gradually brittle and sour, and then crumble into a grainy flour dust. No matter how hard I prayed or schemed, the figures would never come alive. They never turned around in the cupped palm of my hand, to smile up at me and say "Hi."

I found my first playmate when I was around four years old. It lasted for about ten minutes.

It was a high winter noontime. My mother had bundled me up in my thick one-piece woolen snowsuit and cap and bulky scarf. Once she had inserted me into all this arctic gear, pulled rubber galoshes up over my shoes and wrapped yet another thick scarf around the whole as if to keep the mass intact, she planted me out upon the stoop of the apartment building while she dressed herself hurriedly. Although my mother never liked to have me out of her sight for any period of time, she did this to keep me from catching my death of cold from becoming overheated and then going outdoors.

After many weighty warnings to me not to move from that spot, dire descriptions of what would happen to me if I did, and how I was to yell if any strangers spoke to me, my mother disappeared down the few feet of hallway back to our apartment to get her coat and hat, and to check all the windows of the house to make sure that they were locked.

I loved these few minutes of freedom, and treasured them secretly. They were the only times I ever got to be outside without my mother urging me along on my short stubby little legs that could never run fast enough to keep up with her purposeful strides. I sat quietly where she had put me on the slated top of the stone banisters of the stoop. My arms stuck out a little from my sides over the bulk of my clothing, my feet were heavy and awkward with sturdy shoes and galoshes, and my neck was stiffly encased in the woolen cap and wrapped scarf.

The sun shone with a winter milkiness onto the sidewalks across the street, and onto the few banks of dirty soot-covered snow that lined the sidewalks near the gutter's edge. I could see up to the corner of Lenox Avenue, about three houses away. At the corner near the building line, the Father Divine man ran his Peace Brother Peace shoe repair business from a ramshackled wooden kiosk heated by a small round stove. From the roof of the kiosk, a thin strand of smoke drifted upward. The smoke was the only sign of life and there was nobody on the street that I could see. I wished the street was warm and beautiful and busy, and that we were having cantaloupe for lunch instead of the hot homemade pea soup that was simmering on the back of the stove awaiting our return.

I had almost made a boat of newspaper just before I had to start being dressed to go out, and I wondered if my bits of newspaper would still be on the kitchen table when we got back, or was my mother even now sweeping them away into the garbage bag? Would I be able to rescue them before lunch or would there be nasty wet orange-peelings and coffee grounds all over them?

Suddenly I realized that there was a little creature standing on a step in the entryway of the main doors, looking at me with bright eyes and a big smile. It was a little girl. She was right away the most beautiful little girl I had ever seen alive in my life.

My lifelong dream of a doll-baby come to life had in fact come true. Here she stood before me now, smiling and pretty in an unbelievable wine-red velvet coat with a wide, wide skirt that flared out over dainty little lisle-stockinged legs. Her feet were clad in a pair of totally impractical, black patent-leather mary-jane shoes, whose silver buckles glinted merrily in the drab noon light.

Her reddish-brown hair was not braided in four plaits like mine, but framed her little pointy-chinned face, tight and curly. On her head sat a wine-colored velvet beret that matched her coat, and on the very top of that sat a big white fur pompom.

Even with decades of fashion between us now, and the dulling of time, it was the most beautiful outfit I had ever seen in my not quite five years of clothes-watching.

Her honey-brown skin had a ruddy glow that echoed the tones of her hair, and her eyes seemed to match both in a funny way that reminded me of my mother's eyes, the way, although light in themselves, they flashed alight in the sun.

I had no idea how old she was.

"What's your name? Mine's Toni."

The name called up a picture book I was just finished reading, and the image came out *boy*. But this delectable creature in front of me was most certainly a girl, and I wanted her for my very own—my *vêry* own what, I did not know—but for my very own self. I started to image in my head where I could keep her. Maybe I could tuck her up in the folds under my pillow, pet her during the night when everybody else was asleep, and I was fighting off nightmares of the devil riding me. Of course, I'd have to be careful that she didn't get squeezed into the cot in the morning, when my mother folded up my bed, covered it with an old piece of flowered cretonne bedspread and shoved the whole thing tidily into a corner behind the bedroom door. No, that certainly wouldn't work. My mother would most assuredly find her when, in my mother's way, she plumped up my pillows.

While I was trying to image a safe place to keep her by a rapid succession of pictures in my mind's eye, Toni had advanced towards me, and was now standing between my outspread snowsuted legs, her dark-bright fire-lit eyes on a

level with my own. With my woolen mittens dangling down from cords which emerged from the cuffs at each of my wrists, I reached out my hand and lightly rubbed the soft velvet shoulders of her frock-coat up and down.

From around her neck hung a fluffy white fur muff that matched the white fur ball on the top of her hat. I touched her muff, too, and then raised my hand up to feel the fur pompom. The soft silky warmth of the fur made my fingers tingle in a way that the cold had not, and I pinched and fingered it until Toni finally shook her head free of my hand.

I began to finger the small shiny gold buttons on the front of her coat. I unbuttoned the first two of them at the top, just so I could button them back up again, pretending I was her mother.

"You cold?" I was looking at her pink and beige ears, now slowly turning rosy from the cold. From each delicate lobe hung a tiny gold loop.

"No," she said, moving even closer between my knees. "Let's play."

I stuck both of my hands into the holes of her furry muff, and she giggled delightedly as my cold fingers closed around her warm ones inside the quilted dark spaces of the fur. She pulled one hand out past mine and opened it in front of my face to reveal two peppermint lifesavers, sticky now from the heat of her palm. "Want one?"

I took one hand out of her muff, and never taking my eyes off her face, popped one of the striped candy rings into my mouth. My mouth was dry. I closed it around the candy and sucked, feeling the peppermint juice run down my throat, burning and sweet almost to the point of harshness. For years and years afterward, I always thought of peppermint lifesavers as the candy in Toni's muff.

She was beginning to get impatient. "Play with me, please?" Toni took a step backward, smiling, and I was terrified suddenly that she might disappear or run away, and the sunlight would surely vanish with her from 142nd Street. My mother had warned me not to move from that spot where she had planted me. But there was no question in my mind; I could not bear to lose Toni.

I reached out and pulled her back gently towards me, sitting her down crosswise upon my knees. She felt so light through the padding of my snowsuit that I thought she could blow away and I would not feel the difference between her being there and not being there.

I put my arms around her soft red velvet coat, and clasping my two hands together, I slowly rocked her back and forth the way I did with my sisters' big Coca-Cola doll that had eyes that opened and closed and that came down from the closest shelf every year around Christmas time. Our old cat Minnie the Moocher did not feel much lighter sitting on my lap.

She turned her face around to me with another one of her delighted laughs that sounded like the ice cubes in my father's nightly drink. I could feel the creeping warmth of her, slowly spreading all along the front of my body

through the many layers of clothing, and as she turned her head to speak to me the damp warmth of her breath fogged up my spectacles a little in the crisp winter air.

I started to sweat inside my snow suit as I usually did, despite the cold. I wanted to take off her coat and see what she had on underneath it. I wanted to take off all of her clothes, and touch her live little-brown body and make sure she was real. My heart was bursting with a love and happiness for which I had no words. I unbuttoned the top buttons of her coat again.

"No, don't do that! My grandma won't like it. You can rock me some more." She cuddled down again into my arms.

I put my arms back around her shoulders. Was she really a little girl or a doll come alive? There was only one way I knew for sure of telling. I turned her over and put her across my knees. The light seemed to change around us on the stoop. I looked over once at the doorway leading into the hall, half-afraid of who might be standing there.

I raised up the back of Toni's wine-red velvet coat, and the many folds of her full-skirted green eyelet dress underneath. I lifted up the petticoats under that, until I could see her white cotton knickers, each leg of which ended in an embroidered gathering right above the elastic garters that held up her stockings.

Beads of sweat were running down my chest to be caught at my waist by the tight band of my snowsuit. Ordinarily I hated sweating inside my snowsuit because it felt like roaches were crawling down the front of me.

Toni laughed again and said something that I could not hear. She squirmed around comfortably on my knees and turned her head, her sweet face looking sideways up into mine.

"Grandma forgot my leggings at my house."

I reached up under the welter of dress and petticoats and took hold of the waistband of her knickers. Was her bottom going to be real and warm or turn out to be hard rubber, molded into a little crease like the ultimately disappointing Coca-Cola doll?

My hands were shaking with excitement. I hesitated a moment too long. As I was about to pull down Toni's panties I heard the main door open and out of the front hallway hurried my mother, adjusting the brim of her hat as she stepped out onto the stoop.

I felt caught in the middle of an embarrassing and terrible act from which there could be no hiding. Frozen, I sat motionless as Toni, looking up and seeing my mother, slid nonchalantly off my lap, smoothing down her skirts as she did so.

My mother stepped over to the two of us. I flinched, expecting instant retribution at her capable hands. But evidently the enormity of my intentions had escaped my mother's notice. Perhaps she did not care that I was about to usurp

that secret prerogative belonging only to mothers about to spank, or to nurses with thermometers.

Taking me by the elbow, my mother pulled me awkwardly to my feet.

I stood for a moment like a wool-encased snow-girl, my arms stuck out a little from my body and my legs spread slightly apart. Ignoring Toni, my mother started down the steps to the street. "Hurry now," she said, "you don't want to be late."

I looked back over my shoulder. The bright-eyed vision in the wine-red coat stood at the top of the stoop, and pulled one hand out of her white rabbit-fur muff.

"You want the other candy?" she called. I shook my head frantically. We were never supposed to take candy from anybody and certainly not strangers.

My mother urged me on down the steps. "Watch where you're stepping, now."

"Can you come out and play tomorrow?" Toni called after me.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow. Tomorrow. My mother was already one step below, and her firm hand on my elbow kept me from falling as I almost missed a step. Maybe tomorrow ...

Once on the street pavement, my mother resumed hold of my hand and sailed forth determinedly. My short legs in their bulky wrappings and galoshes chugged along, trying to keep up with her. Even when she was not in a hurry, my mother walked with a long and purposeful stride, her toes always pointed slightly outward in a ladylike fashion.

"You can't tarry, now," she said. "You know it's almost noon." Tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow.

"What a shame, to let such a skinny little thing like that out in this weather with no snowsuit or a stitch of leggings on her legs. That's how among-you children catch your death of cold."

So I hadn't dreamed her. She had seen Toni too. (What kind of name anyway was that for a girl?) Maybe tomorrow ...

"Can I have a red coat like hers, Mommy?"

My mother looked down at me as we stood waiting for the street light to change.

"How many times I tell you not to call me Mommy on the street?" The light changed, and we hurried forward.

I thought about my question very carefully as I scurried along, wanting to get it exactly right this time. Finally, I had it.

"Will you buy me a red coat, please, Mother?" I kept my eyes on the treacherous ground to avoid tripping over my galoshed feet, and the words must have been muffled or lost in the scarf around my neck. In any case, my mother hurried on in silence, apparently not hearing. Tomorrow tomorrow tomorrow.

We had our split pea soup, and hurriedly retraced our steps back to my sisters' school. But that day, my mother and I did not return directly home. Crossing over to the other side of Lenox Avenue, we caught the Number 4 bus down to 125th Street, where we went marketing at Weissbecker's for the week-end chicken.

My heart sank into hopelessness as I stood waiting, kicking my feet in the sawdust that covered the market's floor. I should have known. I had wanted too much for her to be real. I had wanted to see her again too much for it to ever happen.

The market was too warm. My sweaty skin itched in places I couldn't possibly scratch. If we were marketing today, that meant tomorrow would turn out to be Saturday. My sisters did not go to school on Saturday, which meant we couldn't go pick them up for lunch, which meant I would spend all day in the house because my mother had to clean and cook and we were never allowed out alone to play on the stoop.

The weekend was an eternity past which I could not see.

The following Monday I waited again on the stoop. I sat by myself, bundled up as usual, and nobody came except my mother.

I don't know how long I looked for Toni every day at noontime, sitting on the stoop. Eventually, her image receded into that place from which all my dreams are made.

RICHARD MCCANN



MY MOTHER'S CLOTHES: THE SCHOOL OF BEAUTY AND SHAME

He is troubled by any image of himself, suffers when he is named. He finds the perfection of a human relationship in this vacancy of the image: to abolish—in oneself, between oneself and others—adjectives; a relationship which adjectivizes is on the side of the image, on the side of domination, of death.

—Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes*

LIKE EVERY CORNER house in Carroll Knolls, the corner house on our block was turned backward on its lot, a quirk introduced by the developer of the subdivision, who, having run short of money, sought variety without additional expense. The turned-around houses, as we kids called them, were not popular, perhaps because they seemed too public, their casement bedroom windows cranking open onto sunstruck asphalt streets. In actuality, however, it was the rest of the houses that were public, their picture windows offering dioramic glimpses of early-American sofas and Mediterranean-style pole lamps whose mottled globes hung like iridescent melons from wrought-iron chains. In order not to be seen walking across the living room to the kitchen in our pajamas, we had to close the venetian blinds. The corner house on our block was secretive, as though it had turned its back on all of us, whether in superiority or in shame, refusing to acknowledge even its own unkempt yard of yellowing zoysia grass. After its initial occupants moved away, the corner house remained vacant for months.

The spring I was in sixth grade, it was sold. When I came down the block from school, I saw a moving van parked at its curb. "Careful with that!" a woman was shouting at a mover as he unloaded a tiered end table from the truck. He stared at her in silence. The veneer had already been splintered from the table's edge, as though someone had nervously picked at it while watching TV. Then another mover walked from the truck carrying a child's bicycle, a wire basket bolted over its thick rear tire, brightly colored plastic streamers dangling from its handlebars.

The woman looked at me. "What have you got there? In your hand."

I was holding a scallop shell spray-painted gold, with imitation pearls glued along its edges. Mrs. Eidus, the art teacher who visited our class each Friday, had showed me how to make it.

"A hatpin tray," I said. "It's for my mother."

"It's real pretty." She glanced up the street as though trying to guess which house I belonged to. "I'm Mrs. Tyree," she said, "and I've got a boy about your age. His daddy's bringing him tonight in the new Plymouth. I bet you haven't sat in a new Plymouth."

"We have a Ford." I studied her housedress, tiny blue and purple flowers imprinted on thin cotton, a line of white buttons as large as Necco Wafers marching toward its basted hemline. She was the kind of mother my mother laughed at for cutting recipes out of *Woman's Day*. Staring from our picture window, my mother would sometimes watch the neighborhood mothers drag their folding chairs into a circle on someone's lawn. "There they go," she'd say, "a regular meeting of the Daughters of the Eastern Star!" "They're hardly even women," she'd whisper to my father, "and their clothes." She'd criticize their appearance—their loud nylon scarves tied beneath their chins, their disintegrating figures stuffed into pedal pushers—until my father, worried that my brother, Davis, and I could hear, although laughing himself, would beg her, "Stop it, Maria, please stop; it isn't funny." But she wouldn't stop, not ever. "Not even thirty and they look like they belong to the DAR! They wear their pearls inside their bosoms in case the rope should break!" She was the oldest mother on the block but she was the most glamorous, sitting alone on the front lawn in her sleek kick-pleated skirts and cashmere sweaters, reading her thick paperback novels, whose bindings had split. Her hair was lightly hennaed, so that when I saw her pillowcases piled atop the washer, they seemed dusted with powdery rouge. She had once lived in New York City.

After dinner, when it was dark, I joined the other children congregated beneath the streetlamp across from the turned-around house. Bucky Trueblood, an eighth-grader who had once twisted the stems off my brother's eyeglasses, was crouched in the center, describing his mother's naked body to us elementary school children gathered around him, our faces slightly upturned, as though searching for a distant constellation, or for the bats that Bucky said

would fly into our hair. I sat at the edge, one half of my body within the circle of light, the other half lost to darkness. When Bucky described his mother's nipples, which he'd glimpsed when she bent to kiss him goodnight, everyone giggled; but when he described her genitals, which he'd seen by dropping his pencil on the floor and looking up her nightie while her feet were propped on a hassock as she watched TV, everyone huddled nervously together, as though listening to a ghost story that made them fear something dangerous in the nearby dark. "I don't believe you," someone said; "I'm telling you," Bucky said, "*that's what it looks like.*"

I slowly moved outside the circle. Across the street a cream-colored Plymouth was parked at the curb. In a lighted bedroom window Mrs. Tyree was hanging café curtains. Behind the chain-link fence, within the low branches of a willow tree, the new child was standing in his yard. I could see his white T-shirt and the pale oval of his face, a face deprived of detail by darkness and distance. Behind him, at the open bedroom window, his mother slowly fiddled with a valance. Behind me the children sat spellbound beneath the light. Then Bucky jumped up and pointed in the new child's direction—"Hey, you, you want to hear something really *good*?"—and even before the others had a chance to spot him, he vanished as suddenly and completely as an imaginary playmate.

The next morning, as we waited at our bus stop, he loitered by the mailbox on the opposite corner, not crossing the street until the yellow school bus pulled up and flung open its door. Then he dashed aboard and sat down beside me. "I'm Denny," he said. Denny: a heavy, unbeautiful child, who, had his parents stayed in their native Kentucky, would have been a farm boy, but who in Carroll Knolls seemed to belong to no particular world at all, walking past the identical ranch houses in his overalls and Keds, his whitish-blond hair close-cropped all around except for the distinguishing, stigmatizing feature of a wave that crested perfectly just above his forehead, a wave that neither rose nor fell, a wave he trained with Hopalong Cassidy hair tonic, a wave he tended fussily, as though it were the only loveliness he allowed himself.

What in Carroll Knolls might have been described by someone not native to those parts—a visiting expert, say—as *beautiful*, capable of arousing terror and joy? The brick ramblers strung with multicolored Christmas lights? The occasional front-yard plaster Virgin entrapped within a chicken-wire grotto entwined with plastic roses? The spring Denny moved to Carroll Knolls, I begged my parents to take me to a nightclub, had begged so hard for months, in fact, that by summer they finally agreed to a Sunday matinee. Waiting in the back seat of our Country Squire, a red bow tie clipped to my collar, I watched our house float like a mirage behind the sprinkler's web of water. The front door opened, and a white dress fluttered within the mirage's ascending waves:

slipping on her sunglasses, my mother emerged onto the concrete stoop, adjusted her shoulder strap, and teetered across the wet grass in new spectator shoes. Then my father stepped out and cut the sprinkler off. We drove—the warm breeze inside the car sweetened by my mother's Shalimar—past ranch houses tethered to yards by chain-link fences; past the Silver Spring Volunteer Fire Department and Carroll Knolls Elementary School; past the Polar Bear Soft-Serv stand, its white stucco siding shimmery with mirror shards; past a bull-dozed red-clay field where a weathered billboard advertised IF YOU LIVED HERE YOU'D BE HOME BY NOW, until we arrived at the border—a line of cinder-block discount liquor stores, a traffic light—of Washington, D.C. The light turned red. We stopped. The breeze died and the Shalimar fell from the air. Exhaust fumes mixed with the smell of hot tar. A drunk man stumbled into the crosswalk, followed by an old woman shielding herself from the sun with an orange umbrella, and two teen-aged boys dribbling a basketball back and forth between them. My mother put down her sun visor. "Lock your door," she said.

Then the light changed, releasing us into another country. The station wagon sailed down boulevards of Chinese elms and flowering Bradford pears, through hot, dense streets where black families sat on wooden chairs at curbs, along old streetcar tracks that caused the tires to shimmy and the car to swerve, onto Pennsylvania Avenue, past the White House, encircled by its fence of iron spears, and down 14th Street, past the Treasury Building, until at last we reached the Neptune Room, a cocktail lounge in the basement of a shabbily elegant hotel.

Inside, the Neptune Room's walls were painted with garish mermaids reclining seductively on underwater rocks, and human frogmen who stared longingly through their diving helmets' glass masks at a loveliness they could not possess on dry earth. On stage, leaning against the baby grand piano, a *chanteuse* (as my mother called her) was singing of her grief, her wrists weighted with rhinestone bracelets, a single blue spotlight making her seem like one who lived, as did the mermaids, underwater.

I was transfixed. I clutched my Roy Rogers cocktail (the same as a Shirley Temple, but without the cheerful, girlish grenadine) tight in my fist. In the middle of "The Man I Love" I stood and struggled toward the stage.

I strayed into the spotlight's soft-blue underwater world. Close up, from within the light, the singer was a boozy, plump peroxide blonde in a tight black cocktail dress; but these indiscretions made her yet more lovely, for they showed what she had lost, just as her songs seemed to carry her backward into endless regret. When I got close to her, she extended one hand—red nails, a huge glass ring—and seized one of mine.

"Why, what kind of little sailor have we got here?" she asked the audience.

I stared through the border of blue light and into the room, where I saw my parents gesturing, although whether they were telling me to step closer to her microphone or to step farther away, I could not tell. The whole club was staring.

"Maybe he knows a song!" a man shouted from the back.

"Sing with me," she whispered. "What can you sing?"

I wanted to lift her microphone from its stand and bow deeply from the waist, as Judy Garland did on her weekly TV show. But I could not. As she began to sing, I stood voiceless, pressed against the protection of her black dress; or, more accurately, I stood beside her, silently lip-synching to myself. I do not recall what she sang, although I do recall a quick, farcical ending in which she falsettoed, like Betty Boop, "Gimme a Little Kiss, Will Ya, Huh?" and brushed my forehead with pursed red lips.

That summer, humidity enveloping the landfill subdivision, Denny, "the new kid," stood on the boundaries, while we neighborhood boys played war, a game in which someone stood on Stanley Allen's front porch and machine-gunned the rest of us, who one by one clutched our bellies, coughed as if choking on blood, and rolled in exquisite death throes down the grassy hill. When Stanley's father came up the walk from work, he ducked imaginary bullets. "Hi, Dad," Stanley would call, rising from the dead to greet him. Then we began the game again: whoever died best in the last round got to kill in the next. Later, after dusk, we'd smear the wings of balsa planes with glue, ignite them, and send them flaming through the dark on kamikaze missions. Long after the streets were deserted, we children sprawled beneath the corner streetlamp, praying our mothers would not call us—"Time to come in!"—back to our oven-like houses; and then sometimes Bucky, hoping to scare the elementary school kids, would lead his solemn procession of junior high "hoods" down the block, their penises hanging from their unzipped trousers.

Denny and I began to play together, first in secret, then visiting each other's houses almost daily, and by the end of the summer I imagined him to be my best friend. Our friendship was sealed by our shared dread of junior high school. Davis, who had just finished seventh grade, brought back reports of corridors so long that one could get lost in them, of gangs who fought to control the lunchroom and the bathrooms. The only safe place seemed to be the Health Room, where a pretty nurse let you lie down on a cot behind a folding screen. Denny told me about a movie he'd seen in which the children, all girls, did not have to go to school at all but were taught at home by a beautiful governess, who, upon coming to their rooms each morning, threw open their shutters so that sunlight fell like bolts of satin across their beds, whispered their pet names while kissing them, and combed their long hair with a silver brush. "She never got mad," said Denny, beating his fingers up and down

through the air as though striking a keyboard, "except once when some old man told the girls they could never play piano again."

With my father at work in the Pentagon and my mother off driving the two-tone Welcome Wagon Chevy to new subdivisions, Denny and I spent whole days in the gloom of my living room, the picture window's venetian blinds closed against an August sun so fierce that it bleached the design from the carpet. Dreaming of fabulous prizes—sets of matching Samsonite luggage, French Provincial bedroom suites, Corvettes, jet flights to Hawaii—we watched Jan Murray's *Treasure Hunt* and Bob Barker's *Truth or Consequences* (a name that seemed strangely threatening). We watched *The Loretta Young Show*, worshipping yet critiquing her elaborate gowns. When *The Early Show* came on, we watched old Bette Davis, Gene Tierney, and Joan Crawford movies—*Dark Victory*, *Leave Her to Heaven*, *A Woman's Face*. Hoping to become their pen pals, we wrote long letters to fading movie stars, who in turn sent us autographed photos we traded between ourselves. We searched the house for secrets, like contraceptives, Kotex, and my mother's hidden supply of Hershey bars. And finally, Denny and I, running to the front window every few minutes to make sure no one was coming unexpectedly up the sidewalk, inspected the secrets of my mother's dresser: her satin nightgowns and padded brassieres, folded atop pink drawer liners and scattered with loose sachet; her black mantilla, pressed inside a shroud of lilac tissue paper; her heart-shaped candy box, a flapper doll strapped to its lid with a ribbon, from which spilled galaxies of cocktail rings and cultured pearls. Small shrines to deeper intentions, private grottoes of yearning: her triangular cloisonné earrings, her brooch of enameled butterfly wings.

Because beauty's source was longing, it was infused with romantic sorrow; because beauty was defined as "feminine," and therefore as "other," it became hopelessly confused with my mother: Mother, who quickly sorted through new batches of photographs, throwing unflattering shots of herself directly into the fire before they could be seen. Mother, who dramatized herself, telling us and our playmates, "My name is Maria Dolores; in Spanish, that means 'Mother of Sorrows.'" Mother who had once wished to be a writer and who said, looking up briefly from whatever she was reading, "Books are my best friends." Mother, who read aloud from Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* with a voice so grave I could not tell the difference between them. Mother, who lifted cut-glass vases and antique clocks from her obsessively dusted curio shelves to ask, "If this could talk, what story would it tell?"

And more, always more, for she was the only woman in our house, a "people-watcher," a "talker," a woman whose mysteries and moods seemed endless: Our Mother of the White Silk Gloves; Our Mother of the Veiled Hats; Our Mother of the Paper Lilacs; Our Mother of the Sighs and Heartaches; Our

Mother of the Gorgeous Gypsy Earrings; Our Mother of the Late Movies and the Cigarettes; Our Mother whom I adored and who, in adoring, I ran from, knowing it "wrong" for a son to wish to be like his mother; Our Mother who wished to influence us, passing the best of herself along, yet who held the fear common to that era, the fear that by loving a son too intensely she would render him unfit—"Momma's boy," "tied to apron strings"—and who therefore alternately drew us close and sent us away, believing a son needed "male influence" in large doses, that female influence was pernicious except as a final finishing, like manners; Our Mother of the Mixed Messages; Our Mother of Sudden Attentiveness; Our Mother of Sudden Distances; Our Mother of Anger; Our Mother of Apology. The simplest objects of her life, objects scattered accidentally about the house, became my shrines to beauty, my grottoes of romantic sorrow: her Revlon lipstick tubes, "Cherries in the Snow"; her Art Nouveau atomizers on the blue mirror top of her vanity; her pastel silk scarves knotted to a wire hanger in her closet; her white handkerchiefs blotted with red mouths. Voiceless objects; silences. The world halved with a cleaver: "masculine," "feminine." In these ways was the plainest ordinary love made complicated and grotesque. And in these ways was beauty, already confused with the "feminine," also confused with shame, for all these longings were secret, and to control me all my brother had to do was to threaten to expose that Denny and I were dressing ourselves in my mother's clothes.

Denny chose my mother's drabest outfits, as though he were ruled by the deepest of modesties, or by his family's austere Methodism: a pink wrap-around skirt from which the color had been laundered, its hem almost to his ankles; a sleeveless white cotton blouse with a Peter Pan collar; a small straw summer clutch. But he seemed to challenge his own primness, as though he dared it with his "effects": an undershirt worn over his head to approximate cascading hair; gummed holepunch reinforcements pasted to his fingernails so that this hands, palms up, might look like a woman's—flimsy crescent moons waxing above his fingertips.

He dressed slowly, hesitantly, but once dressed, he was a manic Proteus metamorphosing into contradictory, half-realized forms, throwing his "long hair" back and balling it violently into a French twist; tapping his paper nails on the glass-topped vanity as though he were an important woman kept waiting at a cosmetics counter; stabbing his nails into the air as though he were an angry teacher assigning an hour of detention; touching his temple as though he were a shy schoolgirl tucking back a wisp of stray hair; resting his fingertips on the rim of his glass of Kool-Aid as though he were an actress seated over an ornamental cocktail—a Pink Lady, say, or a Silver Slipper. Sometimes, in an orgy of jerky movement, his gestures overtaking him with greater and greater force, a dynamo of theatricality unleashed, he would hurl himself across the