

I. AMY – GREAT EXPECTATIONS
DASHED

1. LOVE AND CLOVES

Somewhere, someone was smoking clove cigarettes. It was probably the Japanese girls downstairs. She'd heard them all morning with their mini-skirts and their leather jackets. Living above an apartment full of beautiful Japanese girls didn't strike her as strange. Everyone in Washington seemed so attractive. Even the handyman, wrestling with the air conditioning unit on the living room floor, was handsome. Water pooled on the hardwood as he loosened screws from the chassis.

"Damn thing's busted," he declared, wiping the sweat from his ebony forehead with the back of his hand. He waited for a response but she was silent, staring out the porch door at the park across the street. The thin rectangle of brownish grass was criss-crossed with footpaths and shaded by a few straggly elms wilting in the oppressive heat. A bead of sweat rolled down the middle of her back.

A woman stood barefoot in the park holding a pair of sandals behind her back, staring at the overcast sky. Searching the gray heavens for a sign of rain, she seemed to know she was hoping in vain.

The handyman was talking. She turned to give the appearance of listening. Behind him, cardboard boxes were stacked against the wall. The scent of the clove cigarettes reminded her of somewhere else.

"Relationships are funny that way," he said. "Excuse me? I'm sorry?"

"I was saying, there aren't many times when you can say men and women really communicate."

"Yeah, sure," she said, nodding, not understanding.

"Last night I picked up Talana, that's my girl, at her job at Macys, where she works nights, and right away she starts bitchin' at me. I knew she was tired so I let her take it out on me for a while."

She crossed her arms across her chest and listened.

He knelt over the air conditioning unit, toying with a screw. By the way he looked at the spent air conditioner she could tell it was a lost cause.

The woman would not shut up!" he continued. "So I turned to her and said, 'look baby, you've had a hard day, let's get some Chinese take-out and I'll give you a back rub.'

"A back rub! I'm just suggesting a back rub, now, and she jumps all over my shit, saying, 'Son, if you think I'm gonna put out for you after the

day I had, you've got another thing coming.' I *never* said anything about sex. I swear. I'm talking about taking care of the woman, and she thinks all I want is to do the nasty."

"Sometimes it's hard," she agreed.

"That's the damn truth," he said shaking his head. "This thing is a piece of shit," he said, wiping the sweat from his forehead again.

She felt like she was sweating from every pore. Her hair was pulled back in a small pony tail and her bangs stuck in strands to her forehead. Occasionally she pulled her damp t-shirt from the nape of her neck

"We was about to get into a nasty fight, when this white guy knocks on the car window, asking if I got jumper cables," he continued, staring at the air conditioner as though he'd forgotten something. "He keeps smiling like a fool, sayin' he left his car lights on and needs a jump start. I think he can tell me and Talana was fighting, 'cause he keeps apologizing and smiling. He keeps calling me 'dude' and 'man.' You know how white boys call the brothers 'maan.' Like I'm supposed to think he's chillin'. 'I really appreciate this, maan,' he's saying. 'I can't believe I left my lights on, can you dude?' he asks. So I shake my head like, 'No, I can't believe it either.' And when I talk to him, I use my best white-boy voice, and he smiles. He knows I'm dissing him, and he smiles!"

"Dis?" she asked.

"Dis...dis-respecting him."

"Sorry," she blushed.

"Na, it's o.k. Anyway Talana was trying to hold off from busting up...laughing, at the guy." He raised his head from his work, and smiled. "This machine is *fucked*, dead, no prayer."

"The landlord said they worked," she said.

"The landlord lied," he replied. "'Tween you and me, Mrs. Sellers is one lying bitch. Ain't no such thing as an honest landlord."

"It's my first weekend in Washington," she sighed.

"You picked the wrong one," he replied. "The hottest so far."

They were silent for a moment. He pretended to examine the broken unit. She wondered what to do next.

"The one in the bedroom is worse than this one," she said.

"Freon's shot in this one, so's the condenser. I can tell Mrs. Sellers you need new ones when she gets back." He shrugged his shoulders. "It's the best I can do."

She put her hands over her face and sighed. She felt like she'd just stepped from a pool.

"Do you know where she's vacationing?"

"The Eastern Shore. No phone."

"Great," Amy said.

"Sorry," he shrugged.

"It's not your fault." She sighed. "I guess I'm screwed."

"Yeah. Sorry" He smiled for her.

As he gathered the pieces he'd removed and began reassembling the unit, she asked him what happened with the guy with the dead battery.

"Oh, yeah." He chuckled, shaking his head. "I gave him a jump and he offered me cash. I acted like I was all offended by his money. Then he offered us a couple beers he had in his car, and I looked at Talana and she looked at me like, 'why not?' So we leaned against his car and drank 'till a cop came along and told us to move on." He stood and shook his head. "Sure was funny."

"Did you and Talana make up?"

"Yeah," he said bashfully. "We got some take out and some more beer, then went to sleep. I didn't get around to giving her a back-rub."

"So it all worked out."

"Yeah," he said. "Can I get a glass of water?"

In the kitchen she filled a glass with water. Cool air streamed out of the empty freezer in a mist. The ice cubes cracked when she dropped them in the water.

"Frost free," he said, pointing to the freezer. "Good thing to have in this city, otherwise you have to defrost the damn thing every two weeks in summer." He emptied the glass without taking a breath and Amy filled it for him again. "You might also want to think about getting bottled water," he said, wiping his forehead with a kerchief. "D.C. water's nasty."

"I guess I'll have to rely on the fan for a while," she said.

"Yeah," he replied, shrugging his shoulders. "Sorry."

He gathered his tools and put them in his battered tool box. She held the door open and at the threshold he stopped and turned.

"It worked out," he said. "But you never know about next time."

"Excuse me?"

"Me and Talana. Last night," he said, turning toward the stairway.

"Yes, I suppose it did," she said, as he walked down the stairs and out of sight. She stood alone in the heat of the hallway. The odor of cumin and clove cigarettes lingered in the air.

She wanted to call his name. Instead, she whispered: "Nathan?" There was no reply. There could be none.

Downstairs, the Japanese girls laughed

2. THE SOUND AND THE FURY AND GIN

Alone, she stood in the middle of the living room wondering where to start. Her shirt was drenched with sweat and her shorts stuck to her legs. She considered taking a shower, but it would be a waste of time. If only it would rain. Maybe that would chase the heat away. But even if it did rain, it wouldn't help. It would only steam up the streets like an eternal shower, fogging reflections in mirrors until you wipe the condensation away with your hand.

The smell of the clove cigarettes rose again. She imagined the Japanese girls downstairs, sitting on their porch, smoking the cigarettes without a bead of perspiration on their white foreheads. She was not built for this kind weather. She liked it when the air grew cold and the snow fell silent and slow.

While driving to Washington, she'd felt as though she was falling directly toward the equator. On the horizon she'd imagined the curve of the globe, the arched line of sky hugging the horizon. She had driven as though in a dream.

Standing in the living room she was paralyzed by the prospect of unpacking. She wondered which box held her alarm clock, which contained her towels, which held her underwear, and which contained Nathan's copy of *The Sound and the Fury*.

She'd hardly been able to think of anything else while the handyman toyed with the broken air conditioner. It had weighed on her mind like a thousand pound albatross. The move from Pittsburgh was meant to help her forget, but the memories resurfaced as she stared at the boxes. She felt a need to hold the book in her hands, to decipher it. But she couldn't possibly read. That would involve sitting up straight and concentrating, and she couldn't possibly do that. Not with that book. Not in this heat.

She unpacked a small table fan, but it did little more than stir the air. "God," she pleaded, as the blades worked up to speed. She drew her nose against the grille and pulled the damp t-shirt over her head. Then she slipped out of her shorts and took a step back to let the fan wash over her. The sweat dried across her stomach as it poured down her back. The clock on the kitchen wall said twelve noon - late enough for a drink, she thought. Luckily, the Tanqueray was in one of the boxes at the very top of the stack. She had arranged that on purpose and had bought a lime at Weisfeld's Market, the little store on the corner run by a Korean family.

Mixing a drink wouldn't require much energy, she reasoned. Slicing a lime would probably work her into a sweat again, but what's a Tanqueray and tonic without a slice of lime?

The tonic bubbled with the gin, pure and colorless, like faith. The cocktail clouded as she squeezed the lime above the glass and threw it in. The drink fizzled and she thought of love, of the handyman and Talana, and Nathan

A piano concerto wafted through the humid air, and she wondered if the Japanese girls were playing their stereo again. The music didn't seem to fit. Nathan had played it for her long ago.

She could not escape the past. This was her proof. Alone, mostly naked, she drank, listening to nocturnes for piano, the scent of clove

3. MEN AND LOVE AND CARS

She wanted to cry. She hated herself for wanting to. She hated Nathan. She'd always looked down on girls who mourned their failed relationships for months on end. "Don't moon over boys," her mother had told her when she was in high school. "Don't let them put you into a blue funk," she'd say. That was what she'd told her friends when they were paralyzed by their love-depressions. "Don't get upset over a *man*, for Christ's sake!"

"Men are like cars," an aunt had once told her. "At first they're strong and new and clean, but it doesn't take long before they start letting you down. In little ways at first, but they keep getting worse and worse, and eventually all you want is want to get rid of them." The aunt had been married for forty years. When Amy called that fact to her attention, she just shrugged and went back to snapping green beans and throwing them in the colander. "Life is full of shattered expectations. You learn to live with it," the aunt had said, coolly.

Her best friend from childhood, Amy Cutler, had broken off her engagement to a lawyer, 20 years her senior, less than a week before the wedding. She bought herself a new SAAB as a reward. She said it was the best idea she'd ever had.

Amy wished her life could be like Amy Cutler's. She wanted to have no regrets. But she'd already made choices that would make regrets all together possible. When she thought about it though, she'd still rather have a man than a car.

4. LOVE IS LIKE A FITTED SHEET

When Nathan left her, she'd just about jumped right into bed with Michael. After the messy breakup, she'd only wanted physical contact. It had scared her at first, that `other' lurking inside of her who acted out of pure desire. She'd been so depressed, and yet she'd wanted contact, the touch of a man's hands on her body. She wondered what Nathan was doing. What he was thinking at the very moment she listened to the piano drift on the air. She thought again of Michael, and winced. Why?

She had told her mother about Michael as they were folding laundry one afternoon just before she moved from Pittsburgh. Her mother had remained silent as Amy told her of the affair. She hadn't planned to tell her everything - of the physicality, her insatiability, Michael's almost embarrassed desire to satisfy her - but her mother had listened silently, folding Amy's father's undershirts. She started pairing off socks before saying anything.

"Love is like folding a fitted sheet," her mother had said, staring out the window absently. "You look at it and you think you can fold it neatly, but when you try, it's not that easy. The corners don't match, and if you turn the gather under, the whole thing looks messy. In the end, you fold it into something that looks like a rectangle and hide it under the other sheets in the linen closet."

It was the only time she had heard her mother say anything approaching the philosophical. If she hadn't felt so miserable at the time, she would have laughed at the beauty of her mother's analogy. Instead, she'd dropped the pillow case she'd been folding and started to cry. Her mother had held her hands at her sides looking at her husband's long black dress sock as if deciding whether to match it, or drop it and hold her daughter. After a moment, she'd put the sock down and held Amy as she cried.

5. RAGTIMES

The notes of a piano concerto floated on the humid air with more significance than the Japanese girls could ever know.

Nathan had once been an accomplished pianist, but abandoned it as their relationship deteriorated. Toward the end, she'd tried to coax him back to the keyboard, hoping it would make him love her again, hoping they would once again be the intimate lovers they'd been when he'd composed Joplinsque rags off the top of his head. She could almost hear those ghostly, lilting ragtimes. They reminded her of spirits dancing, the dead given breaths of life. The years since those nights were as long as lifetimes.

6. CADDY SMELLED LIKE TREES

The gin clouded her head. She wanted to sit in front of the fan and read the Faulkner. The thought of reading, resurrecting Nathan, filled her with a sinking feeling. The book was a link. Every time she tried to read it, she felt a weight on her chest, a tightening; the same fear and expectation she'd felt as a child standing at the edge of the high dive gathering the courage to hurl herself into space.

She was compelled by the book, by its ragged pages and split binding. Nathan had literally thrown it at her. 'Why don't you read something with substance,' he'd yelled.

She'd hated his morally superior tone. Wasn't it he who'd squandered his talent, his gift? But then there was the fear she had been responsible, that it had been her fault that he had quit the piano. His mother blamed his unhappiness on her. In the end she began to blame herself too - that her fear that he would leave her for another woman finally compelled him to.

And what about Michael? Being with someone new left her feeling she was worth something. Nathan had once told her all men think with their penises. But hadn't she done the same with Michael? Hadn't she only wanted someone between her legs, who it was was not as important as long as there was someone there? Was possible she had?

She'd thought that once she had come to terms with it, she'd be able to walk away it all with no regrets. Now she wasn't so sure. She couldn't return to Pittsburgh. There were too many ghosts.

Now she was alone, with no air conditioning and surrounded by boxes.

She'd been so organized about planning the move. She'd planned where everything would go, mapped the floor plan out to scale, arranging little pieces of paper - bed, table, chairs, everything - moving them around like a schoolgirl arranging paper dresses on cardboard figurines. And now she stood almost naked, having a drink at twelve noon surrounded by boxes she hadn't even started to open.

The first strains of *The Firebird Suite* rose from below - a strange choice for the early afternoon, she thought. In the park, a homeless man lay in the shade of a tree. So many hopeless souls. So what if she'd never read Faulkner?

She looked again at the book. It was a hard cover edition that Nathan had borrowed from the library and never returned. At least once a week he'd come home with an armful of books, new and used. He was like a child unwrapping them, leafing through their pages as though he was examining a new toy, a penknife given to a son by a father - a wonder and a treasure.

In the middle of a horrid fight, he'd thrown the book at her.

"And what about the book?" she'd screamed, "You hold literature in such high regard, then you steal your favorite book from the library and throw it at me. Are you going to return it?"

He'd shrugged.

"You, the man who chides me for not respecting knowledge, the man who chewed out David for loving money more than he loves his own mother, *you* aren't going to return a library book?"

"It's public property," he'd replied.

"It is not, Nathan."

He'd laughed once bitterly.

"I used David's library card to sign it out."

She'd hated it, but she'd laughed too. How could she not have? David did love money more than his mother.

She held the Faulkner in her hand, tracing the binding with her finger. Opening it, she touched the words he'd written in the margins. His spelling was horrendous. "T's" were left uncrossed. "A's" weren't topped off and looked like "u's". She looked for some meaning in the notes, some message meant for her only, some kind of explanation.

The marginalia were maddening, they meant nothing. Somehow she thought she'd find a note written in unconscious bliss, one that read, 'Amy, how I love thee.' Instead there was a note about how Caddy smelled like trees.

She tried to read the first chapter for the hundredth time but couldn't. The words held no meaning. She was holding a part of him in her hands. It was as though he were standing over her, looking over her shoulder. She searched an underlined passage looking for something that looked important. She felt if she could break the code, she might understand what had passed between them.

It was a huge puzzle, one that even if she were able to solve, could never change what had happened. She knew that over time, the pain would lessen. She'd cry less often. She'd fall in love again. But she didn't want to.

7. SHAME AND DESIRE AND THE JAPANESE GIRLS DOWNSTAIRS

Why had he turned to another woman? Lust? Was it a dilemma of confidence? If she hadn't refused to see him afterwards maybe he might have returned.

Was it her looks? Over and over, she'd scrutinized herself in the mirror. Her breasts were pendulous, her hips were too wide, and her ass was too fleshy. Nathan told her what the other woman looked like was irrelevant. But every time someone told her they'd seen him with someone else, she'd wish she had a different body.

After the first couple of months, the anger turned to relief. The pain lightened. Something changed. Late one night with Michael, she'd woken from a dream and coaxed him into making love to her. She remembered waking him, coaxing him to her, fighting the sleepy heaviness that controlled his body. She liked the fact that he was not quite awake, that she could languish in the feeling, in her victory.

The memory excited her, made her even warmer. She felt a tinge of guilt thinking of Michael- another mistake left behind. She took another sip of her drink languishing in the feeling that rose in her. She tried to remember a night with Nathan, any night, somewhere, anywhere. An evening at beach crept into her mind. She slipped her hand between her legs. The book fell to the floor, startling her.

She was suddenly ashamed. She imagined someone watching. She imagined the Japanese girls holding clove cigarettes held between white thumbs and forefingers, watching and nodding in some cosmopolitan, approving manner. No one could have seen, but she was conscious of eyes watching. She wanted to recall memories of lovemaking with Nathan, to coax herself back into that warmth, but she wiped the sweat from her forehead and smiled to herself.

Pulling on a T-shirt, she laughed out loud, torn between guilt and desire. She thought of her friend Jenny in Pittsburgh. Jenny had slept with almost all the guys in the group at one time or another. Nathan had slept with her too, before they'd dated. After the break up, she and Jenny even compared notes. The other women in the group talked behind Jenny's back, but Amy admired the way she lived her life.

She wondered if her fiercely physical affair with Michael, had been just a cheap imitation of Jenny? She had tried some of the things Jenny suggested she do with him. She liked his surprise at what she did for him, the things she suggested.

Italian women say a woman should be her man's whore in the bedroom and his mother in the kitchen. Jenny liked so say "be a whore in both, let him buy you dinner if he wants a meal.

8. SEX AND SHAVING

Nathan's theory was that life was a series of great expectations dashed by the reality everyday life. He once told her that next to shaving, sex was the biggest disappointment in a man's life.

“You so look forward to the day you can shave, the day you become a man. But when you do, you realize it’s nothing more than scraping whiskers and skin from your face until you bleed. So you look forward to sex, because boy, you’ve heard incredible things about sex...99% of the guys you hear talking about pussy and about what such great cocksman they are, are just bullshit. They’re scared that if they don’t talk up their sex lives someone might think they’re queer.

“Ever have sex for a long time? It starts to get boring. You just keep going and you kinda start to get mad, you’re telling yourself, I’m gonna see this thing through to the end even if I’m not enjoying myself...”

He'd first had sex when he was twelve years old, seduced by the sixteen-year-old girl next door. He hadn't even known where babies came from, yet a sixteen-year-old had lured him into the basement of her parents' house and fucked him. What goes through a kid's mind to do such a thing? It was no wonder he felt let down by life.

Once at a Sunday brunch, sometime after the seventh or eighth bottle of wine had been opened, he'd declared “Popular culture, MTV entertainment news and CNN, with their fifteen minutes of fame, is raising and lowering our expectations at the same time. Think about it- a kid falls down a well and the firefighter who rescues her becomes an instant hero. Two days later some sicko throws a kid in a hole and fakes the rescue just to get the attention.”

Depending on the mood of the group, these pseudo philosophies were either hotly debated or cut off by the call to drink more and talk less.

Looking back on those brunches, it seemed they had all been moving in a haze, their arms outstretched, groping for something they couldn't see.

9 SWEAT PRIORITIES

Pittsburgh was hundreds of miles away, degrees of latitude, sea currents away. Washington was as foreign as the moon. Outside of the three blocks around her apartment, she knew virtually nothing of the city. Only monuments, marble, damnable traffic circles, and, in her living room-boxes.

She slit the packing tape of a box with her nail. Just cutting the tape covered her in sweat. She took another sip her drink. The gin and tonic was bitter. The glass left a ring of condensation on the cardboard. She drew a bead of condensation from the glass and traced the letter N on the cardboard. She began to write his name. Suddenly, she wanted to erase it but she knew that was impossible.

She felt guilty, dirty. She thought she could smell Michael. She felt wrong no matter what choice she made, a prisoner of her own conscience on a lumbering guilt trip from here to Timbuktu. But there was no going back. She was here

She had to sit on the floor and try to remember what was important, what needed to be done. She thought of the story about the man who wrote lists for everything. In the end he shot himself. Next to his body was a note - "Things to do to today: kill myself."

She laughed a wicked laugh that echoed off the bare floors and walls. She was flushed from the gin and the heat. Sweat poured from her pores without let-up. She needed water. She sipped her drink instead. Her hair stuck to her forehead and she brushed it back. It was too short to be put up, just long enough to put in a ponytail. Before moving, she'd cut off her long auburn hair as a symbol of her clean break. Stupid.

The "N" she had traced on the cardboard box had almost completely faded. Soon it would be unnoticeable. When she finished unpacking she would throw the box in the trash and that would be that.

She pulled on a fresh t-shirt and began to unpack. She put away pots and pans, dishes, spices, canned goods, utensils, towels, shoes, shoes, and more shoes, work clothes, casual clothes, sweats. She occasionally stopped to take sips of the gin. She rationed drinks - one for organizing coats and umbrellas in the closet, another for assembling the bed frame. She had no plan. She completed each task, took a sip from the glass, wiped her face with a dishtowel, and embarked upon another. She caught a glimpse of

herself in the mirror in passing. Her skin glistened with perspiration and was dotted with dust bunnies and dirt. She liked gliding through her new territory like a cat in a cage. Pacing, retracing her steps over and over, setting priorities in her mind, she remembered her own strength.

10 THE QUEEN OF THE PLAYGROUND

By three thirty she'd had enough of unpacking and poured herself another drink. The scent of clove cigarettes again wafted through the air and she felt the need to go outside. A hopeful notion crossed her mind - what if the heat were confined only to her apartment? But she recalled the woman in the park earlier futilely staring at the sky, and she knew there was no escaping the heat.

The cloves reminded her of parties back in college, of loud arguments about politics and literature, of love and sports, when everyone was high or drunk and it was like swimming in a tropical ocean with an amiable school of fish.

The scent of the cigarettes made her want to leave, run back, but she knew she couldn't. If she took a walk around, maybe she'd lose the feeling of impending doom that enveloped her.

Standing in front of the mirror, she tried to make herself look less disheveled. It was too hot. Her hair was frizzed out. She put on a pair of sandals and a bra.

It seemed unimaginable, but the hallway was even hotter than her apartment. The stairwell reeked. As she stepped out the front door, one of the Japanese girls sat on the front step smoking a cigarette while holding an ice pack to her face. The white of the girl's eye was blood red, the flesh under the eye was swollen a dark purple. The face she made, smiling and wincing, was as sad as anything Amy could have dreamed of. She smiled back bravely then turned to escape the vision.

In the park across the street a homeless man slept, snoring in a deep basso. Black flies buzzed over his head which he occasionally swept away with a restive brush of his arm. She walked past the police station and stopped to watch the children wailing in the playground bordered by its low black wrought iron fence.

The adults were segregated- white with white, black with black, while the children played, white and black intermixed in a whirl of noise. Two white women in business suits chatted, looking nervously at their watches. In a corner, a white earth-mother type tried to strike up a conversation with a pair of black nannies who gave her polite attention but little more.

Good for you ladies, Amy thought. Only one adult sat in the sandbox actually playing with the children. On a park bench three nannies in starched white dresses chattered in Spanish. Their complexions were dark and rich as coffee. She could not understand their tropical patois. The privileged white children raced about them and would continue to circle them, growing older, racing to private schools to discover the boredom of having everything given to them, and then slip gently into drugs, or worse, blind ambition.

The children ran and ran and ran as though they would never wind down. Their bright clothes flashed through her mind when she closed her eyes. Their voices echoed in her ears, murmuring like the swells of the ocean, or like some night murmuring nurse, murmuring nothing perhaps, but murmuring. Opening her eyes she found herself staring at an immense black woman sitting on a bench at the far side of the playground. The monumental woman sat like a majestic queen, fanning herself with a small fan embossed with the name of a funeral parlor. She had been afforded the only seat with any shade, a splintered throne overhung by a sickly sycamore with limp, teardrop leaves. She was as dark as a starless night. Despite her girth, she had an air of grace and frailty of a woman lost in the isolation of her immense beauty and grace. She sat in her regal isolation, alone amid the wailing children. Amy could do nothing but watch them run circles around the stationary women. The blur of sound and vision made her queasy and she had to turn away.

11 THE PULL OF TIDES

Crossing Fourth Street, the gin came up on her, the unpleasant taste stinging her throat. She shivered and stopped for a moment.

The brightly painted houses lining E Street paled in comparison to the colors of the children screaming in the playground. Windows and doors on the ground level were barred with intricate ironwork. Gardens were landscaped with annuals flowering in tended beds. Other yards were covered with lush ivy embracing beds of impatiens. The brick sidewalks lent to the feeling of having walked into another, more gentler time.

She turned down First Street through side alleys. She peeked in windows into parlors and sitting rooms. It was a finer world than the neighborhoods of Pittsburgh. There was a sense of southern charm to the houses, quiet seclusion. Within a few city blocks were the Capitol public housing.

She felt sheltered, secure, empty in her gin haze. The heat permeated her skin. She thought of water, deep green and cool. She turned back to E Street, debating whether to return to the apartment. She thought again of the water and continued on.

At South Capitol Street the neighborhood changed. E Street led to the power station. An immense pile of coal rose beside the steam-spewing plant and ran under the highway like a barren mountain range. Above, on the highway, cars and trucks thundered by. She crossed under the highway, her back to the marble of the Capitol office buildings. Ahead, blaring neon signs advertised fast food restaurants and gas stations. The neighborhood grew seedy. Traffic sped past her. No one walked the streets.

At I Street she turned in the direction of the river. One side of the road was lined with tenements. On the other were an elementary and a junior high school. Grass sprouted from between cracks in the sidewalk in front of the brick tenements. The walls were scrawled with graffiti. In the unmown schoolyard, two young men exchanged money for drugs. Old men and women watched her walk the crumbled sidewalk. Mothers holding babies on their hips stood in tenement doorways. On the highway, trucks rumbled by unceasingly, downshifting, roaring like dragons. Rising

above the school in the distance, the power plant spewed steam high into the sky- cumuli-strata that obscured the Capitol rotunda.

An old woman stared blankly from behind a decaying screen door, her eyes clouded by cataracts. In the shade of their front stoops, people fanned themselves.

The hot breeze carried the stench of the river at low tide. She could feel the distrust in the eyes of the people who watched her. She tried to hide her fear. She must have looked like a crazy woman wandering the streets in the middle of the June inferno. The thought of the river kept her on her way.

She did not know what would be waiting for her there. Before she'd moved, she'd looked at maps, at the tidewaters and estuaries of the Potomac. She imagined the water could cure her, soothe her. She was pulled in its direction.

As she waited at a corner the traffic light to change, a Jeep with dark tinted windows rolled up next to her. Music pulsed from the rear of the vehicle, shaking the ground. The driver's side window rolled down.

"Hey baby," the voice called to her. "Wanna do the nasty with some fine ebony? Ever go down on a black man, hey baby?" She could see the smile of someone sitting in the passenger seat. "Whadda you say my fine lady?"

"No thank you," she said, staring at the car like a child possessed. She hoped to see someone coming to her rescue. The streets were deserted.

"No thank you?" the voice asked. "Damn girl, this ain't the queen's own castle."

She laughed nervously. "No, I guess not." She rocked from side to side, a ticking metronome. Time crawled by painfully, roasting in the cruel sun, hip-hop music pulsing from the back of the Jeep.

"You ain't from around here. I can tell that," the voice said. He shook his head. The passenger in the Jeep showed his teeth again. The light changed. "All right," he said, laughing. "All right," he repeated, rolling up the window, driving off in a squeal of rubber.

12. THE MAN-WIDE WORLD

Her hands shook. A ringing in her ears varied in a phase dance. It took her a moment to recognize the sound - the voices of children playing. She felt immense relief. It was the last thing she'd expected to see or hear.

In the schoolyard, boys and girls chased each other. A boy fell on the crumbled blacktop, and instead of crying, stopped to examine the cuts, and then rose to join the game again. Amy locked her fingers in the chain link fence and watched.

The children were playing a game of tag. Once one of the players was caught, he turned on the others, yelling some unintelligible cry. A dark skinned girl broke from the game and ambled to where Amy stood.

"Hey lady," she said.

"Hi there."

"Whatcha you watching for?"

"I was thinking of a game I played when I was a little girl."

"When was that?"

"Oh, a long time ago." Amy replied.

"Oh," the girl said. "You got any babies?"

"No I don't."

"You gonna steal one of us? `Cause if you do my daddy will find you and kill you."

"No," she said, crouching down to the child's eye level. "I don't want to steal you. I was just watching you play."

"You smell like the liquor, just like my grandpap. He drinkin' all the time." The girl paused for a moment and wiped her forehead with her hand. "What games you play when you was a little girl?"

"Oh, I don't know. We just used to run around for the fun of it."

"That's stupid. That's a stupid game. Your game *gots* to have some kind of meaning. Else it ain't a game."

"I guess you're right," Amy replied. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." The girl curtsied and smiled broadly. "Now you stay away from the liquor," she warned, her brow knit in a serious expression.

"I will," she promised.

The boy who was "it" tip toed behind the little girl.

"You're it!" he screamed, tagging her, running in the opposite direction. The girl rolled her eyes.

Boys," she said. She smiled at Amy with all the knowledge of the man-wide world they shared, and with a weary acceptance, turned to return to the game.

13 DON'T NEED A WEATHERMAN TO TELL WHICH WAY THE WIND BLOW

She continued toward the river. At Seventh Street, she turned south, walking in the shade of high rise apartment buildings with security guards in their glass-enclosed lobbies. Rising above the tenements, the luxury apartments afforded their tenants water views and panoramas of the Capitol and the Mall. Only when they drove out of their fortified buildings did they see the foot traffic, the destitute and the poor.

From what she had seen, Washington was unlike any city she'd known - a city of masked division. Parks with nurtured grounds, roped off grasses and marble monuments hid the decrepitude of the city. The high rise apartments with their water views, hid the tenements behind them, another mask, another lie.

Restaurants lined Maine Avenue with views of a narrow boat channel, their glass enclosed dining rooms and outdoor patios perched over the still water. She could imagine tourists pouring into them never realizing the lights they saw were sparkling off the fetid water of the boat channel rather than the cool, wide Potomac.

They suffered the fate of every restaurant boasting a view - all vista, lousy food. It could have been a Howard Johnson's in Kansas City if you took away the view. One of the restaurants was skirted on three sides by a deck. If she wasn't going to see the Potomac, she was determined to look at some water, any water. She ducked under the chain barrier and ventured onto the deserted deck. Leaning over the railing, straining her neck, she could see the confluence of the Anacostia and the Potomac rivers in the distance.

Something crawled onto her finger, and she swatted at it. A spider escaped between the planking of the deck. She'd ripped half of its web. She hated spiders, but she felt sorry. The spider would begin to reconstruct its trap within minutes, but she felt guilty anyway.

Still, there was the dilemma of getting to the river itself. There was no walkway along the boat channel leading to the river. To the north, the channel came to a head where the highway crossed over the narrow

peninsula that separated the channel from the river itself. Sea gulls screeched above the bridge and the highway.

"Hey lady, the patio's closed," a man wearing a chef's outfit called with a heavy Jamaican accent. "You gotta go inside to da bar if you want a drink."

"Sorry," she replied. She felt light headed in the sun. She stumbled. The chef caught her and offered his arm in a gentlemanly manner, leading her inside the restaurant.

"Maybe you don' need a drink," he said.

"I'm unaccustomed to the heat," she said.

"Oh, yes. De heat will get you if you not used to it," he replied.

Inside, the air conditioning almost bowled her over. The perspiration on her forehead chilled instantly. She shivered.

"Take a few breaths," he said watching her. "Yes, dat's good."

She smiled wanly.

"Nester know what you need," he said pointing a finger to the ceiling.

"Mango juice," he said, turning toward the bar.

"No thank you..."

"No lady, you drink this," he said, pouring a glass. "It'll do you good." He slid it in front of her.

"It'll make you feel much, much better."

The juice was warm, heavy as molasses. It was all she could do to finish. The chef looked on with great expectation.

"It's very good, thank you," she said.

"See. You feel better?"

"Yes," she lied, her stomach was churning.

"You get used to the weather, you see." He smiled confidently. "You wonder if it's going to rain, eh?"

"Yes."

"It gonna rain tonight."

"The weatherman said..."

"Oh, the weatherman he looks at a computer and get everything wrong. It's gonna rain tonight. You'll see."

"I hope so..."

"I know so," he said placing his index finger on his wrist. "Lady will forget what's troubling her. You'll see."

"Thank you," she said.

"And lady," he said still smiling. "Maybe go easy on da gin."

She smiled wanly.

"Der's nothing, Nester don't know. Gotta go now," he said, nodding his head enthusiastically. "Gotta go work for `de mon.' De mon," he repeated, laughing as he headed towards the large swinging door to the kitchen.

The plush carpet cushioned her steps as she headed to the exit. Outside it was agonizingly warm. The mango juice roiled in her stomach and she had to stop and catch her breath before moving on her way.

14. DEAD FISH IN THE DEAD OF AFTERNOON

At the north end OF the channel the smell of decomposing fish was overwhelming. A marina was filled with moored sailboats and motor cruisers. Even larger boats lay in anchor in the channel. A few large motor yachts moored in the waterway were a big as small hotels. A man in a suit carrying a bag of groceries and a briefcase hurried along the wharf. He struggled with his load as he stepped onto a boat's deck. It would be nice to live on a boat, she thought, but she couldn't believe the smell. Her gut tightened as the gin and mango juice mingled in her stomach.

Towards the bridge, gaily colored fish stands floated on barges in the channel like an outdoor carnival. Baskets filled with ice spilled over with fresh seafood of every variety. The colors were as dazzling as the smell was overwhelming. Mangy-grey men stood behind bushels of crabs and fish laid out on ice. In the water below, dead fish and crabs floated. Gulls flew crazily overhead calling in a wild dance.

"Come on baby," a toothless vendor called to her. "You look like you could use a good dose of the crabs!" He held two handfuls of squirming crustaceans. She tried to smile at the gaunt unshaven man. His skin was so white it was gray. His grizzled face reminded her of hawkers on the carnival midway, rough and shaped by a world she could not even imagine. In the blackened teeth he showed as he laughed with his co-workers, she saw everything that was not of her world. It was as though they could see right through her, see her weaknesses and fears and laugh at her as the fish hawker laughed at her.

He lifted a crab and it pinched his rubber-gloved thumb. "Fucker," he yelled, pounding the crab against the railing as the other men laughed. The crab fell to the water, its claw still clutching the gray man's glove. He pried

it from his thumb, examining it as though he had never seen a crab claw before.

"Son of a bitch," he said in Amy's direction, but she was gone, heading up Maine Avenue, hailing a taxi and hoping to get home before she threw up.