

## THE MOOSE SHOW

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**MATTHEW  
LIGHT**

**The  
Moose  
Show**

**S**  
SALT

CAMBRIDGE

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*For Beautiful Michele*



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## JUST A TOUCH

Adele had even called Mike from the party at her friends' apartment. Over the loud dance music, she said, "I'm having such a nice time, Mike. Everyone's here, everyone's asking me about you. Why don't you come? It'll only take you twenty minutes to get here." She hadn't mentioned anything about a guy named Ed Snate being charming and amusing and asking her to dance over and over again.

Mike said he was too busy, even though he'd already signed off for the night. Mike didn't like going to parties. He didn't like party chat, didn't like to dance, felt he wasn't good at it. He was not, he admitted it, a whole lot of fun. Adele often complained about this fact. She kept telling Mike he never looked at her, or talked to her, only touched her when he wanted sex. They'd been going out together almost three years.

Adele was forty years old, not the best-looking woman in town, even though she still had an impressive figure. She stuck with Mike because nobody else was asking her out.

Mike was surprised when Adele told him the next day about how she'd danced and eventually wound up going home with this Ed Snate. Mike didn't ask for details, although Adele obviously wanted to talk. She was looking at him, hard, waiting for him to let it all out, almost wanting him to start some big scene with her.

Mike knew he was supposed to puff up and turn red with rage. His woman had gone to bed with another man. She'd been

unfaithful. He was supposed to hunt down and beat his rival, reconquer his female and make her submit, but that wasn't his style. Instead, he stood up, turned away from Adele and, pulling on his jacket, started walking towards the door of the diner where they'd met. He wasn't going to see her any more, that was all.

Adele expected something like that from Mike, but it galled her. She said, rather loud, "Ed's blind, Mike. He's a blind man, but he looked at me more than you do. Touched me more, too, and better."

The other people in the diner were looking at him. Mike acted as though he hadn't heard, or as though Adele wasn't shouting at him, and kept going. He and Adele had never moved in together. She kept a few things at his place. He was going to toss them out the window.

When he got home, Mike didn't throw anything out the window. He didn't punch any walls or tear up any photographs. But he couldn't stop thinking about Adele being touched, and so well, apparently, by a blind man. He saw the blind guy, nude, with dark glasses on, touching his girlfriend, now his ex-girlfriend. The blind man was running his hands up and down, reading her body the way the blind read their books. Blind Ed Snate's fingers were going all over Adele's nice bumps and curves, her smooth and downy areas, as if they were going over Braille—all those raised dots on white paper that a guy like Mike, a guy who could see, if nothing else, could never understand, would never need to understand.

Ed Snate—Mike had never heard of this mole Casanova before. Mike wasn't angry at him. Even if he had been, beating up a blind fellow was out of the question, it would be ungentlemanly. Anyway, what had happened was Adele's fault. How was some blind man supposed to know that a woman he's just met at a party was going out with someone already, unless she told him that was the case? No ring on Adele's finger for him to feel and interpret while they danced. But Mike was angry, no mistake. He wanted something to happen. He felt he ought to meet Mr Ed Snate, blind man. He was curious about a guy who, despite a severe handicap, went out to parties, drank and had a good time, turned his charm on for the ladies and scored.

All the blind people Mike had ever seen seemed vulnerable and tentative. He'd seen them feeling their way down streets with thin white canes, groping, sometimes asking for help when they got to corners and crosswalks. He'd seen blind people begging, wondered if they were faking it. He remembered one guy in particular who looked like he'd been caught in a fire and blinded that way. The man's scorched eyeballs were white and yellow; they jiggled strangely in their sockets with no eyebrows above.

Mike turned out all the lights in his apartment and closed his eyes. Feeling his way about the place, which he thought was familiar to him as the back of his hand, he bumped his fingers and knees on his way to getting himself a drink. A drink which he wanted badly because he'd just broken up with his girlfriend because she'd cheated on him with a blind man. Mike cut his finger on a knife in the drawer where he kept the bottle opener.

He waited some time before calling up those friends of Adele's who'd thrown the fatal party. He'd met them before; he and Adele had gone out for dinner with them a few times. Four people sitting talking at a low-key restaurant—that was about as much of a party as Mike usually felt like dealing with. He was used to being a voice rather than a presence. He enjoyed the fact that people could turn him off, make him disappear, at the touch of a button.

The people in question, these friends of Adele's, must have noticed her and their blind friend Ed Snate dancing and drinking and flirting. They'd seen her leave their little wing-ding with this fellow who was not he, Mike, Adele's legitimate boyfriend of some years' standing. Perhaps this party-throwing happy couple did not yet know that Mike had been made aware of Adele's infidelity, that Adele had told him herself, that they'd broken up over it.

Adele's friend Martha picked up when Mike called. Mike imagined he could see her as he listened to her voice over the telephone. Martha was hot stuff: she had red hair, lots of it, and an incredible female physique. Ed Snate might not know that Martha had red hair, or even what red looks like. Ed Snate might possibly have enjoyed Martha's intimate company too, at some point. He might be the sort of blind man, the sort of man, period,

who is irresistible to women. Mike was aware that there were such men, and that he was not one of them.

Mike said to Martha he was sorry he hadn't been able to make it the other night; he'd heard that she and Ben had thrown a swell, rip-roaring bash. He said he'd also heard that Adele had met a great guy at the party, name of Ed Snate, and he wanted to invite Ed and his old lady out for drinks and dinner sometime because it's so good to make new friends.

Mike caught the slight catch in Martha's voice when she said, "Oh sure . . . Oh, damn, Mike, I don't have Ed's number handy. Ben's got it. Ben knows Ed from work. You should give Ben a call at his office."

So Mike called Ben at his office. He remembered his first impression of Ben, which was that he didn't like him. In fact, he thought Ben was a lawyersome, inflamed asshole. But his wife Martha was hot.

"Listen Ben, I want Ed Snate's phone number. I would . . . I'd really like to meet the guy." No use beating around the bush with another man. It's only women you have to be cagey with. Being direct with women doesn't get you all that far. Unless you're a charming, irresistible blind man, perhaps. Ed Snate might have used the direct approach with Adele. Mike had not, back when they first met. He'd taken Adele out on a week's worth of dinner dates before he even tried kissing her, and that was because Adele asked him didn't he like her.

Ben sounded grave. He said, "All right. OK, Mike. I can give you that number." And he gave Mike that number. Mike had asked and Ben had given, that was all. Nobody could fault Ben in that exchange, should the sordid affair wind up in the courts of law.

Mike felt he needed another drink before he talked to Ed Snate. He wanted to be in a bar when he called, preferably a smoky, tough joint with a ballgame on the TV and pickled eggs in a glass jar and an old guy with an Irish accent behind the counter. Mike wanted masculine background noise as he stood in a wooden phone booth, pulled a coin from his pocket and stuffed it in the slot so that the metal clicked. He knew a place that fit the bill and he went there.

The phone rang a long time. Mike imagined Ed fumbling for it in his darkness.

Finally, "Hello. Ed Snate speaking."

"Ed, my name is Mike. You and I haven't had the pleasure, but I do believe you've met Adele Layton."

"Oh. Uhm . . . yes."

"Adele was my girlfriend, Ed. And now she's not."

"That's too bad, Mike. I'm sorry to hear it."

"That's why I'd like to meet you, Ed."

"Ah. Sure, Mike. That's fine. Where are you?"

Mike had expected the blind man to offer excuses, to say wait, we can't have a brawl because I'm blind. Instead, blind Ed Snate was on his way over to O'Casey's bar. Mike sat down at a table and got another drink from the waitress. He hadn't thought to ask Ed Snate where he lived. It might be somewhere clear across town, might take him hours to grope his way.

A man in a dark gray suit walked through the glass doors twenty minutes later. That is, he pushed the glass doors open and entered. Ed Snate came to a halt in the middle of the barroom and folded his thin white cane precisely, with sharp metallic clicks. He tucked the cane away in a breast pocket and said, "Mike."

Mike stood and went over to him. Ed Snate wasn't wearing dark glasses. There was nothing tentative or hesitant about him. If not for the white cane you wouldn't know he was blind, and now the cane was out of sight. How long had it been before Adele realized? Mike said, "Here I am, Ed."

They didn't shake hands. Ed said, "Let me take your arm, Mike."

Leading Ed back to where he was sitting felt odd to Mike: two men linked arm in arm in a bar, in public, touching. Two men, furthermore, who were supposed to be adversaries.

The waitress came and Ed ordered scotch. The waitress smiled at Ed, who didn't see and didn't, therefore, react.

Mike sat looking at Ed's face, trying to see what, if anything, was irresistible there. Ed said, "What's on your mind, Mike?"

Mike didn't answer. He didn't know what to say. Here was Ed, sitting at a table with him, at his request, summoned by him, and Mike didn't know any more why he'd called, or what he wanted to do once he was in the presence of his mysterious rival.

They sat in silence. To Mike, it seemed that Ed was looking at

his face too, although of course that was impossible. Ed was seeing nothing, or blackness, or whatever it is that blind people see.

Without sounding impatient, Ed said, "Look, I'd love to stay, Mike. I'm not having a bad time, not at all, but there's a party I said I would go to and it's getting late. Why don't you come with me?"

The invitation was too unexpected to refuse. Mike, who didn't go to parties, who still half wanted to beat somebody up because his girlfriend had cheated on him, at a party, with a blind man, was going to another party, with the same blind guy, whom he couldn't beat up because he was blind, who had screwed his girlfriend after a party which Mike hadn't wanted to attend.

They paid the pretty waitress, each man buying his own drink and tipping generously, then stood up. Ed said, "Let me take your arm again, Mike."

They exited the bar looking for all the world like intimates, the best of friends.

The party was being thrown not far away, Ed told Mike. They could walk, it was a nice evening for it. Looking at Ed's sharp suit, Mike said, "I'm not exactly dressed for a party, Ed."

Ed threw his head back and laughed out loud. "It won't matter a bit, Mike. Whatever you have on will be just fine, you'll see."

Though Mike was in theory leading, Ed was giving all the directions. In the middle of a tree-lined block, Ed pulled on Mike's arm, reining him in as though he were a draft horse. "This is the place." With his right hand, Ed felt his way down a row of doorbell buttons, counting. Mike thought of those well-manicured, elegantly tapered fingers twiddling Adele's large and somewhat rubbery nipples.

They were buzzed in. Ed preceded Mike to the elevator. The lobby of the building they'd entered was modern—marble floors and walls, low-slung chrome and black leather furniture—a bit of a maze. "Nice place," Mike said, as they rode up seven flights in a wood-paneled elevator. Ed's fingers had glided gently on the elevator buttons, too. Ed sniffed, shrugged, breathed a non-committal yeah. Some lobbies might smell better than others, or be easier to negotiate, the rest didn't matter to a blind man, Mike thought.

A beautiful woman answered Ed's knock. She was tall; her blond hair fell almost to her shoulders in wild, tight curls. She was dressed, like Ed, in dark gray. Mike instantly wanted to touch her dress. The woman's eyes were blue. The left eye was looking far left, the right was looking over to the right, not at quite the same extreme angle as its mate.

"Hi Gwen, it's Ed Snate. And I've brought a friend with me. Gwen, this is Mike."

Mike stuck out his hand. The beautiful blind woman whose name was Gwen said, "Hi Mike, glad you could come." She wheeled and started walking back down the hall of her apartment.

Ed closed the door behind them and Mike nearly stumbled. They entered a dimly lit living room. The only light, Mike saw, came from the street lamps outside.

Gwen stopped, put her hand on a sofa, a large dark shape near the middle of the large dark room. She said, "Ed's here, and he's brought his friend Mike."

Mike made out ten or a dozen people sitting, standing, talking, drinking, smoking, in the square, high-ceilinged room. He held back from nervously waving and said, "'Evening, everybody." He expected to hear a murmuring echo of his greeting, but there was none.

Party noise took over again. Mike fell to admiring Gwen's figure silhouetted against a window. The music sounded polite, perfunctory. Mike thought he was being rude, staring at people who couldn't see him, people who, aside from an amused Ed Snate, weren't aware that he could see them. Mike had been turned into the Invisible Man from the old horror movie.

Ed left Mike's side to go talk to two women and a man standing in a corner. He'd heard and recognized their voices. Gwen asked Mike if he wanted a drink and he said sure, a vodka tonic.

Mike's eyes had adjusted to the low light. He watched as Gwen ran her fingers over a sliced-up lemon, over a bucket full of ice cubes, and a range of bottles.

"Ed hasn't told me about you, Mike. Where have you come from?"

Mike imagined a worldwide network of blind people. He said, "I'm from Chicago." Which was true, except he'd come from there twenty years earlier.

“And you’re a colleague of Ed’s?”

Mike had no idea what it was Ed Snate did for a living, though it was obviously a good living. He said, “I’m on the radio. A disc jockey, I guess.” Which was true without qualification.

“You guess?” Mike saw Gwen smile. A smile is involuntary, universal. Gwen had a pretty, unrestrained smile.

“Well, I do a twice-weekly radio program about jazz.”

More than being polite to a friend of a friend, Gwen suddenly seemed genuinely interested in Mike, in his job, in his implied knowledge of music. Mike knew that radio is like television for the blind. He was aware that part of his audience must be made up of blind people, although none of the listeners who called in with questions or requests ever prefaced things by saying, “I’m blind.” Gwen said, “It seems to me we’ve had enough of this chamber music by now. Why don’t you help me pick a record that’ll loosen things up a bit?”

Mike felt for, and took, Gwen’s arm. Her sexy dress was cashmere, exquisitely thin.

Gwen had lots of records, neatly arranged in bins made of the same dark wood as her building’s elevator. Mike had been to the shop where such boxes were custom-made for rich record collectors, opera fanatics. The album covers had black adhesive labels on their upper right-hand corners, riddled with the raised white dots of Braille. Gwen took Mike’s hand, gently drew it towards the back of a bin on the left. “Jazz starts here,” she said, smiling at her wall, which had no pictures hanging.

Mike pretended to read the Braille labels, looked at the album covers. “I would have to say, ‘You got good taste.’” He thought perhaps he could taste Gwen’s fingers in the vodka, lemon and ice of the drink she’d made him.

Mike pulled an album, held it up. Gwen felt along his arm and took it. Moving the knobs and dials and levers of her stereo, she doused the classical stuff, put that record away. The blind people went on talking in the brief silence of the record switch, not enough time for Mike to catch what it was they spoke about amongst themselves.

Gwen reached for Mike again, a soft touch on his chest. Without a word, she led him to a sofa in a corner of the room and, looking off nowhere in particular, felt below her to make

sure there were two places free. She steered Mike, sat down close to him, left her hand on his knee. Their faces were almost touching. Mike could smell her breath, lemon and alcohol, and her wonderful hair.

Gwen asked him how he knew Ed. Mike almost said that they'd been to college together, but that would only have brought more questions. Besides, Gwen might have gone to college with Ed for real. He said, "Oh, we're old buddies, me and Ed," and that seemed enough of an answer for her. They talked about music, about nightclubs and places to eat in Mike's hometown, Chicago, where Gwen had never been.

Mike said, "Excuse me a minute, would you, Gwen?" He'd drunk two pints of beer at O'Casey's.

Gwen said, "Of course." She took his hand, rose and guided him. Along the way, she collided with a fat blind man and they both laughed. Mike remembered not to turn on the light, although the fact of being in a blind woman's bathroom made him curious.

Gwen was waiting for him outside at a discreet distance. She said "Mike," and led him back to her living room, back to the party. She made them a couple more drinks, took him around and introduced him to a few people. Mike got a kick out of being the Invisible Man. He saw that Ed was talking to two women; he had them both laughing out loud. Mike wondered if there was going to be any dancing at this party for the blind. He wanted to try dancing with Gwen, but she'd gone back to being a busy hostess, making the rounds, fixing more drinks for her guests.

What's it like to be drunk if you're blind, Mike wondered, and closed his eyes.

He bumped into someone and quickly opened them again. Standing before him was a woman who had no eyes. She started laughing first, her eyelids closed, flat and empty. Mike quickly joined in. He thought his own laughter sounded forced, fake, but the woman with no eyes didn't seem to notice.

Later, Mike made his own way back to Gwen's bathroom. Any competent blind fellow would be able to locate it again. This time, he turned the light on. Gwen's towels were all white. The material was thick; they felt warm and soft and smelled clean. She did not have one of those clever shower curtains that people

who live in big cities often buy. Mike had just opened Gwen's medicine cabinet when someone knocked on the door.

Mike froze, stopped breathing. He hadn't locked the door; he never did. Gwen came in. Her pretty blue eyes couldn't even register that the light was on. Paralyzed, Mike watched Gwen hike up her dress. No panties; nude Gwen underneath, blonde. Gwen touched the seat and sat, her face a mask. Mike let the noise she made cover his step back from the sink onto a soft white bathmat. She'd wash her hands after, women always do.

She came close to him. He could have kissed her cheek, her ear. Mike wondered how Gwen would react to being secretly observed like that. He wondered if what he'd just done could be construed as spying, or voyeurism, or something even worse than that.

Mike watched Gwen smooth her dress down, watched her go back out of the bathroom. Breathing hard, he let a minute go by, then he followed her.

He saw Gwen at the bar table, saw her hair; she was straightening up. Mike lightly jostled her, touched her shoulder. "Gwen?" He complimented the fabric of her dress, asked where she'd gotten it. He concentrated on her, tried to be charming, like Ed Snate, tried to make her laugh. Nobody else was dancing, but Mike asked Gwen anyhow. It didn't matter that he had no moves at all in his repertoire, or that his rhythm was off—Gwen and Mike got close and swayed slowly.

People started leaving Gwen's party. Instead of coming up to her to say thanks and goodnight, they called out to her on their way to the closet by the door where they got their coats and jackets by count and feel.

Ed Snate left, roisterously, with the two women he'd been chatting up. After he'd gone, Gwen said, "It just occurred to me, Mike: Aren't you staying with Ed?"

"Uhm, no, actually. I'm at the Kranepool Hotel. For the duration of the radio conference."

"That's so far uptown. Why don't you stay here tonight? I have room."

When they were alone, they sat on the big couch in the living room and started kissing. There hadn't been any sly remarks on the part of the last stragglers, as there might have been at a party

where people could see what was going on. Mike didn't know if Gwen's friends were being discreet or if they were merely unaware, but it didn't matter. He kept his eyes closed and let his hands roam over Gwen, her hair, her dress.

She took the dress off in her bedroom, just pulled it over her head and let it fall on a chair. Mike put his arms around her waist. There was a window in the bedroom; they were standing by it. The blinds hadn't been pulled down. Mike leaned back slightly because he wanted to see Gwen's breasts, her small, hard nipples in the soft light from the street.

She took in a sharp breath. "Mike. You can see."

Mike wanted to kick himself. "I never said I couldn't see, Gwen."

Gwen considered, relaxed. She touched him all over again; had he changed now that she knew he could see? Mike let himself be touched, felt, as though he were a book Gwen was reading. She'd been momentarily thrown by a plot twist.

Gwen reached for a light switch on the wall, flicked it. The darkness was not dispelled. Gwen didn't know that the light bulb had burned out. Mike didn't say anything. She was being generous, wanted to show herself to Mike who could see.

Mike said, "You're so beautiful, Gwen." He thought she must know, lots of men must have told her that. She got onto her bed; she stretched out fully. "Tell me, Mike: why am I beautiful? What does it look like?"

Mike looked at Gwen, wishing for light. He saw an outline, a shadow, gray and black. He said words about clouds, hills, strawberries and cream, the fur and the manes of healthy animals, ripe figs; words that probably meant nothing to Gwen, but which she wanted to hear anyway, words in a book that look important to somebody who can't read.

## AMOURANG

The Sea Empress Motel is right on the beach. Despite all the maxims concerning the setting of foundations, the architect, whom I pictured as a brush-cut, glasses-wearing fellow in summery attire, wanted his creation to have sand between its toes, to breast the waves. He lavished not a few nautical details on the place: among them a wrap-around tubular railing painted glossy aqua and a prow—a concrete outcropping from which guests could survey the horizon, the gaudy Florida skylscapes and the waves, which slosh directly below at high tide. The salt water and the constant low-level battering have done the building some damage.

My wife Zabba heard about the place from someone she works with in the fabulous fashion biz. She and I needed a break, she said; we needed to get out of the city for a while. Always a good idea, as far as I'm concerned. She didn't spring it on me until we were inspecting our room—our suite, actually—that her old friend Nibs would be joining us on our long-weekend getaway. Would be joining us shortly, in fact.

“What? Why? And why didn't you tell me?”

“Cause you'd have said no, that's why.”

She was right about that. It's not that I have anything specific against Nibs. Our problem is what you might call mutual negative attraction. But Nibs and Zabba were girls together; their bond spans forty years and seems unbreakable.

They gave each other those crazy names; crazy names that

stuck. Something to do with a song by Captain Beefheart and a fling with calligraphy, I suspect, but I haven't inquired too deeply into that, or any other of their girlish mysteries. That's what I was suddenly up against: the wall of girlishness, of female intimacy. I was going to spend the weekend being the invisible man, the bad man who takes the blame for all men, and the guy who goes and gets things.

"And I want you to promise to be nice, too, because Nibs is in a bad place right now." The way she said it carried the implication: be civil or be in the doghouse for a long, long time.

"Sure, I'll be nice, don't worry. What's wrong with her this time?" Always some crisis or other, in Nibs' chaotic existence.

"Remember Tom? Well, Tom is dead."

What I remembered mostly about Tom was that I didn't much care for him, either. Nibs seemed so happy and proud when she introduced him to me as her husband. "See? Got myself a fella. You thought it would never happen. And he compares pretty favorably with the likes of you, I must say." Or that's what I imagined was running through Nibs' head as she watched Tom and me shaking hands.

Here's this man, Tom: half a head taller than I am, good-looking, a sharp dresser without being flashy, enormously successful in some arcane offshoot of the movie biz—sound effects editing? Nibs deliriously happy and, as a consequence, me rather moody and not inclined to like the guy. And now he was dead. Car crash? Coke overdose? I didn't even ask. Needless to say, Nibs' grief was cataclysmic. I could only wonder why I hadn't heard anything about it before our spontaneous little vacation was decided upon.

My wife and I had a few hours left as a couple before her best friend, the new widow, was due to arrive at the motel. Zabba hit the beach. I got in the car and went off in search of a liquor store. Piña coladas and Mexican beer with key lime would be crucial, I thought, in making the next few days bearable. I was picturing a sun-bleached fog in which two women talked and shared emotions while I sprawled on the sand, flopped into the milky-blue water to be buffeted about by the short but persistent waves.

The lady who ran the liquor store was tall, angular. She asked

me, with a note of concern, was I planning to drink all this stuff myself. She called me sugar-pants, and slipped a sample bottle of hooch flavored with passion fruit into one of the paper bags. I drank it down before I started the car, threw the empty into the back.

I got lost on my way back to the Sea Empress. I saw my first wild alligator, which looked like a spectacular turd on the dry grass above a waterway. After locating the ocean, I parked by a public pier and walked out to where several, numerous, black families were fishing. Huge cargo ships were a well-spaced line of traffic in and out of the Port of the Everglades, punctuated by vast white cruise ships. Both types of vessel came off as overburdened, ungainly, grim. From the end of the pier, by dint of her railings the color of sea foam, I was able to spot the Sea Empress Motel.

By the time I got back, Nibs had arrived. The hot-pink convertible could only have been rented by her. She'd left her bags—three large ones, for three days—in the back seat, unattended. To be nice, I carried them up to the room for her. Or perhaps she'd intended for me to carry them in the first place.

Our suite looked like an orgiastic crime scene. Women's clothes were strewn all over the place. I pictured the two girlhood friends, girls no longer, applying preliminary coats of sun lotion, trying on various bathing suit and sundress combinations for each other's approval. I deposited Nibs' luggage on the bed in the suite's second bedroom, stacked the beer in the fridge, pulled on my surfer shorts and knocked up a seriously strong round of piña coladas in paper cups. I went out on the deck-like terrace and, after a minute or two, descried my two weekend companions. They sat in beach chairs under coconut palms, with brilliant-green, round-leaved shrubbery for a backdrop.

The word "forever," spoken in Nibs' siren-screach, struck my ear as I approached, somewhat clumsily, with the drinks. The women fell silent, watched me without expression behind their sunglasses as big as movie screens. I was intruding. I handed out the paper cups.

"Hi, Nibs. I'm terribly sorry about Tom. But I'm glad you could come. I'm glad you're here. You look beautiful. Both of you do."

Nibs slowly rose from her beach chair. She's a tall woman. She

put her arms around my shoulders, hugged me in tight. I felt her breasts, wet and cold from a recent swim, press against my chest. She went further: her crotch also pressed in, and there was some grind to it. Then I felt piña colada spilling down my back, flowing cold into my shorts.

Nibs pretended to be horrified and apologetic. As badly as I wanted to pour the drink I was holding all over her hairdo, I held it out as a peace offering. I was dealing with a woman recently bereaved; they tend, understandably, to erratic behavior. "Bottoms up," I said. "I'll go make us some more in a minute. Right now, I'm in the mood for a quick dip. 'Scuse me, ladies."

I heard, "Aw, ain't he a dear?" as I ran into the surf.

I counted off fifty strokes before diving, eyes open, to grab sand at the bottom—a childish habit, proof that I went down all the way. I came up slowly, surfaced, looked back at the beach, at my wife and her old friend. I was many hundreds of feet from the shore, but the women weren't looking for my head in the water. I swam in an arc and emerged from the waves on the other side of the motel, where there was an outdoor shower.

Up in the room, I turned on the TV and fixed myself another piña colada. I might've taken a swig or two from the bottle. I sat on the chair with my tropical cocktail and watched part of a dance program, then I sliced up a few bitter little limes and went back onto the beach with three cold Mexican beers in paper cups.

"He's trying to get us drunk," said Nibs.

I didn't have to try all that hard. Twelve beers, a big can of pineapple juice, a half-pint of pearly, unctuous, heart-stopping coconut cream got together and went down with a quart of rum before you could say yo-ho-ho. At sunset, not trusting ourselves to drive or be driven, we took a stroll and had dinner at a place called Le Beache Combeur. The tables were all outdoors, under dripping mangroves and banyans. Congealed French fries, hamburger scraps, salad remains and saltines were tossed overboard by waitresses and patrons alike to be slurpingly devoured by a school of monstrous tarpon that haunted the bay which the restaurant's terrace overhung. I'd never seen a tarpon before, except under a heavy coat of varnish in certain bars. I thought of them as rare, exotic game fish—tough, elusive adversaries for barrel-chested men straining at dangerously bent fishing rods—

but there they were, sliding by like elongated gray ghosts, sucking down garbage like goldfish being fed.

Back at the Sea Empress, the weeping started. Midnight had come and gone; the three of us were slumped in chairs out on the deck, following the lights of all the ships issuing from and entering the harbor. Nibs whispered, "Tom took me to Catalina on our first date. In a seaplane. Wasn't that special?"

Then came the womanly waterworks, the wailing and choking and sobbing and hugging and patting. I went into the room and got undressed: I unvelcro'ed my shorts and let them fall. Then I fell on the bed. I don't know how long I got to enjoy unconsciousness. The door opened. One person bounced and rolled on the mattress, then another. I wasn't, I recall, exactly pleased to be jolted awake to headache, parchedness and nausea, but almost immediately two bodies, female, with all the appendages and orifices, overwhelmed me.

I woke up before the women did. I extricated myself from the tangle and went outside for a walk on the beach. Before setting off though, I took a swim. I felt unpleasantly sticky and smelt alien to myself. The water was warm, the dawn rosy-red behind a few purple-gray clouds. It looked as though I were flowing into a huge papaya-colored sea-shell, a conch. The tide was at lowest ebb; the white sand was littered with detritus from the sea. I started picking up shells and found a pretty little red, dead fish with bulging black eyes. The fish's pink belly was grotesquely distended. Leaning over for a closer inspection brought on a dizzy spell and the urge to vomit. I saw a pair of fine, whiskery antennae protruding from the dead fish's mouth: the little greedy-guts had fatally engulfed a shrimp almost as big as he was.

Back at the motel, barely glancing through the bedroom door at the two nude women, I got a sharp knife from a drawer in the kitchenette. On a table out on the terrace, I performed the autopsy. My diagnosis was confirmed: an entire shrimp, dead, bleached by gastric juices, practically sprang from the fish's belly on the first incision. I considered leaving this scientific dissection diorama for the ladies to inspect and evaluate, but wound up hurling both creatures back into the water. I arranged the shells I'd gathered in what I thought was a female-pleasing

manner, went back in to set the coffee-maker in motion and took off on another, much longer, swim.

After what had happened the night before, I thought that our next group encounter—I mean me, my wife, her oldest friend—would be hushed and awkward, tinged with shame and guilt. What had happened, though undeniable, was something to be forgotten, best left unspoken—alcohol involved, a peculiar set of circumstances and atmospheric conditions. I found the two women sitting at the cement table on the deck. They'd put up the rainbow sun umbrella and were musing over their mugs of coffee. They'd put on kimonos, which must have sprung from one of Nibs' big bags. These robes, unfastened, fluttered in the breeze. I muttered good morning on my way into the room for a hot shower. Nibs stopped me by wrapping her arm around my leg. She patted my ass in a proprietary manner. She said thanks, without any of the usual sarcasm, mockery and implicit criticism. Suddenly I felt ten feet tall. Surveying the sea, the horizon, the beach, I was a man with two wives: a laird, a tribal chieftain, a god. But I knew I'd better keep the feeling strictly to myself. With a stone face, I kissed my wife and then her friend.

We made plans for the day: we'd go for a drive, in the car Nibs had rented, because it was splashier. The ladies wanted to visit a castle down near the Everglades. The castle had been built by a runty Eastern European man who thought it would be a good idea to quarry immense blocks of coral by hand in a hot, humid climate, and build himself a fortress home in the middle of nowhere, among the alligators and the snapping turtles. Nibs said he'd done it to soothe the pain of thwarted love; she'd read these facts in a magazine.

I drove; my wife and her oldest friend sat in back, as though I were their chauffeur and not the husband of one, lover of the other. I'd worn loose, thin, cream-colored pants for the outing, and a well-worn T-shirt. I drove and stole glances at my women in the rear-view mirror. Nibs' husband had died. She was feeling empty, crushed, cast adrift in the unpredictable ocean of life, but she had her friend beside her, holding her hand, brushing the hair out of her eyes.

Two girls, eleven or twelve years old, sitting on grass, away

from the rest of the world in a clump of bushes or trees, in a park on the edge of a Midwestern town. Two girls making plans for the future, which for them is concrete, definite and subject to certain iron rules which they are just then devising. We'll both get married when we're twenty-four, in June. Our wedding-dresses will be white with pearls sewn onto the cloth. We'll each have three children—two girls and a boy apiece. The names for these six children are a matter for much discussion, then the intimate conversation turns solemn. A blue jay sends a screech downward. The trees around the girls bend slightly in a breeze; the leaves show both their shades. "If one of us dies . . . The two girls swear they'll raise the other's children to adulthood, should the need arise. What about the husband, then? Should the widower be turned loose to marry again? Married, perhaps, to somebody hated and unthinkable like the big blond girl in Mrs. Archer's class who's bossy and thinks she knows everything? The girls agree that this must not be allowed to happen. "What if one of our husbands dies?"

Everything had been worked out in advance. There were no children to raise. Sad, perhaps, but that's the way it was. Having children must be even more frightening for women, I thought, than it is for men. Have children, however, is what women are supposed to do. Women expect to have children; it is expected of them. What would be the equivalent for men? Go off to war? Get a job? Get married? I couldn't remember making any binding deals with any of my friends in junior high. We looked at our first girlie magazines and our thoughts were not of tuxedos or jobs or children.

Because of a discussion held by two little girls, if only in my imagination, and because another man was dead, I was doing what a man's supposed to do with a woman with two women.

There was a billboard for an alligator farm, then a hamburger stand, then the Coral Castle. Tickets were expensive. The coral blocks, though indeed massive, looked like cement. The coral furniture the little Latvian had so laboriously hewn and carved was uncomfortable. His sculptures of heavenly bodies were crude and childish. On the other hand, just outside the coralline outer wall were a mango tree with unripe fruit dangling from its branches and a pineapple plant with its tiny, perfectly formed

product offered up on a spray of green as though to heaven. I'd never seen mangoes or pineapples growing before.

People stared at us in the restaurant that night. The waiters and waitresses all took turns approaching our table to ask if everything was all right. It felt as though everyone in the place knew what the three of us had been up to the night before, and what we would be doing later on. I drank more wine than was good for me, or my wallet. I recall flirting rather crudely with Nibs. I might have indulged in some under-the-table groping. I think I even asked a perky blonde waitress if she'd care to join the three of us swingers at the motel on the beach when she knocked off. We had liquor there, I told her. We could order adult entertainment to be beamed into our suite. The manager of the restaurant, a big ex-Captain of the Football Team kind of fellow, came over to ask if there were any problems. He told me they'd run out of wine for the evening.

There was no adult action at the motel that night, except for me throwing up as soon as we were safely back in our suite. After I'd gotten the bathroom back in order, feeling much better, I announced to my two ladies that I was going to take a revitalizing moonlight swim. I'm sure I appeared buffoonish to them as I stripped and exited the suite to face the black, briny deep gloriously nude and alone. Neither of them said, "Take care you don't drown yourself, honey."

The water was warm, lovely, a mother's embrace. I swam towards the never-ending stream of overloaded cargo ships. I thought I could reach one before the hammerhead sharks got me. The Chinese sailors would toss me a rope, haul me aboard, and I'd be in Kowloon or Sydney in a few weeks' time, leaving all embarrassment behind.

Sober, shivering, shriveled, I found the door to the suite's other bedroom locked from the inside. My two wives were in there, sleeping—wrapped, perhaps, in the safety of each other's arms. I didn't knock or make a fuss or bellow to be admitted to the harem to exact my *droit-de-seigneur*. I showered and fell asleep in the other bed, with the TV on.

Strange, muffled screams awoke me. It sounded as though a cat, or a small ape, were drowning nearby. These cries weren't coming from the TV before me, which in any case was set on the

lowest volume. Neither were they issuing from the orgy chamber from which I'd been excluded. They were coming through the wall, from the room or suite next door. The door to our other bedroom clicked open; out popped two well-rested women in terry-cloth bathrobes.

"Well? Put on your pants and go see what's the matter."

Out on the deck, I heard whimpers, snorts, disbelieving yelps. I rapped with two knuckles, then knocked, pounded. The door opened a crack and I looked down into a pale, wrinkled face; fine white hair matted against the head; a nightgown from an earlier age clutched at the bosom by a crabbed, liver-spotted hand. The old woman didn't, or couldn't, speak. She moved away from the door. I entered and saw a robust bald man lying face-up on the double bed, his eyes and mouth open, agape, staring at nothing, shouting silence.

The old woman—his wife, now his widow—took my hand. "This wasn't supposed to happen," she said. "We came down here because of me. The doctor said only a month or two: I have cancer. We just wanted to take one last trip together."

She didn't let go of my hand until the ambulance came. Even then, she didn't let go.