

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/3

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When the smoke alarm began its hellish scream she sat bolt upright, jumped out of bed, and ran naked (she liked to sleep naked) toward the door. Unimagined terror flooded her senses as she heard the crackling of burning wood beneath the ear-splitting din. Smoke slithered under the door and enveloped her feet and calves.

She reached for the door handle but stopped when Brett shouted: "Wait." His tone was so commanding that its very force froze her hand in midair. She turned around. Naked also, he was charging out of the bathroom holding two damp face towels. He handed her one and wrapped the other around his face. "Cover your face," he ordered. "The children!" she cried.



It wasn't hot in the tiny second-class cabin, but she woke covered with sweat. Her eyes wide with terror, it was all she could do not to scream. Gradually, the cabin rising and falling as the freighter ploughed its way ahead, she remembered where she was. The sweat ran down her back and between her breasts; her cotton pajamas as well as the sheets were soaked. She touched, momentarily startled, the red hair that now reached only the top of her ears, its curls cut into straight strips. Her fingers came away damp and gummy.

Why was it so short? Then she remembered. A few days after the fire, she had gone to the salon and told Molly to cut it all off. It was all she could think of doing. Brett had played endlessly with her thick curls. What other sacrifice could she lay before him?

Her life? Maybe. What was left of it.

"But Abigail," Molly had remonstrated.

"Just do it."

"I'd do anything if it would help," Molly later told Evelyn, who owned the salon.

"Nothing will help," Evelyn replied.

Abigail swiveled out of the narrow bunk and felt a tingle as her feet touched the cold steel floor. She wondered if the first-class cabins had carpets. She took off her striped cotton pajama top and dropped it on the bunk. Her fingertip followed a drop of sweat as it ran down her side. She walked quietly to the sink and, careful not to wake her cabin-mate, who was snoring ever so slightly in the other bunk, rinsed her face and wiped down her arms and torso with a damp wash cloth. She towed off, put on a tee shirt, a light sweater and a pair of jeans. She slipped into her sandals and left the cabin. She climbed a flight of steep ladder steps to the upper deck. A mild breeze bathed her face. She glanced at the dark water and then walked along the deck to the open area in the bow. Mute forms lay in sleeping bags; some of the younger passengers had taken to sleeping on deck.

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She sat in a deck chair and watched the sleepers, who would occasionally grunt or roll over in their bags. She wondered how they could sleep on the hard deck.

Hey, you could do that when you were in college. You could sleep twisted like a pretzel in somebody's chair. You've just forgotten how.

She put her head back and stared into the black urn of night.

So much vast space. Is it just so much nothing? I wonder if there's any chance ... stop it ... you don't believe that and you know it.

The ship's rocking soothed her. The Atlantic had been calm for over twenty-four hours now, but a nor'easter had struck a day and a half ago, early in the morning about ten hours out of New York. Heavy rain had engulfed the ship, and fierce winds made a boiling cauldron of the ocean. The freighter's prow rose, pushed upwards by the swelling, crisscrossing waves, and then plunged sickeningly towards the trough. Near noon, she had felt compelled to venture out on deck. The wild, face-pummeling wind had lashed at her like an alley cat with its back up, and freshets of rain streamed through her hair, across her face and down her rain jacket. She had gripped the rail and stared, mesmerized, at the churning water.

It would be so easy ... and quick: just one heave. What would it feel like?

A sailor in shining yellow rain gear came along the deck and looked at her incredulously. Cupping his mouth, he shouted something she couldn't hear but would not have understood anyway. His dark eyes fierce with anger, he took her by the arm and guided her brusquely to the arched door, closed it behind her and went on his way.

Returning to the cabin, she had lain in her bunk all that afternoon as the ship careened up and down, side to side. Waif-like, Tracy had barfed twice in the shallow sink. "Sorry," she mumbled each time and staggered back to her bunk. Around five, the storm ended as unexpectedly as it had begun. That night she had again stood against the rail of the upper deck, this time gazing at a sky peppered with stars and at a long finger of moonlight that lay like a whisper across the quiet sea.

Gone for now was the terrible urge; but what would stop it from returning? Like one of those interminable upstate winters, it would not easily relax its grip.

"That was some storm," said a young man who had stopped near her, cupping his hand to light a cigarette.

She nodded but said nothing. Her willingness to talk had been sporadic at best these last months. Mostly she had wanted to be alone: to think - as if thinking would do any good. She wanted to picture their faces, knowing that no matter how hard she resisted, they would grow dimmer with time. If not for her parents and Brett's, she wouldn't even have any photos.

On a cloudless and windy March afternoon, not quite two months after the fire, she took a walk on a back road not far from the blackened timbers that had been her house. She happened on a knock-kneed foal with its mother. Something about the foal gamboling around the patient mare gave expression to what until then were inchoate feelings.

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"I'm hollowed out," she said to herself.

It was at that moment that she knew she had to leave – for how long, she didn't know.



She had no idea how long she'd been sitting in the deck chair with those encased sleepers lying carelessly on all sides. She hadn't thought to wipe away the tears running down her cheeks. She got up and walked unsteadily along the deck.

Tracy turned on the light when Abigail closed the cabin door.

"I'm sorry. I thought I was being very quiet."

"You were, but I sleep like a cat."

Tracy sat up. Her thick dark hair framed her face.

"Are you okay?" Tracy asked. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

Abigail stood rooted as if turned to stone.

"No," she said. "I mean yes."

"Would you like a joint?" Tracy asked. "You look like you could use one."

Abigail smiled and breathed deeply.

"No thank you," she said. "It's not for me ... and really, I'll be all right."

She sat on the edge of her bunk. She didn't feel like trying to sleep again – not right away. She had said little to Tracy in the two days they'd been cabin-mates, and she hoped Tracy didn't think her rude.

"There are even more people sleeping on deck tonight, I think."

"You should try it," said Tracy, who had slept outside the night before. "It's awesome. It's like camping out on a water bed."

"That does sound like fun, but I don't have a sleeping bag."

"You can borrow mine."

"Thanks ... maybe."

"Are you feeling better?" Tracy asked. "Your color's back a bit."

"Yes," she answered. "Better."

"It's not the storm, is it? I know it's been over for a day, but let me tell you: it took my stomach a long time to get right. Sleeping outside helped. The cabin made me think of barfing. Did I really gross you out?"

"No," said Abigail. "It's not the storm, and your getting sick didn't bother me in the least. I'm glad you're okay now."

"Thanks."

Abigail suddenly felt very tired.

"I guess I'm ready for sleep ... unless you want to talk some more."

Tracy chewed her lower lip and then gave her head a quick shake.

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"No," she said. "We should sleep. There'll be lots of chances to talk. After all, we're on a ship."



The next morning, Abigail and Tracy stayed behind at their breakfast table.

Food on the freighter was heavy and plentiful. Three meals plus tea were served. Breakfast that morning consisted of hot cereal, scrambled eggs, sausage, rolls, cheese, fruit and thick yoghurt. Abigail had only wanted a dish of the yoghurt on top of which she diced an apple. Tracy took a hearty serving of everything except the sausage.

"I'm storing up," said Tracy. "Who knows what we'll get in Morocco?"

"Exquisite food, I would imagine," said Abigail, "what with the combination of Arab and French influences."

"You sure know more than I do. Are you a teacher?"

"No, I was an architect."

"Well, I'm storing up anyway ... just in case Arab and French combined ends up like my Mother's rice and bean casseroles: burnt on the top and cold on the bottom.

"Where on earth could you be storing it?" asked Abigail. "You're razor thin."

"I know and it's not like I exercise."

When the waiters started giving them inquisitorial looks, they carried steaming mugs of coffee to the upper deck. They sat in deck chairs near the stern. The sky was cloudless. Dazzling sunlight danced on the waves and hurt their eyes.

"Should have worn my sunglasses," said Tracy. "My mother used to bug me about them."

Abigail glanced at her and then studied the vast expanse of ocean. A knot formed in her stomach.

Who will I ever bug?

She wanted to get up and walk away, but she forced herself to sit still.

"Why didn't you want the sausage? Seems like good storage material."

"Vegetarian," Tracy replied, "but not vegan," she added hurriedly.

First-class passengers marched briskly past, circumnavigating the ship. They did it in pairs and threes every morning. They wore casual clothes but eschewed the jeans and tee shirts ubiquitous in second class.

"They seem a determined lot," said Abigail.

"Sure do. I hope I'm not being a jerk but why are you in second class?"

"You mean at my age?"

"It is true," said Tracy, "that everyone else in second class is pretty young." She reached back and smoothed her hair which that morning she

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had pulled into a pony tail. "Would it be really awful to ask how old you are?"

"Thirty-eight."

"Wow! Still, you're different from the first-class stiffs. They walk around like they've got poker sticks up their butts."

Abigail laughed.

"An apt description and thank you for the compliment."

"So ... answer the question."

"About second class?"

"Uh huh."

"I didn't know how long I'd be gone so I wanted to travel economically." She paused a second. "And I thought second class would be more interesting."

Cawing gulls drifted above the ship. Occasionally, one shot into the water and came up with a small fish, which it promptly swallowed. A young sailor carrying a bucket came on deck through a low door. He had unruly, curly hair, long in the back, and wore a white tee shirt and dark blue work pants. He smiled, showing deeply stained, crooked teeth with two outlined in gold, and said: "Good morning, ladies" with a heavy accent. Leaning out, he dumped the food scraps off the stern. Noisily showing their appreciation, the gulls dived over and over again to fetch the garbage from the sparkling sea.

"How long are you traveling for?" Abigail asked Tracy.

"Don't know either. I sort of quit my job and just left."

"Interesting. What kind of job?"

"Admin assistant in a construction company. I started three years ago ... right after high school."

"You didn't like it?"

"It was okay. I learned a lot. I had no clue about what running a company was like."

"Most people don't."

Tracy chewed her lower lip. Abigail waited patiently.

"There's more to it. My boyfriend dumped me."

"I'm sorry. Had you been going out long?"

"About a year."

"Were you pretty upset about it?"

"Yeah," sighed Tracy. "It was the second time it's happened. Seems like once men get in your pants they lose interest."

"Not all men."

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Abigail averted her face so Tracy wouldn't notice her fighting back tears.

"Hey, that's good to know. At times, I think I just make bad choices. I know it sounds dumb – and clichéd – but my parents were divorced and my father wasn't around much so I didn't have a very good male role model."

"Could be," said Abigail thoughtfully, "but maybe you just need time and experience. Very few people get anything right the first time."

"Or second?" laughed Tracy.

"Or second."

She paused.

"I will say that your boyfriend's loss is my gain. You're a ..."

She was going to say "delightful" but caught herself.

It might sound condescending ... especially to a younger person.

"...a great roommate," Abigail concluded.

"Why thanks: that's so nice of you to say."

Tracy jumped up and grabbed Abigail's left hand.

"Come on, I want to show you something."

She led Abigail, the wind blowing in their faces, toward the bow. A group of the younger passengers sat in a knot. The wind muffled their voices. A few smoked, the wind tearing the smoke from their mouths. The first-class passengers, in their wool slacks, wind breakers and walking shoes, were still circling the ship, their arms pumping rhythmically. Tracy crossed the deck and climbed down a steep ladder that led to an open space behind the prow. Abigail followed.

Abigail noticed a hole on each side of the acute angle of the prow. The holes were just large enough for a person comfortably to fit their head through. Tracy knelt on the steel deck and stuck her head through one. Then she lay flat on her stomach. Abigail pictured the guillotine and shivered. She stood dumbly watching Tracy's back and rear. Tracy pulled her head back out and shouted: "Try it." Abigail got down and felt the steel bolts of the deck press against her knees. Terrified, she stuck her head through the hole and lay flat on the cold steel.

Suddenly she was hanging in space. She looked down at the water far below her and gasped. The ship's prow rose and fell, slicing through the waves like a knife through butter. She bobbed with the ship's motion, and the ocean rose toward her. She lost her fear, knowing her shoulders could not fit through the hole. She looked up and found herself gazing over the vast sea. It was completely different from standing at the railing. Except for the rise and fall, she was level with the horizon. It was as if she were a bird, skimming over the waves.

She heard Tracy shouting. She turned her head. Tracy was laughing and shouting: "Isn't it fabulous?"



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Brett opened the door. Her scream was muffled by the towel. Flames were licking up the stairwell. Catching fire, the banister crumbled in a flash and tumbled into the front hall. Flames edged rapidly along the hall and smoke billowed into their bedroom. The Oriental rug in the hall was on fire. The stench was sickening and the heat overwhelming. The fire headed towards the kids' rooms. She took a step out the door, but Brett grabbed her arm. He jerked her back into the bedroom and pulled her rapidly towards the French doors leading to a small balcony. He yanked open one door and lifted her up. She hit his face and shoulders, trying to shout: "Put me down." He stepped through the French door, took a quick look down and dropped her two floors onto a snow-covered bush.



"Abigail, wake up."

She was soaked with sweat again. She opened her eyes. Tracy was sitting on the edge of the bunk, shaking her by the shoulders.

"What is it?"

"You were screaming. You shouted 'Put me down' a couple of times. It must have been a nightmare. Are you all right?"

Her voice shook.

"No."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No."

"Maybe some other time?"

"I don't know, but thank you ... thank you for waking me."



The day before they docked at Casablanca, Tracy suggested to Abigail that they travel together.

"Only if you get rid of the joints. The prospect of spending a few years as a guest of the Moroccan government doesn't appeal to me."

"I only brought five or six." Tracy checked in a side pocket of her back pack. "Two left."

They wrapped them in a Kleenex and ceremoniously dumped them from the stern.

"We won't get the Jacques Cousteau Award," said Abigail. "Not on this trip."

"Who?"

"An oceanographer and environmentalist: he was dismayed at what was happening to our oceans."

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"Not as dismayed as I am at what just happened to my joints. I have visions of some shark doing loop-de-loops and cuddling up to a sea bass."



Abigail was prepared for the stares of the men, but it surprised her how the eyes of women with covered heads seemed to follow and bore into them – although she assumed they were paying far more attention to Tracy, who was fair-skinned with delicate features.

Wearing close-fitting jeans and a flowing, multi-colored shirt, Tracy had commented, as they left the cabin that afternoon, that she didn't want to attract attention. Abigail assumed she was referring to her usual skin-tight tee shirts that left no doubt as to the size (small) and exact whereabouts of her breasts, and she reflected that the jeans on their own would do a more than adequate job of attention attraction.

Having given up working-out after the fire, Abigail had added a few pounds to what was already a solid frame. She had played soccer in a Division-One college and not been pushed around. Brett had played soccer at the same college. "You have the most beautiful body," he said the first time they made love, and when she objected: "I'm not into skin and bones. I need a woman who can help with the heavy lifting."

She also had an extraordinarily pretty face and flashing blue eyes.

They cleared customs in the late afternoon and walked towards the city from the dock. Abigail carried a suitcase and wore a day pack on her back. Tracy had only the back pack, which towered above her, and a knit bag. "Be careful with your passports," the customs officer had advised in French-accented English.

"*Merci bien,*" replied Abigail.

"Do you speak French?" asked Tracy in astonishment.

"We'll find out. I took it through college and spent the summer between college and graduate school in France. But it's been a while."

"You're way ahead of me. I know '*Non,*' which I figure will get me through most situations."

The buildings were white-washed and crumbling in this part of town. There was not a lot of traffic, and people walked in the street. They passed a woman covered head-to-toe in a blue robe and pushing a large blue baby carriage. An olive-skinned baby in a white jacket and cap was sitting upright in the carriage. The baby stared and then pointed at the two women. A little girl, covered except for her face in a light blue gown, walked along the side of the carriage. She smiled and said brightly: "*Bon soir.*"

"*Bon soir,*" replied Abigail with a smile.

"Hi," said Tracy.

The street narrowed and started twisting and turning in an indecipherable pattern. They turned down an alley into an area of small houses, shops, and dark cafes. Two middle-aged men in sweaters and knit caps stepped out of their way and, grinning, asked: "*Vous etes seules?*"

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"*Non*," said Tracy in a loud, determined voice.

The men continued down the alley.

"What did they say?"

"They asked if we were alone," said Abigail.

"I figured something like that. I told you I knew enough."

At the end of another alley, they found a hotel that charged the equivalent of five dollars for a room for two. The narrow strip of a lobby sported two worn red sofas at right angles to each other and a couple of palm trees. A photo of King Hassan II hung behind the scarred front desk. The clerk was a tired-looking but friendly old man in a threadbare jacket and narrow tie. He had a few wisps of hair and a barely perceptible moustache. Abigail asked where they could find a good but inexpensive restaurant.

They climbed the stairs opposite the front desk that led to rooms on the upper three floors. Their narrow room was clean and contained two single beds, a sink, a chair, and a closet with shelves and a few drooping wire hangers. The window looked out on the fluorescent-lit alley. The bathroom was down the hall.

"I heard the word restaurant," said Tracy. "Did he give you any good suggestions? I'm famished."

"I thought you were all stored up."

"Depends."

"On what?"

"The restaurant."

Abigail laughed and said she'd be ready in a flash. She went down the hall and opened the door marked: *Salle de Bain*. There was a sink, a stall shower with a plastic curtain decorated with purple flowers, and an oblong hole flanked by serrated foot pads. She stared at it for an instant, then shrugged and squatted.

"Guess what we have for a toilet."

"A squatter," Tracy replied without missing a beat.

"How did you know?"

"Lonely Planet."

They walked back up the alley, around the corner, and found the restaurant in the next alley. Half a dozen tables of varying sizes and a bar with a few stools comprised the entire establishment. There were no decorations except for the apparently ubiquitous photo of King Hassan II. Abigail ordered *lotte roti* – having understood little of what the waiter had said but catching the word *poisson*.

"It's fish – I'm fairly certain."

Tracy picked the vegetable *tajine*. Abigail had understood the part about vegetables and told Tracy that it seemed okay. It turned out to be a fragrant and substantial stew loaded with potatoes, onions, zucchini,

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carrots, and tomatoes. The place was full with one other table taken up by foreigners: a young woman and three young men speaking German. Several adolescent boys lounged around the entrance.

"Why are you traveling alone?" asked Tracy as she forked half a potato into her mouth.

Delaying, Abigail peeled the skin off her fish and separated the flesh from the spine. She picked out a sliver of bone from between her teeth as she bit into the fish. She chewed thoughtfully while Tracy watched. Finally, she answered: "Because I'm alone."

"That's too bad." Tracy ate a slice of zucchini. "This is totally delicious." She ate a dripping square of tomato. "Were you ever married?"

"Yes."

"Divorced?"

"Widowed."

"Oh damn. I'm sorry. That was so nosey."

"That's all right, but I don't want to talk about it."

"I understand." Tracy pushed her hair, which she was wearing loose, off her high forehead. "It can't be easy."

Abigail took another bite of the moist flesh.

"The desk clerk was right. This is very good. He told me to have the fish." She ate some rice dotted with green peas. "What will you do when you get back?"

"Probably go to the community college. I can do better than administrative assistant, but I would like to be in business. It's kind of jazzy."

"I think you'll do well."

"Really? Why?"

"Because you're bright and open and curious. I suspect those are important qualities in business. You just need to build your self-confidence."

"You're cool, you know that. I'm so glad I decided ... we decided ... to travel together."

When they had finished eating, one of the boys who had been lounging at the entrance came up to their table. Abigail asked him what he wanted, but the boy spoke no French. He had on a dirty shirt and trousers; he was barefoot. He stared at the fish skeleton, few grains of rice, and two peas on Abigail's plate. Finally, he said in halting English: "Please, Miss." Shocked, Abigail handed him the plate, and he dashed off to squat in a corner. Shielding the plate with his body, he peeled tiny strips of fish from the bones and gobbled them down. Finished with the skeleton, he picked up the few grains of rice and two peas.

Abigail watched, tears brimming in her eyes.

Two days later, they took a rickety bus to Marrakech. The bus was crammed full with passengers, suitcases, and boxes. A further pile of luggage was strapped to the roof. Several women had placed caged chickens

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under their seats. An elderly man in a flowing robe sat in the rear with a goat held firmly in his lap. They sat on a wooden seat across the aisle from a veiled woman and a young girl. Reading a book in Arabic, she looked up briefly and smiled as Abigail, and Tracy stowed their gear under their seats. The veiled woman sat silently.

The bus rattled as it ambled along the crowded streets of downtown Casablanca. The traffic thinned as they reached the outskirts and passed trim white houses with walled gardens. Leaving the city, Abigail studied the countryside through the dust-caked window spattered with dead flies. In a field, a man in a narrow-brimmed straw hat raised a stick and rapped the rear ends of two, single-humped camels pulling a crude plow. The turned earth looked rich and loamy, but the adjacent unplowed field was littered with stones.

Not easy farming, she thought.

They passed through orange groves, and the perfumed air pouring through the half-open windows made her think of the time she and Brett had driven across southern Alabama, the air laden with the scent of honeysuckle.

Oh God, Brett.

She turned away from the window. Tracy was watching her. She tried to smile but sobbed instead. Tracy said: "Are..." and then stopped. The young Moroccan girl closed her book. She reached into a basket at her feet and extracted two oranges. The veiled woman put a hand on her arm, but she shook it off.

"Vous voulez?" she asked, holding out the oranges.

Abigail hesitated and noticed a flicker of disappointment in the girl's eyes.

"Mais oui," Abigail said. *"Merci bien."*

She and Tracy each took an orange.

"Vous etes tres gentile," said Abigail.

The girl smiled and fished two more oranges out of the basket. She offered one to the woman, who declined. She put the second orange back in the basket. They peeled their oranges. The girl put her peel back in the basket and extended a hand for the other peels. They each bit into a section of orange.

"Fabulous," said Tracy. *"Thanks,"* she said to the girl.

"Vous etes Americaines?" It was barely a question.

Abigail nodded and, in an undertone, said to Tracy: *"Don't say 'non'."*

The girl laughed. *"Mes premieres Americaines. Attends jusque je dis a mon frere."*

Abigail listened intently.

Linda had just started French. They're about the same age.

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She struggled to speak.

"We're her first Americans," she explained to Tracy. "She can't wait to tell her brother."

The girl laughed and nodded surreptitiously at the veiled woman who faced resolutely forward.

"C'est ma grandmere. Elle n'aime pas les etrangeres. Mais n'importe parce que elle ne parle pas le francais."

"It's her grandmother," Abigail explained. "She doesn't like foreigners, but it doesn't matter because she doesn't speak French."

"I'd say yours is pretty much up to snuff."

At that moment, the driver turned on a radio; and a high-pitched song filled the bus. The road started to climb, and the bus swayed around tight curves. The unfamiliar music grated on Abigail's nerves. She wanted nothing more than to look out the window and think about Linda and Zack. She would never see them again. The thought was intolerable. She stared at the barren hillside. She put a fist to her mouth and bit hard. She wanted the music to stop. She turned away from the window.

"Vous aimez la musique?" the young girl asked.

"Oui," Abigail said. *"Beaucoup."*



The bus left them off on the edge of the Town Square, the Jamaa I-Fna. They said good-bye to the young girl and smiled at the Grandmother who nodded stiffly in return. They found a dirt cheap hotel a few blocks from the square, dropped their things in the tiny room that didn't even have a sink, and headed back to the Square. It was late afternoon, and the myriad performers, for which the Square is renowned, had just begun their acts. Knots of people, Moroccans and tourists alike, surrounded contortionists, snake charmers, and story tellers. Food stands were scattered throughout the Square. Abigail stopped at a stand that sold snails soaked in garlic and butter. Sniffing the pungent aroma, she asked how much.

"You're not actually going to eat those," exclaimed Tracy.

"Why not?" asked Abigail, handing the vendor the equivalent of twenty-five cents. "You didn't blink when I had a steak the other night."

"It's got nothing to do with being vegetarian. They're snails."

"Right: a delicacy."

"My mother spreads poison in her garden to get rid of them. It would be like eating ..." She hesitated for an instant and then burst out: "... caterpillars."

"I'll bet they eat those with relish in some places."

"Yuck and double yuck."

The vendor, an elderly man in a white skullcap, handed Abigail a small bowl and a pin with which to extract the snails from their shells.

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"I can't watch," said Tracy, and she wandered over to a man sitting cross-legged in front of a coiled cobra that raised its head from time to time as if to take in the spectators.

They spotted an open-air café on the roof of a hotel, climbed three flights of stairs, and took a table at the edge of the parapet so they could look down on the square. Spectators – the tourists with their cameras pinned to their faces – thronged the large open space, moving from one performer to another. The two women ordered mint tea, which the waiter served by putting the leaves in cups and then raising the teapot slowly until a stream of water cascaded into the cups. They sweetened the tea with tiny sugar cubes and watched the activity below.

"It's like a mini-circus," said Abigail.

"I've never seen anything so exotic," said Tracy.

They wandered into the *souq* that bordered the square and strolled along the rattan-covered lanes. Beams of light shot through the roof. Otherwise, the *souq* was dim and cool like a deep cavern. They passed stalls crammed with mounds of dazzling spices and shops selling carpets, carved chests and silver or painted tea pots. A young merchant dressed in jeans and a tee shirt that read I Love NY called to them in English:

"Best prices in the *souq*. Check it out."

His store was well-lit and crowded with an astonishing array of merchandise. While Tracy picked through piles of Moroccan shirts, Abigail examined bolts of brightly-colored material, rummaged through racks of long robes, and then wandered over to the counter where several trays crammed with jewelry lay side by side. She picked up a necklace of engraved copper balls and spun one or two on the string.

Linda would have loved these.

"How does this look?" asked Tracy holding up a bright red shirt embroidered with silver threads on the front and cuffs. "Is it too bright?"

"Not at all: a little brightness is a good thing."

"How much is it?" Tracy asked the young man.

"Sixty dirham."

"That's way too much," said Abigail.

"Not for this quality. It is hand-stitched." He made a clicking sound by flicking his tongue against his teeth. At the same time, he jerked his chin upwards. "Okay: fifty-five."

"Still too much."

Tracy watched with amazement. The young man turned to her.

"Are you going to let your mother speak for you?"

They laughed and the man regarded them curiously.

"She's not my mother."

"Oh."

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"We're really..." said Abigail.

"Sisters," interrupted Tracy.

"In that case, fifty – which is a very good price. You won't find better in all the *souq*."

"You already told us that," said Abigail. "Maybe we should find out for ourselves."

"Trust me. That would be a big waste of your time; but if you insist..."

He shrugged with an air of indifference.

"We have plenty of time, but..." Abigail paused, winked at Tracy and then turned back at the young merchant who was watching her warily. "... we'll settle at forty."

"At such a price, I would have to go out of business."

Looking as if she were watching a ritual from Mars, Tracy stuttered: "I ... I ... think ..."

"Are you from New York?" asked the young man.

"Close enough," said Abigail.

"In that case, forty-five."

"Done," said Abigail.

"Something else?" asked the young man, folding the shirt and taking a sheet of wrapping paper from under the counter.

"No, thank you," said Tracy.

"And for you, Lady?" he asked Abigail. "That necklace was hand made in the desert. It would look good on you. Or your sister."

Abigail looked at him vacantly.

"Or a loved one back home," he said.



The branches raked her naked body as she fell through the bush. Snow and leaves caught in her long hair. A stub of a branch stabbed her foot when she hit the ground. She was in the backyard. Several inches of snow covered the ground from the snowfall two days ago. It was dry and powdery and stung her feet as she ran toward the terrace. She noticed neither the icy wind from the garden nor the heat bursting in waves from the house. The glass from the windows had shattered and flames licked up the side of the house. She couldn't get near the door that led from the terrace through the pantry into the kitchen. She turned away and raced around the side of the house to the front. She heard sirens blaring. She saw vague forms of people. She heard shouts. She ran to the front door and grabbed the handle. She screamed. From behind, someone grasped her around the chest and pulled her away. She kept screaming: "Brett, Linda, Zack," over and over again.



She felt someone shaking her hard.

"Abigail ... Abigail ... stop it. You'll wake everyone."

Abigail woke gasping for breath. Tracy was sitting on the bed in a tee shirt and underpants. She gripped Abigail tightly by the arms. Abigail's breathing slowly returned to normal. Tracy let go her arms. Abigail stared blankly at Tracy who pushed damp strands of hair off her forehead.

"You were shouting names this time," said Tracy. "Please talk to me."

Abigail stared silently.

"Please ... I'm so frightened."

"I can't."

"Something terrible happened."

"Yes."

"Tell me."

"No," Abigail whimpered, shrinking back.

Tracy grabbed both Abigail's arms and shook her.

"You have to." She fought to control her voice. "You can't keep it bottled up. It's choking you."

Without a word, Abigail got up and went to her suitcase. She unzipped a compartment and took out a manila envelope. She extracted a sheet of paper and handed it to Tracy.

The Freeport Journal
FIRE DESTROYS HOME
by Sharon Wilkins

February 6, 1972

The Freeport Journal Staff

A raging fire on the Barnesville Road last night engulfed the home of Brett and Abigail Jameson, leaving three people dead. The fire killed Mr. Jameson and the couple's two children, Linda (age 11) and Zachary (age 9).

Mrs. Jameson was saved by her husband who dropped her from their bedroom window. He then attempted to save the two children, but the fire apparently spread too quickly, trapping him and the children in the doomed house.

A neighbor pulled Mrs. Jameson away from the front door where she was trying to reenter the house.

Mrs. Jameson was unhurt except for bad scratches and a third-degree burn on her right hand.

Captain Richard Bennett of the Freeport Volunteer Fire Department said that the blaze was completely out of control by the time...

Tracy stopped reading, stood up, and put an arm around Abigail's shoulders. Gently picking up her right hand, she observed the crescents

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of scar tissue. She guided Abigail back to bed and stepped across the tiny room to turn off the light. She climbed into the bed and took Abigail in her arms. Abigail laid her head against Tracy's shoulder.

"Tell me about your family," Tracy said.

"We lived in an old farmhouse with an apple orchard. The house needed lots of work when we bought it, but that was the only way we could afford it. Brett and I did a lot ourselves, and it took years.

"The floors were what I loved the most: old, wide oak boards held together by misshapen nails.

"'This is a place to raise children,' I had said to Brett the minute I saw the house. We were so happy living there. The kids had a swing hanging from an apple tree that might have been sixty, seventy years old – who knew. We built them a tree house, and they spent hours up there with their friends.

"Linda was..."

She talked for over an hour. Tracy held her the whole time.

"I can't get it out of mind," she concluded, "that if we hadn't bought that old farmhouse but instead had lived in a more modern place, maybe it wouldn't have happened."

"If you think like that," replied Tracy, "you'll never heal."

Tracy paused.

"Unless, of course, you don't want to."



Tracy wanted to go to the ocean so they took a bus to the coast and stopped in a town called Essaouira – on a long stretch of rock-strewn beach. The town overflowed with hippies who jammed the cafes and restaurants, thronged the back alleys and filled the hotels so that Abigail and Tracy found themselves in some kind of hostel that had toilets but no showers. Fortunately, the public baths were clean, if dilapidated, with walls water-stained like a Rorschach test and a clientele that ranged from loud, exuberant hippies with unshaven legs and armpits to shy Berber women who quietly undressed down to their underpants and sat in small groups pouring water over themselves from wooden buckets.

At an outdoor cafe near the town walls, they spread butter and raspberry jam thick as putty on croissants and occasionally ordered scrambled eggs – Abigail's with a thick slice of ham. They read the morning papers in the lavish sunshine (Tracy the *Herald Tribune*; Abigail struggling with *Le Monde*) and dawdled over their coffee. Time had no meaning except that the day began and the day ended: when they got up and when they went to sleep.

Finished with the papers, they walked far out along the beach. Camels, led by men in long blue gowns and white turbans, plodded sedately along the beach. Large burlap sacks filled with stones hung from wooden frames affixed behind their humps.

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By the time they turned around to head back, the town was a mere series of specks on the horizon.

Late one afternoon, they sat in the café drinking mint tea and watching the sunset when a young man with the makings of a beard and blond hair reaching to his shoulders sat down at the next table. He had on a white tee shirt with rips under the armpits and bold letters on the front: MAKE LOVE, NOT WAR.

"You are English?" he asked with a German accent.

"No," said Abigail, "but thanks for the compliment."

"Ah: American imperialists."

"You've got it turned around."

"What?"

"It was the English who had the Empire ... and the Germans."

The German looked nonplussed for an instant and then broke into a thin laugh. "You are very clever," he said, then looked at Tracy. "How do you find Morocco? Pretty far out, eh?"

"It's beautiful," replied Tracy.

"You are a student?"

"Not quite."

"I am studying at university in Hamburg." He pulled nervously at his hair. "Maybe we should eat dinner tonight? You and I?"

"I'm sorry," said Tracy, "but I don't think so."

"Oh well," said the young man and got to his feet. He leaned towards Tracy. "You want to buy hashish candy? Guaranteed good shit."

She didn't as much as glance at Abigail. She shook her head.

"No, thank you. Better try somewhere else."

As he stalked off, Abigail smiled at Tracy and said:

"You handled that creep nicely."

"Did I really?"

"You know, I think your judgment about men will be just fine."

"It will," said Tracy, "if I keep learning from you."

"What could you have possibly learned from me?"

"Courage," said Tracy.



The next morning, they walked even further than usual. They passed several camels kneeling on the beach while men in the familiar blue gowns piled stones into the sacks. The men paid no attention to the two women. It was a warm day with only a hint of a breeze off the ocean. The sky's deep blue vault was tinged with a powdery gray at the edges. The

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town was completely out of sight. They took off their new sandals, purchased at a shop in town, and walked through the lapping waves. They sat on a small dune.

"Sitting here," said Tracy, "is as close to absolute stillness as I can imagine."

"Indeed," said Abigail. She glanced at Tracy.

"You're a wonderful friend," Abigail said.

Tracy smiled.

They headed back. The camels were now far ahead of them, carrying their loads into town. A young man and woman, European, passed them. Otherwise, the beach was empty for a long stretch. About a quarter mile from the town, they saw a woman running frantically at the water's edge, waving her arms and shouting. Abigail and Tracy ran up to her. She was dressed in a long, gray robe but no head covering. She yelled at them in Arabic and pointed out to sea. The waves flowed in long, gentle undulations. She ran towards the water, went in a ways and came back.

Abigail scanned the water close to shore and saw nothing.

"What is it?" Tracy called to the woman. "What is it?"

The woman pointed again. Then Abigail saw it: two arms thrashing and a head bobbing and then sinking – about thirty yards out. She dropped her sandals and dashed for the water. She swam towards the head, but it disappeared. Her jeans felt heavy and slowed her down. She reached the spot where she thought she had seen the head and dove but found nothing. She swam again. She dove. Nothing. She swam in a circle, certain this was the right area. She dove, turned this way and that and then barely made out the boy in the murky water, sinking towards the bottom. Her lungs raw with pain, she kicked her legs and pushed desperately with her arms. Flinging herself forward, she grabbed an arm. The boy swung with his other arm and clipped her on the jaw. She let go. He sank again. She went after him, caught a fistful of hair and yanked. He came up a bit and she threw an arm around his neck. Desperate for air, she pulled with her free hand towards the surface. He twisted and fought her. She almost lost him again. Suddenly, Tracy was there, pushing the boy up by the waist. They exploded into the air and gasped for breath. The boy was choking and gasping but had stopped thrashing. They each took an arm and pulled him towards shore. They dragged him onto the beach and knelt, gasping, on the stone-littered sand. The boy spit out a mouthful of water. The woman ran up, followed by two panting men. One of the men pounded the boy on the back while the other helped Abigail and Tracy to their feet. The woman hugged the boy and jabbered at Abigail and Tracy.

The man who had helped them to their feet said something to her in Arabic and turned back to Abigail and Tracy.

"She is saying 'Thank you' over and over again," he explained. He spoke perfect English. "She cannot swim, and but for you two the boy would have drowned. You did a very brave thing. There will certainly be one Moroccan family that will always think kindly of the United States."

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The woman kissed their hands; and the boy, who was about seven, shyly shook hands. Abigail and Tracy watched with the two men as the woman led the boy towards town.

"How did you know we were American?" Abigail asked.

"Lucky guess."

The man wore trousers and a white shirt. He was middle-aged and starting to go bald.

"My name is Pierre Jobert. I own that restaurant over there," he said, indicating a building on the beach near town.

"The fancy French one?" asked Tracy.

"The same. Fouad is my maitre d'," he said, nodding at the other man.

Fouad smiled and bowed slightly.

"*Un plaisir.*"

"We happened to be looking out the window," continued Pierre, "and ran over to see what was going on. It would be my pleasure if you would be my guests at the restaurant for dinner tonight. It's the least we can do."

Abigail stood looking out to sea after Pierre and Fouad had walked back to the restaurant. She walked a few feet into the water. The waves lapped around her ankles and the bottoms of her jeans. Tears streamed down her cheeks. She wiped them away. She walked back to the beach and stripped off her dripping tee shirt and leaden jeans. Wearing only a bra and panties and without saying a word to Tracy, she walked slowly but deliberately back into the sea. When the water reached her knees she plunged into a wave and, with smooth high-arched strokes, swam and swam until she could no longer stand the ache in her arms. She treaded water. Tracy watched her from the beach.

That was close, she thought. We almost lost him.

She turned to the west and watched the late afternoon sun. Her thoughts turned in a direction that she realized she had been resisting for some time.

Brett, will we ever meet again? And Linda and Zack: will I ever see your shining faces? I don't believe in an afterlife, but I could be wrong. After all, no one knows. It's not much to hang onto, but why not hope? In the meantime, I have a friend; and she's enough of a reason to go on living.

Abigail swam back to the beach, her muscles begging her to stop. Stepping out of the water, she felt drained but at peace.

As much as I ever will.

She put on her soggy clothes and walked up to Tracy who was silently watching her. She took Tracy by the arm.

"Let's go get baths," said Abigail, "and rest up for a great dinner."

Arm in arm, the two women walked towards town.