

“Fairly godmothers are always old women. Think of me as your magical beauty consultant, if you like. You may call me Ariel”

Wilma gave her a hard look. “You are insane. But, yea, I’m desperate. So, work your magic if you can, lady, but don’t expect to be paid for it.”

“Delighted you’ve decided to place your trust in me. I think we’ll start with a lovely, at home, spa.” Wilma had never been to a spa before and actually knew very little about them but she was ready to try anything so she meekly nodded assent. “You had the right idea about taking a shower but we need to start with some basic skin care first.” Sliding the shower door shut, she stepped in front of it, blocking the way. “While the water warms up, I’ll give you a nice, moisturizing scrub.” She made a face. “Your skin is as dry and gritty as desert sand.” Wilma felt offended and started to retort but bit back the remark for fear of driving away her savior.

Producing a large jar from somewhere among the voluminous folds of her skirt, Ariel screwed the top off and stood waiting expectantly. Understanding but not liking, Wilma shrugged off her t-shirt. Today was not one of the rare occasions when she had worn a bra and, in the cold air, her breasts looked unpleasantly like shriveled prunes. Her skin stretched taught over her protruding pelvic bones, but collapsed into saggy wrinkles between them.

Ariel wrinkled her nose delicately. “The necklace must go to.” She gestured towards the horde pendent.

Wilma recoiled as if she had been threatened and her hand went to her breast. “No, the necklace stays,” she said stiffly.

“But it’s ugly and unfeminine. Your beauty transformation will automatically be flawed by it.”

Wilma wavered. She couldn’t be flawed, not for Esten. But she had never removed the pendent since she was ten. It would be like betraying and sacrificing a major part of her identity. She closed her eyes against her reflection in the mirror. “Do the best you can now and we’ll talk again later,” she said at last.

Ariel nodded a tad curtly as her hand went into the jar and came out covered with pulp filled with salt crystals that glittered like bits of ground glass. The warm grease was slapped over Wilma’s skin and the salt shards bit her flesh. Feeling like she was being flayed alive, she fought back the urge to scream.

When Ariel again slid back the door to the shower, clouds of sweet smelling steam drifted out. The basic design of the shower looked the same but now all the mold was gone and the stall was fully stocked with fluffy towels and large sized bottles of more kinds of soap and lotion than Wilma had ever imagined.

“Enjoy your bath,” said Ariel with a dazzling smile. “Take your time and remember what I said about the necklace.” Wilma started for a second. When Ariel had parted her full lips to smile, she thought she had seen that that woman’s canine teeth were abnormally long and sharp. But the glimpse had been too brief to tell for sure because, immediately, Ariel had placed a hand on her back and, almost playfully, nudged her into the shower, before sliding the door shut behind her. Wilma looked down the length of her body, expecting to find it covered with a spider web of tiny blood trickles after the vicious scrubbing, but her skin was white, no longer pasty, but with a healthy glow.

The warm water poured over her skin, heavy with a sweet floral scent. It should have all been very relaxing but Wilma wasn’t able to really enjoy any of it. Although she was glad she now had assistance and was no longer groping blindly, the woman Ariel was so perfect that she made Wilma’s imperfections all the plainer. She didn’t entirely trust or approve of the girl, not after she had insulted her pendent, which appeared all the more tarnished and grimy against her now clean skin, with the clear water flowing over it. She didn’t want to be ugly but she didn’t understand, if her face and body were, magically, beautiful, why this tiny flaw should matter? The contempt Ariel had shown her made

her bristle with resentment and hated having to depend on her. At the exact second she finished rinsing the shampoo out of her hair, there was a knock on the shower door, giving her the uncomfortable feeling that Ariel had been watching her somehow.

“That will have to do,” said Ariel, eyeing her coolly up and down. “I have all my make-up tools set up.”

“Make-up?” Wilma hesitated. “But I don’t want to mask my face.”

“For someone like you that is a very foolish attitude.” Wilma flinched with shame but bowed her head and stepped obediently out of the shower to take a seat next to the sink, wrapping herself in the bath robe that Ariel held out for her. She felt the teeth of a comb slip into her hair and jerk through it over and over so it felt like every strand was being ripped out. Trying her hardest not to cry, she kept her eyes tightly shut, not daring to open them, even when the vicious pulling stopped. Carefully, she raised her hand and touched her hair lightly. Her scalp was a net of fire but her hair felt like a cloud of silken mist.

“Would you please keep your hands out of the way.” She felt Ariel swat her hand back down to her lap. Then, she felt something sharp and hard pressed against her eyelids, pressing so hard it felt like it was scratching the eyeball beneath. She wanted to scream in pain. A cold and sticky paste was smeared across her lips and her cheeks were rubbed until they burned.

While Ariel was momentarily distracted, Wilma struggled back into her old clothes, being very careful not to smear her make up or tangle her hair. She almost hated the way the thin fabric, dank with sweat, felt against her now clean skin and felt a sudden fear that the contact would contaminate her again. But she really hated being naked in front of this strange and contemptuous woman. Even the bathrobe, luxurious as it was, was no sure concealment.

“Now, all you need is to get dressed,” said Ariel, then turned back and saw that Wilma was, in fact, dressed already. At the sight, she let out a great sigh of exasperation and rolled her eyes before saying tartly, “Well, I guess this is my fault. I should have expected such idiotic behavior from someone as ignorant as you. The only remedy now is to get you some proper clothes as quickly as possible. Would you care to step into your dressing room?” With a flourish, she threw wide the door Wilma had been sure opened into the linen closet. Instead, it revealed an archway and a carved wooden stair leading down, with glowing candles mounted on the walls. When Wilma hesitated, Ariel took the lead, gesturing impatiently over her shoulder and Wilma made haste to follow her, her eyes bewildered by the flickering light of the candles reflecting on the shining fabric of Ariel’s gown, the shifting highlights and shadows making it look almost as if something thick and round like a large snake was undulating and coiling beneath the back of her skirt.

At the bottom of the stairs, the passage opened out into a room that did look very much like a giant dressing room. All the walls were set with drawers, except for one which was covered with a single slab of mirrored glass. In the center was a large square of thick marble counter like a kitchen island, supported on yet more drawers. Though the room was not very big, the sheer volume and single-mindedness of its storage space was rather overwhelming.

“Over here we have the lingerie.” Ariel pulled out a draw. Inside, the pale, honey colored wood was lined with burgundy velvet and, resting upon it, carefully spread at full length like a museum display was a bustier and garter belt with a matching pair of panties and folded stockings set beside it, all iridescent white lace, shimmering with faint rainbow highlights and accented with tiny clusters of seed pearls. “And over here we have velvet bodices.” This drawer contained one in delicate powder blue, cut and pieced so exactly that it would fit the body like the outer petals enclosing a flower bud. From the crisp turned down collar a line of self covered buttons ran down the front to a deep flounce around the hips. So precisely was it tailored that it might actually be able to make Wilma’s flat bony body look elegant, even curvy. “We also have gauze skirts.” Ariel rushed Wilma away before she was

anywhere near done admiring the beautiful jacket. Here she saw a skirt to match the jacket, its many layers of translucent gauze spread out in a fan shape like a giant pinned butterfly.

While Wilma was admiring the skirts, Ariel set out several trays of jewelry on the center island, the metal and jewels sparkling like a glittering rainbow. Most of the pieces were shaped wire, set with cabochons or with crystals hanging from them, wrapped in spirals of yet more wire. There were circlets and tiaras, earrings, and necklaces of both the pendent and choker variety, but no bracelets or rings.

"We don't have rings because they symbolize a level of commitment we do not care to endorse," said Ariel briskly, "and also out of respect." She cast a significant glance in Wilma's direction. Respect for what? Wilma wondered as she clasped her hands apprehensively under the piercing gaze. But, in doing so, she rubbed against, and was reminded of, the ring. It still felt hot, as it had just before Ariel appeared, but that must simply be the metal radiating her own nervous heat.

The stone on the ring was black, and, since there was no way she was setting aside Esten's gift, she had best chose jewelry to match. Signing, she turned away from a very elaborately shaped circlet and necklace pair, set with brilliant emerald green stones. The combination of the curving wires and green crystals made it appear almost like a living mass of vines and leaves. It was probably for the best anyway, she tried to console herself. After all, it was a bit over the top elf princess and, while that was a look Esten would probably go for, she did think it was a rather presumptuous on her part. Instead, she went for a single necklace, a V shaped choker with faceted, pear shaped stones hanging from it.

"Don't you want some earrings too?" Ariel asked when Wilma declared her choice.

"My ears aren't pierced.

"Well that's easy enough to fix," she replied with a small smile and Wilma felt sick. She wasn't a coward exactly and had her fair share of scars from surgery and from accidents but self-inflicted injury made her queasy. She didn't see much difference between piercing someone's ears and a girl she had known in college who would stick needles through her skin as an artistic statement. She was always safe and sterile about it but Wilma found it creepy none the less. Fortunately, she was spared dealing with the issue at the moment because Ariel set the necklace down on the counter and said briskly, "Well, at least you've made a start. Let's try to choose the rest of your clothes now."

Some time later, Ariel squatted down impatiently next to Wilma. "Come on now, what would you like? We don't have all day," she said sternly over Wilma's shoulder. Wilma had three draws of lingerie spread on the floor around her, the iridescent white, a black set where the lace pattern twined and curled like sinister vines, and one in brilliant red, and she was hopelessly deadlocked between them. "It all depends on what message you want to send. White is for purity, black for dark desires, and red for pure lust."

"Well red, I guess, then," said Wilma hesitantly. "I'm certainly not pure but I wanted to wear that beautiful blue jacket and I don't think the red underwear would go with it."

"Oh, that doesn't matter. He won't see them both at the same time anyway. And, besides, if you wear something soft like blue, it will be an exciting surprise for him when he sees how hot you are underneath." Ariel clapped her hands and three other women stepped forward coming from the direction of the mirror in the back of the room, which Wilma now guessed must conceal a hidden door. "Kindly assist Wilma in dressing herself," she said with a dismissive gesture. The three women came forward and laid their hands on her, gripping her clothing roughly, as if they meant to rip it off her. For the first time, she notice how long and curved their nails were. They leaned closer and one lifted the necklace to put it around her neck, then recoiled with a hiss upon spotting Wilma's pendent.

"What is this ugly piece of tarnished metal doing here?" she cried, as if the mere fact of its existence offended her.

"I tried to have her remove it," said Ariel with a yawn. "It's in your hands now." The woman

nodded and made a grab at the pendent. Wilma reacted instinctively and shoved the woman away, who tottered backwards and lost her balance. As she fell, her skirt became tangled up around her knees, revealing a pair of cloven hooves with hairy ankles and calves. With a gasp of pain, she struggled into a sitting position. Her elaborate hair style had been knocked askew and the curved horns, just back of her brow could be plainly seen, blotched red and black like the mottled skin of a poisonous salamander.

Although girls in books always screamed when confronted by a situation like this, Wilma, having read the right books, had some idea of what to do. "Get thee behind me," she cried and they recoiled at her words, as their dresses melted from them, leaving them clad only in patches of scaly leather, like snake skin, that clung to them so closely they seemed more a growth of their own hide than a garment and revealed them for what they were: horned, hooved, fanged, clawed, and tailed devils.

"You stupid girl," shrieked Ariel, who had undergone a similar transformation. "Now you shall always be ugly. Give us the necklace or, as punishment, we shall go offer ourselves to Esten and he will choose one of us instead of you."

As they flung themselves at her again, exquisitely painted nails raised to tare and rip, Wilma lunged forward and seized the stool, hurling it with all her strength at the mirror. It impacted in the center and a giant crack split from end to end. Then a lace-work of tiny cracks like a spider web rayed out from the point of impact. Quickly, she grabbed up the stool and struck again. The center of the mirror shattered and a large piece fell out of it. As she had hoped, there was a dark opening behind it, a way out. Avoiding the sharp edges of the glass with difficulty, Wilma climbed through. But, as she drew her back leg after her, she felt something snag the hem of her pants. She wrenched it free and took off running, without stopping to find out if it had been a piece of glass or the nails of her pursuers.

The dark hallway soon ended in a heavy door, the kind you pressed a bar to open. This gave onto a grimy hall of dull gray bricks, lit by weak electric lights. Her feet made echoing sounds on the floor and she guessed she was in some kind of basement but the scenery was so generic that it could have been the basement of almost anything from a school sports facility to a warehouse. Like most such places, it was a complete maze of corridors and doors. Choosing one at random, Wilma pulled it open and was rewarded with a rusty metal stair leading upwards. But, at that moment a door back down the hallway, in all likelihood the door she had come out of, slammed loudly. She pulled her own door closed as quietly as she could and raced up the stairs.

The top of the stairwell opened onto a large foyer, such as might be found in a fancy office building: a huge soaring glass ceiling, seeming almost to vanish above her head, and a vast open space, broken only by a few potted palm trees, stretching all the way to the vast windows at the front entry way. The floor was a gleaming sea of black tiles, so reflective that, as she raced along, Wilma could see a ghost of herself sprinting beside her like a pale cloud. She was barefoot, never having replaced her shoes after getting in the shower, but the thudding sound her feet made still roused faint vibrations in the glass high above.

As she ran along, she saw another ghost shape come flying towards her and, raising her head in alarm, she saw Esten moving towards her, his eyes wide and hair tousled. "What is it?" she cried, hurrying over to him.

"They're trying to kill me."

"Women with horns? What did you do?"

"No time for that, they're right behind me."

"Then tell me as we run," she said, setting off towards the glass entry way at a swift jog.

He looked very embarrassed. "I wished that I could be better for you, to be thinner and more in shape so you wouldn't be upset to see me."

"You don't need to do that for me," said Wilma angrily. "It offends me you think I'd be that

shallow. You don't look that different than you did in high school and I was crazy about you then."

"Ditto to your new look," he replied shortly, gesturing at her heavy make-up. As they said this, they passed through the glass doors and stepped out into an impeccably groomed courtyard between two huge high-rises. Although it had been dusk and drizzling when they checked into the motel, here the pinkish bricks of the courtyard were flooded with sunlight from the blue sky overhead. The bricks were placed in ever widening circles, the outermost ring edged with neat stone benches and boxes of black dirt holding carefully trimmed evergreen shrubs. "Look at that." Esten pointed at the building across the courtyard. "It's a luxury hotel."

"So?" Wilma had a very short temper, perhaps this time with some justification.

"It's huge, they would never find us in there." He grabbed her hand and started pulling her after him.

"Until the security guards throw us out for squatting in the halls."

"You're as negative as ever, Wilma. Look." He fished a curiously shaped hair pin out of his pocket with his free hand and held it up. "I can pick open the door to a luxury suite and then..." He paused and grinned at her. "Then we can do our consummation in style." It was a mad plan and Wilma wanted to tell him so but, when she looked at him, he had that look of utter mischief, completely fearless, completely delighted in his own daring, the very thing that had always captivated her about Esten. Instead, she smiled and nodded assent, her eyes dreamy, then glanced back over her shoulder and saw motion in the darkness behind the reflective glass they had left.

"We need to move faster," she cried. "They're still after us." They sprinted the last few feet to the hotel grounds. On the main floor going in was a swanky bistro and they quickly weaved in among the wrought iron tables and chairs and potted shrubs, attempting to lose themselves in the crowd. At the tables sat couples, sharing crunchy calamari curls and bruchetta toast while sipping bright blue cocktails from martini glasses garnished with maraschino cherries.

"We need to come back here and eat," Esten whispered as they slipped through the revolving door.

"You forget we have no money," Wilma hissed, "and you can't lock pick the check."

He rolled his eyes. "The elevators are over here," was all he said. The elevator was already waiting but when the doors slid back, they revealed a full sized room with an arched ceiling painted in rich blue accented with gold. There were a few chairs scattered around the room, most of which contained men in gray business suits, staring blankly at the vividly painted walls.

"What floor?" Wilma gasped, catching her breath after the final sprint.

"Up high. We want to get up to the rooms." Wilma nodded, wiping the sweat from her forehead, and pressed the button for floor twenty. The doors slid shut and the elevator simply took off. It felt as if the floor had dropped out from under her and her stomach with it. She gripped the sides of the elevator box in pure terror as the screws attaching it to the wall bit into her fingers.

Finally, the elevator came to rest and Wilma slumped against the wall, her heart hammering. She glanced around her indignantly and saw that all the men in business suits were still staring straight ahead, apparently completely un-phased. She was utterly torn between disgust at them and wondering frantically how she would possibly get down to ground level again when the time came, when a wild laughter cut through her thoughts. Whirling around, she saw Esten, his head thrown back, mouth open in delight. This was like a roller coaster ride to him. Her knees buckled with desire and the after weakness of fear as she staggered away from the wall like a drunk person and slumped against him. Her sweat fouled hair draped across him and her make-up was smeared across her face. Esten's arms closed around her. His sweaty hands were on her shoulders, his lips on her face.

"Kiss me," he whispered, his fingers digging into her cheeks. When they stepped apart, she left lipstick and mascara smudged across the side of his face.

The elevator opened onto a dimly lit area that looked nothing at all like a hotel hallway and everything like an office. This impression was further reinforced by the fact that all the men in business suits immediately filed out past them like a line of clockwork soldiers. The entire floor was in dull colors of black, white and gray, the floor covered with slate gray tiles and was crossed and criss-crossed with various screens and partitions. Inside each of these cubicles was a desk and rolling swivel chair made from cheap black plastic and the desks were loaded down with over-sized dirty white computers, clearly many years out of date. Some of the chairs were already filled by suited men, sitting rigidly upright and staring blankly at the screens. The ones who had come off the elevator quickly made their way to the closest empty seats, sat down crisply, and turned on their computers. A chorus of boot up sounds filled the air, some occurring almost simultaneously and others chiming a harmony. Then, silence fell again, broken only by the clicking of keys. Somewhere far away, probably on the other side of the floor, a copy machine started up.

"This is worthless," cried Wilma in disgust.

"Well, it's your fault anyway," said Esten. "You didn't bring us up high enough."

"Shut the hell up. It was your idea to come up here in the first place."

"What do we do now? Get back in the elevator and look for another floor."

"Can't," said Wilma, who had been looking out the window. "I saw them go in the front door. They could be on the elevator by now. We need to find another way out." She gave Esten a shove. "Don't just stand there like the moron you are. Help me look. You." She grabbed one of the gray suits by the shoulder and shook him. "Tell us another way off the floor. Quick, quick, make yourself useful."

"There's a freight elevator in the back," he said in a dull monotone, not lifting his eyes from his computer screen.

"Great. That's all we need." Wilma grabbed Esten and started dragging him down the hallway. "Rude bastard," she muttered, making a face over her shoulder at the businessman. The entry to the service elevator was carefully hidden behind a crisp black screen since the battered metal doors would have completely shattered the sterile office environment. There was no button to press, just a very large rusty lever. Wilma gave it one tug and knew that she would never be able to move it. She shuffled aside for Esten to try and he smirked as he took a grip on the handle. But the grin quickly faded as he began to pull and realized it was going to take all his strength. Eventually, the lever did give and the doors opened with an equal amount of grating and creaking as Esten stood back, slowly flexing his sore hand. Inside was another lever, but...

"It doesn't go any higher," cried Esten in frustration.

"Then we go down," said Wilma grimly. "That's actually better anyway."

"But *they're* down there," protested Esten.

"They're coming up to look for us...on a different elevator. This way, we can try to slip out when they're not watching." She waited, eyeing him intently. "So, pull the lever already."

"No, my hand still hurts from the last lever. You pull it."

"Fine, you whiner. I'll pull it," Wilma shot back, not certain she could. She reached out and grabbed the lever, feeling the cold solid thickness of the metal, the heavy texture etched into the handle to provide a better grip, then pulled as hard as she could. The lever ground through its groove, and through the palms of her hands as well. The textured grip remained firmly holding most of the skin from her hands when she took them away.

And then the elevator dropped, dropped like one of those "drop tower" carnival rides. Wilma fell to her knees, covered her head with her hands, and screamed until her voice cracked. Perhaps she fainted since she remembered nothing but blackness after that, until she became aware of Esten gently shaking her shoulder. "We're here," he said softly. "Time to go." She gratefully accepted the hand he

held out for her, her legs feeling boneless as unbaked dough.

The doors opened to a blast of heat and smell. They were in the kitchen full of steel ranges and ovens, dark with dry crusted spills and shining with grease. Chefs, their white aprons smeared with watery blood stains, blocked their way, hovering over heavy slabs of meat, some with jagged bones still sticking up out of them. Wilma took a deep breath and felt Esten give her hand a reassuring squeeze. Then she was off running, ducking under the arms of cooks burying cleavers in the slabs of meat and shying away from blasts of fire rising from the stoves. There was a swinging door at the far end that opened onto a grimy parking lot, filled with piles of garbage., the air heavy with the odor of rotting meat and vegetables.

“Don’t just stand there. Keep moving.” Esten gave her a shove from behind and she staggered down the cracked concrete steps. Accidentally treading on a pile of refuse, she dislodge a cloud of flies that flew up into her face but when she took a step back, she felt Esten’s hand between her shoulder blades. “I’m right behind you,” he said, his deep rich voice reassuring and exciting.

And, suddenly, she remembered what she had forgotten ever since she had looked into the bathroom mirror. She was going to be sleeping with this man, the thing she had dreamed of for years and she was tired of waiting. She wanted to do it now, to know him in all his glorious imperfections. She could stand no more delays. If he wanted her, what else mattered? Her hair could be greasy and her clothes faded, after all, his were much the same. They could do it on a broken creaking mattress in a dim shack where the cracked plaster fell down on them. None of that was of the least importance. All they truly needed were their two bodies.

With a new sense of purpose and self, she beat the flies away and set out, watching her footing with great care. The ground was slippery and the smell was overwhelming but they made it. Wilma leaned close to Esten and breathed in his strong stale odor to cut the stench of the garbage. When he stumbled on the cracked pavement or slipped on a wet banana peel, she put her hands on his arms and shoulders to steady him. By supporting each other in this way, they managed to cross the parking lot and reach the building on the far side, where they found their way blocked by a large, shinny garage door, suggesting they had reached a warehouse of some kind.

“There’s a side door over here,” Esten called, then, as Wilma hurried over, he added disappointedly, “But it’s stuck, not locked, stuck.” Wilma looked at the door closely, wiggled the handle, and poked at the plastic weather sealing strips around the edges.

“It’s just like the side door back home,” she said. “It’s swelled in the heat, so the weather strips are making too tight a seal. Where’s that fancy looking lock picking stick you had?”

“It won’t do any good,” Esten objected. “The door’s not locked.” But, when Wilma snarled at him, he handed it over. Using the edge of the hair pin, she was able to push back a small part of the stripping and break the seal. Esten shoved the door hard with his shoulder and it swung in, revealing a dark and strangely fragrant interior with a great sense of space, as would be expected in a warehouse, and they could hear the soft whirl of ceiling fans, but no other sound. Though they could see nothing, it somehow seemed more protective than any of the other places they had seen recently and they stepped inside without hesitation.

As their eyes became used to the dim light, they saw it was a wood-working room, the saw dust ankle deep. As they crossed the floor, they stirred up little sweet smelling clouds and left a trail of foot prints like the ones on the surface of the moon. When the door swung shut behind them, they felt a distinct sense of safety, so they took their time making their way around the work benches and band saws, all powdered with a fine film of wood dust. It made the place look as if it was immeasurably old, as if it had been sealed away waiting just for them. The silence and the specks of powder dancing like dust motes in the sun beams made it seem incredibly peaceful and protected.

On the far wall there was a door that Wilma felt sure would be locked but, when Esten smiled

and laid his hand on the knob, she held her tongue and simply smiled back. What did they lose by trying? The handle turned and opened on the last thing Wilma had thought to see, a rustic bed room. The walls were paneled in raw wood, the bed frame made of the same, with the bed itself piled high with quilts and overstuffed pillows. Hand stitched curtains were drawn over the windows and there was a small table in one corner with a bowl of apples and a loaf of bread on it. Tears welled up in Wilma's eyes. Never would she have dreamed of finding something like this.

Forcing a smile through her tears, she turned to Esten and took both his hands in hers. "So," she asked, her voice strong, but sincere and not mocking, "are you ready to lose your virginity?" He swallowed and his eyes, like blue gray marbles, were wide but he looked her straight in the face as he nodded, then shrugged his shirt off over his head. His hair, clinging to it with static, was left sticking out in all directions. Wilma gave him a slow look up and down and a satisfied smile spread across her face. "I like what I see," she said, reaching out and taking a handful of his belly fat, then giving it a squeeze.

Esten stared down at her hand in shock, then looked up, tossing the hair out of his eyes, and smiled as well. "I like what I see too." He reached out and squeezed the air in front of her flat breast, pretending it was larger. A rush of anger swept through Wilma at the insult but swiftly faded at the sight of his grinning face and she was overwhelmed, not only with desire but with the realization that he had not meant to hurt any more than she had. The next moment, they fell laughing into each other's arms and held each other tightly, faces buried in each other's necks, before making eye contact again.

"Now." Neither of them said it out loud, but the understanding was as clear as it could possibly be. She felt his hands on the waist band of her pants, releasing the clasp of her fly. Then his hands slid up her bony sides under her shirt to cup her breasts. His hands were virtually flat against her ribs but, as she watched the delighted, almost foolish, grin spread over his face, she knew he was fully satisfied with her as she was with him. He tried to lift her shirt off over her head, but it caught on her hair and, as he pulled against it, her pants were dislodged and fell down around their ankles. Esten tugged harder and the shirt came off but the force of the pull made Wilma stagger forward and she tripped on her pants, falling hard against Esten and, together, they stumbled across the floor and rolled heavily onto the bed.

She sprawled out beside him, totally naked, her pasty skin clearly to be seen in the watery light filtering through the curtains. This had never happened before. In the frats, it had always been strictly business, conducted perfunctorily in a darkened room with her skirt (practically the only time she ever wore one) around her hips. His legs still twined with hers, Esten propped himself on one elbow to look over at her.

"You're a mess, he teased, giving her matted hair a playful yank.

"And you look like you haven't washed or combed your hair in years."

"That's 'cause I haven't." He grinned insolently at her and Wilma slapped him. He grabbed her wrist and they wrestled together for several more minutes, all out grabbing, biting, and hair pulling. At last, Esten pinned her down and climbed on top of her. He sat back on his heels, his thighs straddling her, as he reached down to unbutton his pants, the only piece of clothing either of them had left. As Wilma gazed up at him, despite his bald patch and the heavy folds in his stomach, he looked every inch sixteen again. Loose white skin merged with loose white skin and Wilma finally fulfilled her seven year-long dream of going to bed with Esten.

Afterwards, Esten pulled one of the quilts around himself and brought over the food from the table. They ate and fed each other slowly and then began the whole thing again. At last, they fell asleep, still wrapped around each other. Some indefinite time later, Wilma slowly returned to consciousness. She was still lying in Esten's arms but, as she glanced at the ceiling above her, seeing the dirty off white and heavily textured plaster, she realized she was back in the motel room. Turning

carefully to avoid waking him, she raised herself up on her hand to look at him. As she did so, she saw that the finger on which she had worn the ring was bare, but stained by a circle of fine black ash, as if fire scorched. Wilma did not spare it another thought as she lowered her head to kiss him on his bald patch.