

UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII LIBRARY

VANESSA'S BED AND THE CONCRETE GARDEN

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE  
UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

IN

ENGLISH

MAY 2003

By

Roberto Chávez Figueroa

Thesis Committee:

Ian MacMillan, Chairperson

Rodney Morales

Robert Shapard

*Vanessa's Bed and the Concrete Garden*

I

“Mariana! What’s up, sister? Where you have you been this whole week? I thought you’d left Hawaii. And why is it that I always find you right in front of the chi-chi lady mural.”

“Oh, hi, Milton. How are you?”

“Fabulous, how else can a person as fabulous as me be, Darling? Here, let me come down a couple steps so I can give you a hug and a kiss, you short little Latin cutie.”

“Short? ‘Cause I ain’t eight feet tall like you?”

“Six foot six. I ain’t no giant rabbit, you.”

“Ummm, that feels good! Um! And you smell so good too.”

“Me? It’s you who smells good. Let me smell you good... Pleasures, right? ... and something else too... Oh yes — I remember — it’s that two-hundred-percent-pure sandalwood oil you told me your friend sends you from where, Iowa? Today must be a special day. You haven’t worn this in a while. I remember the first day I met you at that leadership conference, when, two years ago? *It was this smell that made me notice you right away.* Hey! By the way, I am still waiting for that little vial you said you were going to get me, remember? You’ve made me wait two years — why you are a bad girl! Hmmm, let me smell you again. You smell divine, D I V I N E, just like me!”

“I’m so proud of you, Milton. You can rhyme *and* spell too. No — really — Milton, thank you for giving me a hug and lifting my spirits. You’re always so nice, and always there when I need you the most —”

“Oh-oh. What’s wrong? Did you get another C on your exams?”

“No, Milton, it’s not that! If you only knew what I’m going through —”

“Oh dear, you’re upset. I have noticed you’ve been a little different these past couple of weeks, but I didn’t know something was bothering you this much. What’s wrong? Oh-oh — don’t tell me it’s love trouble. Oh, I am sure it is. You look it dear. I can see it now. You’ve been crying, haven’t you? Oh my, my, my — don’t cry now, you poor thing. Here, let’s get out of the way and sit down over there... Oh please don’t cry or you’re going to make me cry too, and you don’t want to do that. I’ll sob so loud that I’ll puff this whole building down like a pagan temple. Can’t you see that I’m Samson? And you, my little Delilah, why’d you cut your hair so short? How am I supposed to caress you? Here, lean your head on me, dear, and let me hold you. There, there. Like my momma used to say, there ain’t no pain that a good hug can’t tend to. Now I’ll be your big momma. That’s it, that’s it, just rock your troubles asleep... Oh, Mariana, Mariana, Mariana. Someone as pretty as you. No right to suffer. Not you madam, not even to cry. Leave that crying to us fat and ugly and didn’t hit no gene pool lottery like you did, missy. Just look at yourself, dear Lord, look at that godly face of yours! How can someone with a face like yours even conceive of crying? You look like an angel that’s strayed from its post.”

“Oh, Milton. I’m sorry I’m crying. Look, I’ve smeared snot all over your silk shirt. I’m so sorry — it’s just that — it’s just that you — you’ve always been such a nice friend — and I feel I can trust with everything — I’m so sorry — I just — ”

“Oh, baby. Don’t you be worrying ’bout nothing, especially if it’s love trouble. I’m the love kahuna. And that I’m the biggest goes without saying. Don’t you be embarrassed about crying. I’ve shed enough tears to fill both Babylon’s rivers and drown

all the infidels in this world. It's okay to cry and don't you ever feel embarrassed about nothin' when you're around me. Here, here. Have these Kleenex. And there's lots more where these came from."

"Oh, Milton. Thank you. I'm sorry I'm taking your time. Don't you have to teach class?"

"Mariana, honey, I'd be late for my own funeral for you. You just tell me what you need and I'll do it. Do you want me to kill somebody? I'll just sit on his head and pop it like a zit. That's the way. Smile your troubles away. You're too pretty to suffer, and so young. Let us old folks bear the fardels of malcontent. You just concentrate on enjoying life."

"Thanks, Milton. I don't want you to be late to teach class. Besides, I've got to make my last class too."

"All right, dear. We don't have to talk about this now. But I do want you to tell me what's bothering you. God knows it's Friday, and you should not have anything weighing you down. Let's meet at the Garden. What do you say? Is that okay? I'll tell you what. I'll show up a good hour earlier than usual and we can talk about all this over a tall drink. By the time everybody else shows up, I guarantee your troubles will have gone bye-bye. Would you like that?"

"Yes, Milton. I do. But I might be a little late because today we're auditioning for parts for the upcoming play. I am not sure how long it's going to take and my teacher sometimes makes us stay late."

"Oh that's right. It's your acting class — I remember. Not a problem, dear — just get there when you can, and run along now. I remember you've told me how he hates it

when you're late. Just hold on and let me give you a kiss for good luck. Ummm, darling, you really do smell good. Don't you worry your little head 'bout nothin', all right? Go easy on them at the rehearsal. I'm sure you'll get the part you want. Now run along. Bye, bye. Ta-ta. That's it, keep smiling, my dear..."

...

"Wait up, Mariana. Damn, you walk so freaking fast!

"Hi, Gina! How are you? Have you been practicing for the play?"

"'Fiddle dee dee', no thanks to you, Missy. How come you haven't been returning my calls? I don't even know why I bother. What part is David going to do? You're probably going to land this lead part too? You're trying for Scarlet, aren't you?"

"Or Melanie — Hurry up — we're going to be late! Mr. Teeter is the one who always decides, so you should ask him what part David is going to do — not me, or even David."

"Melanie is too hard. You have to sound like some goody-goody, retarded, inbred piece of white trash. If Mr. Teeter asks me to do Melanie, I'll tell him I'll drop his class. Melanie is just ridiculous."

"If you're serious about acting you should always be willing to do a difficult part, Gina."

"Easy for you to say, Miss 'The best female lead we've had in a very long time.' Oh shit! We *are* late. Mr. Teeter is going to be pissed."

"Oh, don't worry. It's only two minutes."

“Right, except that old bastard keeps his watch five minutes fast. Shit! I hate these heavy doors. Why can’t we rehearse in a regular classroom, close to the rest of the campus? Let’s see, what kind of mood do you think the old fart is in today?”

“You’re asking me? I don’t even what mood I’m in today.”

“You do look tired, Mariana. Did your roommate finally get herself a date? Is that what’s been keeping you up; things are bumping all night in Vanessa’s room? How about you? It’s been a while since I’ve been seeing you hanging with anyone, except for David. Are you all right? Hey! By the way, guess what, Mariana: today is going to be my day! *The Voice* printed my article today, you know, the one I told you I was going to write about Bush and the war. And you know what else? The biggest DJ at the school station is going is traveling these whole two weeks. So guess who’s going to DJ today before Spiriton plays at the Garden tonight? Me, Mariana. For the first time I’m going to have an actual day-time slot today. I was told I could play anything I want, so long as I play a song or two from that band playing tonight at the Garden. Are you going? I’m most certainly going to be there because the regulars are going to be talking about my article. You know how they are, ignorant despite reading all those books. I’ll definitely be there tonight. Say you’ll come. Who knows, maybe those guys will take us out partying with them tonight.”

“Good for you, Gina. Anyway, we’re already here. Did you take notes from the past lecture.”

“I did but not very good ones. Mr. Teeter is such a stickler, isn’t he? He always gets all stressed out when we start a new play — have you been watching his face lately? Red, red, red like a freaking tomato. Either he’s drinking too much or he’s having heart

trouble, again. I hear he hasn't taken a sabbatical in over fifteen years. I feel sorry for him. Poor guy, he's got more veins on his nose than I've got varicose on my legs and ass. People say Filipinas don't have asses, but you should see mine! Mr. Teeter is going to choke on his heart one day when I finally tell him he can kiss my big fat ass! And you know what else I'm going to tell that bastard when I get done with — ?”

“Shhhhh. He'll hear you.”

“Hey, check out the old chick with the pierced ears. Wow! Are those ears or colanders? How many do you think she's got?”

“Shhhhh.”

“Good! Now everyone's here — Gina, Mariana, you two can get your notes out later. I will introduce to you our new guest, who will accompany us through the duration of our new play. Everybody, this is Ms. Bartlett. Ms. Bartlett, who is head of the Gay and Lesbian Studies Student Association, is doing her dissertation on drama and issues of sexual identity. Would you please say a few words to our class, Ms. Bartlett?”

“Oh my god, Mariana. Is she weird or what?”

“Shhhhh, David. You're going to get us in trouble.”

“Hello, everybody. I hope you don't mind my being here. The truth is that I've been using your performances to work on my project for quite a while now. I have been to every play you have been putting together for the past few years, and I have seen many new and old faces come and go, and I really think you are the best team put together in at least ten years. I was particularly impressed by *A Midnight Summer's Dream*, *As You Like It* and *The Merchant of Venice*, and it wasn't just because Shakespeare is my number one playwright. I really think all of you make a terrific team. And just to tell you how

much I admire your work, I will tell you that I loathed *The Iceman Cometh* with a passion until I saw your rendition of the play. I just can't wait to see you rehearse. So please, please, I need to ask you to pretend I'm invisible. I can't very well study you if my being here changes what you normally do in any way. But what I really, really need for my project is something else, and I hope you are willing to help me. I need to conduct a series of interviews and I need your help answering a number of questionnaires regarding sexuality and identity issues. Now, I know how busy you all must be — and being that this is all voluntary — well, I just hope that you'll be willing to help me.”

“I don't think this will be a problem, Ms. Bartlett. I am going to give extra credit to anyone who's willing to help you. So, all of you who need to make up for absences and latenesses, be sure to see Ms. Bartlett after class. Some of you owe me a lot of time. You know who you are. All right, then. We've got a lot to cover in one class. Let's begin by reviewing our notes...”

“Mariana, I think that dyke likes you. I remember her. Check out how she keeps looking at you. Yikes! Don't you remember her? She always seats smack in the middle of the third or fourth row.”

“Shhhhh.”

“... You're all supposed to have read the novel once, viewed the film at least twice, and at the very least glanced at all the articles I've been feeding you. By now you all ought to be Civil War experts. I would like anyone here to explain the romanticism behind the unrealistic notions held by the pre-Civil War South? Can anyone sum up the historical paradigm of the Old South? Yes, Braedon...”

“Oh my god, Mariana. I think she's going to eat you with her eyes. Do you want

me to pretend I am your lover or something? I'll French-kiss you ear right now if you want me too."

"Shhhhh. Shut up, David, or Mr. Teeter is going to have you rehearse last again... I need to get out of here early today..."

...

"I told you, David, that he was going to make us last if you kept talking."

"Like I care. Freaking old goat, lecturing us about the South. Did it occur to him that that's where I am from? What the hell does Braedon know about the South? He's from freaking Utah or whatever it is that Mormons come from. And besides, we're supposed to be actors, not history majors. Did Marlon Brando even bother to read *The Heart of Darkness* before doing *Apocalypse Now*? Instead of doing research that motherfucker was doing speedballs. I've never seen anybody so high in all my goddamn life, and coming from me and where I come from that ought to mean something. What is this shit about us having to be 'experts'? He can kiss my ass. Mr. Teeter may think he's Honest Abe or something, but I think he's a fat langur priest-monkey with that misplaced white halo of his around his face. The old man just trips me out."

"All right. Thank you Gina and Braedon... Mariana and David, you two are next. Please tell us which part are you're going to do."

"Prof. Teeter, I know you told us you wanted variety and that we shouldn't all do the same characters or the same parts. Well, we're also doing a Scarlet O'Hara and Rhett Butler part. The only difference is we're doing the final scene. I know, I know... don't

explain or apologize, just do the damn part. Anyway, here we go... Ready, Mariana?"

"... I can't let him go, I can't! There must be some way to bring him back. Oh, I can't think about this now. I'll go crazy if I do — ... I'll think about it tomorrow ... But I must think about it, I must think about it! What is there to do? What is there that matters? ... Tara, Oh. I'll go home, and I'll think of *some way* to get him back. After all, tomorrow is another day!"

"All right, everybody. That's enough for today. But before you go, remember that I am giving extra credit to anyone who helps Ms. Bartlett's research. I'm going to make it a whole letter grade. A grade and a half if Ms. Bartlett tells me that you were particularly helpful. Please stay after class if you're interested."

"David, let's go."

"Why are you whispering?"

"Just walk with me, like we're going someplace together."

"What, are you afraid of Miss 'We're here, we're queer, get used to it'?"

"You know her, David?"

"Me and everyone else in the eight-O-eight know who she is. Every year she's on TV leading the Gay Parade on Waikiki."

"I don't watch TV, remember?"

"It figures — but anyways — so what if she's got the hots for you? It's not like you ain't used to it. Aren't you the one who gets flowers after each play, half of them anonymous? I never get a single flower, I'll tell you that! Shit, man! I can use that freaking grade and half. Unlike you, I always do poor on the old man's quizzes. Damn! If I get another C I'm going to lose my tuition waiver. And then I've been late about half

the classes 'cause you always make us practice past the time when we're supposed to come in. Anyways, I ain't going to back out now. Hey, wait a minute. Why you look all upset and shit? What's wid-cha? I didn't mean to piss you off or anything."

"It's not that, David. I just got something on my mind, that's all. Thanks for walking me out, and I'm sorry about making you late to class and then asking you to walk me out and miss the extra-credit and all."

"Sorry? How about you buying me instead? How about you going out with me sometime like I've been asking you to do for the past year?"

"That's not fair, David."

"Fair? You want to talk fair? How fair is it that because I am black no matter how good my acting may be I always get a minor role? Do you think Mr. Teeter is going to give me that Rhett part? I bet you anything that he's going to cast me as the slave foreman who saves Scarlet from being raped. And that's if I'm lucky. If I am not, I'll be stuffing pillows under my belt and playing the role of Mammy — 'If you is old enough to go to parties, you is old enough to act like ladies... um, um, um' — hey, by the way, it never occurred to me to ask you before, but is that the reason why you've never gone on a date with me, the fact that I am black? Now, come on and tell the truth, Mariana. Is that why you've never given me the time of day besides what we do for school? Hey — now don't get me wrong and don't give me that blank stare of yours — I ain't calling you racist or anything like that. It's just that I always —"

"Stop, David, stop. I resent that you first imply I am a homophobe and then that I don't like you because you're black. For your information my closest friend is gay *and* black. Second, I find it difficult to believe that you, being older than I am, don't see

what's plain obvious. You and I are partners *and* good friends. I've never told you what I think of you because I thought you, being older than I, would have enough foresight to see that there simply is no room for that between us. What do you want to hear? That I find you handsome, intelligent, athletic, witty? You know, I'd easily kill and eat a chunk of a beating heart if I could have lips as full and as delicious-looking as yours. What? Don't act surprised or I'll really get pissed off! And don't be smiling either. You don't think I've always worried what would happen if we were to have a scene in which we actually had to kiss? You don't think I've lost sleep thinking I might like it too much? But you see, the animal part of a person, the flesh, does not have to take over a person unless that person is base, base, base, and I ain't base. Don't you ever be patronizing enough to think that because you are a man you have the prerogative as far as the strength of your desire goes. This notion that we women are weaker is something you must not be so dumb as to fall for it. It isn't true. And I would personally fuck your face up if you were ever to intimate, especially after knowing me for as long as you have, that women are any weaker than men are. Strength, as well as any other virtue or vice, has nothing to do with gender. So, just because you're good looking or because you look like you're good in bed, that does not mean that I'm going to be with you. I have a higher ideal for that type or relationship. And, if I were ever to deviate from that ideal, believe you me; you would be the last person with whom I would jeopardize my personal integrity. We're friends, David. Do you think that a friend is worth less to me than a good fuck or a convenient one night stand? I don't. I ain't that weak. And do you know what? Even if I didn't care about your friendship, even if I didn't care of you as a person and as a friend, I would still never do it with you. You know why? Because even if I didn't care about you,

which I do, I take acting seriously and up to this moment I thought you did too. So I am going to tell you something serious right now: if you've been my acting partner because you think that one day I am going to go to bed with you, I need to tell you right now that that's never going to happen. Our relationship is different and I am never, ever going to see you like that — ”

“All right, all right, damn it, woman! Take a breath, or two if your deep as the ocean wisdom will allow it. I think I caught your drift. Thick, I'll admit it, but not that thick. I am not your partner because I expect you to sleep with me. All right? So just relax. Take a deep breath or something. Geez, man! Come down. Yes, I do like you, but I ain't gonna go psycho on your or anything. Believe or not, I *can* control my self.”

“Well good. I'd hate to lose you, David. I want us to keep our relationship close, like it's always been, but strictly professional. We can have a drink after work like we always do, but I just don't think it'd be a good thing for us to go out together. I just don't see it happening, all right?”

“All right, all right. I am sorry if I seemed insecure just now. I'd hate to lose you too, Mariana. If I had to work with anyone else, I think I'd give it all up. I mean, I may be dumb, but damn, I'm a genius compared to some of those dweebs... And you know what else? It's also the fact that you and me are among the only few who are not locals. Except for a few whites and Filipinos, you're the only Hispanic and I'm the only black. And I'll tell you something else and you too not be offended either. Don't think I ask you out just because I want to get laid, 'cause, I ain't bragging or anything, but it's not like I have problems getting dates. And as far as my feeling insecure, try being a black *popolo* in Hawaii. Try going into a Korean or Japanese restaurant and see how all the old men and

the old ladies look at you. But you know what? At the end of the night at any club, those same old ladies and men's daughters will jump in the car with me and do what I please. The next day they may pretend they don't know me, but let them get a little drunk and let it be dark, and then see if they don't choke on me."

"Too much information, David. Please. I don't need to visualize any of that!"

"Hey, sorry, okay? Excuse whatever graphic images just slipped out from my seedy and perverted mind. Damn, it's not like I'm doing something everybody else isn't doing. Damn! But anyways, my point is that I feel exactly as you do, all right? I don't have to tell you that I think you're beautiful, or that I like your looks. But you know what, even though I like them, I don't like you for your looks. I don't care if you look like a brunette Elizabeth Vigee-Lebrun. I'll tell you, I will never forget what you said on that first day we met on that acting workshop. You know you actually got me to look that up? And I hate that motherfucking library shit. It's cold in there. Anyways, I like you but not because of any of that superficial shit. I like you because I've been acting since I was five years old, all right? And you know what, I don't think I've ever made as much progress as I have since I been working with you. And you know what else? I could not think of anyone better than you to be my — partner — and — I mean — I don't know what the fuck I'm saying anymore, so just you don't think that I'm seeing you like you were some kind of juicy piece of meat, like some stupid fucking chick, all right? Do you know how much I really admire you? All those people in our group think you're aloof and sometimes they get jealous of you because you get the parts they cannot do. But you know what? I don't. I've always seen you for what you are. I know how much you care, and you know what, I'm probably the only person who really feels you. And when I

mean feel you, I don't mean any of that lame ass fuck-and-run shit. I'd be a fool to think of you like that. Don't you ever quit on me, baby. I respect you, all right?"

"Don't you fucking call me that, David! How many times have I told you."

"Oops, I am sorry. Don't be pissed. I forgot. How long has it been since I call you that? I'm sorry — I mean — Mariana. Shit! See what I mean? You get me all worked out and then you want to blame me. I am sorry. But I know what will make us both feel better. Come here! Here, I say. Give big ass lips David a big old hug... Come on, strictly professional, like a good friend... Oooh yea... Now *that's* what I'm talking about! ... Don't you worry about a freaking thing, baby — I mean, Mariana — Shit! You see what I mean, you see what I mean? Just keep holding me and it will go away. There, there, I feel much better. We're cool, right, you and me? You sweet thing you."

"Yes we are, David, but let go; you're squeezing me too tight."

"All right, just let me soak in the last little bit. Okay, now... So, are we still on for Sunday? Three o'clock, right?"

"Yes, David. Three o'clock. And if you want wine, it's your turn to bring. But remember, no drinking until after we're done."

"Are we going to invite anyone to practice with us?"

"I'm not sure. Call me tomorrow and let's talk about it then."

"No problem. Say, are you going to the Garden tonight? I think my roommate and I are going. Will you be there?"

"Your roommate. I didn't know you had a roommate."

"That shows how much you know me. Actually, I just got one about a month and a half ago. We just avoided each other in the beginning, but these past couple of weeks

we're getting to know each other. He was assigned to me 'cause he was in some kind of legal trouble and his scholarship was about to be taken away from him and shit. But anyway, yes, I do have a roommate and I am pretty sure we're coming to tonight's concert. So maybe I'll see you there if you go. I'm pretty sure my roommate and I are going. He's been talking about it since last Tuesday. Just one thing, though: don't you go falling for him."

"Why, is he real hot or is he a real asshole?"

"Well, I ain't into guys and shit, but the girls seem to think so. I mean, this guy's got a girlfriend and stuff. But you know what? I've been having to disconnect the motherfucking ringer off whenever I need to get some real studying done around the place. I swear nine out of ten of the motherfucking calls are for him, all young, foreign-sounding girls. I tell you, I thought I was hot until this guy moved in with me. I'm telling you chicks flock to him. You should meet him. Who knows? Maybe you'll like him since you don't seem to like me. So what, you're going to the concert tonight or what? The band is supposed to be really good."

"I might, David. I usually go there to hang out with my friends, though, not to be picked up. So you can tell your friend that if he ever thinks of making a move on me."

"Are you all right, really? Is something wrong that you're not talking about?"

"I've just got a lot on my mind right now, David. So I am not sure if I'll be going or not. All right?"

"Okay, just don't you fail to let me know if you need anything, all right?"

"All right, but I got to go now. I'll see you later, David."

"Bye, Mariana. I'm glad we had this heart-to-heart talk."

“Me too. Bye.”

## II

*Heart-to-heart?* Surely Mariana was glad that she had this talk with David, with whom she became as close to as few people can without falling in love. She thought of when that friendship bloomed. It was at these words from *A Raisin in the Sun* that she decided David was more than good: *Do you hear the beating of the wings of the birds flying low over the mountains and the low places of our land ...Do you hear the singing of the women, singing the war songs of our fathers to the babies of the great houses? Singing the sweet war songs! OH, DO YOU HEAR, MY BLACK BROTHERS!* Gina had played Beneatha, and she had played Ruth. The laughter they had shared painting their Filipino and Latin faces black; and how David had been able to do those satirical parts satirically, and those serious parts seriously; and how Mariana had since then felt that, at least as acting went, David was serious, instantly earning him her respect; from that day on there was Shake-Speare and then there was Flaming-Speare, David's nickname every time he forgot his lines and began to improvise. Mariana thought of their shared secret, that although they both acted, someday they both wanted to be playwrights, film directors, something other than living breathing puppets. It was a matter of principle. Money would never become a measure of their worth, they'd confessed to each other one late night after rehearsing, over a glass of chilled wine. David had indeed won her as a friend. But it was a funny thing and it seemed inexplicably ridiculous that someone as great as David wanted to grow closer to another person, her, without being in love. He had been honest with her. He did not love her any more than she loved him. Yet he had just intimated to her that he was willing to be her man, simply because they got along

well, because they could function together. What a world it must be that people are willing to tie a lifelong knot simply because they can get along. What ever happened to romance, to passion, to that intoxication true love brings? Was it only in the songs and the stories and the novels and the plays of love? No, it couldn't be. She had felt it. She was feeling it now, a face coming into her mind so alive that for a moment she had to close her eyes, and imagine her self kissing. No, she shouldn't do it. She opened her eyes and tried to reason with herself. That intoxication was termed as such for a very good reason. It made a person feel elated, floating on air all right, but too much of it could also make a person feel sick, drowning in a sea of irrationality, where no compass of direction existed, where no magnetic north and north star gave hope that a shore could be reached across painful, ineffable distances. But hope was a hopeless word, so why have any? Why not certainty, but what certainty could she have? That face she imagined did not love her, did it? Had she really done it? Had she really allowed herself to fall in love with someone she shouldn't? It had been weeks since she had been herself, allowed herself to have a good time, let things hang out and roll; it had been months since she had gotten high, drunk, or made love. Things had gone from empty and lonely to a desperate worse. But like Scarlet O'Hara, she did not want to think about it now, even though she wanted to talk to Milton about it because she could barely handle being alone any more; for she would start crying uncontrollably, or laughing, or take to being angry, and punching her mattress and ripping her clothes. She was not going to agonize about it now. She was going to use her trained mind to think of something else. She would dissolve her small personal ego. She would think of something bigger, something more. Love, after all, was a matter of the heart, and as Mariana looked about, she thought about the university as a

living being. *If this place was a being, where would its heart be?*

If this were a living being, where would its heart be? Mariana kept looking at her surroundings, the gray and lifeless-looking buildings contrasted by large trees everywhere with their living, breathing barks and waving leaves in the wind, birds darting in and out, being free. This university had completely devoured her, become her life. But to what end? Was this place only about practical skills and about brains? Did it also have a heart, and if it did, where was it? Mariana wondered as she walked, with each step walking more slowly, until she entered into a kind of somnambulist trance. To Mariana, the university's heart could not be found at the president's office where she and other student "leaders" had been at meetings whose minutes, although written down, in the end amounted to nothing. No wonder she had dropped student government, disillusioned; for it was more about immature egos than about brains, and a lot less about heart. Were their adult, merely older counterparts wearing forty-dollar leis on glossy pictures, with their mortgages and children's tuition weighing down their narrow minds any better? It took her only a short time to decide she would not find out. Who cared about a check that paid for shelter and family obligations, but did not bring meaning to anyone else? No, to Mariana the university's heart was definitely not at the student union where the student government offices shooed rather than beckon, where the booths lined up for this and that club or organization, making offers: join the Navy or the Air Force or the Army, wear white or blue or green; join the FBI or the CIA and wear what others wear but with a tap or gun concealed; join the ever-increasing legions of credit card holders who wear Gap with their Banana, paying an additional sixth for every dollar they borrow to look thin; join the Jehovah Witnesses and wear silk ties with plastic suits that

match their well-cushioned plastic-sole shoes, or long plastic dresses while waiting for *the Archangel of Death, on leave since Passover, to except their addresses when the end of the world finally gets here, as they've said each of the ninety years they've preached on the streets; join the Sigma this or Alpha that and wear as little as possible while drinking with instant buddies who like instant gratification, and who, like instant everything, dissolve into thin air like goblins even before the hangover of graduation wears out; and while you are at it, wear a condom and go study abroad in Europe where others' English accents will wear out your own along with your own sense of identity, so that when you come back you sound like someone else off-and-on for a few years, forever if you marry that somebody and together return home. And as much as she loved them, she had never been able to find that feeling of heart at either of the two university libraries, where she had viewed more films than she could remember their titles, where she had spent countless hours book-worming old yellowed tomes, some of them unchecked for whole decades and not just years, of plays, novels, poems and books of art from Lascaux to modern times. But only deep sighs of longing came out of these. To Mariana, the university's heart could not to be found at the leisure center either, where mind-numbing loud commercial FM radio with its ten-song repertoire for the *consumption of sub-classed riff-raff rang, maddening her temples. No evidence of heart* could be found in that place with its un-kept, never-vacuumed pool tables with their blue-chalk stained, ripped green felt, and their pool sticks, every single one of them crooked, pointing up but limp like Salvador Dali's mustache — or his melting paintings — against dimly-lit, mad-colored walls of Darth-Vader, encased in grotesque plastic, shoot-kick-or-punch, feed-me-lots-or-quarters games for bug-eyed morons with knitted eyebrows and*

gaping mouths. What heart could be found in a place where shoddy lights flash impudently and maxed out speakers compete feebly in broken unison against a background of sex-violence and every other kind of denigration lyrics that demon-like, like epilepsy of the spirits, mixes promiscuously and hovers over a blanket of mindlessness that smells of living dung? Had the university's heart been at the Zen garden, that heart would have in a single hour been sucked dry of all its blood by millions of mosquito bites, Mariana thought reminiscingly, despite its beautiful simplicity, its tall sway-dancing and creaking bamboo, and its painted koi swimming unperturbed in mild, diaphanous water with pale, sad green mold. To Mariana, the heart of the university was not found at the small Catholic chapel, because it was run more like a secular business than like a holy place. There was a business-like quality lingering there whenever she went there to pray. There was no real quiet, no real love. But most blatantly obvious, the one place where Mariana was passionately clear no heart could, and would never, ever be found, was the small campus movie theater. Why? Because it had recently been taken over by Christian fundamentalists. She hated them because they, on several different occasions, had assumed she was dumb. She had given them enough tries to know. But the truth could not be helped. Unlike her, they had never bothered to read the Bible in its entirety, something she could not conceive of — being that the Protestant Bible has only sixty-six books, and that is a lot fewer than the number of books that the Catholic Bible has, which she also had read. Nonetheless, these pretenders to ecumenical authority preached to Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and to her alike, with the authority of a John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness. But what did they preach, "good news"? Did they preach love, unity and tolerance? No they didn't. They lured people with feigned

sweetness to bring them to their “church.” There they sang their only song, one of an apocalyptic tone, a magnanimous tone of fire-and-brimstone, guilt-and-fear emotional, irrational rhetoric of outdated self-flagellation and shame designed to deny humans their humanity. Their promises of simplistic afterlife in some eternal Arcady, some timeless, space-less Peloponnesus where people wear white robes and no one bleeds, was but a device to entreat attention to their main theme, which was invariably a stupefying, deafening emotional din accompanied by dark notes of impending doom and eternal damnation and a cacophonous finale of flames and the screams of punished souls. She hated with red-faced vehemence how they had taken something universal, timeless and not just ancient, and therefore most venerable, as is the capability of love inherent in every human heart, as it is conveyed in the myth of love’s ultimate sacrifice, and turned it into something that would terrify any child. But hadn’t Jesus preferred children over adults? Did they think that Jesus tortured youngsters with guilt and fear, teaching them that the flesh should be loathed? Hadn’t that type of Christianity already done enough damage? They were holes and their intellectual foundation for such darkness was too full of holes. Yes, holes. That is what Mariana thought of them and their notions and their minds and especially their hearts. Theirs were heart-size black holes whose event horizons devoured people’s time, people’s emotions and the future prospects of intellectual progress and mental equilibrium of any child unlucky enough to be around them. Did they really think that people are that dumb, or was it their mission in life to make sure that they were? Did they really think that they were not black holes of human potential but actually “saviors”? Mariana pondered as she walked. They were the Anti-Christ. *But if anyone causes the downfall of one of these little ones who believe in me, it*

would be better for him to have a millstone hung round his neck and be drowned in the depths of the sea ... Such things must happen, but alas for the one through whom they happen! Matthew 18, Mariana remembered. Well, the depths of sea were all around Hawaii. Why didn't they charter their own Titanic? In a prehistoric past one might lose life thanks to the paws and claws of a saber-toothed tiger; in this age life stood a good chance of being wasted thanks to the misfortune of being lured to these pretenders' herds. If only they read the Bible, really read the Bible, all of the Bible, and thought deeply free of guilt and fear. If they only did this before they ever opened their mouths. And if their reading comprehension was too poor for such a task, if only they tried to get inside secular minds. Einstein, Stephen Hawking, Joseph Campbell, Emily Dickinson. Even in secular matters resided more spiritual wisdom and more common sense than they had. More could be learned about the Eucharist from *Stranger in a Strange Land* than from listening to their trembling words about Jesus' sacrifice. *The Garden of Rama*: three-in-one. And about the passion of a man-god willingly accepting torture and humiliating death for the sake of those who sought his blood, could they not read — and understand — Thomas Sterns Eliot's *The Wasteland*, Parts IV and V? And if this was too much too ask, could they not simply do as Jesus did when contemplating those luxuriously-clad *Canvallaria majalis*, those "lilies of the valley," and mind with a child's simplicity and even Ferlinghetti's pessimistic sense of wonder, a simple leaf, a single flower, the universe contained in a single drop of dew? Had they ever drowned their thoughts and soared in the whispering dreamy flow of an unhurried body of water? Did they really think that humanity's god-notions came from books and not brooks, from rote learned philosophy and not from simple acts of contemplation? What did they think Jesus did for

forty days besides overcoming the lure of a city-dwelling Demon? Had they ever taken five minutes at a stretch to contemplate anything at all, but without fear, without the limitations that a mind creates when it is afraid that its natural function offends a white Judeo-Christian anthropomorphic god suffering from celestial hemorrhoids from having sat so long in that eternal throne of absolute power? To Mariana, these people, this movable feast of fear, this movable locus of locust-like barren souls, rather than the university's heart, were more like the university's foul-smelling sphincter. Why did she hate them so much? Because despite their being dumber than a sheep or cow, when it came to their gathering new members they went about their business with rapacious deceit and guile. They acted friendly and invited her to a "party." And when she went there, what did she discover? They asked only those who on the one hand seemed receptive and alert, while on the other were also naïve enough to fall for their illusory sense of society. They did not want to make friends with anyone, but only enlist for free new proselytizers, young enough, good-looking enough, well-dressed enough, anything-good-enough, so long as they would be effective at seducing yet others who would fall for the same mouse trap whose cheese was feigned interest, feigned personal attention. That is why she hated them so much — theirs was a travesty of friendliness; they exploited the most basic human need for acceptance and love. Mariana smiled thinking of the sandal left behind by the fleeing Jesus in Monty Python's *The Life of Bryan*. It occurred to her that it was emotional and intellectual pettiness that made these people shallow, something like the martini party in *Le Charme Discret de la Bourgeoisie*; they were low because, like the chauffeur in the film, they were incapable of being at ease among their betters — in this case almighty god and its legions of angels and other orni-

and anthropomorphosized creatures — and so instead of feeling at ease at the ritual, this cocktail party, they guzzled their drinks and much too fast like filthy plebeians and thus missed their chance of getting closer to their purported goal. But this type of pettiness had a far more widely-spread and pernicious effect on humankind than simple fear of ascending the crude ladder of social class. If the ritual of remembering Jesus' sacrifice made a surrendered body a cucumber sandwich and spilt blood a cocktail martini, they had missed the mark. Just as the purpose of a cocktail party isn't the eating or drinking but the bonds that come from it, so was Jesus' sacrifice meant to be viewed as something more than that surface level: at the lowest of all levels the opportunity to create a higher form of love between those wise enough to be in attendance. Everything else was built from there, and whether it was a temple or an international space station, the goal was the same, which was to approximate humanity to its source in creation. But these people had taken it upon themselves with their crude minds to turn an ancient ritual into an ordure of guilt tears and salty fears designed to be purged around the time before the collection basket was passed. Mariana would have none of it. If Jesus had indeed died on a Friday, it was Friday, and she was going to be glad. If Jesus had died for love of humanity, this Friday in love of humankind she was going to drown her selfish concerns of personal love and engage in something higher, the indiscriminate love of humankind. So where was the heart of this university? It wasn't at the places for contemplation, nor at the chapels nor at the other places borrowed to worship guilt and fear. It was not in the swaying bamboo nor atop the trees verdant canopies, though they were closer there, the birds and the bees. The heart of this university, Mariana decided, was at the waterhole. It was where she had been going to all along, to the Garden, where people would be

gathering soon in pagan ritual, smoking cheap tobacco and drinking poorly made spirits, the place where poorly tuned music was played every Friday night. In this university, that place was as close to the heart as one could get.

### III

But when she got there Milton wasn't there yet. She sat on one of the outside tables. She never went inside unless she absolutely needed to, either to get something to eat or drink. Inside, there were fluorescent yellow lights. Inside, the air conditioner, as was a habit in all of Hawaii's buildings, was turned up much too high. Inside, thirty-two inch TVs were always turned up to an earsplitting blare attacking from all the walls, and the programming was always the same, either some testosterone-fueled college game or some poorly acted show. And what she hated the most, the commercials were always turned up considerably higher than the actual shows. This bothered her. So, she, together with anyone else she considered an acquaintance or friend, sat on the patio outside. And if it rained outside, it was always preferable to leave than to enter such an unwelcoming place.

But Milton wasn't there yet. She looked around. The late afternoon crowd was still there, eating their late lunch. Since it was Friday, many students, a few of them who did not look old enough to drink legally, were drinking tall transparent plastic cups of beer. Gleeful redness sat on these students' faces like a scarlet drone-shadow each time their laughter rose. At other tables, there were the perpetually-studying Asian students who had their cigarettes sent from home, smoking as if their lives depended on it. But all of these people would soon leave. The real crowd had yet to arrive. These students would have their drinks and get in their cars and drive to the island's north shore, or to any other

fairly distant place where they could afford rent, and this drink of theirs was a weekly treat. They were not the regulars. Mariana was sad not to find Milton. He must have gotten caught up with some last-minute, unforeseen student meetings. Psychology students like to talk, she knew.

But she was there already. She pulled out a thick book of British poetry from her bag and started on her next week's assigned reading. But before she started, she looked at the place around her, the so-called Garden. Except for the green sign that read Garden, crudely screwed above the wall, no garden was there. And with the exception of a four-foot strip of uncared for soil on the perimeter of a single wall, the entire place was concrete. What a waste, Mariana thought. Instead of deep and cool green bright beneath the waxy cover of water mist, instead of the dance of trembling flowers from whose terse petals liquid jewels fell and vanished into a whisper of that same mist, instead of this by the compass of song played by pouring waters out of wells with tasteful mouths and curbing lips, a few decrepit-looking ill-shaped and flowerless dwarf spiny palms cast their scant shadows over a soil so poor that it was miraculous it had let them live.

Perhaps the reason why someone might have gotten the idea to call this miserably barren place a garden came from the fact that a large *e'e*, or octopus tree, grew on the fringe of the five-foot wall that separated the campus from that place where those who were old enough could legally drink. But a garden implies human involvement, planning, some toil and some expense, while this *e'e* tree had without a doubt been the dropping of some bird whose wings had spread above that spot some forty years before. An undoubtedly well-meaning but ignorant groundskeeper had not been able to tell the difference between a weed and a young tree, and so the lone allspice tree that once could

have been the single argument for calling that place a garden, had been mercilessly beheaded, leaving behind nothing more than a pathetic little stump, cruel testimony that at this place only concrete and parasitic life forms thrived. Still, in a hot summer day, the engulfing tentacle-like branches of the octopus tree lent shade of dark and dusty green, a welcome relief, despite the rats and cockroaches that traaveled stoically, feasting on the bodies or the droppings of each other as they went along silently on its sinewy twisted branches. A little allspice tree, only a few feet tall, had once been the only ray of hope that the place would some day improve, maybe even become an actual garden. But that was gone thanks to plain stupidity, killing Mariana's visualization of what the place could be. It was another one of her daydreams. But at least she was not thinking about her roommate. At least she was not thinking about that which could at any moment move her to tears.

Mariana went back to her British poetry textbook and read for a short while. She then took out her folder and wrote:

Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*, more than a masterful poem about didactic lore, is also an epic poem in that it serves as a vehicle that transforms familiar issues and themes into the fantastic and the exotic. The importance of resolve, constancy, and fidelity found in Homer's *Odyssey*; the still novel concept that purity of human love is abler at redeeming from damnation than the self-appointed religious system of the Church found in Dante's *Inferno*; — all of these works perform the didactic function of addressing the familiar dilemmas of human experience and its dilemmas by transplanting them into the setting of the imaginary, the distant, and the exotic. But what familiar dilemmas borne in the human breast does *Goblin Market* deal with through the use of the imaginary and the exotic? Certainly the dilemmas covered here extend beyond issues of didacticism about the value of labor, handling money wisely, and homology with respect

to relationships. But there is more here, not only with respect to what can be posited as Marxist, Feminist, and Gender-related issues...

But there, somewhere in the parasympathetic regions of her automatic mind, Mariana saw the face of her roommate, Vanessa. She saw her face and her long, curly black hair, her chiseled shoulders and profuse eyebrows and felt as if an atomic bomb was going off inside her brain. She looked at her forearms and every hair was standing. She closed her eyes and pictured Vanessa wearing a white dress with thin shoulder straps. She remembered this. It was a time when Mariana played a CD from a dated English band, London Beat. She remembered Vanessa getting up from the couch across from where she sat, and then moving those bare shoulders of hers as if to fly or swim with her eyes closed to *A Better Love*. This had happened shortly after Vanessa moved in with Mariana. Mariana had thought it would be wise to have a roommate because this would save her money, but the decision cost her something more. Mariana remembered how she had watched Vanessa with awe at first, fearing that she may fall, and then, how for the first time since she had lived with her she noticed how beautiful this Puerto Rican girl was. They did not know each other well enough to trust themselves speaking in Spanish to each other, even though they both knew they could. Yet Mariana suddenly felt herself unimaginably close to her right at that moment. She caught herself looking at Vanessa furtively, stealing with the glimmer of her eyes every detail of her youthful body, and her hair that seemed to be independently alive with an offbeat bounce of its own in reaction to Vanessa's carefree movements. Mariana remembered watching Vanessa's closed eyes, her pursed lips, as if imagining that somebody was kissing her. She remembered it as if it were happening again: When *No Woman No Cry* came on, a song Mariana really liked,

she stood up and touched Vanessa's hand. She remembered how Vanessa had smiled, but only a little, and how she held her hand in hers, slowed down her hips to a slower beat, and went back to closing her eyes as they both danced together, and then, when the song was almost over, how they held each other by both hands, and how both of them whirled round and round until Vanessa let out a cry of excitement as she opened her eyes and smiled again. After that they both fell on the sofa in raucous laughter, the type adults seldom engage in one they leave behind the innocence of childhood and join the ranks of mature, adult-thinking humanity. Mariana remembered how she had held on to Vanessa's wrists as they attempted to right themselves up from the sofa, and how before letting her go she had smelled her, a perfume so delicate and erotic, which came from Vanessa's skin in her excitement, something sweetly intoxicating. Vanessa's shoulders and forehead, covered by thousands of minute perspiration drops, had reminded her of those phosphorescent particles that shine at night on a fine-sand beach. Mariana realized that that had been the beginning of her end, when she started to fall in love with her. And how to explain it? She had never felt anything like that for anyone before, especially for a woman. *And it had happened just like that, mysteriously as a wild fire, without premonition, without a single clue that this was coming.* She remembered a savage and unrelenting pounding inside her chest, deafening, intoxicating and life threatening, as an overdose must feel before the end. She remembered that taste in her mouth, heavy liquid mercury yet hot and fleetingly fluid, making her lips tingle and sore, throbbing. She remembered that never-felt-before excruciating bliss, how she forgot about the existence of her arms and feet, and how the back of her head throbbed as if she had been hit with a sledge hammer, how her ears had rung and how without thinking, as if possessed, she

almost said, *Vanessa, you are so beautiful and I love you*; and it surprised her, making her afraid she had said it loudly. Mariana realized that, since then, the chemistry between them had changed. After that day Vanessa had grown closer and closer to Mariana. But Mariana, careful to not betray her newfound feelings, adopted a different position. Supportive, helpful and nurturing, nonetheless she had changed her manner. It was as though by allowing Vanessa to lean more and more on her, asking questions about this or that academic subject, Mariana had adopted a big-sister position, enabling Vanessa to feed off her caring. Mariana had since then acted nonchalant about herself, yet never ceasing to listen to Vanessa's daily vicissitudes and challenges. This paradoxically had made Vanessa grow closer each day to Mariana, while Mariana put on an air of mature neutrality that had only increased her tortured feelings. With each day of advanced confidence, Vanessa had opened up more and more, telling Mariana virtually all of her feelings, about how she liked this or that boy, and about how the one she'd always wanted had never asked her out, and how this hurt her. Mariana opened her eyes and thought again how this had been the beginning of her undoing. She then closed her eyes again and imagined that night they had danced together. She saw her dancing in front of her again, bathed in faint color lights bouncing off a white leather sofa between lava lamps and a giant Bob Marley poster on the wall behind, seeming to nod in agreement. But had he agreed that she should be tortured for having these feelings? How many times had she heard Vanessa talk about how this or that boy had asked her out, and how she agonized about going out with any one of them; but then she would call and cancel this or that date — each time for the same reason. She had already met the one she wanted. Vanessa had mentioned him so many times, yet Mariana had never let it show that it bothered her. He

was some sports-buff boy Vanessa had shared a class with during her first semester. During a small group project, they had exchanged phones but he had never called her. Yet Vanessa had persisted in her fantasy, mainly that someday he was going to figure out she was the real thing, that she was a virgin, and he should take her seriously. Vanessa had said it so many times, that one day he was going to call her on the phone for a simple date, that he was going to fall in love with her. It was a mixture of anger and sadness that Mariana had felt each time Vanessa had spoken of her feelings. Jocks, Mariana had managed to tell her without betraying her negative feelings, were usually the types that like to date young girls and just score, and that they very seldom if ever got serious about love and relationships in general. That rather than getting stuck on anyone, no matter how well-built or handsome, that she should concentrate on school, and just go out on dates with friends who did not see her as free entertainment — that is what Mariana had suggested in her best nonchalant voice. But Vanessa's fantasies about this boy seem to increase rather than wane. Each time she spoke of him she did so more and more passionately, which only hurt and served as a reminder to Mariana that Vanessa would never love her the way she had come to love her. She opened her eyes and realized that she had been dreaming and that it was time for her to wake up.

She had to talk to Milton about all this, even though she was shy about it. How was she going to find the right words to explain that she had fallen in love, in infatuation, or whatever it was that she felt, for someone of the same sex, just like that, without warning and all of a sudden? What was happening? Was she bisexual? Was she homosexual? Was she turning into a masculine woman-lover like that lady who had come to observe her class? Did she look at Vanessa in that same manner as Ms. Bartlett had

looked at her just a few hours before? If she did, there would be no way that Vanessa wouldn't know it. It was impossible not to see that hunger in a person's eyes, that face flushed red by impetuous blood. Was her love something different? Was she simply experiencing a burst of overwhelming maternal feelings? Did she only want to protect her because she knew how much a bad sexual experience could hurt her? What was going on and how could she make it stop? She was going to admit to having homosexual feelings to someone who had known her to go out with men? Would Milton take her seriously? After all, he was secure in his sexuality. He was gay and comfortable. He didn't hide it or act as if he knew he should. But she, how could she go on like this? It was killing her. She had been losing sleep. She had been losing weight. And most important, she had been losing ground with her school and personal advancement. She had not been able to learn her lines as well as before. She had been overly sober and had relegated much of her social life to cordial but distancing civility. But it had been a while since she had truly shared any of her real feelings. Vanessa had taken her heart with her, and what hurt the most was that she did not seem to know it. That left Mariana feeling depleted, depressed, and desperate. But where was Milton?

She decided she would go and relieve her bladder before getting herself a serious drink and wait for Milton. She put her things away and with her bag she made her way to the ladies room, which was behind the Garden. When Mariana reached the entrance, the door opened and there was Vanessa, smiling broadly, her teeth shining like pearls and her dark eyes sparkling. It was disarming. Mariana's legs did not obey her and she would have fallen down had Vanessa not held her, though she could barely do it as the weight of Mariana's bag dangling from her shoulder offset her balance. It was only for a moment,

but it felt longer than that to Mariana. When she opened her eyes she could not believe it. She was in her arms, she was touching her, and she felt how soft she was, how warm her shoulder felt on her face. Vanessa's smile had vanished and been replaced by her surprise and genuine concern.

"Are you all right, Mariana?"

"I'm so sorry, Vanessa. I don't know what happened. You surprised me and I just had a huge drink on an empty stomach... Oh, my head. Good lord! That's okay. I'm all right now. Just help me with my bag, please."

Vanessa helped Mariana get a hold of her bag and they went inside where others waited for someone to come out of the toilet stalls. Standing by the sinks, Vanessa held Mariana's hands pleadingly, which surprised Mariana.

"Are you sure you're all right, Mariana? Do you want me to take you to student health services? I think they're still open."

"No, really. I'm all right. I just need to eat something. That was from the alcohol and being out in the sun."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, Vanessa, I *am* sure. I'm just a little dizzy, that's all. You looked so happy when I first saw you. Is there something you want to tell me? Did you win the lottery, or something like that?" Mariana said this in a reassuring tone of voice.

Vanessa's face changed immediately, back to that childish excitement she had had a moment earlier, something that puzzled Mariana, for she had never seen this expression on Vanessa before.

"Well," Vanessa said, studying Mariana's face to make sure that it was all right to

proceed, “I want to make sure you’re really okay because I have something, really, *really* important to tell you.” And then, satisfied that Mariana was fine, Vanessa went on in a surprisingly excited tone that filled Mariana with doubts, doubts she concealed beneath her reassuring face. “You’re not going to believe this. He finally called, Mariana. He finally called me! I told you he would, remember how I told you he would?”

“Who called, Vanessa?”

“Oh my god! Richard did! He called — and he asked me out!” Vanessa’s words were spoken in a high-pitch voice Mariana had never heard her use before. “We’re going out and I need your help, Mariana. You do remember I told you about him, don’t you?”

Mariana’s felt stabbed, but she could not let it show, even though the taste in her mouth changed violently, causing her to feel the need to vomit. But she kept on smiling with that older-sister smile and attitude she adopted with her, a smile that said that not only she was fine, but that she was also in a position of secure control — even though she’d just almost fallen down on the bathroom floor. “Oh my goodness. Congratulations,” Mariana said as excitedly as she could under the circumstances. She did not know if she could actually do it, or if Vanessa was so swept away by her own feelings that she was incapable of noticing hers. She stole a glance of her reflection in the mirror closest to her and saw that her face had darkened, that her eyes looked depleted of life, that anyone watching would have been able to see that she was dying from concern. But when she looked back into her eyes, Mariana realized that Vanessa was much too excited to notice what was written all over her face. Mariana realized that she was going to have to do better than this. Vanessa might not notice what was going on in her heart, but others sure would, unless she composed herself. She shifted her posture and made

sure that she was standing straight, that her shoulders were relaxed and that she was not slouching. She turned on her inner mechanism of self-control, unconsciously repeating those inner mantras she repeated when life challenged her. *It's all right, Mariana. It's all right. Just be cool. You're in control.* “So when are you two going out?” Mariana asked in a calm voice.

“Tomorrow, Mariana, can you believe it?” Vanessa said as if it were too good to be true. Mariana marveled at the fact that it apparently did not occur to Vanessa that a date on such a short notice was actually a kind of an insult. “I came looking for you as soon as could because I need to ask you for your help, Mariana.” Vanessa paused for an emphatic moment and then went on. “I need you to help me. This is the first time I am going out on a real date. We’re going to go to dinner and then we’re going to go dancing and I want to look really nice for him. I really mean it, Mariana. I need your help because I have no idea what I am going to do. This is why I came looking for you right after my last class. Mariana, please say you’ll help me. If I’ve ever needed you, it’s now.” Mariana could not believe what she was hearing. She had never known Vanessa to get so excited; her dark irises seemed to dance inside her eyes, and her body posture was like that of a little girl asking permission to go outside on a sunny day after a week’s rain. “This is it, Mariana. *It’s the time of my life!*”

Her voice was so loud that everyone, even the ones who had already washed their hands and should have gone out, were standing there, listening to Vanessa’s loquacious outburst. It was both naïve and beautiful, Vanessa’s excitement — which at that very moment everyone who could hear her thriving on it, as was evident in the expression they all wore on their faces, a mixture of softened facial muscles and uplifted foreheads —

everyone of them, except Mariana's. Yet it cheered her to realize that there was in fact something truly remarkable about Vanessa, that her sincerity was in fact something she hadn't simply imagined, for she could feel it in the air that everyone in the room felt the same thing she was feeling: love and a need to nurture that delicate creature that stood in front of her. That gave her some relief, something she could hold on to; and she wanted to hold on to anything that would instill in her some sense of security, or for that matter, anything what so ever as she began once again to feel her legs wobbling. But she was not about to let it show this time. She put her hand on the edge of a sink and shifted her weight in order to appear as simply getting more comfortable — a good simulacrum of relaxed confidence. She looked around and noticed how the other women were waiting for Vanessa to go on. But catching Mariana's look, they suddenly became embarrassed and pretended not to be looking or listening. A few of them left since it was obvious their reason for being there had ended. A few others were standing, forming a small queue that extended a few bodies outside the door. She knew that she was not the only one who thought Vanessa was beautiful. This again reassured her. Perhaps anyone else who lived with someone as beautiful as Vanessa would have no recourse but to fall hopelessly in love with her### just as she had. Yet it seemed surreal that such a creature would ask for help, her looks already gorgeous. Vanessa's natural hair was so gorgeous that it seemed preposterous that such a person would need help acquiring glamour. What could she possibly need besides a clean dress and good conditioner? Mariana reflected, and with this reflection came an entirely different feeling. Yes, she could dwell on being hurt. She could be jealous, but it struck her that she was lucky. It had been she who Vanessa had gone to, hadn't it? It was she with whom she'd been completely honest. And it was she,

not any of these women, whom she had asked for help. She felt empowered. “Listen,” Mariana said with a tone of voice that startled her in its assurance, “I’ve got you covered. I’ll take care of you. But I’ve got to be some place right now, and I’ve really got to go. Now, don’t you worry about a thing. If you really want to look nice, it will only take a couple of hours. So just go ahead like nothing’s happening and I will take care of everything. But not today. We’ll do everything tomorrow, okay?”

“Oh, thank you, Mariana. Thank you!” Vanessa said as she threw her arms around her. Mariana closed her eyes and let herself be hugged — with all her heart. She was afraid that she might start crying helplessly, so she again made sure to straighten her back, thereby distracting herself from the warmth and smell of Vanessa’s arms, which she would have rather kissed profusely. “I’ve got to go,” Vanessa said. “I’ve got to do laundry and iron and get ready and — ”

“You don’t have to do anything, Vanessa. What did I just get done telling you? I’ll take care of everything. So don’t stress. You just go ahead and do your homework or something. All right?”

“All right, Mariana.”

“Good. I’m glad we understand each other.”

“Oh, Mariana, you’re such a nice friend!”

“It’s nothing. You’re like my sister. I’ll take care of everything. You just go home and everything is going to be all right. All right?”

“Yes, I’m going.”

“All right. Good. Now I am going to go to the bathroom before I pee on myself. I’ll see you later.”

“Bye, Mariana. I’m never going to forget this, you know. I am so excited!”

“Yes, I can see that. Now just go before I shove you out.”

“Okay, Mariana. Good bye.”

“Bye,” Mariana said, and she wanted to add sweetheart, but she stopped herself in time.

“I won’t wait up for you,” Vanessa said, turning from the door, “but I’m going to leave some food for you on the stove just in case you’re hungry when you come in. Okay?”

“Thanks,” Mariana replied, and as she did a stall door opened and she went inside. Afterwards, when she had washed her hands and picked up her bag, she decided that if Milton wasn’t there already, she was going to go and see if she could find him at his office, which was not far. She walked away slowly, overwhelmed, and with a strange taste lingering in her mouth.

...

“Come in, Mariana. I do apologize for getting stuck here for so long,” Milton said as Mariana walked into his office. “Please sit down and let me finish putting these things away — last moment stuff, as I’m sure you can imagine — all these students seem to want to know how they’re doing in my class right as I’m walking out the door. You know how this crap is.” Mariana’s heart felt as heavy as lead, and she was afraid that her speech alone would make her cry; and she did not want to do that — at least not yet. Milton took note of her sad eyes as she set her bag down before taking a seat in front of

Milton's desk. He went on to finish putting his things away until he heard her release a deep sigh, after which he returned, but not to his desk-chair; instead he dragged the chair directly across to where Mariana sat so that he would have eye contact with her. Mariana lifted her un-sandaled feet to the end of her seat, a motion Milton took to be an unconscious desire to get into the fetal position.

“Well, I can see that things have not improved since I saw you this morning — but not to worry, dear — you are well loved and supported, and I will do anything within my power to help you in any way I can.” Mariana did not even look up. “So, having said that, I hope you don't think it rude of me if I cut to the chase.” Mariana's eyes lifted shyly. “This is a problem of the heart, isn't? — No, you don't have to answer until you feel like talking — just let me know if I'm going the right way, okay?” Mariana nodded like a small child. “Now, look, Mariana, having a psychology degree does not automatically make me a counselor, and I know that you know that. I know that you came as a friend, seeking a friend, not some professional who's going to have you lay on a couch and treat you like an emotional experiment. So I'll tell you from the get-go that I'm not going to do that. So, you better take courage and trust me with whatever it is.” Mariana did not reply, but just looked at him, unmoving. Milton continued, “Well, so far I know that this is an affair of the heart, most likely you've fallen in love or think you've fallen in love with someone you think does not love you. Am I right so far?”

To Milton's relief Mariana answered with a question, though barely audible. “Milton, how do you know when you're in love? How do you know when you're in love and when you're just infatuated?”

Milton was happy to hear her, but kept a neutral face; he remained quiet for a

moment and then, when he was satisfied she was waiting for him, he used an expression to show that he was thinking of his reply, for Milton could see that it was important that he be gentle, that what was afflicting Mariana was beyond the ordinary for her. "Mariana," he said after a moment, "infatuation is difficult to tell without the test of time. You see, if that attachment goes away after a while, then it is infatuation. Love is something longer lasting, and deeper. And the easiest way to know if you really love somebody is if that love you have isn't a selfish one. Do you think of what you might be getting from a person, or do you think of what you can give to that person?" Then Milton appeared to interrupt his own self. He truly did care for Mariana and one way of showing this love was by encouraging her, reminding her of what he saw was her true self. "But is that what your trouble is? At your age that should not be such a problem. You have the time to find out if you're in love or just infatuated. This should not weigh so heavy on you — "

"Then," Mariana interjected in voice only slightly louder than before, "what do you make of jealousy, and of unhappiness when you love someone and *that* someone doesn't love you back the same way you wish you were loved... I mean, what do you think one should do when the one you are in love with doesn't know of your love... or ... the person loves you, but not the same way — and treats you like a friend ... when what you feel is an amazing passion, but the other person never even notices what you feel?"

"Mariana, are you kidding me? Is there anyone in this world who would not notice you — who does not love you? Can that be possible?"

Mariana's eyes let out two large teardrops, and then she said in a deeply felt voice, "Apparently not, Milton. Why would I be here otherwise?" And with this, she let out a sob she immediately stemmed off to prevent herself from what would have been

unrestrained crying.

Instinctively, as a mother runs to a child in need, Milton wanted to hold her, but he knew that this was not the right time, at least not yet. So instead he apologized to her, “Oh, Mariana, I’m sorry. I’m sorry I’m not being of much help.”

“No, Milton, it’s not that. It’s just that this whole thing has been heavy on my mind, and I have been carrying it around with me... and I should have come to talk to you — but... It’s just that I thought I’d be able to handle it...and, well, as you can see... I can’t! Damn it. I hate my self! I’m so weak and so stupid.”

“Mariana,” Milton intoned with a deeper, more serious tone, “being weak or stupid is the last thing anyone would ever accuse you of. These feelings you’re having are *part of what all humans must go through; that is, if ever a person is to achieve wisdom.* It’s not just ‘no pain no gain’ with respect to muscle, but it’s also with respect to wisdom — that is, until you get wise enough that you can escape this whole cycle... but I don’t want to be philosophical with you. This head stuff is not going to help you now... I feel that what you need is something practical. So, why don’t you just go ahead and tell me more about this cruel guy who’s apparently too blind or too dumb, or possibly even both, to recognize who you are and love you. I mean, Mariana, you must have some idea of your worth. Look, I’m a teacher because I love people. People are the one thing I know in this world, and believe you me, young woman, people like you are truly uncommon. You are not only intelligent, but you are also a seeker, one who’s always willing to consider something foreign, something new. During these two years that I’ve known you, and that I’ve heard you in all of those discussions I’ve have heard you speak, there has never been a time — not a single time and I do mean not one time — that I have felt sorry for you,

that I've said, poor Mariana, she lacks intellectually, or in compassion, she just can't see. And, *and* this is a big *and*, add to that your attractive and youthful physical self in which this beautiful heart and soul are encased, and what do we have? We have you, Mariana, a true gift to the world. Who would not see you for what you are? Who would not love you, Mariana?"

But Mariana made no reply. Milton waited for a short while, and seeing that she would not speak, that she was struggling with her feelings, he tried to help her. "Mariana, is this some dark secret you're keeping? Are you agonizing so much about this because the man you're in love with is already taken or married or too old?" Milton's final interrogation stress was unexpectedly heavy and it surprised them both. Mariana, who was shedding new tears, answered without thinking, as if denying a false accusation of illicit activity after having arrived late after curfew to a conservative home.

"No!"

"Then what is it?" Milton asked, still with an excited voice. But Mariana simply cried, this time without holding back, and made no answer as she covered her face with both of her hands to muffle her sounds. "What do you mean by 'No'? 'No' to one of these? 'No' to all of the above?" Mariana simply kept crying. Milton could hear that her nose was running, and he could see that the clear liquid was streaming from her hands past her wrists. He got up and handed her a small packet of Kleenex, which she held on to when he tapped the back of her hands on her face. She took out a few and dropped the packet to the floor. Milton stooped to pick it up, something difficult for him to do due to his large size. He set the package on the edge of the desk, where she could reach them later. He sat back again and rested his chin on his pudgy, relaxed fist. He watched

Mariana struggle with her breath and her tears as she balanced the simultaneous issuing of these while she blew her nose clean.

“None of these, Milton,” Mariana finally said with her eyes closed, “it’s none of these.”

Milton paused, and then it came to him. He drew ponderous breath as he opened his mouth in exclamation. “Oh my god, Mariana. Why didn’t you tell me? You have fallen in love with a girl, haven’t you?”

Mariana, whose eyes were transformed by the presence of suddenly-sprung small red veins, nodded as she continued to cry, holding on to her soaked Kleenexes. Milton stood up, pulled out fresh ones, and with his hand opened hers, taking away the wet ones and replacing them with dry ones, which Mariana’s yielding hands accepted. “You should have told me, Mariana. Why, you should have told me right away, young woman.” Mariana sobbed louder. “Oh, you poor thing. Now I know what you’re going through. This is the first time you’ve fallen in love, isn’t it?” Mariana let out a high pitch cry at these words. Milton caressed her short hair for a moment and then sat back again. He chose not to interrupt her, to let her cry until she, on her own, could compose herself.

When Mariana’s breathing changed, Milton asked using a somewhat urging tone, “Okay, Mariana. So let’s have it. Can you tell me? Who is it? Is it a teacher, or an older friend, or someone else’s lover — ?”

“No!” Mariana said and resumed back to sobbing, but more slowly than before, which told Milton that he should continue.

“Well — who is it then? I don’t care as long as she’s not your mother.” Mariana let out a mixture of a sob and a laugh, whose sound surprised them both, such that Milton

too laughed, which made Mariana laugh even louder. With tears still streaming from her eyes, she reached for more dry Kleenexes and with these she blew her nose loudly, causing her to choke slightly as laughter continued to come from her. This moved and was extremely endearing to Milton. Her red eyes and her reddened face, shiny from tears, clashed with her broad smile and bright white teeth. He decided to go on, to profit from the impetus of her emotional reversal for her own sake. Now that she had opened up like this, this was a good time to continue probing her for her own answers, Milton thought. "Just tell me, Mariana. Who's the one for whom you were crying just now?"

"It's my roommate, Milton."

"Roommate?"

"Yes, Milton, I was having problems making ends meet, so I decided to get a roommate. That's been a while ago."

"Well, is she pretty?"

"Milton, don't do this! Of course she's pretty. That's my whole fucking problem — I just can't get her out of my mind."

"Do I know her?"

"Yes, one time I brought her to the Garden and you saw her."

"Do you mean that cute Latin-looking girl who has really long black hair? She was wearing a cute little white dress, right?"

"Yes, that's the one."

"I remember her! That was when you used to have long hair too. I remember thinking you two looked like sisters. I thought she was your family visiting from somewhere. I didn't know she was your roommate! Well. She is pretty. I can see why

you'd fall for her. But don't you think she's a little young for you?"

"What? You think I chose this, Milton? I didn't! All I know is that I dream of her, I think of her, I drink and eat and smell and everything her, Milton! I feel like I'm dying."

"Go on."

"Well, you see, I said to myself, This is just infatuation, Mariana. You'll get over this soon, or, This is just some wild maternal feeling stuff you're feeling, Mariana. You are projecting onto her the type of loving care you'd want someone to show to you if you were her. But you know what, Milton? I just can't get her out of my freaking mind."

"Is she really that pretty? Is she really that special? Is she weak or needy? What is it you think makes you love her?"

"It's everything you've just said, Milton. Everything. I've never, ever, ever, ever, Milton, have met anyone like her. She's not just pretty. She's got these full lips she's got because I'm sure some of her Puerto Rican ancestors were black. I am just sure of it! White people just don't get lips like that. And she's got this amazingly long and dark curly hair that makes her look like a little goddess. Her body is perfect, not too tall or too short, not too big or too small. She's got this perfect symmetry to her arms, that you could measure any scientific instrument with them. She tans into a golden color, whereas I go to the beach and burn and peel like some sick disease is killing me. She's got these eyes that just pour a look that speaks of nothing but this amazing sincerity and this pure love. Yes, that's right. She loves blindly, like a little girl. You just want to hold her and kiss her. I mean, I'll be honest with you, Milton. I have had a bunch of sexual thoughts about her that even I don't have the guts to think about them — much less explain them. But I tell you, I think I would sell my pagan soul if only I could spend a night with her,

just holding her, just kissing those beautiful shoulders of her, that forehead of hers. If I kissed her on the mouth, I think I'd die on the spot, Milton. I think I'd pee myself and collapse right there and be a corpse, but with a smile that no mortician would be able to take away from me not even by super-gluing my cheeks."

"Well, that sounds all right so far, Mariana. I still don't see the problem. So just get to what's wrong. What *is* the problem?"

"Milton, that is the problem. The problem is that she is beautiful, and there is nothing wrong with her, Milton. There is nothing wrong with her except me. I *am* what is wrong."

"How you mean that — how are you wrong? Because you love her? There is nothing wrong with loving if your love is the kind that isn't designed to satisfy your needs instead of others; there is nothing wrong with loving if your love is not a selfish one."

"No? Then why the fuck am I crying now? Why is it that I've been thinking only of dying for these past few weeks? I mean, haven't told anyone this, but all I've been thinking about is how to end this pain. That's how much I love her, Milton. That's how much I love this little woman, Milton. That's how much I'm in pain."

"Woa, there, woa! Hold on just a minute and let me interrupt you there. But I do mean a minute. Just be quiet for a little bit. Don't say anything for a while. And when this silence is broken, it will be me who speaks. But I need you to be receptive. I need you to quiet your mind for a little while. Okay?"

Mariana nodded her head, although she was much too excited and would have liked to go on. But during that silence she realized that indeed she had gotten much too

excited. Her mouth was dry and she was breathing hard. Her head felt as though it was filled with gas under pressure, and she could feel and hear the beating of her own heart. She closed her eyes and all she could see was red with ghost-like specters hovering about. She realized that she was clutching her used Kleenexes. She dropped them and concentrated on relaxing and on regulating her breathing as she inhaled through her nose and exhaled through her mouth. The fact that her nose was still partly clogged naturally helped her breathe more slowly, and as she did, she shifted her attention to emptying her mind of all thoughts, thoughts of Vanessa, thoughts of herself as some type of victim, thoughts of fear about feeling shame for her disclosure of these feelings she had been in denial about, and regret. But these only retreated farther into deeper recesses of her mind, and she could feel their faint voices, especially those expressing regret, which echoed faintly yet still audibly inside her head. She should not have said what she had just said, her mind was telling her. But so what? She had already done it. Why not go through with it? Why not go along and let Milton do his part? After all, she had come to get his advice, so why get in her own way? Why not allow him to show her his perspective of life? She started to see things in a clearer perspective. That man who was out there, who would undoubtedly be looking at her with dotting, genuinely caring eyes, was one of the people she had known longer than anyone else at the university. When she met him, they were both students, in fact. Knowing of the school's policy not to hire its own graduates, when she heard that Milton had gotten a job and was teaching, she inferred that an exception had been made, something that reaffirmed her own notion that Milton was in fact special. And yet he was humble, never making any airs about all he knew and had read and experienced. His carefree laughter at the Garden had always been disarming. Lightly

jocular, always cheerful, always ready for a laugh of even the simplest kind and sometimes also crude humor, which was the most common type of humor that was heard at the Garden — that was what everyone identified Milton with. Milton was as openly gay as he was cool. Around him only smiles could be seen, and when there was trouble, sincere concern could always be found in his eyes. A true good egg, that is what Mariana had always thought of him. But as time went by, she realized that he was much, much more than that. That persona he portrayed in public was just that — his public persona; for underneath that cordial and light-hearted manner was a mind matched only by a heart just as deep, if not deeper; for who could know fully just how deeply those intelligent eyes of his were? One thing was for sure, though, Mariana thought, there had never been a conversation of any topic whatsoever that Milton was not at least elementarily informed. History and pre-history, Classical literature and mythology, science, fiction and science-fiction, poetry, drama, domestic and foreign film, popular culture, current events and even things that had yet to be leaked out, — there simply was nothing anyone could say to which Milton did not have an educated, contributing reply. But that was not the real reason Mariana had gone to him, or at least not the only one. The reason why she had gone to see him was that first, she trusted him, and secondly, because he was the only homosexual person she felt she could trust, and only after that did his wisdom and experience appear to weigh into the equation of why she had come to him. Surely that wisdom mattered. Okay, Mariana, she thought, let the wise man work his magic. She opened her eyes, reached for more Kleenexes, blew her nose and cleared her throat, a sign to let Milton know that she was ready. Only then did she notice that he too had closed his eyes. She went back to closing hers, and to breathing purposefully slowly and

loudly enough to have him hear her, her continuing sign that she was ready for him to go on. She needed him — she needed something, — she knew that much.

“Mariana,” Milton spoke in a steady, calm tone of voice, “I need to reiterate to you my earlier disclaimer. Just because I have a degree in psychology does not make me a licensed practitioner. Do you understand the difference? I studied psychology, but I’m not a licensed counselor *per se*, nor an unlicensed one either for that matter. I want you to remember this throughout the conversation we are about to have; and I need you to realize that anything I say to you will be said only as a friend tells something to another friend. I’m willing to talk to you because I care about you, not because I think anything I can say to you will mean much; in fact, what I tell you may mean absolutely nothing at all. This is only my way to show you solidarity and support in what you’re going through. You’ve come to a fork in the road. You may ask me anything you want, but in the end which road you take will be your own choice. Okay?”

Mariana was pleased with the way he spoke to her. His voice strengthened and soothed her. He spoke simply but beautifully, endowed with an almost saintly glow. No matter how much he tried to humble himself, to Mariana he always came across with beyond-professional, unpretentious elegance. Mariana was already feeling better. His manner affected her in a reassuring way. Milton paused and then smiled sagely. Mariana’s eyes leveled with his, the first time she had made real eye contact with him since she had come into his office. She too smiled though only for a moment, her way to acknowledge that she was fine with what Milton was telling her. Milton, after a pause, cleared his throat and went on.

“All right. Until now I’ve only been going on guesses. How exactly may I be of

service to you? Just go ahead and be blunt with me. Ask me anything. I will do my best to be open and tell you what I really think and anything you want to know about my own experience.”

Mariana was again surprised. She expected Milton to launch into some type of philosophical apology about homosexuality and then connect this to what she was feeling. But he had not. Instead he appeared to be taking a step back.

“How do you do it, Milton?”

Milton’s eyebrows rose unevenly, one slightly quicker and higher than the other, expression she had never seen on him and which struck her as funny. “How do I do what, Mariana?”

“How do you manage — you know — how do you manage having thoughts and feelings that, well — you know — most people just don’t agree with because they think it’s ‘queer,’ if you’re lucky, and when you’re not, people say it’s ‘sinful,’ ‘damnable,’ ‘abominable,’ ‘unnatural’ and all that stuff?”

“How do I handle being gay?” Milton spoke as if he were repeating a question put to him which he needed to repeat out loud in order to determine if the question was in fact a question, or if it had been put to him rhetorically. He repeated the question again, but this time barely audibly, a mumble. And then he was quiet, but Mariana could see that his lips moved slightly, that he was repeating the same question again, only in his mind. “Mariana, is this a loaded question?” Milton said after a short while. “First of all, I want to tell you how relieved I am that the first words out of your mouth are not words of denial. Just the fact that you’ve asked me this tells me that you are in far better shape than most people who are confronted by the type of feelings you’ve admitted having for this

young woman. So I think that this is good start. Now, as far as what you're asking me, I will tell you that I'm not exactly sure what you want to know. If you really think about it, you might realize that what you've asked me would be not unlike asking French people how they handle being French. What if you had asked me how I handle being black, or how another person handles being a Jew, or tall short thin or fat? One is what one is, and awareness of one's self precludes the act of self-acceptance. How do you handle being a woman and having your period? That's something you do not intellectualize — there is no handling in being oneself. One just is. So perhaps you'd like to be more specific. You want to give your question another try?"

“Well, — I mean, I've always enjoyed looking at beautiful girls, but by itself that never felt wrong or anything. I mean, by itself it never felt wrong — or even sexual — although I will say that another woman's beauty has always excited me. I mean, for a person to be able to look at or to talk about one's own gender is beautiful, we women have always had it made. We women can look and be open about looking and talking about it without fear that there might be something more to it — you know — that there is something funny. Women can talk about each others bosoms and butts and what beautiful hair you've got and what beautiful skin you've got and no one thinks anything of it. Men, on the other hand, cannot whistle when another handsome man walks into a room full of people. Everyone just assumes the worst. I can walk up to a woman and say 'That dress really makes your body look sexy' — and 'Thank you' and where she bought that dress is what most likely I'll be getting. But if a man were to say something like that to another man, who knows what could happen — from killing to calling names and saying that so-and-so is a fucking faggot. In short, women just aren't as afflicted by the

same degree of homophobia men face every day. We women can hug each other in public; we can hold hands in public; we can kiss each other each time we say hello and good-bye; we can go to any party and dance together; we can give each other lingerie and silk underwear as a presents. But men can't do any of this — at least not most men. So I guess that is what I'm asking you — how do you handle it? What's it like when people see you as some kind of an oddity, as something deviant?"

"Mariana, if what you're asking me is how I handle being sexually aroused by someone of my own gender, I will tell you that I do it pretty much the same way as anyone else. Imagine you going to the supermarket and then finding someone who is sexually attractive walking up the same aisle as you. What would you do? Well, the same thing I or anyone else would do. Gender really has little to do with it. When you like someone, it shows in your eyes, that's all. If the other person feels the same way, you can feel it too. Now, this does not mean that acknowledgement equals performance or that performance equals fulfillment. *Only childish and shallow people think that way.* Imagine if you were to feel attracted to your boss's spouse or lover and you felt that the attraction was mutual. Would you act on it? No. Imagine that an irresistibly sexy, older-looking seventeen-year-old gave you a look of ravaging desire, and you knew this person's age. You would be out of your mind if you acted on it — wouldn't you? So you see, Mariana, sexual orientation doesn't change in the least how people ought to behave with other people. You are just as likely to do something offensive or immoral regardless of gender or sexual identity. And to be weak and do hurtful and destructive things in exchange for a few minutes of feeling good has nothing to do with what type of genitals one desires. If you have a sense of dignity and responsibility, you are going to do the

right thing no matter what. But, Mariana, I don't think that is what you really want to know. You see, *this stuff about being afraid about what other people think about your sexual orientation* is really just a detour you're bringing into this conversation. This is your way of stalling because you're afraid of dealing with the real issue. Am I right, Mariana?" Mariana did not answer. She was almost hypnotized by Milton's calm and soothing words, words that made her feel secure and free from her turbid emotions. She heard Milton's question as one who hears a parent saying that it is five a.m. and that it is time to get up — as if from a state in which one understands but cannot move or make reply. At that moment she lacked the strength to answer Milton's question. "Can I ask you a very, very intimate question, Mariana?" Milton asked when he felt she was ready to continue, "something that goes deeper than this situation you have now?"

"Yes," Mariana answered softly, meekly.

"Can you tell me about your those events you identify in your youth — those events you yourself realize played a role in how you came to be who you are sexually? Can you tell me about your earlier sexual experiences, both good and bad? And in particular, can you tell me about any experiences you have had with another girl or woman? — Even if the experience wasn't sexual, even if it only was something strong that you felt, that you think might have had an influence in how you feel now today. For example, Mariana, I've noticed already that with respect to your roommate, you feel you are the strong one. It doesn't have to be because she's younger or you think she's less experienced. You just do. Consider, for example, is there anything in your past that could make feel like your roommate's protector? Did something happen to you when you were younger that she reminds yourself of?" Mariana's eyes showed a reaction of recognition.

“Just think,” Milton continued after a pause, “was there ever a situation in your earlier life when another woman had position of power over you and you wished that someone had protected you?”

Mariana did not have to think for long. Immediately she knew what Milton was asking her to think about, but she could not bring herself to speak right away. She sat quietly, looking blankly past Milton. And then she spoke differently, as if she were telling someone else’s story, as if it were a story of someone else’s tribulation.

“When I was nine,” Mariana began taking a deep breath, “my parents divorced. My aunt came for Christmas that year. Apparently they both agreed that I would live in America with my aunt. My father’s only involvement in my life was that of sending a check each month to my mother — alimony and childcare, I supposed — which he sent from Florida where he’d gone to and where I learned later he’d remarried. We never heard from him again. I loved my aunt, Milton. I really did. She had such a strong manner about herself. She dressed so well and spoke with such authority that whenever she said something people listened. I’d always looked up to her, come to think of it. I just loved the sound of her voice, and I wished and wondered why my mother wasn’t strong and outspoken like her. For some reason, with each Christmas she came, I ended up believing that if my mother had been stronger, my father would not have a reason to leave her, to leave me. I guess I blamed her for my fatherless misery, and her daily visits to the nearby church only made me think less and less of her each day. By the time I received my first communion it became clear to me that I had no one. There were so many members of every other child’s families, except my own. Of mine there were only my aged grandmother, my mother, and myself. When my mother was not at church, she

was with her. And when my mother was at home with me, she might as well not have been, for she was quiet and said much too little. She was always so shy talking to people she didn't know, especially strange men who'd knock on the door selling something or other. She never had the strength to tell them no. What should have taken a minute would always end in half an hour of listening to some religious or a vacuum cleaner or an encyclopedia-selling presentation. I started begging my mother that she let me go with my aunt. I started writing letters to her, telling her that my mother said it would be all right. It took a few years before the immigration documents were processed — years I spent already gone, thinking of myself during school and among my friends as some kind of ghost who'd at any minute evaporate and vanish forever from their unrealistic midst, as if it were they who were the ghosts, they who I should not take seriously. Then the papers and a plane ticket finally arrived. I was going to America, to a better life. I remember asking my mother to let me wear the same white dress I'd worn for my first communion. She worked on it in the dim light of that old house for days because it no longer fit me. It was the most beautiful white dress when she was finished, which I wore with white stockings on the last day I saw her face. I was so happy that I forgot to cry or to be sad about leaving my mother. She did not cry either, but only had several wrinkles on her forehead I'd never seen before. Perhaps she cried once she got home — I will never know for sure. But even less did I suspect my aunt's well-guarded secret. The woman my aunt lived with did not come to meet me at the airport. My aunt only told me about her on the way home, after she'd treated me to a McDonald's Happy Meal. I will never forget the taste of pickles, and the overly sweet American drink. She told me that her "friend" was from New York and that her name was Flor. She told me that the two of

them had been “best friends” for three years and that I should call her aunt — Aunt Flor. Now, I know what you’re probably thinking — that Flor was the one who wore the pants. But the truth is that both of them did. In fact, both of them wore *only* pants; not a single skirt could be found in their closets. What Flor had was that, although older, she was the better looking of the two, with fixating, seductive green eyes I soon found myself staring into. I realize now that I made her life miserable, but back then I only thought of her as mean to me. At first it was a period of adjustment, of going to school and the distraction of ESL and all-English classes followed by one or two hours of reading and homework, which would then lead to ‘family’ TV watching. The shows were nothing like Colombian TV. The pace was fast and the commercials ruthless. No one would ever dream of *comparing Pepsi to Coke in Colombia, not on TV. Here it was everything. Somehow life* did seem better, cleaner, faster, but also lonelier and cruel. Making friends at school was almost impossible. Soon there was that hour that Flor would be home before my aunt — but she’d always say, ‘Oh, I just got home about five minutes ago. I was just making sure that Mariana was doing her *tarea*’ — which means homework. I remember like a dream how the neighbors looked whenever I passed by. Back then I thought they felt sorry for me because they knew I was a newcomer who could barely speak English. Now I see that they felt sorry for me because they knew that I was the child of a lesbian household. I know now why the children in the neighborhood knocked next door to our two-bedroom apartment to ask the neighbors’ children to go out and play, but never on my door. I know now why Flor and my aunt never bothered buying candy for Halloween — children were not allowed to knock or even come near our door. I now know many things I didn’t know then. But back then, back then I lived in a very confused and fussy dream. It seems

impossible now that I was so naïve. I remember like magic the Sundays we'd go to the park. It was a gigantic park where hundreds of families went, where the smell of barbecues filled the air, where children played Frisbee and handball; and me, following my two 'aunts' with the picnic blanket under my arm. I think of the sigh of relief they both let out when I'd finally gather the courage to say that I would go and roller-skate around the park by myself. From afar I could see them lying next to each other. They did not need me. I was a third wheel. If only my aunt had had the courage to tell me that this amazingly beautiful woman was her lover, although I don't know why I should be mad about this — it seems to me that guts is something I myself lack. I lived under the blanket of my own confusion and turmoil, a stranger in a very strange land where in the summer the sun did not set until after eight o'clock and birds sang deep into the night. Anyway, Milton, eventually I was abused. And I don't think it's necessary for me to give graphic details. I will only say that this started happening after Flor and my aunt started arguing late at night in their room. My aunt's face grew more and more serious with each passing day, until she started looking at me as if I were a puzzle she could not solve. Then one day Flor called me a parasite, suggesting that cleaning around the house could never make up for the cost of the food and rent, for the cost of my clothes, dentist bills, and for cutting my hair. She told me that if I wanted to stay, that I would have to do as I was told. She told me that if I didn't, she was going to leave, and that my aunt and I would both be out on the street because my aunt could not afford to support us both. And I was so stupid then. Flor was older, dressed nicer, and was the one who wrote the rent check. What she said made sense. My aunt's serious face, more and more serious each day, I came to believe was a face of money worries. After all, she worked as a seamstress at a women's

clothes factory, while Flor was a secretary for a legal firm. My aunt's car was old and faded; Flor drove a shiny 4x4 truck so tall that it was difficult to get in it. And so I let her have her way with me, which quickly changed me. At fifteen I finally had the courage to stand up to her. That night my aunt cried so miserably that I too cried until my own pillow was wet. And then I fled, Milton. I fled because I could not take it anymore. I fled because the thought that my aunt would be bereft of her lover gave me an excruciating sense of guilt and pain. The rest is a string of stories I'll not talk about because you only asked me about those parts that have something to do with my problem now. I'll just say that I foolishly thought all my problems would go away the moment I started sleeping with men. And you know what? That's all I've ever done since then. I've had over ten different boyfriends, some of them fairly long relationships. But when I realized that I was not being treated with equal respect, I decided I was going to go to school on my own. I did not want to depend on anyone. I did not want to be like my aunt was with Flor. It took me a while, not to mention years of cleaning houses and waiting tables to get my GED and to do well enough to finally qualify for scholarships and grants. And then I came to this school in Hawaii. And then I met Vanessa. I guess that's everything."

Mariana threw her hands in opposite directions, to show that she did not know what else to say.

Milton smiled broadly. "Very good, Mariana. Very good. I know that this must be painful for you. But I think that it is a very healing thing what you just did."

"Well, Milton, I don't know if it is or if it's not. But I will say to you I've never told this story to anybody, not even to my greatest love, whom I thought I was going to marry until the day he started treating me like I was some kind of house-whore just

because he earned a little more than I did. For some reason I just don't trust anybody anymore. Except you."

Milton let out a short and light-hearted laugh. "Oh, dear. You're going to have to learn to trust yourself more, and quick!" Milton laughed again, this time a little longer, with sweet tones that infected with humor Mariana's own heart. "Like I said," Milton continued, this time pausing to take a deep breath as Mariana erased her momentary smile and the light in her eyes once again became calm, "this is very good Mariana. Now, I want you to go further and consider why it is that you've gotten stuck on this girl, what is her name again?"

"Vanessa, Milton, Vanessa."

"That's a nice name. If I were a girl, I wouldn't mind being a Vanessa. Such a nice sound to it, don't you think? But it does sound like it's a name that belongs to someone who is small and thin."

"That's exactly what she's like, Milton, and sooo beautiful!"

"Oh good," Milton said. "Anyhow, what I want you to ask yourself is, Why am I having problems expressing to Vanessa how I feel about her? Because, you see, even if your past was turbulent and hurtful, even if you were branded by the fires of deceit and abuse, why shouldn't you be able to be happy now? Because, come on! As hurtful as the past might have been, we all have the right and the power to be happy now. Why shouldn't you be able to start anew? If you have fallen in love — or even if you just think you've fallen in love with this girl — why can't you just give it a shot?" Mariana's face suddenly wore a look of terror. "I know, I know what you're thinking. You're afraid that she will be shocked if you tell your feelings to her, that she will move out of your place,

and that she will tell the tearful tale of how you made a move on her and that you're nothing but a filthy lesbo dyke. Is this what bothers you, Mariana? Are you afraid that this will come? Are you afraid of shame and failure? I mean, it sounds to me that if you've already fallen as deeply as you say you have, the hell to pay is already being paid, and yet there is no chance of winning either." Mariana looked confused. "What I mean is that if you are dying for a love you'll never try to get, why not die after trying? Why not give yourself a chance at winning her?" Milton waited for an answer, but Mariana gave none. "Perhaps the problem isn't that whether or not you love Vanessa. Perhaps the problem is whether or not you love yourself, Mariana."

"Perhaps you're wrong there, Milton," Mariana answered.

"I'd love to be wrong, dear. That's precisely the point I'm trying to make, Mariana. Please, please tell me how I'm wrong."

"Well, for starters it isn't that I'm afraid of what she might do if I were to tell her that I love her."

"Then why don't you tell her you love her?"

"Because I can't, goddamn it! I can't, I can't and fucking can't."

"Why not?"

"Because if I do I will lose her."

"But it's not as if you have her now."

"I do have her, Milton. I have her in my mind and in my heart, and in my apartment," Mariana's eyes seemed bright. "What happens is that she does love me, but not like that, Milton. She's a straight girl. She has been telling me about this crush she's had for this jock since she's been at this school. And you know what else? She's told me

that she's a graduate from a Catholic convent school and that she's still a virgin. And you know what else? She's told me that this fucking jock she's in love with finally called her today, even though it's been something like two semesters since she's been giving him every new phone number she's had since then. And you know what else? He's going to take her out tomorrow night. And do you what else? Right before I came here I saw her the Garden's bathrooms. She had come looking for me. And you know why? She came to ask me to help her get ready for her big date. You know what this means? She wants me to get her ready to go and give herself to some guy who I'm sure is thinking of her as just another number he's going to add to his list of conquests. God knows how many young girls he's had by now. And you know those guys; they don't care about anybody but themselves. Usually they have the intelligence and sensitivity of an I-don't-know-what. And you know why I don't know what animal to call him? Because I can't think of an animal who's as low as a fucking jock. It's bad enough being human."

"Oh, I see," Milton said incredulously. "I know exactly what you mean. This is why I own a dog, you know. But let's not get sidetracked. Let me ask you, are you absolutely sure that she's straight and that she's never ever going to love you the same way you love her?"

"Yes, Milton. That is why I don't want to ruin what little we have, which is friendship."

"Friendship my eyes, Mariana. She may or may not feel friendship for you. But one thing is for sure. What you feel for her isn't friendship. What you feel for her is love."

"I thought you said that this might be infatuation."

“Mariana, you’re the one who wanted to know the difference, and I told you that the truest test is the test of time. But I can tell you right now that what you’re feeling is not.”

“How do you know?”

“Because, Mariana. When someone really loves another, that someone is willing to sacrifice. And you have been sacrificing yourself for her all along. You have not said a thing to her because you think that it will hurt her, since you think she’s already in love with some jackass, or should I say jock-ass? How noble, Mariana, but at the same time, how pathetic.”

“What! This is all I need, Milton. I thought you were on my side.”

“I am, Mariana, I am. This is why this has to be said. Do you think that your mother didn’t love you? Think again. She sacrificed the pleasure of having you with her because she believed that coming to this country would be better for you. And you know what? Time will prove her right. But that’s another conversation. The point is what I just told you.”

“What, that I and my love is pathetic?”

“No, that it’s about time.”

“Time for what?”

“Time for you to stop denying yourself. You’re no good to anyone if you don’t take care about your own self first. Yes, you know exactly what I’m trying to say and that’s that you ought to confront her with your feelings. If she does not like them, then let her move out. If she respects you, she will not slander you — if you’re so afraid of that. And if she does, then you’ll at least know that she’s not as much the angel you thought

she was. If she's got any compassion whatsoever, she will be nice to you even if she feels no love for you other than friendship as you have told me. But you see, the buck has to stop somewhere, and it should stop before you die. Why should you have to sacrifice? You've done it enough already."

"So you think I should come out and tell her?"

"Yes, Mariana. The key word is you should 'come out.' No, I am not mocking you, dear. I'm not asking you to go out there and tell the world that you like women if you yourself aren't sure. But I will say that it is not going to be easy for you, as it is often not easy for those who have been taken advantage of. The sad thing is that more people out there have been abused than they are willing to admit and come forward with their pain. I think it's going to take some serious effort on your behalf, but at the same time, I think that you're going to be all right, in the end. But for now, I seriously think that your first step needs to be you talking to this beautiful thing who's sharing your home. I absolutely think you should tell her how you feel. Why? Because this is not someone you see somewhere in some supermarket or some street. This is someone you're living with, and she should simply know."

"But don't you think that I would be like Flor if I were to tell her this, that she would feel persecuted by someone who thinks of her as if she were food or some kind of pretty toy?"

"Mariana, you don't think of her as food. You have never done anything other than try to help her. I can only imagine how much advice and how many other things you've done for her well-being. Have you helped her with her homework?"

"Yes," Mariana said shyly, as if she were confessing a sin.

“Do you ever cook for her?”

“Yes, but she cooks for me too. We’ve become like sisters, you know?”

“Okay then, you’re not using her. If anything the opposite argument could be made. Do you think that if she knew you are in love with her that she would accept all the things you do for her so freely?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, Mariana. I think it’s time you found out.” There was a long pause, a pause that made Mariana feel strong. She agreed with Milton. It was time she did something, but she was still not sure what. Instinctively Milton knew that they were done. “But there is one more thing,” Milton added in a different tone of voice, “before you leave, don’t you want to call her, and tell her that you need to talk to her? Even if you don’t tell her anything over the phone, I’m sure that it will make you feel better if you address the problem right here right now. What do you think?”

Mariana looked up hesitatingly, “You think so?” she asked, but it was not really a question as much as a way to acknowledge what Milton had said, for the idea had had an instant appeal to her. She so very much would have liked to talk to her, to tell her everything. Vanessa might not be at home, besides, and it would be nice just to call home to hear both of their voices recorded in the greeting they shared on their answering machine. “May I?” Mariana said as she stood up and looked towards Milton’s phone.

“Sure,” Milton answered in a long, reassuring tone of voice, one that conveyed to her that the answer was obvious.

Mariana picked up the receiver and dialed. The phone, as she expected, rung several times but only the answering machine picked up, “Hello, this is Mariana and

Vanessa, we're not home, but leave a message and we'll call you back. Bye," this last part said in unison, such that their voices flowed into something that ended like a song.

"Vanessa," Mariana, nervous, spoke as she looked at Milton, "I'm calling because I need to talk to you. It is something important, and it does not have anything to do with your date. It is," Mariana faltered slightly, "about you and me." Mariana paused again, this time feeling her throat dry and unwilling to let her speak. "Bye," Mariana said and hung up. She did not look at Milton, but instead pondered as if she had just enlisted for something irrevocable, as if she had signed up to go to war.

"Mariana," Milton said in an entirely different tone, one casual and detached, "I hope you don't mind, but you'll have to excuse me. I need to go home and walk my dog before I go to the Garden tonight."

"All right," Mariana answered, energized, but at the same time dazed. "I've got to go too." She stood up and hugged Milton while he still sat on his chair. He made a sound of surprise as she leaned heavy on him and kissed him on the lips with affectionate gratitude, still feeling as though she might cry anytime.

"Hey, you be careful, Mariana. I might like that too much," and then he laughed.

She grabbed her bag and threw it around her shoulder with youthful energy, and started off. "Mariana," Milton called, "just one last thing, all right?"

"Yes," Mariana answered.

"Not all jocks are heartless rapist and users, you know? Don't be so quick to judge."

Mariana didn't know what to answer. She simply said "All right," and walked out.

#### IV

When Mariana got to the Garden, it had already become a different place. A small crew, all of them wearing green, short-sleeve shirts, were busy setting up the makeshift stage. But the speakers were already working, letting out the music that the university radio station played. Mariana was surprised when the strumming stopped and Gina's voice came on.

"Hello, everybody. You are listening to Gina, filling in for Crater Jim. You just heard the sweet sounds of Reverend Marley and his thoughts on war, a timely message today. Next, I'd like to play you a song never played before at University Radio, something freshly downloaded from cyberspace. This next song comes from a most musically rich, truly melodic African place, the islands of Cape Verde. Incidentally, that's where our own Crater Jim is right now. Yes, Crater Jim wants you to know that although far away he's still thinking of you. So he's asked me to play a couple of songs for you, which I shall do momentarily. This next song is called '*Malandro Pra Que.*' You're listening to University Radio. It's *almost* Friday night and I hope you're all having a great, great time. By the way, if you haven't already gotten there, remember that tonight at the Garden, our own Spiriton is going to give a free concert. Get there soon, as these concerts end early. Well, all right, here's this next song in the African Portuguese tongue of Cape Verde, '*Malandro Pra Que,*' fresh new song courtesy of University Radio and Crater Jim. This is Gina at University Radio, your only free choice in Hawaii."

"Hey, Mariana! Come join us," Gina and some of the regulars at the Garden were beckoning her.

"Hello guys, how are you? Hello, Gina, what are you doing here? I thought you

were doing the dee-jaying thing.” Mariana was glad to see her. The regulars there were some of the older crowd, the more obtuse ones in their thinking. She wished that the younger crowd were there, the ones who liked to fool around and not be as serious as these people for whom drinking and smoking by itself was their idea of a good time. She liked them well enough, though. In fact, she was quite fond of some of them, the sweeter ones who did not try to make a move on her but actually tried to get to know her. She had learned much from some of them. But of those none were there now. She could use some lightheartedness at that moment. She smiled outwardly but inside she was depressed. If only Milton were there. He knew how to have a good time. Gina was all right too. Why not? Mariana thought. She would spend some time with them. She had a headache and a drink would do her good. She would think about Vanessa the next day.

“It’s prerecorded,” Gina explained about her voice on the radio. “I finished about a half an our ago. But shhhhh, don’t say anything. It’s supposed to be live. That’s why I’m right here just case anything goes wrong, you know; the studio is just right upstairs. The next DJ is pre-recording some stuff right now. I guess we don’t trust ourselves not to make a mistake during the day. Hey, come on! What are you waiting for, the red carpet? Sit with us. Take a load off. Leave your bag here. You want me to go get you a drink?”

“Sure — actually, no. I’ll go get it myself. I’ll be right back.”

“No, let me get it for you.”

“No, that’s all right. I’ll just be right back.”

“In that case, let me ask you, did you read my article, the one I told you would be printed today?”

“Sorry, Gina. I’ve been busy all day.”

“Well, I’m glad I asked you. All the papers have been taken. But no worries. Here’s a copy of the original manuscript. There’s a long line inside. Read it while you’re standing in line. We’re having a heated debate about all these war things right now.”

“All right, I will.”

“It’s short, so come right back and don’t get lost. I’m counting on you to back me up on some of these issues.”

Mariana walked went inside stood in what was already a long line, and this was only the early crowd. It was noisy, but she did her best to concentrate and read Gina’s article.”

I’ve just about had it with the anti-American rhetoric that is heavily laid on those who object to war. Bush and those who profit from a half-century, outdated defense and oil economy would like to have America and the world believe that to object to war means to object to a pseudo-tradition purportedly responsible for the US’ current privileged position of power on the planet.

If you look closely, you will see that those who are shown objecting to war are pictures of common folk, people who don’t occupy high financial, religious, or ideological places, even though such people do in fact object to war. What you find pictured on the cover of magazines, newspapers and on the five o’clock news, are men and women who wear comfortable clothes, who wear hemp clothes, colorful head gear, handmade jewelry and, in the case of men, beards. Why is this? The reason is simple. The media focuses its attention on the objections of the common people because to do so is an effective way to convey an image that the spirit of free-love and free-drug hippies has reincarnated in these who object today.

If France’s President (France is the second largest producer of weapons of mass destruction in the world, followed by the former Soviet Union, which also objects to war) objects to war, he is dismissed as an eccentric Frenchman. What do those wine guzzling, food obsessed people know about war? Americans may ask. Did they not lose miserably to the Nazis? Did we not save them from the utter destruction of their way of life only a few decades ago? Yes, we did in fact

do that. So it is no wonder that the French have almost always supported the US before and after WW II. But let me get back to my point.

Americans are being deceived, made to think that the undeniable yet always hushed imperialistic habit of the US to illegally and often times bloodily run the internal affairs of other countries in the world is the only way that American peace and prosperity can be assured. But this is not true.

Bush, and the entire Bush family for that matter, since before WW II, has had a legacy of profiting from war. When defense money wasn't enough, the Bush family went into oil. When profits from oil began to taper off, new ways were found to increase defense spending. Anyone who does not see that since his dubious election Bush has done nothing but push for oil and to increase spending on defense, is blind. Ask anyone in the military which of the past few presidents has given them a bigger raise.

And what is alarming is that these trends existed even since before 9/11. Now, if people did not see this when they witnessed an oil president and an oil vice-president enter the White House shrouded in the black of election fraud accusations, these people were probably watching CNN. Chad Butterfly became a peanuts and cheap beer laugh, while the anti-Constitution threat to the racial equality of voters in Florida encountered a mine and sunk. Who says that a white man can't get unyielding power thanks to the wielding chains of ignorance and disenfranchisement that still cling to those African-American children of the former slaves of the Old South? Seen *Gone With the Wind* lately?

Well, Frankly, Bush Darling, I *do* give a damn, and I do care what you do and where you go. Tara is not a plantation, but it is mother earth, and we as world citizens can no longer afford the pollution and injustice that short-sighted, stone-hearted men like you unleash like plagues all over the world.

No, do not get me wrong. I do believe that the whole world needs to police itself against terrorist groups and for anyone who's willing to take another's life for any political or religious cause. And I do think that so far this has been done effectively. But somehow to Bush this isn't enough as diplomacy is not as attractive to him as mere brute force. But there are better Americans to look to.

Consider Thoreau who objected to the expansionism of the US during the 1846-1848 Mexican war. He knew what tyranny looks like: it is when a Goliath steals what little wealth those who are weak or small have. Here the little one is everyone, for the security and therefore prosperity, not to mention the lives of those who'll stand in the middle, hang. This war proposed by Bush is a war that will enable him personally and his family to siphon hundreds if not billions of

dollars already set aside for the purpose of defense, money that will only trickle down unless the damned doors of war are opened into a flood. And what runs down the streets will be more than a flood of oil mixed with the blood of the infidels, it will also be the blood of countless innocents, innocents, which since 9/11 everyone by now should see, will fall on both sides, not just on the Arab world.

Today is the time to object. It is a time to resist a war designed only to line the pockets of greedy men who still cling to America's shameful past. Do not let this be something you'll think about tomorrow. Think about it today, or else tomorrow's golden glow of shared promise will be eclipsed by the irrationality of Bush's for-profit war.

When Mariana returned, more people had joined the group where Gina sat. They had brought chairs from inside so all of them could sit. Gina motioned for Mariana to share her single seat around the circular bench where they had flocked. Gina drank greedily from her drink and then set the large plastic container down.

"Mariana, do you think that by invading an Arab country America is going to lessen the likelihood of future attacks?"

One of the older ones answered, "I do. I think those bastards should get fucked up the ass."

"Who? The Arabs or the terrorists?"

"Aren't they the same?" someone else added.

"Oh, come on. What kind of ignorant shit is that?" someone else piped in.

"You don't expect us to swallow that pill about the Bush family getting all the defense money, do you, Gina?"

"Actually," an older guy wearing thick eyeglasses offered, "Bush senior is one of the highest members of a private California company that gets most of the defense contracts. That company, incidentally, since it is a private company, does not have to

report to the world exactly what it does for the department of defense, which means that it can sell a forty thousand dollar bomb for a million bucks. I'm sure you've all heard of the six-hundred dollar hammers and the fifty-dollar nuts."

"Bullshit! You're the one who's nuts."

"No, really. The retirement fund in the state of California owns a chunk of this company."

"Soon you're going to be saying that the Bushes are the anti-Christ."

"That's funny you said that," another regular offered, "'cause that's precisely one thing Bush is not. Bush, for your information, is the only president in a long time who's had the guts to inject or try to inject Christianity back into the US government. And not only that, he's tried to pass several bills that would give money to various religious denomination institutions, many of them not Christian, which tells you that the man does love God. I think he's a compassionate, god-fearing fellow. And if he thinks we ought to go to war, I believe he's got reasons to tell us so. I don't think everything is a filthy conspiracy, like some of my friends here, who either think that or that everything is a UFO plot. But anyway, going back to Bush, he's not only pro-Christianity and against abortion, he's also an all-around compassionate guy."

"I guess you're not from Texas, then," Mariana offered, "if you were, you'd know how compassionate the man is against minorities, especially blacks."

"Are you from Texas?" someone asked Mariana.

"No, I'm from Colombia, but grew up in California."

"Well, I'll tell you something. I'm from Texas, and I ain't a racist, but I will tell you as clearly as water that in my state most of the crime is committed by minorities. Just

check out the statistics of who's collecting unemployment and welfare, and then try to explain to me how Bush is a bad guy. Minorities take all the free money, pay the least taxes, and then have the gall to cry foul when they get caught blood-red handed committing heinous crimes."

"And you say you're not racist?" Gina asked with contempt in her voice.

"Facts are facts. Look, Hawaiians are perfect examples. Where are they now? Why is it that this university is run by everybody but Hawaiians? I think they're a backward race, that is why their time has passed."

Mariana interjected, "I think you're wrong there. Hawaiians have their culture. You want to know where they are? They are playing music, dancing hula, surfing, working two jobs so they can take care of their families — all of which points to tradition, their tradition. You want to measure human progress in terms of what the West considers to be advanced."

"I agree," Gina said, "I know for a fact that success is measured differently by different cultures, and that when a marginalized group lacks the tools of the dominant group, all that's created is an unhealthy situation, which if it does not lead to crime, can surely lead to self-destruction or the waste of human lives."

"That is nothing more than that old multicultural liberal crap. If people want to be equal, they should all be measured by the same rod. Furthermore, Gina, I really resent the allusions you made to slavery in the 'Old South.' And you know what? It is quite typical of foreigners to do that. I mean, you're a Filipina, aren't you? What makes you think that you know anything about the 'Old South'?"

"I'm as much American as anybody. My grandparents came from the Philippines,

yes, and I do eat Filipino food and understand most of the language although I cannot really speak. But to be fair, I'll be honest with you. The only reason why I put in that allusion to *Gone With the Wind* was because I — and my friend Mariana here — are going to be in a play based on the novel.”

“Novel? I thought it was an old movie,” someone else said.

Gina continued, “But I'll tell you that you don't have to be a twelve-generation American to know that what Martin Luther King Jr. was talking about wasn't multicultural liberal shit. Discrimination and its subsequent disadvantages are much too real. African Americans have continued to struggle for equality and they sure got the shaft when they were given those butterfly-voting cards in Florida. Was it a coincidence that it happened right at the time when Bush was running? You decide. But what I mean is, how do you explain that the most likely result of the confusion would be to vote for Bush and not for Gore?”

“You mean to imply that the country ought to be controlled by foreigners? Do you honestly believe that Mexicans and Asians are better at interpreting the destiny of America than those who've been born and bred here since the Revolutionary War?”

“Wouldn't that exclude the Bush family? I thought they were Germans, not Mayflower. But that obviously doesn't matter to you. And do you know why? Because they look like those who came on the Mayflower. What you are really quibbling about is not how long people have lived in this country, but rather whether they look and act white. When it comes to foreigners, what matters to people who think like you is whether they are or dark light-skinned, and whether their accents are European or not.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“What I mean is that it does matter whether immigrants have a European accent or an European skin tone. If someone has a German accent, or even a difficult French one, and that person wanted to work as an English teacher, for example, white American parents, and those have been conditioned to think as such, are unlikely to complain about a foreigner teaching their children. But if a Filipino or a Mexican who talks like one of Frank Delima’s old Filipino skits, or like Speedy Gonzalez, becomes an English teacher, many parents will be wondering why that teacher isn’t cleaning bathrooms or hauling garbage, or why that teacher doesn’t teach Ilukano or Spanish instead.”

“Yea, yea, yea. You can go on about accusations of racism. But the fact remains that we Americans were attacked in our own American land. Now it’s our time to kick some Arab ass on Arab soil. Does that not make sense to anyone?”

“Gina, wasn’t that what you were getting at when you referred to Thoreau *objecting to the Mexican War in your article?*” Mariana asked, not because she was wondering, but because she had studied this in political science and wanted others to know also.

“The famous words that launched one of America’s most infamous wars: ‘American blood spilled on American soil,’ — James K. Polk. Wasn’t it?” Milton said from behind Mariana and Gina’s backs. He had his happily panting dog, wearing a purple bandana, at the end of a purple leash.

“Milton, You made it!” Mariana got up and gave Milton a hug as Milton’s small dog straddled around them on her hind legs attempting to partake in their affectionate hug. “Oh, you sweet little thing, you sweet little thing!” Mariana said as she squatted and held the dog’s excited face while it licked her hand with its fast and purplish tongue.

“Hey, Milton. How are you?” Gina said as she too got up and gave him a handshake. Milton shook it and then looked around for a place to sit. Someone had already gone inside and gotten him a chair, which was placed for him to sit next to Mariana and Gina.

“Thank you kindly, you handsome devil,” Milton said.

“Anything Her Majesty desires,” the one who brought the chair said with mock reverence as he took a deep vow.

“Now children,” Milton said with that light-hearted tone of voice only he could inflect and never offend anyone, “I also read Gina’s article and I think it was great — for a rice-paddy squatting foreigner, that is.”

“Hey!” Gina said with mock injury.

“Well, you see, we’ve got to protect ourselves against all these vicious foreigners and their anti-American policies,” Milton added with an affected self-righteous voice. “And so, we’ve decided that after tonight’s concert, all those who’re not full-blooded American Indians will be summarily sent to wherever their blood came from, or be put to death. So Gina, write me from the Philippines; Mariana, write me from Colombia; and you guys write me from Germany, Ireland, Russia, Poland, Italy, and Mexico, and maybe we can all get together later and share an international holiday.

“I get it. I know where you’re going to,” someone who hadn’t spoken up to this point said. “You’re going to give us that third-grade speech that what makes America beautiful is its rainbow of colors, right?”

“Yes and no, and not quite,” Milton said. “What I want to tell you is that if you really look at this country you will see that from its creation its original ideals have

always gone astray. Pilgrims came here to enjoy freedom, freedom of religion, freedom from tyranny, and more importantly, freedom to see the fruits of honest labor yield without some higher human hand taking a share. But it was only a few generations later before these same people were skinning Indians, burning Quakers, and taking all the land. But you see, America was not intended to be a land of race. Rather, it was intended to be a land of freedom, not just physical freedom but also of ideas. Anything that goes against freedom goes against what America from the beginning set out to do and become. So it is not about what color a person is, or how recently these people got off the boat and lost their accents or, in my case, lost their chains. What America is supposed to be is the model for all in the world to see. And if you look closely, you will find that despite all of our imperfections, we have succeeded. How else do you explain that although there is a great deal of hatred out there, nearly every country strives to be like ourselves?"

"Sounds pretty, but it also sounds like a bunch of bullshit to me," the Texas man said. "If we had not raped and stolen and done all those dirty deeds, America would have never been strong enough to be in a position to save the world from the Nazi hand. That's what's otherwise known as manifest destiny, and that's a little something that a bunch of heart-bleeding liberals will never understand. And you know why? Because they talk about the sheep and the lion lying down together in paradise, but they never mention Christ. You see, they forget everything about the Shepherd, they forget about where Jesus fits in all this. And that's what we were talking about a little while ago — that Bush, and I ain't saying he's perfect, he's still the only man in recent times that's tried to make this country a Christian country again."

"Well, you know, I have a deeply felt respect for religion, but I'm sorry, I don't

think this is the right setting to talk about it now, not while we're drinking."

"Bullshit," the Texas man protested. "If Jesus drank wine, I can drink beer and talk about him and I don't have to wait for 'the right setting' or none of that shit. The reason why this country is in trouble is because people no longer care about religion. They only care about money and about having a good time — "

"Well, I'm glad you agree with me about Bush, then," Gina cut in. "Bush is definitely all about money, and as for having a good time, he may not be having one right now — if you consider all the coke that must still be running through his god-fearing drunk and drugged up head. Freebase, anybody?"

"I'm going to take a piss, if you'll excuse me," the Texas man said and left.

"Excuse me too." Milton got up from his chair. "Gina, would you do me a favor and hold on to my doggie for just a minute?"

"Sure, I'd love to."

"Mariana, would you mind accompanying me, please?"

"Yes, Milton."

They walked away from the noise of the crowd. "Listen," said Milton once they had gotten to a place where they could talk. "Your roommate, Vanessa, does she drink?"

"Not that I know," Mariana said. "Why?"

"Well, when I went to walk my dog, I saw her coming out of the convenience store and she was carrying a bottle of something. I mean real liquor, not wine or beer," Milton said with a neutral voice in an attempt not to awaken undue alarm in Mariana's mind.

"Well, that's odd," Mariana said.

“Well, here’s what’s even more odd, and why I mention this.”

“What is it, Milton?” Mariana said sounding suddenly alert.

“She looked real worried. She looked as if something was really wrong. You could not even see her eyes as she walked by me. All you could see were her black eyebrows. She really seemed to be in some kind of a state. Are you sure she doesn’t know anything about how you feel about her?”

“No! At least, I don’t think she does,” Mariana said almost apologetically.

“Well, do you think that she might’ve figured it out from the message that you left on your answering machine?”

“I don’t know,” Mariana said, nearly speechless, her mouth opened, and her eyes unblinking in a blank stare.

“I suggest you go and check on her. If she’s drinking alone, well, that’s never a good sign.”

“I think you’re right.”

“And remember what I told you, Mariana. You really ought to talk to her, you know, about what we talked about.”

“Yes, Milton. I think I’ll leave now.”

She walked away quickly, without her customary hug or kiss or even saying good-bye. She went to Gina, whispered in her ear, “I’m sorry, I’ve got to leave now. I’ll call you tomorrow.” Gina held her hand as Mariana reached for her bag.

“Is this about your roommate and that guy?” Gina asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, if you’re worried that she’s going to get her heart-broken, don’t worry. I

talked to her about the guy. I gave her a warning and I even showed her the article I dug out. Apparently the guy has almost lost his sports scholarship twice because he has been accused of rape. The last time it was a poor gal who didn't even know him but had the misfortune of getting drunk at some party where he was at."

"When did you hear about this?"

"Oh, Mariana, everybody knows. It was common gossip. Rumors say that that girl was not his first, and probably not his last. And as far as Vanessa goes, she's been telling everyone she and him are going out. So when I saw her today this afternoon, I told her to be careful. But that's no biggy, that's the same thing she should be doing with any guy — Hey, speak of the devil, there he is. And look who he's with? He's with David."

"Are you sure that's the guy?"

"Come on, Mariana, don't you think I'd know? That's him all right."

"Hey, Gina, queen Filipina, don't you think you should pay attention to your own discussion. If you don't, they're going to start talking about UFOs or some such crap."

"Are you with us or what?" someone from the table asked, already half-drunk.

"Okay, see you later," Gina whispered and then went on back to her discussion.

Mariana picked up her bag and saw how David and a very handsome black man, tall, muscular, and most definitely attractive, walked past in the direction of the men's toilets. She followed them slowly, through the crowd, partly because it was difficult to advance with so many people, and also partly because they were talking out loud and she wanted to hear their conversation.

"Anyway," the handsome man said to David as Mariana listened from behind, "you would not believe the small, tight little piece of Puerto Rican ass I'm going to have

me tomorrow night. I mean, she looks so fucking tight. You've got to see to believe that shit. So you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to wine and dine her, and then I'm going to take her clubbing. And then, then, I'm going to get that little bitch completely fucking drunk, and then — even then I bet you — she's going to learn what it's like to have ten inches of black man up her little virgin ass. And you know what? If she makes me wait or work hard or spend too much money, I won't even use any lube. I'm going to have me a good old time, and tomorrow that bitch is mine. Man, thank god for deaths in the family. I can't fuckin' stand her, but you know, she's fucking loaded and now that her dad's passed away, she's going to have even more loop."

"I don't know man," David interjected. "I'm with you about the Latin thing. I *love* Latin women, but I ain't so sure you should be fucking around behind your woman's back."

"What you talking about *my* woman? She ain't my woman. That fat cow bitch! You know what's wrong with you, bro? You ain't a playa and you don't know the first thing about women. They just want to tie you down and kill your dreams, and then, they'll shit and piss and spit on you because you never had any, and then they'll leave you for someone who's got more than you do. You think I'm going to hang around any bitch long enough for her to do that to me? Think again! The moment I break into the big league, I'll be mooning my black ass to that woman and telling her ugly sorry ass good bye. The only reason I'm with her is because she pays. You don't think I actually like her, do you? If it weren't for the porn I watch before I go to her home, we'd have no sex life. But we're going to Europe as soon as school's out. London, Paris, The Riviera, Switzerland, Vienna, Prague, Venice — the whole works. Just on plane and train and

lodging she's forking over twelve grand — each! So as you can see, she's just my money cow bitch. It'll be a rare indeed day in this man's history when I finally tie down to one fucking bitch. And when I do, I'm going get me some fucking Thai little eighteen-year-old when I'm fifty — one of those who don't even speak English and does know anything you say — and likes it. Fuck American women. They're all cunts and they all can suck my dick. I ain't never marrying none of them pieces of shit. You should take stock, my brother. You should never get tied down to no fucking American bitch. Maybe you should go out with me tomorrow. Who knows, maybe I won't mind sharing the aftermath with you."

"No, I ain't into that. Call me a loser if you want, but I want me a woman that's going to stand by me and be my wife. I've had my fun already. I've just about had it with clubbing. It's always the same crap. Believe me, I've had it."

"You don't know what you're missing. I bet you she's tight tight tight. I'm going a-get me all I can right now. But if you hear screaming late at night in my room, just don't call the cops — all right?"

"What do you mean, don't call the cops?"

"I ain't getting into that. Just don't, all right?"

Mariana did not want to hear any more. They had been standing in the restroom queue. Mariana could not believe that they were talking so loud — just like that. They never turned to see who was standing behind them. There could have been a little boy or little girl listening to this. And yet, some of the men who were in front of them and who had heard every word, would look back at this man as if he were some kind of hero; and then, and only then would they notice her and see that she too had heard everything by

the look of mutual recognition in their eyes. But who cared about tomorrow now? Having a good time is what mattered, did it not? Who cared about principles and anything other than *having a good time, even if this good time was at someone else's expense, extracted through deceit and guile?* Mariana turned her back on them and started off on her way home, to where she hoped Vanessa would be.

V

When she finally got home, after turning the same worries over in her mind, she *attempted to unlock the door and was surprised when she turned the key* counterclockwise and found no resistance. The door had been left unlocked. She opened the door and, filled with hesitation, she walked into her own home; her apprehensions, momentarily disarmed, were soon replaced with different ones. Every curtain in the apartment had been closed much too carefully, such that inside it was much darker than she had ever seen her place before. All the lights were off, except for the flicker of the television set. Then Mariana heard the familiar lines, "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn," followed by Scarlet O'Hara's pitiful sobs. There, on the white leather sofa, Mariana thought she saw Vanessa's body, but she was not sure. Mariana turned on a lava lamp. Yes, it was Vanessa, dressed in underwear and a white tank-top. This was a surprise. It was not yet fully dark outside. It was too early to go to sleep, even for Vanessa; and it was too late to take a nap. Mariana, with an apprehensive heart, looked at her intently to make sure that she was in fact sleeping, that she was breathing and that she was alive. This had never happened before. Not only had Mariana never known her to fall asleep on the sofa, she also had never known her to take naps. It was also unusual the way Vanessa was clad, for she was shy and didn't dress like that outside her room. The

film ended and Mariana turned the TV set off. It was then that she noticed the bottle of rum that had been left by the side of the sofa. It was missing about a quarter of its content, and an almost empty glass stood by its side. She then looked at Vanessa's face. She was drunk, but safe. She noticed her long, pitch-black eyelashes, and her rich eyebrows. It occurred to her that the reason why makeup was invented was so that other people could look like her, like that long-lashed creature that stretched before her eyes with the natural grace of a fawn when no danger is nearby. What an amazing thing of beauty was symmetry, Mariana thought, which existed in those legs and arms. What beautiful hands and feet, and by heaven, her lips, her mouth! — Mariana said to herself. *Oh-my-god, oh-my-god, oh-my-god...* Mariana repeated in her mind like a mantra that would help her suppress her overwhelming feelings for Vanessa, that burning passion that poured out of her like boiling oil pours from a war caldron when it is untied. She went into her bedroom and grabbed a blanket with which she covered Vanessa's tempting body. When she returned, she paused shortly to admire her for a few seconds more before she would cover her. She saw the furrowed fabric of Vanessa's tank-top stretch and widen where her small but full breasts pushed out each time she breathed, slowly, gently, but regularly — causing those round shapes to look as though pulsating, transfiguring, making Mariana forget for a moment to swallow the saliva that was accumulating in her mouth. Mariana swallowed audibly hard. Then, delicately, as if Vanessa were made of the finest glass, Mariana covered her from neck to feet. She then watched tenderly how Vanessa licked her lips delicately like a kitten, and then trembled her eyelids as she started to dream. It must be something sweet she's dreaming of, Mariana reasoned, for she's smiling like an angel now. She wondered what or who was in Vanessa's dream.

Mariana leaned carefully and slowly to where she could smell Vanessa's face; and then, with all her tenderness, she kissed Vanessa's forehead as softly as if kissing a newborn. Vanessa's eyelids fluttered just a little faster, and then relaxed. Good. She had not awakened her. She turned off the lava lamp and found her way to her room, grabbed her robe from where it hung, and then went to take a shower she hoped would ease her mind.

As usual, the initial squirt of water that came out of the showerhead was cold and shocking. Mariana played with the two handles until she achieved a flow of water that was reasonable warm. She mindlessly washed her hair, realizing as she was lathering that she had forgotten that her hair was no longer long, as the excess shampoo streamed down her neck and back. The water felt good on her shoulders. Massaging her head felt good, as if her worries could be washed and stream down past her sore feet, disappearing down the drain, and out her life. Then she grabbed her bottle of liquid body-soap and was pouring a generous amount into her body scrub when she heard the bathroom door open loud.

"Vanessa? Is that you?" Mariana, who usually locked the bathroom door, asked with a voice infected with sudden fear, fear that only deepened when she realized that she could not remember whether she had locked the front door or not. She instinctively put her hands over her breasts and squinted her eyes as if by magic that could make her body invisible behind the tempered glass.

"Sorry, Mariana. I really need to pee. I hope you don't mind." Vanessa made a loud sound as she lifted both the toilet cover and the toilet seat at once by mistake, hitting the side of the water tank. Then, like the sound of a heavy-but-made-out-of-plastic hammer, Mariana heard the toilet seat slam down. "Sorry," Vanessa said but in a tone

much sweeter than Mariana had ever heard her use before. She sounded off, but not as drunk as Mariana had imagined her. Two deciliters of rum would surely make anybody drunk, especially someone who weighed only a hundred and eight pounds. She heard Vanessa's urine pour loudly into the toilet bowl. It sounded unusual, as if propelled by some unusually powerful aquatic force. It was only when she heard Vanessa pulling at the toilet paper roll that she realized her body was frozen. She had not moved and she had no recollection of having breathed since Vanessa had opened the door. She was possessed by some kind of panic she had never had before. Surely she was naked, but she felt naked in a deeper sense, vulnerable, undone. Then there was the flushing sound followed by the sink faucet pouring wildly, which made the water falling on Mariana's body suddenly cold, instantly changing the color of her skin to a slightly darker tone. Then the sink faucet stopped and the water was suddenly too hot. But Mariana felt nothing. She was a witness separated from her body, and she would not return to that body of hot-and-cold until after Vanessa had gone. The lights were then turned off, but the sound of door-closing was not made. Instead, in the darkness she heard the sound of the shower stall's door opening, and suddenly Vanessa was there, standing next to her.

“Vanessa? What are you — ”

“Shhhhh,” Vanessa said as she lifted her arms to tie her long and curly hair into a large bun; and then, before lowering her arms, she embraced Mariana, who was still holding onto her breasts with the dripping scrub in one hand. Vanessa whispered, “Shhhhh, turn around,” which Mariana did stiffly. Vanessa took the scrub and poured even more liquid soap into it; and then, with soft, slow movements, she began to wash Mariana's back, and then her arms, and then her legs and feet, and finally, putting the

scrub away, she took a large amount of soap and poured it directly on her small hand, which she used to wash Mariana's sex. Mariana let out a moan that sounded like a noise an un-milked cow would make upon seeing her hungry calf without her reach, and she immediately felt ashamed, for she was half in rapture, and half in bewildering confusion that caused her fear and pain. In the darkness, Mariana's eyes had adjusted sufficiently for her to know that Vanessa had smiled at the sound she had made, which embarrassed her further.

Mariana was glad when Vanessa handed her the scrub and then turned her back on her. She rinsed and then put more soap on the scrub, and then set to clean Vanessa's naked body. She did it deliberately, as if she were cleaning a mare and not a person, rubbing mechanically, consistently, as if she was getting paid for her job and she did not know the names of the bodies she had to clean. She did exactly as Vanessa had done with her, following the same sequence and leaving the cleaning of the crotch for last. When she ran her fingers along the spot, she was surprised when they slipped inside Vanessa effortlessly. Inside she felt a silkiness she had never felt before, which caused her momentarily to slow down her scrubbing rhythm without realizing it at first. Vanessa too let out a pleasure sound as she leaned her head back. Mariana could make out Vanessa's parted mouth only a few inches away from her. She wanted so much to take her chin into her mouth and bite her gently. But she did not. The shower ended and Vanessa swiftly let herself out, tossing a towel to Mariana, getting another one for herself. They both dried in silence, and then, when they had both dried, she took Mariana's hand and in silence guided her through the dark, into her room, where Vanessa's bed lay perfectly made. She continued to pull on Mariana's hand gently until she had laid her on the bed. Then, she

went to her window and tinkered with her already closed curtains in an effort to let even less light in from the street lamp outside.

When Vanessa returned to her bed, Mariana was breathing hard. Vanessa put her index finger to her mouth, and once again, whispered “Shhhhh.” While she did her best to calm her breathing down, Vanessa sat on Mariana’s hips. She then lifted her hands and undid the hair bun, which fell down like the near-silent rustling sound of an owl’s wings when flying in place. She threw her head back as far as she could and then began to turn it from side to side, causing her dangling hair to cut swaths of overpowering feelings on Mariana’s thighs, as if she were caressed by the pendulous movements of a pellucid drape. Mariana started to lose her battle against breathing hard. The excitement was so great that she began to tense as she opened her arms as if she were doing an upside down swan dive, which caused Vanessa’s sex to begin touching the top of hers, pressing against her pubic bone. Eventually Mariana could not go on. With a single motion she inverted the order of things, placing herself on top of Vanessa, who placed her moist hands on Mariana’s shoulders.

Mariana could only make out the outline of her body, but she could imagine her smile. Then she pounced. Without warning, Mariana clamped her mouth around Vanessa’s right breast, which became erect instantly when it was sucked by Mariana’s wet and trembling lips. Mariana’s love was a series of contradictions, a loving wrath. She loved with too much force, with clumsy passion that burned her, and like a hungry lioness she went from one breast to the other, and then proceeded to kiss every part of her body like a growing cub while Vanessa clamped her teeth to keep inside her scream. Mariana’s hands worked with the insistence of a spider wrapping with saliva and silk her

prey before devouring.

The foreplay, savage and breathless, was perfunctory. There was only one place left where Mariana's mouth had yet to reach, and they both knew it; for as Mariana made for Vanessa's sex, Vanessa's grip tightened as if she were afraid to fall from the highest cliff. Mariana, still breathing hard, took deeper and deeper breaths in anticipation as she slid down over Vanessa's legs until her head was in the right place. She was ready to nibble clumsily, urgently, and hurt occasionally with the involuntary movements of her teeth, which caused Vanessa to contort and in futility while her fingertips tried to pull on Mariana's short hair. There was certain aggressiveness in this, a certain violence neither of the two knew to expect. Their hands grabbed and groped and scratched as one eight-legged seizure-sufferer buried alive must in the darkness of an untimely tomb grab and grope and scratch at the lining of a coffin with the ebbing of oxygen and the waning of life. The ecstasy produced in them a heightened sensory perception. The darkness in the room began to retreat, and in their minds, they were aware of everything in particular and simultaneously nothing in general, but a sensation of floating not on a bed but on some celestial cloud whose stuffing was the unfulfilled potential of every living creature's dream. They were there, already, at no place and at everyplace, where time had stopped and where time had already run out completely — until they no longer had to rush. The climax of pleasure came to Vanessa, each time causing her to stretch uselessly, as if to escape from an unyielding forced, her huntress' grasp. Mariana, laboring relentlessly with her burning lips and tongue, slid her hands beneath to cup Vanessa's buttocks, which were stiff with pleasure as she thrashed her head from side to side and back. It was an eclipse of reason, Vanessa's limbs taut as sails pounded by a furious storm, when no

sailor would venture lowering sails until the strength of the gale subsides.

Vanessa sat up and pulled on Mariana until she could hold her head in her folded arms. Mariana kissed and kissed Vanessa's breasts again, this time slowly, meekly, as if to make the burning that still tingled in Vanessa's every part go away. Mariana then looked up and could see that tears had streamed down her lover's face, a face that even in the dark showed to wear a peaceful smile. Vanessa, gently, exchanged positions with the unwilling Mariana. She resisted with her hands Vanessa's head approaching directly the same spot where she had loved so desperately. "Shhhhh," Vanessa whispered once again, which Mariana understood it meant she should not fight. Vanessa took her hands and placed them on her hair, which Mariana held on to and leaned back. She felt Vanessa's mouth hot on her. She felt each time she moved her lips and gently probed inside. Then she felt something that caused her to tense up and pull on Vanessa's hair, hard. Vanessa had buried her tongue in, deeply, and in slow but deep movements, she was making her lose her sense of time. Vanessa loved her gently, softly, but with patience that bit by bit sunk her into some deep place inside her mind. She could still taste the musky sea in her mouth, and imagined that it was a scent that blew in from distant lands, carrying with it elixir of dreams, thoughts unremembered since the security and trust found only in the cradle, un-lived memories that heal all hurts with pain-effacing warmth. Vanessa's loving became more and more intensive, probing deeper and harder, until Mariana thought she saw a lighting flash that filled both the in- and outside of her mind. She heard herself screaming, almost wailing, like some hopelessly disconsolate child. But she was only a witness. She witnessed herself from above, saw her opened jaws but heard no sound. She saw a wave of pulsating particles sparkling brighter as they gained momentum, as each

one approaching and rushing past every pore and fiber of her body until they emptied inside the cavern of her heart; Vanessa was the officiously assisting surgeon, the priestess performing an unspeakable sacrifice. Like a strong and cold fluorescent underground body of water possessed by its own spectral light, flooding an eternal night, the feeling mounted higher and higher as Mariana heard her ears ringing louder and louder and she pulled on Vanessa's hair harder and harder until the reins were cut. Vanessa finally let go of her, and Mariana's hands, limp, fell to her sides. Vanessa slid forward and they held each other tight, falling at last asleep.

In the morning, Mariana woke up late. She found her British poetry book next to her, opened where she had placed her bookmark. Next to this was a note of several pages length, which began with an excerpt from *Goblin's Market*, and which read,

*Golden head by golden head / Like two pigeons in one nest / Folded in each other's wings, / They lay down, in their curtained bed: / Like two blossoms on one stem, / ... Cheek to cheek and breast to breast / Locked together in one nest.*

*P. S. Please be here when I come home from work. I'll be back around five. I have cancelled my date for tonight (something bad, I will tell about it later). If you would like, I want to go out with you tonight. What do you say? Love, - V*

*P.P.S. Why have you been so unfair? Yes, unfair, Mariana. You have been very unfair with me. And do you know why? Because you have loved me, and yet you have never allowed me to love you back. And do you know just how bad and how insulting, and how hurtful it has been? Do you know how many times I have felt like grabbing my things and going home to my parents without leaving you a return address? Do you know how many times I felt like beating you up? Do you have any idea how many times I have asked myself what it is that I must do or accomplish before you start treating me like a*

woman and not a child? Do you really think that I actually like it that you think I am so delicate that the only way I should be dealt with is by keeping all the ugliness of the world aside?

*I am disappointed in you, as I should be since you have treated me condescendingly. You have put me on a pedestal. You have robbed me of my chance to be human, like you. I have come so close to hating you. But I cannot hate you, Mariana, because I love you, Mariana, because I really love you. Did you really think I was a saint? What we did last night is something I did several times with an older friend at the convent school. But I have to confess to you that I never felt the same way as I felt with you last night. You have been unfair, as it turns out, to both of us.*

*But don't you think that I don't understand? Those poor, hardworking people who have worked all their lives for peanuts even though they have worked for decades on the same job, my parents, would die if they ever knew that their little daughter has done it with another girl. But you know what? Someday I'm going to be the best doctor Puerto Rico has ever had. Some day I'm going to be on the front cover of Latina Magazine. Some day I will be celebrated by feminist clubs and organizations that will invite me to give speeches and what not. Imagine me, a successful professional with a color, with a poor, disenfranchised background. And you know what? I am going to hate it. I am going to hate all of it because all I really want in life is just to be myself. But somehow I am cursed to dream my parents' dreams. Don't you think I would rather live rather than dream? And if I dream, shouldn't I at least dream my own dreams? Mariana, I want to dream what's mine. So this is what I really want to say to you:*

*If you're going to love me, you're going to have to love me openly. If you're going*

*to feel something for me, you're going to have to tell me, show me, like you did last night in my room. What you have put me through nearly drove me crazy. You've hurt my feelings by assuming I am so goody-goody. Do you really think that it never crossed my mind how it would feel to be loved by you? Yes, I've thought about it, just as much if not more than I've thought about the date I was supposed to go out on tonight.*

*I want you to swear on what which is most sacred to you that you will never be condescending to me again for as long as you live, that you will always be honest with me and give me a chance to say yes or no before you hide from me your feelings. Swear to me that you will treat me the same way you truly want to be treated, that you are not going to treat me as if I was for any reason better or purer than you. Swear that you will always be open and honest with me for as long as we're alive. Swear to me that you are not going to try to own me like a piece of property, and that when the time comes, when I do meet someone man who really loves me, that you will be happy for me and let me go without tears in your eyes, without jealousy.*

*Lastly, promise that you will never put me up on a pedestal, and that if you can't, promise me that you'll climb on top of that same pedestal, and that we'll both dance together like we did that first time we danced when I moved in. Promise me that you will be yourself and I promise you that I will also be me.*

Mariana, tears flowing down her face, pressed the papers to her face, where her tears mingled with the ink of Vanessa's words. "I promise, sweet Vanessa," Mariana said crying from happiness, "I promise you."