

I Have Tasted Muskrat

The Appeldorns are shovelling cow dung outside the barn on a day in late March when they see a Cortina skating up the icy hill to their farm.

‘Looks like Mike’s in a hurry,’ says Mr Appeldorn, and he prods his wife in the butt with the pitchfork. ‘Hustle up and get out there.’

‘Leave off, old man, or I’ll glue you on some horns and a tail while you’re sleeping.’

They stab the pitchforks upright into the steaming pile of manure and walk out to the mailbox, a fibreglass cow with its tail arched over its back as a cow will do when it is about to eject a hot, liquid stream.

‘Morning May. Vernon,’ says Mike, their mailman of twenty-three years, winding down the window.

He hands out two letters and an economy-sized can of Bag Balm.

‘I’ll have that,’ says Mr Appeldorn, goosing his wife aside and snagging both envelopes in a hand well-fertilised and redolent.

‘Another bounced cheque. You been running up bills somewhere, May?’

‘That purple one’s mine,’ she says, pointing.

‘Don’t matter none. We’re the same people,’ he says, taking a toothpick from between his teeth and beginning to slide it

under the flap of the lilac envelope. ‘You got secrets from me, old woman? Maybe this here is a late Valentine ... you sending my woman love letters, Mikey?’

‘Not my type,’ says Mike, looking away while still contriving to hang further out of the window.

‘Give that here, buster,’ says Mrs Appeldorn and yanks the envelope out of her husband’s hands.

She rips it open with her thumbnail and as she removes the card, dozens of tiny rose petals fall out and sprinkle the snow like drops of blood.

‘It’s an invitation,’ she says, ‘from Gloria.’

She pictures the long-haired girl, who made everyone call her Cougar and painted her nails black before they sold black nail polish at the Walmart down to Sparta, long before there was a Walmart.

‘What’s that?’ shouts Mr Appeldorn, twiddling the dial of his hearing aid with numb fingers.

‘You old faker. You heard what I said.’

Together, they watch Mike, driving mailman-style from the passenger side of his car, speed off to surprise Avalanche, Wisconsin, with the news that Gloria Appeldorn had finally written to her poor parents after twenty-odd years out on the west coast doing God-alone-knows-what and, lo and behold, if she isn’t getting married. The car fishtails as Mike takes One-Eyed Olsen’s Corner too fast, a fan of snow spraying up from under the right rear tyre.

‘The wedding’s on April first ... the invitation must have got lost in the mail.’

‘Damn silly time to get hitched. Typical of her.’

‘You can get Pederson over to help out with the calves. We won’t be gone long.’

‘She’s gotta be forty. Bit long in the tooth for that lovie dovie stuff.’

‘She’s your daughter.’

‘Pederson’s a cretin.’

Turning the envelope over, looking for a return address, she smiles at the stamp with its aqua and pink candy hearts on which ‘I love you’ is sweetly inscribed. She opens the card again and rereads it, wondering if the groom is anything like Mike, who she once saw holding Gloria’s hand. She kneels among the rose petals and pushes her fingers deep into the snow, groping for a reply card, puzzled that there isn’t one. After a minute, her husband touches her shoulder.

‘Mother.’

Her knees are locked, frozen in position. If she could just put her hands together, fingers pointing piously heavenward, all Avalanche would be saying that old Mrs Appeldorn was so grateful to hear from her daughter that she’d gotten down on her knees to pray in the snow.

She looks up at her husband and his eyes are half closed, a little shiny on this cloudy day.

‘Come on, old lady.’

He holds out his hand and helps her up, touching the invitation with one finger. Soggy petals stick to the knees of her woollen long johns.

A sweet champagne rises from the card to her fingers, bubbling up to tickle her lips, and she is tumbled by the desire to stroke her daughter’s hair again, feel the weight and swish of it between her fingers and absorb the story of the unknown years from the strands themselves. She pauses to slip the card up underneath the layers of her parka, her sweater, her blouse, and feels its hard contours poking her breasts.

Gloria had been knitting a black silk gartel, a slinky prayer belt for her wedding, when she thought of inviting her mother. Bent over, make-upless, her mother used to spend hours each night knitting protection for her family against the Wisconsin cold: purl, plain, slip stitch over, cast on, cast off. It was one of the things they'd argued about. Wanting the orange bell-bottoms she'd seen on Lucinda Shlabaugh, the local slut, she'd nagged at her mother to take her shopping, even as her mother knitted plastic bags into bathmats, unravelling the coarse grey yarn used in servicemen's woollens, and winding it into balls.

'No one knits anymore! You're so, so ...'

She dredged for her most derogatory adjective, the one that would blast her mother over to Avalanche Dry Goods, and finally blurted out, 'Cheap!' which wasn't quite what she meant. Her father, passing, swatted her hard on the backside and said, 'Pig. Quit bothering your mother.'

But knitting was in vogue again. Now everyone was knitting – her group included lawyers and insurance agents, gay guys and – why not? – country women in loose grey cardigans that smelled like Army aftershave, all getting together to click their needles and make a little something out of nothing. And it wasn't her mother's fault exactly that she had run away. Sometimes she even caught herself singing her mother's favourite song, a song about blackbirds. She didn't know all the words.

Draping the prayer belt over the arm of her chair, she took the last invitation out of the box, addressed it to her mother, and then, as an afterthought, added her father's name as well. Knowing they wouldn't come, she tossed the return card in the trash.

But later, she is massaging herself with a Rutilated Rainbow Manifestation Crystal when she thinks, with a feeling of

shame that slips down the backs of her legs like afterbirth, 'I wish to God I didn't send that invitation.' She's been in *People* with Madonna, *The Wall Street Journal* with Rabbi Berg, and *Architectural Digest* has photographed her home with her in it, but she has never thought that her family would want to find her. It's something else entirely to send an invitation. It was weak. It looked like she cared about them. Needed them in some self-serving, old-fashioned way.

Soon after coming to California, she had changed her name to something chic, easy to spell, free of barnyard odour – changed her name so nothing could reach out and catch her by her long black hair and drag her back to Wisconsin. There was something waiting to kill her in Avalanche.

Even after she ran away, she found herself staring out of windows, waiting, and once, during a double period of history back in high school, she had stared out at a snow-covered corn field for the entire two hours. Nothing moved. No bird flew over. No blackened stalks poked through the crust, no tracks crossed the field at an angle. Just as the bell rang, the north-westerly wind dusted a veil of snow down from the roof, and instead of heading for the lunchroom with her classmates, she pushed up the window and leaned out, feeling the fat in her cheeks harden as it froze. She waited, and as time passed, rolled her hands in the front of her T-shirt, exposing the bowl of her belly. The field remained empty, and she saw that the emptiness itself might be the thing that could kill her.

After school, a torn plastic grocery bag sailed unevenly over the field. It snagged on a dead elm, and fluttered there.

On her way home, Mike, the mailman, drove by without waving, and the next day she took the Greyhound bus in to Minneapolis.

When Mrs Appeldorn's husband steps out to talk dollars per pound with the driver of the bulk tanker, she dials 411. He would rather that she drive all the way to LaCrosse and browse the out-of-state phone books in the library than waste a dollar using directory information. He is a quiet man, and he has let her know his preferences in carefully penned messages on the margins of bills. He rarely shouts or loses his temper and has become even more placid and bovine with the passing years. When he's chewing his vegetables, she half expects a foamy green string of spit to dangle from the corner of his mouth. She stands next to the window, watching the two men move the discussion from money to off-colour jokes, and she is thinking how unsubtle her husband is, how his hand motions reveal every detail of the conversation, when the operator asks, 'What city and state, please?'

'San Francisco, California.'

'What name, please?'

'Gloria App. A, double p.'

'I'm sorry. There's nothing listed for that name in San Francisco.'

'Is there any listing for any other App? Not initial G?'

'There's one listing, Ma'am, but it's unpublished. Sorry.'

'Wait. Don't hang up. The one that's unpublished, is there an address for that one?'

'No. I'm sorry. Everything's unlisted.'

Small animal traps soak in the sink. Brown guard hairs and flecks of bone float on the surface of the rusty water, and a scaly black tail lies, dripping, in the dish rack. Mrs Appeldorn hauls a trap out by its chain and picks off tags of waterlogged flesh. On the stove, the muskrat she caught in the Kickapoo bobs in a

soup of beer, mustard and onions. Steam from the open pot fogs the windows and the kitchen smells like Heileman's beer and wet skunk. She tries to forget Gloria saying, 'To err is human, to eat muskrat is not.'

'What do you think he looks like?' she asks, picking, picking, picking.

'Who?'

'Very funny. The wedding's in six days.'

'I wish you'd stop yapping about that stupid wedding.'

'Listen, Vernon, we have to go. She's our daughter.'

'Lee Wuornos was somebody's daughter too.'

'Gloria's not a serial killer.'

'That's bullshit. We haven't seen her in years. She hasn't cared enough to call in all that time. How do you know what she would and wouldn't do? You know nothing about her.'

'A mother knows her child.'

'Did you know she was going to run off?'

'God, I hate you sometimes.'

'When I win.'

'You didn't win.'

Mrs Appeldorn had waited for news from her daughter, until one day, in the seventh year, it occurred to her that Gloria was never going to write, didn't feel any kind of invisible umbilical cord connecting them, was – in all likelihood – an ex-Hare Krishna bag lady who didn't even remember her own name, and from that day, she had let the idea of Gloria float away. She thinks of her daughter now in the same way she thinks of her brother, who was killed sleeping in a seaplane lying at anchor in Broome in the far north-west of Australia, when Japanese Zeroes strafed the harbour. It was 9:30 in the morning, on Tuesday the third of

October 1942, and his body was not recovered with the others from the mangrove swamp where they were washed with the rising tide. She thinks of them both as stories, people who have strange things happen to them, people she doesn't really know.

But each October, she remembers her brother, standing in the warm el of her home, watching the combine weave its streamer of corn dust and smoke into the afternoon light, one crow calling to another, a maple leaf falling free from its burning building, red petiole dangling as it falls like the feet of a suicide, rotating and expanding as it blows towards her, platting against her cheek.

And in January, she remembers Gloria, hanging out washing on the line behind the house, the air still and wet and raw, the snow squeaky underfoot, the overalls in her hands smelling of gasoline.

Mrs Appeldorn is wiping spoons free of water spots before nesting them next to the others in the drawer. When her husband comes in from the barn, she says, 'I'd like to go in to LaCrosse today to get the tickets. If we wait any longer, we won't be able to get on a flight. Could you let me have the credit card?'

'Terrorists could hijack us and plough us into a field some place and Gloria wouldn't care.'

Her finger traces the ridges in the metal band that trims the red formica countertop. There are deep cuts in the formica, and a circular brown burn from the time when she took a pot from the stove without wearing an oven mitt and dropped it.

'Don't you want to meet your son-in-law?'

'No. He'll be some pansy, faggot, silk shirt fella, never saw a day's work in his life.'

'Give me the credit card, damn it!'

He runs his hand back through his hair and she sees his shirt is torn under the arm.

‘The buckle on my overalls got bent in the washing machine. I used a rubber band to hold it yesterday, but it wants mending. Do you think you’ll be able to get to it today?’

Before the wedding, Gloria has one final appointment with Rabbi Berg, spiritual head of the Kabbalah Centre, and leader of the fastest growing celebrity cult on the west coast. She is eager to discuss Chakra Healing, her phenomenally successful web-based business which sells crystals and also a new line in Zulu war paint, and her alien abduction. She meets him on a night when the moon is full, and he makes her stand, arms and legs spread, on a white sheet and gazes at the pale shadow she casts. One hand, her right, is missing from the shadow. No matter how she is repositioned, the hand is lost.

He asks, ‘What is your mother’s name?’

Gloria, startled, almost says ‘Mommy’, but then manages to squeak out, ‘I’m not Jewish.’

‘Mmm,’ he says. ‘What is she like, your mother?’

‘Right before hunting season opens, my father paints an orange stripe down the back of anything that moves on his farm – cows, horses, the dog, Mom – just to be sure no one takes a pot shot at his precious livestock. He’d never leave to come to the wedding, and Mom won’t come if he doesn’t. She’s his chihuahua. She’ll wag her tail and pant over the invitation, but then she’ll climb right back in Dad’s pocket.’

‘I take it you don’t have a good relationship with them?’

An image stabs her: she is twelve, playing baseball with her parents after milking, the twilight sky a deep purple tent over their heads, the frogs in the pond just beginning their love

songs. Her mother's wild pitch sails straight at her head, and her father's voice comes anxious from behind her, 'Steady, May. We want to keep this girl.'

And her mother muttering, 'Speak for yourself.'

'I haven't seen them in twenty years,' Gloria says to Rabbi Berg.

'Things can change.'

'I never want to be in anyone's pocket.'

'No risk of that.'

In the basement, Mrs Appeldorn unlocks the file cabinet and slides open the top drawer. Each folder is labelled in her husband's fussy handwriting, the g's looking like her father's wire-rimmed glasses, each i topped with a circle instead of a dot. The insurance policy is in a file towards the back. She pulls the entire folder out and inhales its odour of mildew and yeasty bread, a smell that makes her hungry and nauseous at the same time.

After Gloria disappeared, she began to stay up late, lining the claw-footed tub with her daughter's down quilt and lying cocooned in it, reading romances by kerosene lamp so as not to wake her husband, and sometimes a faint scent of Gloria would rise from the down, reactivated by body heat, or maybe just by her imagination, and on those nights, the bathmat knitted from plastic shopping bags and the towels turned and resewn down the middle seemed monstrous to her, and she had to fight the urge to tear them apart.

Now, she passes over the wills and the deed to their house, and, hoping that Gloria's fiancé is as financially responsible as Vernon, she slips out her husband's whole life policy. Stapled to the back page is a form for cashing out and claiming the

accumulated value. Twenty thousand dollars.

From the phone in the laundry room, she calls the insurance company and is connected with a twittering female voice, which tells her that it takes up to six weeks to cash in a policy.

‘Is there any way we can get the money faster? Our daughter’s getting married in a week.’

‘I just got married myself and the money flies out the door but I’ll tell you what, honey. Fax the surrender form to me today, and I’ll take care of it personally. We’ll overnight the cheque to you and you’ll have it in your hands before Friday. How’s that?’

Against the basement window, she aligns the form over a cancelled cheque and traces her husband’s signature. As she shapes the large A at the beginning of Appeldorn, she hears the tractor turn off in the machine shed, followed by the faint crunch of boots coming around to the kitchen door. She tries to hurry but her damp hand smears the letters and she has the sensation that her throat is swelling, closing, so that she can’t get a single clean breath.

Vernon calls from the top of the stairs, ‘May? You down there?’

‘I’m trying to fix that buckle,’ she says.

‘I’m glad you’re not upset about the credit card.’

‘Oh, no,’ she says, ‘I was mad at first, but you’re probably right.’

‘That’s my girl.’

‘I don’t think this buckle can be fixed. I’ll head on over to Sparta this afternoon and see if they’ve got one.’

‘Maybe you should bring it out to the shop before you go. I got that clutch working all right.’

The night after she faxes the surrender form, she is awakened by an odd noise in the wall and can't fall back asleep wondering what the sound reminds her of. Not mice, but perhaps keys turning in locks. Many keys in many locks.

Her husband's hearing aid, lit by the light from the clock, looks like a foetus she once saw in *National Geographic*, pink and glistening, folded in on itself. She considers driving to the all-night Walmart to look through their pattern books for something up-to-date, but as she mulls this over she suddenly knows that the sound she has been hearing is run-off trickling through the downspout on the other side of her bedroom wall, that this is the early spring rain that pocks the tired snow and causes the waiting earth to shiver and stretch, and she also knows she will buy a dress, because that would please Gloria.

She finds the dress at the Goodwill, a fifties chiffon in blues, an overlay of silvery lace with a neat self-belt and a round mother-of-pearl buckle at the pinched waist, most of the petticoats intact. It only needs the simplest of alterations to fit: taking in the seams at the bust and the waist, and relining the circle skirts with an old shower curtain. The dress is exactly right for a mother-of-the-bride, frilly, feminine, a bit glamorous.

Wearing the dress, she climbs the narrow, painted stairs to the attic. Light falls in bars on the floor, and as she shuffles to the hat boxes, particles of dust flash golden through the beams. She fossicks, opening box after box until she finds the hat she wore to Gloria's christening, a crescent-shaped metal frame covered in netting and blue silk petals, secured by tiny hand stitches. It is a little loose – she is shrinking inside her own skin – and she bends the wire gently between her hands, and this time it fits snugly over her coiled white hair.

Humming the Elizabethan Waltz, she spins like a mote, in and out of the light. The hat matches the new dress perfectly, the same dying blue as her eyes. Her son-in-law will love her in blue. Everyone loves her in blue.

‘Gloria sent us tickets,’ she lies. ‘They came today.’

It’s Friday night, two days before the wedding, and she is in bed beside her husband.

‘What’s that?’

He fumbles with his hearing aids, knocks one off the bedside table.

‘I hate these stupid things.’

She feels like telling him it’s his own fault. He should have worn headphones when he was out working with the noisy farm machinery. She feels like screaming that she has cashed in his whole life insurance, his only savings, so loudly that he’ll hear it in his bones. She wants him to hit her, to put his fist through the wall and throw the old RCA radio through the window. An image of herself slicing plastic grocery bags into strips flickers before her in the darkness. Long, shrivelled ribbons of plastic squirm at her feet, clinging to her skirt, twisting in her hair, and one wriggling in the socket of her eye, rippling in the draft from the broken window. She hears singing, something slow in a minor key, without accompaniment.

‘What did you say?’

She takes a breath.

‘Gloria sent us tickets.’

‘Like hell she did.’

‘Really. FedEx dropped them off today.’

She can’t believe he missed the truck in their driveway, idling as the driver handed over the certified cheque from

Northwestern Mutual. The exhaust had looked like an anaemic mushroom cloud.

‘If you think that changes my mind, you’ve got another think coming. I’m still not going.’

‘But she wouldn’t send tickets unless she was really looking forward to seeing us.’

He is silent and, in the dark, she reaches for his hand.

‘Right?’

‘She can’t do that to us. Like a stop light. Green. I love you. Red. I hate you. Green. I love you again.’

‘Don’t be so stubborn.’

‘Gloria doesn’t love you, May. The only person she’s ever loved is herself.’

‘You’re just bitter.’

He pulls his hand away and rolls onto his side.

‘No,’ he says, ‘I often wish that she died in a car accident so I could cry over her, think she called our names when she saw the headlights, but I know that isn’t true. She was always cold. She used to cringe when you hugged her – her own mother, for God’s sake. But you go if you want to.’

He sits up, and she hears his drawer shwuff open, papers whispering, and then a metallic clink and the snap of a rubber band. From behind he looks headless, just a set of broad shoulders in a patched nightshirt. The electric alarm clock daubs him with a bloody light, and there is a tiny click as the minute card inside its glass face flips down. Ten thirty-four.

‘Here,’ he says, turning, and he lays eight creased ten dollar bills in her hand. ‘Get her a present.’

On the twin-prop plane from LaCrosse, a man drops into the seat next to her. He is wearing a suit and a red paisley bow tie,

and as he pulls a laptop out of his briefcase, his perfumed sleeve brushes hers. She flicks through a bridal magazine bought with stolen money, looking at smiling faces and trying to subtly edge away. The roar of the plane's engines is no match for the roaring in her own head and she can barely hear him when he asks, 'San Francisco? International Film Festival?'

After she shakes her head, he asks, 'Gay and Lesbian Travel Expo?'

'What are you talking about?' she says. 'Do I look like one of those kind of people?'

She worries that this is what happens to people who travel alone. They become suspected deviants. All these years, she thought travelling with Vernon was a sign of their mutual respectability when, in reality, it only signalled her own lack of depravity.

The man's eyes drift from her trembling chin down to her shit-smearred orthopaedic shoes. 'No,' he says. 'No you don't.'

She turns the page and glares at a bride.

In San Francisco, she takes the shuttle from the airport to Union Square and walks to the Green Tortoise Hostel. From the window of her shared room, she sees neon lights advertising things she thought were illegal. Violent metallic crashings from a concert downstairs shake a rain of small insects off the ceiling and, alarmingly, they run for the bed and climb under the covers. After she dresses, she walks along Broadway and turns down toward the Embarcadero and Pier 33. The streets are full, roiling and boiling with people and cars, taut young men on bicycles darting between beeping trucks and rearing up unexpectedly on the sidewalk. It has been many years since she saw real black men and as she passes them, she sniffs their odour

of foreign flowers and coconut, bright and hopeful against the squalid breeze from the Bay, a rotting mix of seal and salt and fish and diesel. She already wants to go home. Already knows from the air itself that Gloria will be unrecognisable.

The wedding is held on a yacht in the bay, the water unfathomably black and cold, the guests smoothly oiled and glittering. She's the only one tugging at her clothes, tripping over new shoes, waiting for a glimpse of her daughter. She hasn't found any other address for Gloria than the boat on this night. And the guests are all women. They wear backless tops with no sign of bra straps, and torn designer jeans, and expensive perfume that has never made it to Avalanche. The silver overlay on her dress looks nothing like the rhinestones swirling over their faded denim and if she could, she'd rip out her mildewed plastic petticoat and toss it overboard. She passes two women swaying in a stairwell, kissing. Not a social kiss. Vomit rises in her throat, together with other painful urges. Gasping, she sucks in the sweet smoke from the women's shared cigarette, a smoke that reminds her of the peculiar tangible stink of fermenting corn tassels.

'Excuse me,' she says, tapping the woman next to her, 'I'd like to meet the groom. Where is he?'

The woman lifts her wine glass to her eyes and stares at Mrs Appeldorn through it. She raises one eyebrow, and says, 'A vibrator?' Mrs Appeldorn backs away, trips over a rock. Stones have been arranged around the deck, lettered with fluorescent paint – the kind used on roadside reflectors, and, puzzled, she'd read them earlier: 'Survivor', 'Artist', 'Dreamer', 'Lover', 'Believer'. Bending over, she picks up a stone, cradling it, relishing its weight, its stony shoulders, its roundness in her

hands. The word painted on it is ‘Inspiring’.

She rubs the stone on her thigh, scratches spots never meant to be scratched in public, hawks and becomes the rube she least wishes to be. Gloria, spotting her from the bridge where she is adjusting her twenty-seven foot train studded with celestite – a crystal used in astral travel and in replacing pain with loving light – says, ‘Oh God! What’s she doing here?’

How utterly predictable that her mother should show up at the exact moment when she’s least wanted, when Gloria is finally able to speak about Avalanche without feeling frostbitten, when – thanks to years of therapy – she has reached a place where she revels in her independence. And embarrassingly, her mother looks like a Romanian cleaning lady, an unfamiliar old refugee wearing rags and a dead man’s smile like badges of survival. The boat is already well out in the bay, but if it weren’t, she’d have someone ask her mother to leave. She’d even do it herself.

Unaware, Mrs Appeldorn creeps around the deck, overhearing fragments, partial sentences that are somehow focused and perfect like the momentary images frozen on the television screen when her husband clicks from channel to channel, searching for the loudest voices.

‘It’s not so strange. In Hindu countries, sick children are married off to dogs ...’

‘Is Gloria’s daughter here?’

‘Dad’s a postman back in Disaster or wherever.’

She is stunned that Gloria has a child. That she is a grandmother. She can’t believe Gloria withheld even this from her, but she searches the crowd anyway, looking for a country girl with waist-length hair and black fingernails. She sees only California women, jeans wedged tightly in their privates.

When everyone is seated for the wedding, a bald woman

in a lime-green muu-muu and Doc Martins hefts the stones individually, reading each one aloud in a smooth radio voice, before dropping it over the railing, her fingers hanging like willow branches even after the splash. She stares at Mrs Appeldorn's rock, but doesn't ask for it.

The guests sit silently, serious and thoughtful. They appear to accept rock-throwing as a standard wedding practice, like cans behind the car, crudités, or confetti. Mrs Appeldorn twists around to look for the groom. She prays that there's a groom, any kind of a groom, and not a partner. Not a ... woman. She makes a little sound, a mew, or maybe it's more like a hiss. And she pokes her fingernail through the lace of her dress and rips at the shiny, silvery stuff while she waits. Shreds it.

The muu-muu woman leans down and fiddles with a boom box, which fills the air with an eerie recording of whale song. The guests ululate, the bride descends from the bridge and – oh! – she is lovely. The keening of the whales is accompanied by the stamping of young girls with cans of crystals tied to their ankles. Nobody notices the letters of God's holy and unknowable name that Gloria has inked on the train of her gown. Mrs Appeldorn waits for Gloria to turn, to notice her, to smile. The seals bark on Alcatraz.

Gloria walks around the canopy seven times, and then stands in front of the rabbi – a sleek Japanese woman in an elaborate kimono, the sleeves of which hang to her split-toed socks. Mrs Appeldorn stares at her with horror: how could Gloria forget that her own uncle, her mother's only brother, was killed by the Japanese? She feels like she is a sweater being incautiously unravelled from a dozen damaged places at once, the yarn piling at her feet in kinks and snarls. She feels nothing like the mother of the bride but stares hungrily at the bride

anyway. Gloria's hair has been twisted into a unicorn's horn, wound with silver wire, polished emeralds, baby's breath, and dipped in green at the tip, as if she has deflowered a frog. The back of the gown is open to the base of her spine, where a tattoo of an upraised middle finger nestles in the valley between her buttocks. The train bumbles along behind her, gum wrappers and swizzle sticks tangled in the lacy edges.

A black-haired girl standing near Gloria whispers something to the rabbi and lifts a gilded mirror. Four candles gutter in the exhaust from the diesel engine, their light quivering oddly in the sequins of the bridal gown. Mrs Appeldorn strokes the rock as Gloria sips from the cup of wine, extends her index finger and the ring is slipped on. The ancient words, words that have joined two souls as one since time immemorial, but which are alarmingly unfamiliar to Mrs Appeldorn, are softly spoken – 'Behold! You are consecrated to me with this ring, according to the law of Moses and Israel.' – and the Japanese rabbi adds, 'Will you love this woman as your truly wedded wife in happiness and in sadness, in sickness and in health, honour her and cherish her until death do you part?'

The bay wind draws a cold finger down Mrs Appeldorn's spine as Gloria says, 'I do.'

'Then you may kiss the bride.'

Against her will, Mrs Appeldorn leans forward to get a better view, just as the women holding up the canopy lean forward with their candles, grease raining down on the hem of the gown like fat from side bacon, and she has a suddenly clear view of Gloria turning and tenderly kissing the mirror.

'What?' she thinks, not understanding.

Gloria stands alone in a ring of well-wishers, laughing. She pats the girl, takes the mirror from her and holds it up. The

moaning of the whales is joined by the beating of drums, the panting of pan pipes, and the women gyrate, fused, grinding together, licking each other's faces, winking. The girls stamp faster and faster. The crystals crash in their cans. The boat rises rhythmically on the hips of the water. The air is suddenly hot. A woman with a buzz cut and barbed wire in one eyebrow undulates against Mrs Appeldorn, and whispers, 'Are you with someone tonight, or are you a do-it-yourself gal, like Gloria?'

Mrs Appeldorn's head sizzles and hums, wired and electric, tiny blue shocks snapping off the steel cage of her hat and exploding into rose petals that rain darkly on the tilting deck. With the lights on, her daughter looks like she is covered in broken glass. In each shard, she sees the shattered eyes of the night, thousands of shades of darkness, and she smoothes the stone, thinking of the day her husband taught her how to pitch. Her husband's hand over her hand over the softball. The eager, true flight of the ball and her husband's calm voice calling, 'Strike!' The stone moves, impatient, in her hand.

'Gloria!' she cries, as her arm swings back, her fingers groping for leather laces, her voice a seagull's scream.