

It's hard for me to pinpoint the exact time Ben and I became interested in the dark differences between men and women, although I feel there was an exact time, that it happened almost overnight. During the last few weeks of sixth grade, the spring warmth banished the sweatshirts and overcoats that seemed to have kept people—girls—covered up for the first twelve years of our lives. One day I was sitting at the back of Mr. Gabriel's math class, watching him write on the board and making Ben giggle by reflecting sunlight off my watch and onto the back of Mr. Gabriel's balding head. The next, it seems, I sat quietly near the front of the room, staring sideways at the bulging front of Kathy Tedesco's blouse, mesmerized by the way Leah Anne McLafferty's thigh lay outlined under her plaid skirt, and filled with a frustrating longing for something I could not yet define. I would look over at Ben, and he would be as quiet as I was.

But it was the older woman—those that had finished out whatever strange process the strange birds we went to school with were going through—that we found most intriguing. Whether together or by ourselves, we were perpetually on the lookout for the female figure. The faded, swim-suit clad smoker on the Kool billboard above the hobby shop on Lorain Road; the voluptuous models on magazine covers at

the supermarket; Linda Carter from the *Wonder Woman* reruns; and Pat Benetar, singing "You Better Run" in tight leather pants, all were worthy of my confused attention.

During the early summer, I slept over at Ben's house quite often. I was an only child, and in a sense, he was too. His birth had been an accident, and his two brothers were much older and had recently moved out. As a result, their gigantic bedroom on the ground floor, next to the living room, became his own. His mother, a tired divorcee who worked as a manager in a department store and generally spent little time with her youngest son, would usually turn in early, and she was a sound sleeper.

I suppose it would be a lie to say Ben and I slept at his house. He found a way to rig his cablebox so he could insert a paperclip somewhere or other and get *Escapade*, an adult channel that began broadcasting after 10 p.m. (We were both smart like that.) Most of those nights we spent wide awake in the living room, the lights out and the TV on with no sound. We sat Indian-style or lay on our stomachs, watching dubbed European movies that were not made for us, but nevertheless taught us quite a bit. I saw my first nude woman on the screen of Ben's TV. I remember being shocked by the patch of dark hair between her legs, and thrilled by the mysterious beauty of her body as she frolicked with an airplane crew member over the Atlantic (she played the part of a rather lusty stewardess).



There was also a film about a beautiful secret agent who slept with enemy spies for reasons that defied our undeveloped powers of logic, though we still managed to enjoy the film.

These women, whom we only saw after dark, starred in my fantasies as well as their movies. They were two-dimensional, intangible specters, which fit quite easily into my imagination, like photos in an album. Of course, my fantasies were the simple creations of an inexperienced young boy, and ran like replays of my favorite scenes, slightly embellished with my presence. They were like memories, fresh in my mind, of moments that had never taken place.

Our neighborhood was comfortable and grassy, its streets lined with trees that bore small, fragrant flowers in the summer. (Japanese maples, my mother once told a new neighbor.) The houses were large and aluminum-sided, built very close together and very similar in architecture, like a set of giant game pieces on a board game of suburbia. On summer weekends and some weekend afternoons, the air would be bright with the smell of cut grass and barbecued meat, and the hum of the bees and the lawnmowers.

But Ben and I did not appreciate our neighborhood the way someone much older might. We did not think like real estate agents or retired couples or even my parents, who wouldn't think of living anywhere else, as they were so fond of saying to anyone who would listen. We were two twelve-year-olds—by some tragedy of demographics, the only twelve-year-olds on the block—who felt unfortunate to be born into a suburban existence, as opposed to Australia or the Old West or Occupied France during World War II. In our opinion, our neighborhood would have been improved by a few well-placed bomb craters and an army of invading stormtroopers or

mutants. But the few and shallow potholes in the streets were shamefully inadequate as craters, and the closest we had to mutants was Jay Kurtz and his friends, who were cruel and in high school and whom it was in our best interest to avoid.

My parents were a doctor and an interior decorator, and our house, although nicely furnished, was empty until five in the afternoon. Ben and I spent a lot of time there, using tennis rackets to guard the backyard against wasps we imagined were sentient and evil, or using my father's Betamax camera to videotape burning matchbox cars plunging disastrously off the barbecue grill precipice. (Getting them to burn was difficult; we had to use gasoline.) Sometimes we patrolled the neighborhood on our bikes, or rode down to the hobby store on Lorain to look at model rockets, discussing ways in which they might be converted into deadly missiles (perhaps by soaking them in gasoline and setting them aflame prior to launch). We would finish off the afternoons by watching TV until our parents came home for dinner. After a while we became quite good at reenacting memorable scenes from Warner Brothers cartoons.

I had a paper route, which I had started in February. It was a weekly community paper, the *Sun Herald*, and until June I delivered the papers immediately before going to school on Thursday mornings. After school let out for the summer, however, I began getting up around three o'clock, shortly after the paper truck dropped the papers off at the end of my driveway, Ben would sneak out of his house to help me deliver them. In my garage, we would place the advertising inserts and TV guides into each issue, then we would set out into the dark to deliver the local news to a sleeping neighborhood.

By four we would be finished, and then we had about an hour and a half before daylight



in which to go Spying. It was a weekly ritual, since neither of us had the willpower to get up at that hour on other days. Dressed in black, we would run through the backyards of the neighborhood, trying to catch glimpses of our neighbor's secret lives. I suppose the term Spying is inappropriate, because we never actually saw anything except opaque windows. Fairview Park shows no signs of life at four in the morning. Somewhere within those darkened houses, we imagined, were people committing acts of passion in the style of a dubbed European movie. Unfortunately they were quite good at protecting themselves from amateur voyeurs. We nevertheless revelled in exploring enemy territory as we crouched on our neighbor's manicured lawns, hiding from imaginary foes among rolled-up garden hoses and canvas covered gas grills and listening to the crickets sing out of the blackness.

Every four weeks I had to collect for the paper, knocking on the doors of houses whose backyards Ben and I had sometimes visited by night. It was somewhat frightening, although most of the people seemed very nice for the thirty seconds a month that I dealt with them. There were a few I actually looked forward to calling on, like Mr. Queener, who gave me two York Peppermint Patties and a quarter tip each time. Ben, who was somewhat shy, did not start coming with me until I discovered the woman who lived on the corner of Robin Hood Drive.

She was older; second or third year in high school, at least. I think she had green eyes, although I can't be sure, but I do remember her hair was blond and shoulder-length. If at some other time and place we had seen her dressed in a ball gown and silk shawl, or a full-length overcoat, or baggy jeans and a sweater, Ben and I might have been able to identify her. Perhaps this is why we—I—didn't notice her until that

summer. She must have come to the door at least once during those first few months, but in the winter she didn't linger at her door, smiling and wearing torturously tiny shorts and tank tops that sometimes revealed a glorious bit of bra—though there was more behind my fascination than the change in wardrobe brought on by warmer weather. It was a matter of timing, a combination of her glaring sexuality and my newfound awareness.

I can still remember the baddump of my heart jumping against my ribs when I saw her come to the door that first morning in June.

"Oh, hi!" she said, looking excited to see me. She was barefoot and wearing a bathrobe. I suppose she had just gotten out of the shower, because her hair was still wet, and fell straight down from her head and lay against her bronzed face in a very wonderful way.

"A dollar forty for the Sun Herald," I said, in an embarrassingly quavering voice.

"Oh", she said, smiling. "No one's home. Can you come back later?"

I turned around and walked down the driveway, extremely conscious of the unwanted erection that had suddenly made my jeans quite uncomfortable. After I finished the rest of the neighborhood, I went to Ben's house and told him. About the girl, not the erection. He came with me when I came back later. She answered the door again, and after that Ben was my collection partner.

My card for her house read:

F. Frauenholtz    21620 Robin Hood

Deliver:    x Inside front door

              In/Under Mailbox

              Milk chute

              Other \_\_\_\_\_

The "F" probably stood for her father's first name, but Ben christened her Foxxe, after a certain libertine from one of our movies, and



after that she was Foxxe Frauenholtz. The perfect and proximate Foxxe.

Besides our monthly calls, we didn't see her very often. (I realize now she must have had a job.) Once or twice her father, the real F.Frauenholtz, answered the door himself and paid us, which was a cruel disappointment. As a result, we got in the habit of collecting in the early afternoons, which although decreasing the chances of catching other customers, virtually ensured that if anyone was home at the Frauenholtz home it would be Foxxe. We rode our bikes in front of her house, hoping to catch her outside, perhaps walking out to pick up the empty metal barrels on garbage pickup day, or working on the flower garden in the front yard. At such times we would hover nearby like bees near a flower, and she would often wave at us and smile, recognizing us.

She became queen of my fantasies. In some of them she would answer the door wet-haired and in a bathrobe, smile and ask me to come in. A vague intermixing of scenes from dubbed European movies would follow, with Foxxe's face superimposed on a variety of unclothed bodies. It was repetitive but never boring. At night in bed I would try to picture her exactly, but though her presence was strong in my memory her image seemed to flicker in my mind, fade and shift its shape, as if distorted by its very perfection and beauty. Still, it comforted me to know that she existed, that she was always there, unlike the women of our movies. She was real and three-dimensional, and, if I dared, I needed only to walk down to the house on the end of Robin Hood and knock on the door to prove it.

The sun hung alone as we walked down Robin Hood Avenue and turned into Ellen Drive. We were on our way home from the shopping mall center on Lorain, with a bag of model rocket

fuse, a few sticks of hot melt glue, and two boxes of paper matchbooks: ingredients we would combine into our first bomb. It was late July, and there was no breeze to stir the heat that settled thickly over the neighborhood.

"Watch out," Ben said, and I looked up. Up ahead was the Kurtz house, in front of which Jay and a friend sat shirtless on the hood of an old station wagon. I could see them smirking and murmuring to each other as we approached.

"Hey dudes," Jay said as we passed meekly by them. A few feet past his house I felt a sharp pain as something hard bounced against the back of my head. I heard laughter, and another object whizzed between us and bounced on the sidewalk ahead. It was a small crabapple.

"Ten points," Jay said, as Ben and I walked away without turning around. My head was stinging and my face was hot with fury.

"We should bomb his house," I said quietly, picturing myself shoving a lit tennis ball bomb into a bound Jay Kurtz's mouth.

"Fine with me," Ben said.

A few days later we were armed. Our bomb was finished. We had experimented with various casings—toilet paper roll cores taped up on both sides, balloons, a few of the plastic specimen bottles that were always laying around my house—before finally deciding on a tennis ball with a small X-shaped hole cut into it. Through the hole we filled the ball with our choice of explosive (we had wisely decided against gasoline): hundreds of heads cut out from the paper matchbooks. Ben's mother kept two boxes of them next to the living room fireplace, and with the two others that we bought from the drugstore, we had enough for two bombs. When scissors proved too slow, we used my mother's paper cutter to behead a dozen matchbooks at a time. After we filled the balls, we inserted a short length of fuse—ten seconds an inch—into the



hole, then sealed it with a small amount of hot melt glue, melted with a match.

The day we finished these prototypes happened to be during a collection week. I was giddy because earlier, on the way home from our weekly trip to the supermarket, my mother and I had driven past her house, and I had been struck by the astonishing sight of Foxxe in a yellow bikini, watering the flowers.

"You should have seen her," I said to Ben later. We were at his house watching his gerbils run around in their plastic-tube city. Despite the gerbils, the extra bed and the huge Cleveland Browns poster on the wall, the spacious room looked almost bare. On Ben's unmade bed were the finished tennis ball bombs, which looked like those in Bugs Bunny cartoons, except they were green and fuzzy.

Ben smiled wickedly.

"I bet she was tanning herself in the back yard," he said.

"Maybe she still is," I said, my voice heavy with unspoken possibilities. I could picture us knocking on her door, getting no answer and then walking around to her backyard, where she would be stretched out on a lawn chair like a beautiful bronze statue, sipping a cold drink.

Ben picked up a tennis-ball bomb and rolled it in his hand, looking at it proudly. We were both looking for an opportunity to test them, or even use them as real weapons, perhaps against burglars or rabid dogs. If only we'd had them for the fourth of July, I thought wistfully, instead of the puny drugstore firecrackers my parents had bought for us. I mentioned this to Ben, and he surprised me by suggesting we sneak out of our houses that night, after our parents were asleep.

"I bet we see a lot more stuff at midnight," he said. I thought about this for a minute. We had resisted conducting bomb tests on Thurs-

day mornings. The resulting police investigation of the explosion would surely lead to me, the newspaper delivery boy as a prime suspect. I would have no choice but to turn Ben in as my accomplice, and we would languish in a cold cell until old age, guilty of attempted terrorism.

Tonight, if all went well, no one would know we had been out. And the possibility of seeing "a lot more stuff" was unbearably tempting. After brief deliberation I agreed to the unprecedented mission.

As we walked down the street, I swung my ring of collection cards around two fingers, pushing a slight and inadequate breeze on my face. We were in the habit of starting on the west end of Robin Hood and working our way east, leaving the Frauenholtz house for last. Our first stop was old Mr. Hammond, who invited us into his house while he spent fifteen minutes searching for his change jar. I was scolded by Dr. Ely's wife because I—Ben, actually—had delivered the last issue of the Herald in the mailbox instead of behind the screen door, and this had happened before and if we didn't stop she would cancel her subscription and call my manager. We received our Peppermint Patties from Mr. Queener along with—wow, we said—a fifty cent tip. Ben suggested that perhaps Mr. Queener had won the lottery.

By this time we were almost at Foxxe's house. We were walking towards her driveway when a beat-up green Camaro screeched around the corner and came to a stop in front of her house, and in front of us. The driver looked out the passenger window. It was a boy who looked older than Jay Kurtz, perhaps about seventeen, with long curly hair and a gold cross hanging from his left ear. He wore horn-rimmed glasses that gave him a rather cruel look, as if any second he would sneer, rev his engine and run us over



without a second thought.

He honked his horn twice, and a few seconds later Foxxe appeared, an amazing sight in a black tank top—were those her nipples I saw?—and tiny red running shorts. When she saw us, she smiled and waved us up the driveway

“Go right on up,” she said. “My dad’s in.” She reached for the passenger door, but the Camaro kid grinned and locked it. She started tapping on the window.

“Come on,” she said laughing. “You’re so mean.” Eventually Camaro kid gave in and

unlocked the door, and she bent down to readjust the seat.

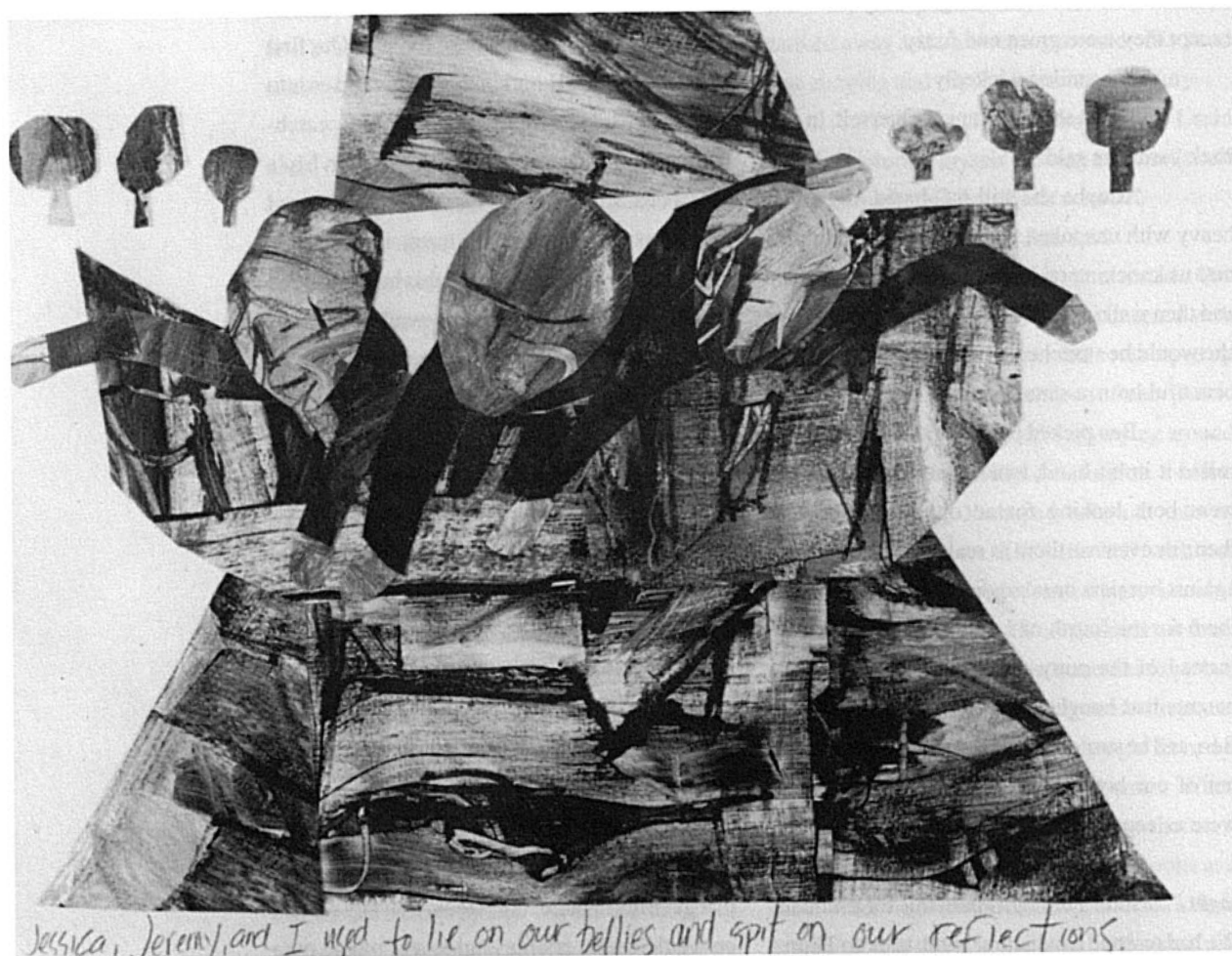
And then, for a split second that lasted weeks, we saw it. A little slice of white, like the quarter moon glowing in the sky. We saw Foxxe’s underwear. A real woman’s underthings, no more than a few feet away. Somewhere in the wrinkles of my brain forever burns the image of that neat little curve of silk peeking out between red nylon and tanned skin.

And then she was in the car and then she was gone. Ben and I walked slowly up the

## *Maple Street*

**Teri Guy**

Mixed Media



driveway. I had seen Foxxe's underwear, as clearly as if she had shown it to me. If I had dared I could have touched it. My lungs felt overly full, and, had I been able to, I would have told Ben I had an erection the size of Milwaukee. But at the time such things were uncomfortable to talk about, even in joking, and we kept them to ourselves. We knocked on the door, got our money from Mr. Frauenholtz, and went back to Ben's to discuss the wonders we had seen.

That night I waited anxiously in my room for my parents to fall asleep. I probably waited much longer than I had to, but when all had been quiet for some time I snuck downstairs and out of the house. I wore my spying uniform: black sweatpants, a black Mickey Mouse T-shirt turned inside-out, and an old pair of Chuck Taylor sneakers I had spray-painted black.

Ben was waiting in his yard when I got there.

"About time," he said softly. He had the two bombs, and he held one out to me. I took it and put it in the pocket of my sweats. "Who should we bomb?" he said. "Jay's house?"

"Let's do some real Spying first," I said. "Real Spying."

We took off down the backyards of Ellen Drive, hopping the identical chain-link fences and then crouching down and sprinting like mice across the lawns. For three fourths of the block it might have been a Thursday morning: black windows, quiet houses. We were beginning to wonder if this had all been worth it when we arrived at the Kurtzs' yard, dimly lit by the light coming through a sliding-glass door. Ben and I hopped into the backyard and crept silently towards the back wall of the house. I was breathless from trying not to giggle out loud.

It was even more difficult when we tried to keep silent when we managed to peek through the vertical blinds and spied Jay Kurtz,

wide receiver for the Fairview High Warriors, and a very unfriendly sort to us kids, sitting on the couch shirtless and in his boxer shorts. He was watching TV, and on the coffee table in front of him was a beer bottle. I wondered if his mother knew he was drinking beer, or did she even mind.

Suddenly Jay's hand was in his boxer shorts, and Ben and I had to look away, flatten ourselves on the grass and bite our tongues to keep from laughing. I was flushed with triumph. Here we were, at last privy to a neighbor's secret life, and about to avenge earlier humiliation. After a minute I looked up. Jay's hand was still in his shorts, his beer now on the arm of the couch. Ben tapped me on the shoulder, held up his bomb and smiled. I nodded enthusiastically. We began looking for a route that would allow us quick escape. Ben pointed to the yard behind the Kurtzs'. If we ran that way, to the side instead of down the block, we could see what happened when the bomb went off before we sprinted off through the back yards of Robin Hood.

Ben reached into a pocket and pulled out a matchbook, crouching on the balls of his feet to light the bomb fuse. My skin tingled with anticipation, and my mind raced ahead to the upcoming glorious explosion. I watched as Ben struck the match and put it to the fuse. And then the lights went out in the Kurtzs' living room, Ben, startled lost his balance and fell back against a steel garbage can, which tipped over with a deafening crash.

Instantly we were racing for our lives, over the fence and into the yard behind the Kurtzs', then to the side of that house, where we pressed against the aluminum siding and waited, with flaming lungs and pounding hearts.

Nothing. After a minute we relaxed and looked around. We were now on Robin Hood. I looked at Ben. He still had his bomb.



Briefly I thought about lighting it and throwing it grenade-style into the Kurtzs' yard, then decided against it.

"Let's go to Foxxe's," I said.

Her house had a glass door in the back like the Kurtzs', and here too there was a glow from within. My heart was hammering painfully as we stood in the next-door-neighbor's yard, leaning over the fence and looking at that curtained portal. It could be her dad, I thought. Then Ben tapped my shoulder and pointed out between the houses towards the street. A beat-up green Camaro was parked at the end of Foxxe's driveway.

Ben and I looked at each other, then hopped the fence. The grass of the Frauenholtz's lawn was soft and thin-bladed. I ran my hand through its coolness. A big lawn-chair sat in the middle of the yard, as if taken right from my earlier daydream. I crawled slowly towards it. Its presence conjured up the image, like an impossible memory, of Foxxe sunning herself happily in her yellow bikini, right there in front of me.

Ben was next to the door now, and motioning frantically for me to join him. His eyes were wide, bulging almost out of his head. I crept up next to him and looked through the crack between the curtain and the wall.

Camaro kid was in the living room, shirtless like Jay Kurtz. The TV was on but he wasn't watching it, and his hand wasn't in his shorts. It was in Foxxe's.

I watched the colored lights flicker on them, and on the wall behind them. His head was buried in the curve of her neck, as if he were trying to hide. Her eyes were shut and her mouth

was slightly open, and moving like she was trying to say something. Around her shoulders was her tank top, clumsily bunched up to reveal the objects which I had so often mentally replaced with those of some movie actress. I was shocked by the whiteness of her breasts, contrasting absurdly against her tanned shoulders and stomach.

For a minute or two they remained almost motionless on the couch, and I wondered if Camaro had fallen asleep. Then she spread her legs a little wider, and I saw the ridge of Camaro's knuckles moving around under the red fabric of her shorts. Suddenly, she leaned her head back, so that I couldn't see her face. She clutched his shoulder, digging her fingers into his arm, then relaxing and squeezing again. Her head turned slowly, so that I saw the tortured grimace on her face. She brought her legs together tightly, as if she was trying to trap his hand there, and he moved to kiss her lips. They stayed that way for a long time, just kissing, his hand trapped between her legs.

Then they relaxed. She brought her head up to smile at him, and Camaro said something that made her laugh, echoing the grimace that was still bright in my memory, cut into it alongside the image of her underwear.

Lightheaded, I watched Ben strike another match and light the fuse. We ran toward the back of the yard, over the fence, and I looked back just in time to see a shower of flaming match heads, like a hundred angry fireflies, shooting upwards with a disappointing whoosh.

Someone once said that man's worst fears and greatest hopes are seldom realized. Ben's





grounded for the rest of the summer and made to sleep upstairs. I believe he received a spanking as well.

We stopped Spying after that. Ben stopped helping me deliver the Sun Herald, since it was much harder for him to sneak out of the house, and I'd never paid him for his help anyway. Doing the route was lonely work without him, and although I had done it for three months at the end of the school year, I soon grew to hate it. Eventually I asked my mother to call the paper and tell them I quit. She made me do it myself. It wasn't so bad.

The last time I ever knocked in the Frauenholtz door I heard a man shout from inside the house.

"Hold your horses, Tood," he said. "Be patient for once."

The door opened and Mr. Frauenholtz appeared, smiling. When he saw me he laughed loudly.

"Oh, hi!" he said. "I'm sorry. I thought you were Liz's boyfriend."

And then she was Liz, who lived on the corner of Robin Hood, who watered her flowers and took in the garbage cans and fooled around with Todd when her father was asleep.

They say the city has everything you can think of. There are pictures on store windows and certain movie theaters, for example, that leave nothing to the imagination. They are sharply focused and colorful, these pictures of men and women intertwined, their faces masks of agony or ecstasy. Inside the theater the pictures move, gigantic, on a large screen, showing these same men and women performing acts the

camera captures in the smallest detail.

There are bars near the street where I live, where dancers strip down to nothing in front of an audience. Sometimes they were costumes — police uniforms, silvery space-alien outfits — that they shed piece by piece. You could go to one of these places, make your way to the front, stand a few feet from the swaying, almost-nude stranger in front of you. You could, if you went to one of these places, hold a bill in your hand, watch her smile and come toward you, stand in front of you and move her body inches from my face. You could, if you wanted, feel her skin as you inserted the bill into the front of her bikini top or the side of her sequined panties. But you know that would prove nothing.

Ben still lives in Cleveland, working for a small advertising agency, and I've been trying to convince him to move out here. He comes to visit me one day, and we take a subway downtown, squeezing into a reeking, overcrowded car.

"Smells like piss," Ben whispers with a frown as we hang on to the straps and stand among the mass of people. As always, I watch the lights of the tunnel flash hypnotically across the window. Light, then darkness. Black, then white.

Ben taps my shoulder, and when I look he smiles and swings his eyes sideways towards a seat next to him, where a pretty young woman in a bright red overcoat sits reading a magazine. I glance at her, then back to Ben, still smiling, and raising his eyebrows. I glance at the girl again. She has large eyes, and straight dark hair. She is beautiful. I smile back at Ben, and turn to the window to watch the bright spots of light streak by.

