

Fireflies

by Lauren Cobb

“Six ball, corner pocket.” Mark shot and missed, then leaned against the bar with his hands in his jeans pockets, pool cue balanced in the crook of his elbow. Four-Fingered Dave studied the eightball, circling the table with his head cocked first to one side, then the other. “Umm, umm,” he said. “Don’t look so good.”

Mark drained his Heinekin and shook his head at the bartender when she started forward. Her smile offered him more than a beer, but Mark ignored that message. He’d quit chasing skirt a long time ago, when he’d woken up once too often beside a woman whose name he couldn’t remember and who he couldn’t pry out of his apartment without hurting her feelings. But they still came on to him, even though he was just an average looking guy, with big dark eyes like his sister and her kids, and a drooping brown mustache that his niece thought made him look like a pirate.

“I don’t have all night, Dave,” he said.

Dave grinned at him, the cue between his middle finger and the stub where his index finger used to be, and sunk the eightball. Mark racked his cue. “Later, Dave.”

“See you, man,” Dave said.

Mark nodded to the bartender, then pushed open the heavy door with its glass porthole and stepped out into the cold night. Muted blues drifted up the street from Danny’s Place, and the smell of Danny’s barbecue ribs hung faint in the cold air. A woman shouted in a hoarse voice from an upstairs apartment. Mark winced. It sounded like Loreli when she lost it with the kids, and again he wondered if he’d been right to talk her into moving away from Bronson Street. He’d been sure it was bad for Vicky and Jim to be growing up with the poolhalls and bars for their neighborhood, but Loreli wasn’t happy in the house on North Field Drive. It was a quiet, residential cul-de-sac, a fancy name for a dead-end, as Loreli liked to remind him.

“Hey baby, where you going?” Theresa leaned out her second-story window, her jet black hair hanging down around her high-cheekboned face. She used to be called crazy Theresa, and Mark had been in love with her once. They used to tear up the night so hard he could barely drag himself to work in the morning. He tilted back his head and smiled up at her. “Over to Loreli’s.”

“Ah, that’s no fun. I was there with Doug and Freddy Thursday.” Theresa leaned farther out the window. “Doug’s working the night shift. Why don’t you come up?”

“Yeah, like Doug don’t weigh three hundred pounds. Like it’s worth my life.”

Theresa laughed, then narrowed her eyes. “How long since you’ve had a

girlfriend, Mark? It's way past time you settle down."

He grinned at her. "I've already dated every girl in town, you included."

"What's wrong with Sue Chambers, or Bobby Anderson?"

"Been there, done that," he said flatly. "I gotta go." Her window shut with a muffled whoomp as he crossed the street to his beat-up stationwagon. An almost full moon shone above Bronson Street's red brick buildings. He jingled his keys in his pocket and wished he did have a girlfriend, but the only one he'd ever really loved was crazy Theresa, smart and cursed with a wild streak that was downright dangerous. Given time, they'd have wrecked each other, turned into another Loreli and Johnny. He'd had a ringside seat to that marriage, and it was enough to make anyone think twice about love.

"Look you can see the droopy eye and the sad mouth like he's looking at us but not all the way." Vicky tugged at Jim's gritty, sticky hand. Jim stared up into the night sky past her pointing finger, his mouth open and his brown eyes squinting. Behind them, a cricket chirped in the stone wall that halted the sloping lawn of the house on the corner. White smoke unfurled from its dark chimney, pungent in the damp autumn air.

"It's blurry," Jim said. "I can't see nothing."

Vicky twisted her thick brown braid around her knuckles in exasperation. Jim was six. At his age she'd been able to see the man in the moon, even when it wasn't quite full. Her Uncle Mark had shown it to her, and ever since, she could find it whenever she wanted. She'd hoped to pass on this talent to her little brother, but as in so many other things he was turning out less than satisfactory. Satisfactory was what the S mark meant on your report card. It meant you were doing okay. Vicky wished she could give her mom a report card and explain that U meant unsatisfactory, because her mom's report card would have a lot of U's on it.

"Vicky! Jim!"

Jim turned to go but Vicky still gripped his hand and she lingered, gazing up at the moon glowing in a nimbus of misty light. Jim pulled her arm taut as he leaned his weight toward home. "Come on, Vic. It's cold."

Vicky glanced at his round freckled face. "Whining is unattractive," she said, quoting her uncle as she let Jim lead her away. Jim wriggled his hand free and ran ahead, blending into the shadows of the front lawns, then reappearing in the yellow porch light of their small two-story house. He clomped up the wooden steps and across the porch, squeaked open the door and slammed it behind him. A minute later the door reopened and their mom appeared in the porch light. "Vicky! Dinner's tonight, not tomorrow morning!"

"Coming!" Vicky hollered. She quickened her pace but watched for the sidewalk cracks in the dim moonlight because even though her mom was unsatisfactory they couldn't afford the hospital bills if Vicky stepped on a crack and broke her mother's back. Vicky was ten, old enough to under-

stand about unpaid bills, like she understood that renting made them different from their neighbors, who owned their houses, and had fathers who went to work every day so they could afford things. Vicky drag-stepped up the porch steps and went inside, wrinkling her nose at the cigarette stench mingled with the smell of her mom's soggy fried chicken.

In the kitchen Jim was already seated at the table, drumming his short, stocky legs on his chair rungs and singing tunelessly, "uh uh, uh uh, uh uh, kowabunga!"

Vicky slid into her sear and squinted with distaste at the Morton salt and pepper shakers, the salt blue and the pepper brown. When she'd had dinner at Beth Olmstead's house last week she'd noticed their salt and pepper shakers were glass and had to be refilled. Now she hated the cardboard disposable kind. "I thought Uncle Mark was coming to dinner," she grumbled.

"He called and said he'd stop by later," her mom said as she sat down. "You want a drumstick Jimmy?" Jim nodded vigorously, rendered speechless as he tried to slurp all of his milk in one long gulp, both hands gripping the green plastic tumbler. He emerged with a white mustache and crossed his eyes at his sister.

"Mrs. Rastin says they'll get stuck that way," Vicky warned him.

"She would," their mom said.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Vicky asked beligerently.

"It means the old bat tells lies to scare children."

"At least she acts her age," Vicky said under her breath.

"What's that supposed to mean, Vicky?"

Vicky narrowed her eyes at the dark roots in her mom's short blonde hair, at the unbuttoned vee of her blouse tucked into a too tight denim skirt. "You know what I mean." She helped herself to the mashed potatoes. "Yuck, these are instant, aren't they?"

Her mom slumped in her chair, blew back the bangs slanting into her eyes. "I swear, Vicky, you get more like your grandma all the time, mean as the day is long."

"Oh no!" Jim shouted as his half-full tumbler toppled sideways, spilling milk across the table.

"He did that on purpose," said Vicky.

"Did not!"

"You did to."

"That's enough!" Their mom warned them.

"Enough what?" Both kids shouted back. They giggled when their mom stuck out her tongue at them as she got up for a paper towel to wipe up the milk.

When Mark opened the front door, the sweet smoke haze made him pause, looking across the living room at his sister. A dim lamp shone at the table next to the couch where Loreli was stretched out under a torn pink quilt,

smoking a joint and watching a newscast of the fighting in Bosnia with the sound turned off and Percy Sledge low on the stereo.

"Kids in bed?" he asked.

Loreli glanced at him, then back at the television. "Jimmy is. Vicky's upstairs doing her homework."

"I thought you were gonna wait until they were in bed before you started taking."

Loreli sat up. She stubbed out the joint in a Caesar's Palace ashtray from her honeymoon and said quietly, "You can go upstairs and get Vicky, and the two of you can catch the next bus to Mom's, and stay there, and you can all tell each other what a lousy mother I am until you're blue in the face because I'm sick of it and I do not want to hear one more word of it do you understand me Mark?"

Mark crossed the room and sat down next to her. He reached past her for the joint, lit it, inhaled. "Sorry," he said.

"You ought to be."

"I said I'm sorry."

"Okay, but between you and Vicky, I'd like to get on that bus myself. I mean, you think I like working my ass off at that stinking bank every day, then coming home to put up with this shit? And Mrs. Olmstead and Mrs. Rastin with their 'Nice day, isn't it Loreli' when I know they think we're low rent trash." Loreli sucked in the smoke, then snuffed out the joint and carefully poked it into her cigarette pack. "One of these days I'm gonna put a rusted-out Chevy on cinder blocks in the front yard, just to give the old bats something to talk about."

Mark ruffled her hair. She leaned her head on his shoulder and said, "It makes me feel old, living here."

"You're only twenty-nine. That's plenty young."

"You're just saying that cause you're thirty-two."

Mark grinned. "Damned straight."

"I know what. I'll have a party Saturday. A Halloween party. That'll liven things up." She smiled, her eyes glazed in the lamp light.

"What are you gonna do with the kids?"

Loreli shrugged. "Oh, they can come too, if they're good."

Mark didn't say anything. He knew better than to argue with Loreli when she was in a mood. He stood up. "I'd better go say hi to Vicky."

"Yeah, she can tell you what a shitty mom I am."

As he climbed the stairs, Mark looked down and saw her dialing the telephone, an unlit cigarette between her lips. Upstairs, he tapped on the door at the end of the upstairs hall with a piece of notebook paper thumbtacked into the wood saying "Knock Before Entering—This Means You."

When she heard Uncle Mark downstairs, Vicky was already in her flannel nightgown and seated at the slant-top desk her uncle had bought her at the

Good Will, writing a book report on “The Unicorn Charm.” It was the best book she’d ever read, next to “A Diamond in the Window,” which was about a girl and boy living in a house where some smart people called transcendentalists had lived a hundred years ago. Both stories had magic in them, but there was more of it in “A Diamond in the Window,” which was why she liked it better. She didn’t go downstairs when she heard her uncle’s voice, because eventually he’d come up to her room, and then she’d have him to herself. When he tapped on the door, she called out, “Enter!” then smiled at him over her shoulder. “Can you wait a sec?” she asked. “I’m almost done.”

“Sure.” He lounged over to the window, pushed back the faded animal-print curtain. Vicky bent over her paper, her thick dark eyebrows bunched together in a scholarly frown. “Voila!” she said, writing *Finis* at the end of the paper with a flourish. Then she turned and held out her arms. Her uncle picked her up and swung her around. As he lowered her to the floor, she sniffed at his face. “You’ve been smoking pot with Mom.”

He grinned. “Just one hit. And I didn’t inhale.”

“Oh, charming. Joke about it why don’t you? Aren’t you afraid of being a bad influence?”

“Honey, nothing could influence you, short of a Mac truck.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Vicky dragged her chair to the window, clambered onto it and pressed her nose against the cold glass to watch the moon edging past the Olmsteads’ peaked roof. She leaned her shoulder against her uncle. “Why do we like the moon?”

“I don’t know. Maybe the same reason you like magic. Because it makes the world beautiful.”

“That’s not why I like magic.”

“No?”

“I like magic because then life’s more interesting. Like if your wishes come true, or an ordinary day turns into a magic adventure, with dragons and enchanted castles.”

Her uncle scooped her into his arms and carried her to the bed, plopped her down on it. She giggled, then got under the covers and tucked a black stuffed unicorn with a white mane, a Christmas present from Uncle Mark, in the crook of her arm. He sat on the edge of the bed and smoothed back her heavy bangs. “If you had three wishes, what would you wish?” he asked.

Vicky made a fist, popping up a finger for each wish. “First, I’d wish for a magic cloak that made me invisible so I could go wherever I wanted and no one could see me to stop me. Then I’d wish for a silver purse that was always full of million-dollar bills, so when we needed money, I’d just say, bring me my purse, Mom, and I’d give her as much as she wanted. And I’d wish Mom was like other moms, and we owned our house, and had a normal dad, not like our real dad.”

“What’s normal?”

"You know what I mean."

"Yeah, sweetheart, I know. But lots of moms and dads get divorced, and I think if you had that magic cape and could go inside other families' houses, you'd be happy with your mom just the way she is."

"You sound like some boring tv show with a moral. I hate it when you talk like that."

"Then I guess I'd better go."

Vicky grabbed his hand and pressed it down against the covers. "Don't go yet," she begged. "Tell me your three wishes."

"First, I wish my beautiful, intelligent niece would appreciate her mom for what she is." Vicky stuck out her tongue and screwed up her eyes into piggy slits. "Second, I wish she'd have at least one magic adventure." She clapped her hands soundlessly. "Third, I wish she'd take me along on it."

"Of course I would!"

"Thank you," he said gravely as he stood up. "Now it's time for you to get some sleep." He switched off the light, and Vicky listened to his footsteps on the stairs. She hoped he'd talk to her mom for awhile. She liked falling asleep knowing he was there.

At work the next day, LeeAnn was giving Mark shit like always. "Poor sad Marky," she crooned above the clank of bottles and the hum of machinery. "How long since Marky's gotten laid? Or maybe Marky doesn't like girls."

Mark grinned, yanked the red lever and stepped on the treadle in one smooth motion. "I like girls fine, darlin, but I like 'em with some manners." He swiveled on his stool and pressed the black, then the blue button without missing a beat. He was the fastest operator at Stevenson Bottling Co., and he knew it. LeeAnn tossed back her long auburn hair and said, "Hey, I hear your sister's having a party Saturday. Aren't you going to invite me?"

"Nope."

"Why not?"

"Hate to mention it, LeeAnn, but those bottles are piling up, and Mr. Asshole Bartley's two aisles over."

"Shit!" LeeAnn turned back to the bin of soda bottles in front of her, shouted, "Why not?"

"I get enough shit from you here. I don't need it when I'm off the clock."

"Fine. Who wants to go anyway? I got better things to do."

After work, Mark stopped by the Lost and Found Lounge, on the second floor of one of Main Street's brick buildings. He ordered a draft and slurped off the foam as he shouldered through the crowd to a table by the window, where Dave sat with a couple of other guys from the plant. LeeAnn was at the next table with Marica and Jocelyn. Jocelyn smiled at Mark, and he raised his glass to her. She was new at the plant, the first woman to interest him in a long time. He was working up his courage to ask her out. His courage and his energy, because it seemed these days he was tired all the time. Tired of worrying about Loreli and the kids. Tired of paying

attention to levers and buttons, of listening to the same jokes from the same people. He guessed he was feeling like Loreli. Wanted to get on that bus and head out of town, only he wouldn't mind taking Jocelyn with him. She had curly brown hair, freckles, a flat, elfin nose, and the greenest eyes he'd ever seen. But what he liked best was how direct her smile was, like she'd never had any reason to be afraid. Maybe he'd ask her to Loreli's party. Only not now, not in front of everyone.

"It's sad Marky!" LeeAnn yelled above the din. She stood up and shouted, "Hey everybody! Loreli's having a party on Saturday, and we're all invited!" She tossed back her hair, smirked at Mark.

"Why's she always on my ass?" Mark grumbled.

"Cause you've never asked her out is why." Dave grinned, his gold tooth gleaming. Mark looked down at his beer and muttered, "Shit."

Vicky wouldn't admit she was excited about her mom's Halloween party, but she was. It would be like the old days, only without their dad. And her mom had bought her the best costume ever—an ankle-length white fairy gown with blue netting over it, and a deep-blue velvet cape. Vicky knew the costume came from Second Time Around, but for once she didn't mind because it was so beautiful. Uncle Mark had bought her a sparkly purple magic wand, topped with a fat white satin star, and he'd made Jim a pink elephant costume out of a big cardboard box, with a curving trunk of corrugated cardboard and ears that wiggled when Jim pulled the strings attached to them. When she saw the pink elephant, their mom laughed and said people would wonder what she'd spiked the punch with.

On Saturday, Vicky helped her mom fill red paper lunch sacks with kitty litter, with candles stuck in them, to line the walkway up to the porch. They were called luminarias, Mexican lights. Her mom said she'd seen them in a place called San Antonio, when she was Vicky's age.

"Did you look like me then, Mom?" Vicky asked as they crouched together on the front lawn, her mom filling the paper bags, Vicky sticking in the candles, and Jim running up and down, positioning them along the walkway and on the porch steps.

"You've seen pictures of me then, Vic. What do you think?"

Vicky frowned. "I've got your face, but I don't know where my eyebrows come from. I hate them. Maybe I'll shave them off."

Her mom laughed. She was in a good mood today. The party was making her nicer, more fun. "Don't do that, honey. They look stylish. Lots of actresses have thick eyebrows now. It shows character."

"Does Dad have character?"

Her mom stopped pouring kitty litter. She leaned back on her heels and looked at Vicky. "Are you trying to bring me down?"

Vicky hunched her shoulder. "Jeez, Mom. I was just asking."

Her mom reached over and stroked her hair. Vicky jerked her head away. "I'm sorry, hon," her mom said. "Your dad's long on good looks but

short on character. And I don't have a lot of it either, so I don't know where you get yours from."

"Well, where do my eyebrows come from?"

"I think it's your Uncle Mark's mustache, a little higher up."

Vicky chuckled. Then her thin face grew serious. "I probably got my character from him, too."

"I don't know, Vic. He's a lot more easygoing than you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well," Loreli looked at her daughter. "You want things so bad, and you're so willing to fight for them. Mark's not like that."

"I'm out of bags!" Jim bawled from the porch. "Get to work, ladies and germs!"

Mark's armpits were flooding with sweat as he listened to the burred ring at the other end of the line. He'd gotten Jocelyn's number from information and was worried about calling without asking. Sometimes women were funny about that. When he heard the click of someone lifting the receiver, he cleared his throat.

"Hello?" Her voice was soft and cool.

"Hi, is this Jocelyn?"

"Uh huh, who's this?"

"Hi, it's Mark, from work."

"Oh! Hello there."

"Hi, I just called to say I hope you can come to my sister's party." God, he sounded like a jerk. High-voiced and sweaty palmed like the pimpled teenager he used to be.

"It's tonight, right?"

"Yeah, I know it's last minute but—"

"No, that's okay. I'd like to come. I don't know all that many people in town yet, so, I'd like to."

Mark relaxed slightly, felt his voice slide back down where it belonged. "It's a costume party."

"What are you gonna be?" she asked.

"A magician. You know, black tux, top hat, wand."

"I thought you'd be a pirate, but I guess that's too obvious."

"Only one thing I want to steal right now," Mark said.

"What's that?"

"I think I'd like to steal your heart." He held his breath, surprised at his nerve and half-expecting her to hang up on him.

"You use that line often?"

"I swear it's brand new, still has the price tags on." He grinned into the receiver.

"Yeah? What's the price?"

"Come to my sister's party and find out."

Her laugh was soft and nervous.

“So I’ll see you tonight?” he persisted.

“Yeah, I guess so. I don’t know. I think so.”

As Vicky clattered down the stairs to answer the doorbell, holding her dress up to her knees so she wouldn’t trip, she was torn between excitement about the party and dread that her mom would wear something embarrassing, like the year she was a belly dancer and you could practically see her chest through her gauzy blouse. All night their dad had glared at their mom and when he got drunk he followed her around, trying to make her put on a windbreaker until she screamed at him to leave her alone, if she was that slut he saw behind her back, his tongue would be hanging out. Then the guests left and the fighting started, and Uncle Mark took Vicky and Jim to his apartment for the night.

Vicky threw back the front door and flashed her brightest smile at Doug and Theresa and Freddy. “Trick or treat!” they shouted, grins on their faces. Doug was a big dark man with curly black hair who weighed about a million pounds. He was dressed as a pirate and was awesome. Theresa was a witch in a low-cut black dress. Thin, pale Freddy wore jeans and a black sweatshirt with twine dangling from it, and some rocks and few sticks attached with wire woven through his sweatshirt. He carried a grocery bag, and bottles clinked inside it when he shifted its weight against his chest. He glanced down at Vicky as they trooped past her to the kitchen. “Conceptual art,” he said.

“Conceptual who?”

“Art. That’s my costume. I’m junk but I’m expensive, conceptual junk. You can’t afford me.”

“Who wants to?” Vicky shrugged. She didn’t like the way Freddy looked at her mom.

“Exactly.” He smiled and followed Doug and Theresa into the kitchen.

When Vicky pounded up the stairs to get her mom moving, she bumped into Jim careening down the hallway in his elephant costume. She grabbed the pink cardboard box to steady him. “Be careful on the stairs in that thing. You want me to help you?”

“I can do it!” he shouted as he sprinted toward the staircase. Vicky shrugged, feeling elegant in her fairy costume. She pranced down the hallway and leaped into her mom’s bedroom with a flourish of her wand. Loreli was seated at her scarred vanity table, another of Mark’s Good Will finds, carefully drawing a blue teardrop on her left cheekbone. She was in whiteface, and her hair was slicked back in a short, stubby ponytail and sprinkled with blue glitter. Vicky noted with relief that although her mom’s black leotard was form-fitting, it was opaque with a high neckline. Vicky sank down on the unmade bed. “It’s only Doug and Theresa and that nasty Freddy,” she announced. “But next time, you have to answer the door.” Loreli glanced at her in the mirror, raised her eyebrows and opened her red lips in mock surprise. “But why, sweetheart?”

Vicky grinned. "Because it's your party. You look great, Mom."

Loreli rose gracefully. Her heavily made up eyes were shiny. "So do you. You look beautiful. Let's go downstairs and dazzle 'em."

Mark tilted back the flask of vodka then passed it to Doug. The flames from the backyard bonfire he'd kindled earlier leaped up into the black night. An old Rolling Stones song shook the house, blasted out the back door into the yard. Ghosts and vampires, witches and monks and Michael Jacksons crowded through the house, and a stream of costumes flowed down the back steps to the beer keg or wandered over to the bonfire. Jocelyn hadn't shown up yet.

"Hey, sad Marky!"

It was LeeAnn in her ratty foxfur coat and a tight leather skirt. Mark tried to smile, realized he was drunker than he thought. LeeAnn waved away Doug's flask. "I don't know where it's been," she said. Doug laughed, waved it in her face. She batted it away. "Hey sad Marky, you look like you're waiting for someone. Hope it isn't Jocelyn."

Mark's jaw tightened. "Now why would you hope that, darlin'?"

"Oh, something she said." LeeAnn tossed back her hair. "But I set her straight. I told her you were already seeing someone."

Vicky wandered through the hot, smoke-clouded rooms, looking for Uncle Mark. Jim had fallen asleep in his elephant costume next to the living room floor heater, and Vicky was afraid one of the dancers would step on him, or someone would sit on him. She wanted her uncle to carry him up to bed.

In the kitchen, her mom was seated on the table, her slender, black-clad legs crossed at the ankles, one hand on a red devil's chest and the other holding a joint between her red lips. Her brown eyes looked like glass, and she seemed to stare right through her daughter. Vicky opened the back door and looked out, searching for her uncle in the dark cluster around the bonfire. When she saw him, she froze. His top hat was on the grass at his feet, and he was shouting furiously at a plump, redhaired woman in a too tight miniskirt and a short fur jacket.

"Get the fuck out of my face!" her uncle yelled. He staggered as he moved away from the woman, who trailed after him yelling sad Marky, poor sad Marky. Vicky wanted to go help him but she was afraid he'd yell at her too, and she couldn't stand it if he did. She gripped the sparkly purple wand with both hands and screwed shut her eyes, wishing as hard as she could that Uncle Mark would be okay, would be happy tonight. As she opened her eyes Freddy pushed past her, and Vicky felt a tug at her neck, heard the velvet cape rip. She tried to blink back her tears as she turned and hurried through the kitchen.

"What's the matter, princess?" It was the red devil. Vicky tried to brush past him, but he blocked her way and leaned down so his face was near

hers. He had blue eyes. Behind him, her mom was smiling sadly at Vicky, the teardrop on her cheekbone almost real. For the first time, Vicky wondered if maybe her mom wasn't very happy either. Maybe her mom missed the old days, maybe even missed their dad.

"My little brother's asleep on the floor and I'm afraid someone will step on him," Vicky muttered.

"Want me to carry him up to bed?"

Vicky hunched her shoulder. "If you're not too stoned. I don't want you to drop him."

The devil didn't smile. "I won't drop him."

As they passed the kitchen table, Loreli asked, "Where's Mark, honey?"

Vicky paused. "He's yelling at some lady with red hair out back. I didn't know what to do! And then Freddy stepped on my cape and tore it."

"That bitch, LeeAnn." Loreli swayed a little, smiled. "Don't worry, hon. I'll settle her hash. You just get Jimmy up to bed, okay?"

As Vicky led the red devil into the living room, the front door opened slowly, and a woman stepped cautiously over the threshold. She was a cat or something, dressed like Vicky's mom in a black leotard, with whiskers drawn on her cheeks and slanting brows drawn above her green eyes. The cat woman smiled at Vicky. Vicky liked her smile. It was fearless and interested, not like the fake smiles so many grownups pasted on their faces when they looked at Vicky. She winked at the cat woman, who solemnly winked back, then glanced around the living room, like she was looking for someone.

"Sad Marky, poor sad Marky" LeeAnn jeered as she strutted around the bonfire after Mark. When she grabbed at his shoulder, he thrust out an arm to push her away. She stumbled and would have fallen if Freddy, avidly watching the scene, hadn't caught her. Mark staggered toward the back steps, saw Loreli standing there, and veered off to the left. Loreli started toward him, but he waved her away. She paused, then strode across the yard toward LeeAnn. He grinned through his misery. Loreli on the warpath would flatten LeeAnn but good. By the time Mark stumbled past the garbage cans, knocking two clattering lids onto the ground, and emerged onto the dark front lawn, he'd come up with a plan. He'd get in his car and just drive away from the music and the shouting, from the bottling plant, from Bronson Street, from Vicky and Loreli's discontented hunger. And then he'd keep driving, head south to someplace warm where an ocean quietly lapped an empty shore. It sounded drunkenly beautiful.

"So there you are."

Mark stopped and looked around. A cat woman strolled down the front steps. In the dancing light of the Mexican candles she looked familiar. As she came closer, he recognized her and started forward, hands outstretched, but she stiff-armed him, her hand hard against his chest. "Is what LeeAnn said true?"

"No, no." Mark shook his head. When she didn't say anything, he looked up at the ragged black clouds drifting across the full moon. "She just said it so we'd be sad, like she is." He glanced at her. "Did it make you unhappy?"

"It made me mad. I just don't know if I was mad at you or her."

Mark touched the hand she still held to his chest. "I'm drunk. I got drunk waiting for you. But I'm glad you came." He shut his eyes and resolutely gave up his beautiful escape. When he opened them, Jocelyn was smiling, her head tilted a little to one side.

"So what do we do now?" she asked.

Vicky came back downstairs with the red devil, whose name was Tom, and followed him through the kitchen and into the back yard. Loreli was with the dark figures around the bonfire, wearing her brother's top hat. She turned and smiled at the red devil. Freddy was talking to the awful red-haired woman. There was no sign of Uncle Mark.

Vicky searched for him among the dancers in the living room. When she couldn't find him, she decided to try the front porch. It was deserted, and so cold she shivered and huddled the torn cape close around her. A white flake touched her cheek as Vicky crossed to the porch railing. Then she saw them on the front walk. Uncle Mark and the cat woman were revolving in a slow, courtly dance that they seemed to make up as they went along, circling between the rows of Mexican lights. The snow fell faster. Vicky caught her breath as the snowflakes glittered red in the dancing light of the luminarias, like a beautiful veil of fireflies swirling around Mark and the cat woman. Then one by one the candles in the paper bags hissed out, doused by the falling snow, and the fireflies turned back into snowflakes.

The dancers waltzed down the walk and into the street, where the darkness and the snow hid them. Vicky leaned out over the railing, straining for a last glimpse because she'd seen her uncle look at the cat woman like they were speaking without words, and that look told Vicky things wouldn't be the same after tonight. As she turned to go inside, Vicky smiled painfully. She'd tell the moon how the one who loved her best had disappeared so beautifully into the snowy night, dancing in a veil of summer fireflies that appeared like magic, as if his three wishes had come true.