

TAMARA

A STORY BY LEONARD COHEN

Tamara had long legs; God knows how long they were. Sometimes at the meetings she used up three chairs. Her hair was tangled and black. Breavman tried to select one coil and follow where it fell and weaved. It made his eyes feel as though he had walked into a closet of dustless cobwebs.

When Breavman and Krantz were seventeen they wore special costumes for hunting communist women; dark suits, vests which buttoned high on their shirts, gloves, and umbrellas.

They attended every meeting of the Communist Club in Montreal. They sat imperially among the open-collared members who were munching their sandwich lunches out of paper bags.

During a dull speech on American germ warfare, Krantz whispered, "Breavman, why are paper bags full of white bread so ugly?"

"I'm glad you asked, Krantz. They are advertisements for the frailty of the body. If a junkie wore his hypodermic needle pinned to his lapel, you'd feel exactly the same disgust. A bag bulging with food is a kind of visible bowel. Trust the Bolsheviks to wear their digestive systems on their sleeves. . . ."

"Sufficient, Breavman. I thought you'd know."

"Look at her, Krantz!"

Tamara appropriated another chair for her mysterious limbs. At the same moment the chairman interrupted the speaker and waved his gavel at Krantz and Breavman.

"If you two jokers don't shut up, you're getting right out of here."

They stood up to make a formal apology.

"Siddown, siddown, just keep quiet!"

Korea had swarmed with Yankee insects. They had bombs filled with

contagious mosquitoes.

"Now I have some questions for you, Krantz. What goes on under those peasant blouses and skirts she always wears? How high do her legs go up? What happens after her wrists plunge into her sleeves? Where do her breasts begin?"

"That's why you're here, Breavman."

Tamara had gone to his high school, but he hadn't noticed her then because she was fat. She lived only a street away, but he never noticed her. Lust was training his eyes to exclude everything he could not kiss.

But now she was slender and tall. Her ripe lower lip curved over its own little shadow. She moved heavily, though, as if her limbs were still bound with the mass of flesh she remembered with bitterness.

"Do you know one of the main reasons why I want her?"

"I know the main reason."

"You're wrong, Krantz. It's because she lives one street away from me. She belongs to me for the same reason the park does."

"You're a very sick boy."

A minute later Krantz said, "These people are half right about you, Breavman. You're an emotional imperialist."

"You thought about that for a long time, didn't you?"

"A while."

"It's good."

They shook hands solemnly. They exchanged umbrellas. They tightened each other's ties. Breavman kissed Krantz on each cheek in the manner of a French general awarding medals.

The chairman hammered his gavel to preserve the meeting.

"Out! We're not interested in a vaudeville show. Go perform on the mountain!"

The mountain meant Westmount. They decided to accept his advice. They practiced a soft-shoe routine at

the Lookout, delighting in their own absurdity. Breavman never could master the steps, but he liked swinging the umbrella.

"Do you know why I love communist women?"

"I do, Breavman."

"You're wrong again. It's because they don't believe in the world."

They sat on the stone wall, their backs to the river and city.

"Very soon, Krantz, very soon I'm going to be in a room with her. We're going to be in a room. There's going to be a room around us."

"So long, Breavman, I've got to study."

Krantz's house wasn't far. He meant it, he really went.

"Hey!" Breavman called. "You broke the dialogue."

He was out of hearing.

"Don't you see it, Tamara, don't you see that both sides, both sides of every fight, they're both always using germ warfare?"

He was walking with her in the park behind his house, telling the secret of conflict and the habits of nocturnal goldfish and why poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

Then he was in a room undressing her. He couldn't believe his hands. The kind of surprise when the silver paper comes off the triangle of Gruyère in one piece.

Then she said no and bundled her clothes against her breasts.

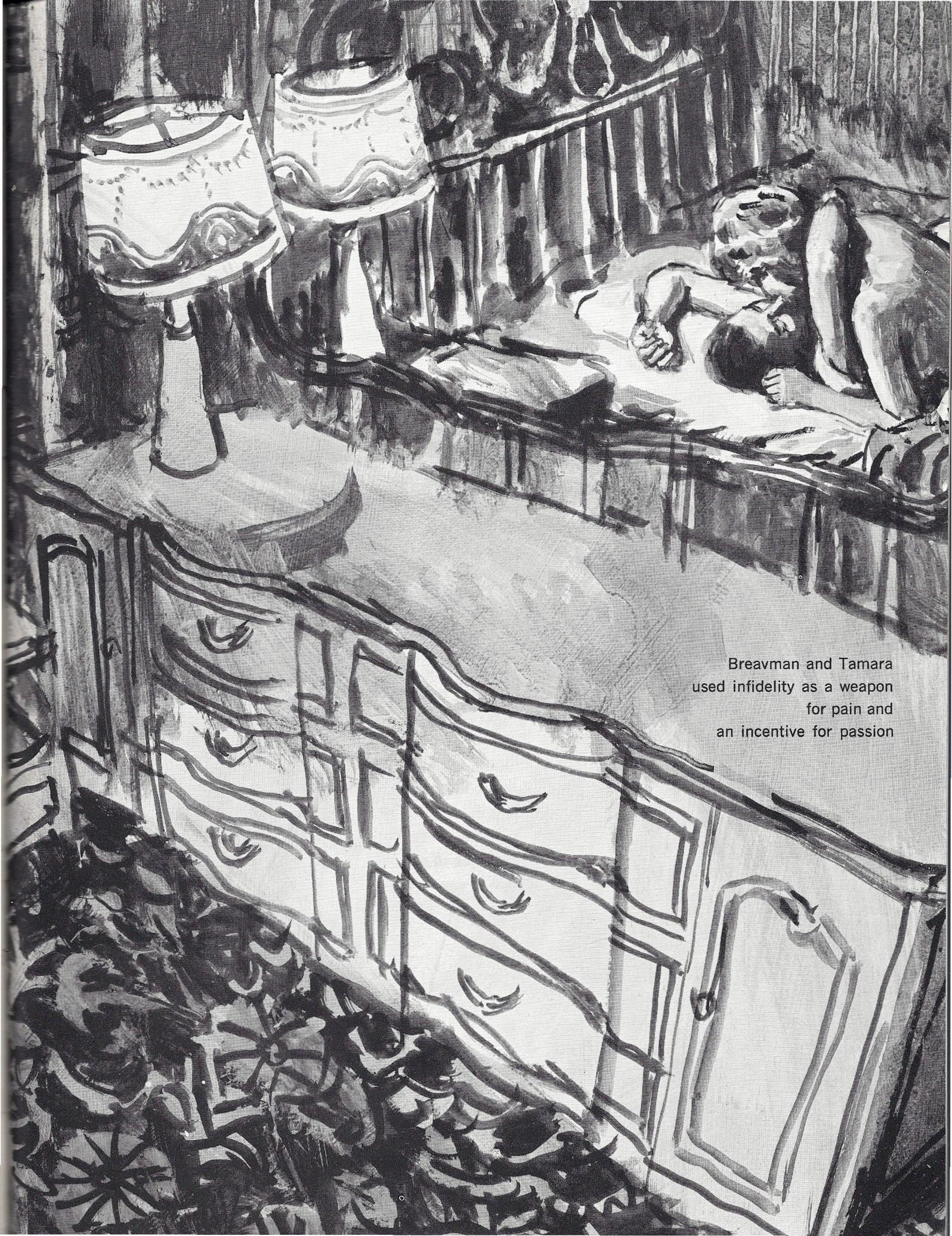
He felt like an archeologist watching the sand blow back. She was putting on her bra. He helped her with the clasp just to show that he wasn't a maniac.

Then he asked why four times.

Then he stood at the window.

Tell her you love her, Breavman. That's what she wants to hear. He came back and rubbed her back.

Now he (continued on page 58)



Breavman and Tamara
used infidelity as a weapon
for pain and
an incentive for passion

TAMARA

(continued from page 18)

was working in the small of her back.

Say I love you. Say it. One-two-three, now.

He was getting an occasional finger under the elastic.

She crossed her ankles and seemed to squeeze her thighs together in some kind of private pleasure. This gesture shivered his spine.

He dove at her. Then there were the strange, strained voices which had turned into whispers, rushed and breathless, as though time were against them, bringing police and parents to the keyhole.

Who was she? Who owned her body?

Congratulations, like slow-falling confetti, covered his mind with sleep, but someone said, "Tell me a poem."

"Let me look at you first."

"Let me look at you, too."

Then he walked her home. It was his personal time of the morning. The sun was threatening in the east. The newsboys were limping with their gray bags. The sidewalks looked new.

Then he took her hands in his hands and spoke with serious appreciation, "Thank you, Tamara."

She slapped his face with the hand that was holding the key. "It sounds so horrible. As if I let you take something. As if you got something out of me."

She cried for the seconds it took until a line of blood appeared on his cheek. Then they hugged to repair everything.

When she was inside she put her mouth to the window of the door, and they kissed through the glass. He wanted her to go first, and she wanted him to go first. He hoped his back looked good.

C'mon everybody! He exalted as he marched home, newest member of the adult community. Why weren't all the sleepers hanging out of their windows cheering? Didn't they admire his ritual of love and deceit? He visited his park, stood on the nursery hill, and looked over the city to the gray river. He was finally involved with the sleepers, the men who went to work, the buildings, the commerce.

He threw stones at Krantz's window because he didn't want to go to bed.

"Steal a car, Krantz. Chinese soup time."

Breavman told everything in three minutes, and then they drove in silence. He leaned his head against the window glass expecting it to be cool, but it wasn't.

"I know why you're depressed. Because you told me."

"Yes. I dishonored it twice."

It was worse than that. He wished he loved her. It must be so nice to love her and to tell her, not once or five times, but over and over, because he knew he was going to be with her in rooms for a long time.

Then what about rooms, wasn't every room the same? Hadn't he known what it would be like? Weren't all the rooms they passed exactly the same, wherever a woman was stretched out? Even a forest was a glass room. Wasn't it like with Sharon under the bed when they were children playing the Soldier and the Whore? Wasn't it the same, even to the listening for enemy sounds?

He told the story again, six years later, but he didn't dishonor it that time.

Tamara and Breavman rented a room in the east end of the city. They told their families they were visiting out-of-town friends.

"I'm used to being alone," his mother said.

On the last morning they leaned out of the small, high window, squashing shoulders, looking at the street below.

Alarms went off through the boarding house. Bulging ashcans sentried the dirty sidewalk. Cats cruised between them.

"You won't believe this, Tamara, but there was a time I could have frozen one of those cats to the sidewalk."

"That's very useful, frozen cat."

"I can't make things happen so easily these days, alas. Things happen to me. I couldn't even hypnotize you last night."

"You're a failure, Larry, but I'm still crazy about your body. Yummy."

"My lips are sore from kissing."

"So are mine."

They kissed softly, and then she touched his lips with her hand. She was often very tender, and it always surprised him because he hadn't commanded it.

They had hardly been out of bed for the past five days. Even with the window wide open, the air in the room smelt like the bed. The early morning buildings filled him with nostalgia, and he couldn't understand it until he realized that the buildings were exactly the color of old tennis balls.

She rubbed her shoulder against his chin to feel the bristle. He looked at her face. She had closed her eyes to savor the morning breeze against her eyelids.

"Cold?"

"Not if you stay."

"Hungry?"

"I couldn't face another anchovy, and that's all we have."

"We shouldn't have bought such expensive stuff. It doesn't quite go with the room, does it?"

"Neither do we," she said. "Everybody in the house seems to be getting up for work."

"And here we are, refugees from Westmount. You've betrayed your new socialist heritage."

"You can talk all you want if you let me smell you."

The cigarettes were crushed. He straightened one out and lit it for her. She blew a mouthful of smoke into the morning.

"Smoking with nothing on is so—so luxurious."

She shivered over the word. He kissed the nape of her neck, and they resumed their idle watch in the window.

"Cold?"

"I'd like to stay for a year," she said.

"That's called marriage."

"Now don't get all frightened and prickly."

A very important thing happened.

They caught sight of an old man in an oversized raincoat standing in a doorway across the street, pressed against the door as if he were hiding.

They decided to watch him, just to see what he did.

He leaned forward, looked up and down the street, and, satisfied that it was empty, gathered the folds of his raincoat around him like a cape and stepped out onto the sidewalk.

Tamara flicked a roll of ashes out the window. It fell like a feather and then disintegrated in the rising wind. Breavman watched the small gesture.

"I can't stand how beautiful your body is."

She smiled and leaned her head against his shoulder.

The old man in the swaddling coat kneeled and peered under a parked car. He got up, brushed his knees, and looked around.

The wind moved in her hair, detaching and floating a wisp. She squeezed her arm between them and flicked the butt. He flicked his out, too. They fell like tiny, doomed parachutists.

Then, as if the butts were a signal, everything began to happen faster.

The sun jelled suddenly between two buildings, intensely darkening the charade of chimneys.

A citizen climbed into his car and drove away.

A cat appeared a few feet from where the old man was standing and crossed in front of him, proud, starved, and muscular. With a flurry of folds, the old man leaped after the animal. Effortlessly, the cat changed its directions and softly padded down stone stairs to a cellar entrance. The man coughed and followed, stopped, baffled, and climbed back to the street empty-handed.

They had watched him idly, as people watch water, but now they looked hard.

"You've got goose flesh, Tamara."

She refastened a wisp of floating hair. He studied her fingers in the exercise. He remembered them on various parts of his body.

He thought he would be content if he were condemned to live that moment over and over for the rest of his life. Tamara, naked and young, her fingers weaving a lock of hair. The sun tangled in TV aeriels and chimneys, the morning breeze whipping the mist from the mountain. A mysterious old man whose mystery he didn't care to learn. Why should he go looking for better visions?

He couldn't make things happen.

In the street, the old man was lying on his stomach under the bumper of a car, grasping after a cat he had managed to corner between the curb and the wheel. He kicked his feet in excitement, trying to get the cat by the hind legs, getting scratched and nipped. He finally succeeded. He extracted the cat from the shadows and held it above his head.

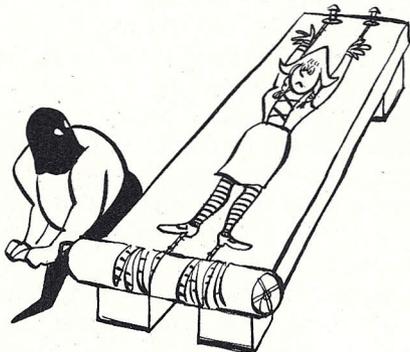
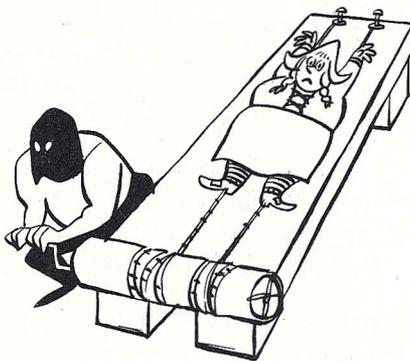
The cat wriggled and convulsed like a pennant in a violent wind.

"My God!" said Tamara. "What's

he doing with it, now that he has it?"

They forgot each other and leaned out the window.

The old man staggered under the struggle of the big cat, his face buried in his chest away from the threshing claws. He regained his footing. Wielding the cat like an axe, his feet



spread wide, he brought it down hard against the sidewalk. They could hear the head smash from their window. The cat convulsed like a landed fish.

Tamara turned her head away.

"What's he doing now?" she wanted to be told.

"He's putting it in a bag."

The old man, kneeling beside the twitching cat, had produced a paper bag from out of his huge coat. He attempted to stuff the cat into it.

"I'm sick," said Tamara. She was hiding her face against his chest. "Can't you do something?"

It hadn't occurred to Breavman that he could intrude in the action.

"Hey, you!"

The old man looked up suddenly.

"Qui! Toi!"

The old man stopped short. He looked down at his cat. He vibrated his hands in indecision. He fled down the street, coughing and empty-handed.

Tamara gurgled. "I'm going to be sick." She broke for the sink and vomited.

Breavman helped her to the bed.

"Anchovies," she said.

"You're shivering. I'll close the window."

"Just lie beside me."

Her body was limp as though it had succumbed to some defeat. It frightened him.

"Maybe we shouldn't have frightened him off," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"He was probably starving."

"He was going to eat it?"

"Well, we protected our fragile tastes."

She held him tightly. It was not the kind of embrace he wanted. There was nothing of flesh in it, only hurt.

"We didn't sleep very much. Try to sleep now."

"Will you sleep, too?"

"Yes. We're both tired."

The morning world had been removed from them; the jagged sounds of traffic were beyond the closed window, distant as history. They were two people in a room, and there was nothing to watch.

With his hand he soothed her hair and closed her eyelids. He remembered the miniature work of the wind unfastening and floating wisps of hair. A week is a long time.

Her lips trembled.

"Lawrence?"

"I know what you're going to say, and I know what I'm going to say, and I know what you're going to say. . . ."

"Don't be mad."

"No."

"I love you," she said simply.

"I'll wait here."

"You don't have to say anything," she said.

"Thank you," he said.

"Will you kiss me?"

He kissed her mouth lightly.

"Are you angry with me?"

"What do you mean?" he lied.

"For what I said. I know it hurts you in some way."

"No, Tamara, it makes me feel close to you."

"I'm happy I told you."

She adjusted her position and moved closer to him, not for sensation but for warmth and protection. He held her tightly, not as a mistress but as a bereaved child. The room was hot. Sweat on his palms.

Now she was asleep. He made sure she was asleep. Carefully he disengaged himself from her hold. If only she weren't so beautiful in sleep. How could he run from that body?

He dressed like a thief. His shirt uncrumpled loud as a paper bag.

A round sun burned above the sooty buildings. All the parked cars had driven away. A few old men, brooms in hand, stood blinking among the garbage cans. One of them tried to balance the cat's carcass on a broom handle because he didn't want to touch it.

Run, Westmount, run.

He needed to put distance between himself and the hot room where he couldn't make things happen. Why did she have to speak? Couldn't she have left it alone? The smell of her flesh was trapped in his clothes.

Her body was with him, and he let a vision of it argue against his flight.

I am running through a snowfall which is her thighs. Her thighs are filling up the street. Wide as a snowfall, heavy as huge, falling Zeppelins, her damp thighs are settling on the sharp roofs and wooden balconies. Weather vanes press the shape of roosters and sailboats into the skin. The faces of famous statues are preserved like intaglios. . . .

Then he was thinking of a special pair of thighs in a special room. Commitment was oppressive, but the thought of flesh—loneliness was worse.

Tamara was awake when he opened the door. He undressed in a hurry and renewed what he had nearly lost.

"Aren't you glad you came back?"

For three years, Tamara was his mistress; until he was twenty.

In the third year of college, Breavman left his mother's house. He and Tamara took a couple of rooms downtown on Stanley Street.

The house had been built at the beginning of the century. There were still some colored frames in the windowpanes. The city had installed modern fluorescent street lamps on Stanley which cast a ghostly, yellow light. Shining through the blue and green Victorian glass, the result was intense artificial moonlight. The flesh of any woman looked fresh and out-of-doors.

His guitar was always handy. The cedar wood was cool against his stomach. The inside of the guitar smelled like the cigar boxes his father used to have. The tone was excellent in the middle of the night. In those late hours the purity of the music surprised and almost convinced him that he was creating a sacramental

relationship with the girl, the outside city, and himself.

Breavman and Tamara were cruel to one another. They used infidelity as a weapon for pain and an incentive for passion. And they kept returning to the bed on Stanley Street and the strange light which seemed to repair the innocence of their bodies. There they would lie for hours, unable to touch or speak. Sometimes he would be able to comfort her, and sometimes she him. They used their bodies, but that became more and more difficult. They were living off one another, had ties to each other's gut. The reasons were too deep and original for him to discover.

He remembers terrible silences and crying he couldn't come close to. There was nothing he could do, least of all get dressed and leave. He hated himself for hurting her and he hated her for smothering him.

He should have kept running that bright morning.

She made him helpless. They made each other helpless.

Breavman let Tamara see some notes of a long story he was writing. The characters in it were named Tamara and Lawrence, and it took place in a room.

Tamara read it carefully. "But I don't talk that way," she said softly.

"Neither do I," said Breavman.

The act of writing had been completed when he handed her the manuscript. He no longer felt ownership.

"But you do, Larry. You talk like both characters."

"All right, I talk like both characters."

"Please don't get angry. I'm trying to understand why you wrote it."

They were lying in that eternal room on Stanley Street. The fluorescent lights across the street provided moonlight.

"I don't care why I wrote it. I just wrote it, that's all."

"And gave it to me."

"Yes."

"Why? You knew it would hurt me."

"You're supposed to be interested in my work."

"Oh, Larry, you know that I am."

"Well, that's why I gave it to you."

"We don't seem to be able to talk."

"What do you want me to say?"

"Nothing."

The silence began. The bed became

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like a prison surrounded by electric wires. He couldn't get off it or even move. He was gnawed by the notion that this was where he belonged, right on this bed, bandaged with silence. It was what he deserved, all he was fit for.

He told himself that he should just open his mouth and speak. Simple. Just say words. Break up the silence with any remark. Talk about the story. If only he could assault the silence. Then they could make warm and friendly love and talk like strangers right up to morning.

"Was it to tell me that you want to end it between us?"

She's made a brave attempt. Now I must try to answer her. I'll tell her I wanted to challenge her love with a display of venom. She'll say, "Oh that's what I wanted to hear," and she'll hug me to prove that the venom failed.

All I have to do is force open my teeth, operate the hinges of my jaw, vibrate vocal chords. One word will do it. One word will wedge into the silence and split it open.

"Just try to say something, Larry. I know it's hard."

Any noise, Breavman, any noise, any noise, any noise.

Using his brain like a derrick, he lifted his twenty-ton hand and lowered it on her breast. He sent his fingers through buttonholes. Her skin made the tips of his fingers warm. He loved her for being warm.

"Oh, come here," she said.

They undressed like they were being chased. He tried to make up for his silence with his tongue and teeth. She had to put his face gently away

from her nipple. He praised her with a conversation of moans.

"Please say something this time."

He knew if he touched her face he could feel tears. He lay very still. He didn't think he ever wanted to move again. He was ready to stay that way for days, catatonic.

She moved to touch him, and her motion released him like a spring. This time she didn't stop him. She resigned herself to his numbness. He said everything he could with his body.

They lay quietly.

"Do you feel O.K.?" he said, and suddenly he was talking his head off.

He rehearsed all his plans for obscure glory, and they laughed. He told her poems, and they decided he was going to be great. She pitied him for his courage as he described the demons on his shoulders.

"Get away you dirty, old things." She kissed his neck.

"Some on my stomach, too."

After a while Tamara fell asleep. That was what he had been talking against. Her sleeping seemed like a desertion. It always happened when he felt most awake. He was ready to make immortal declarations.

Her hand rested on his arm like snow on a leaf, ready to slip off when he moved.

He lay beside her, an insomniac with visions of vastness. He thought of desert stretches so huge no Chosen People could cross them. He counted grains of sand like sheep and he knew his job would last forever. He thought of airplane views of wheatlands so high he couldn't see which way the wind was bending the stalks; Arctic

territories and sled-track distances; miles he would never cover because he could never abandon this bed.

Tamara and Breavman graduated from college. There was no longer any framework around their battered union, so down it came. They were lucky the parting was not bitter. They were both fed up with pain. Each had slept with about a dozen people, and they had used every name like a weapon. It was a torture list of friends and enemies.

They parted over a table in a coffee shop. You could get wine in teacups, if you knew the proprietress and asked in French.

All along he had known that he never knew Tamara and never would. Adoration of thighs is not enough. He never cared who Tamara was, only what she represented. He confessed this to her, and they talked for three hours.

"I'm sorry, Tamara. I want to touch people like a magician, to change them or hurt them, leave my brand, make them beautiful. I want to be the hypnotist who takes no chances of falling asleep himself. I want to kiss with one eye open—or I did. I don't want to any more."

She loved the way he talked.

They returned to the room on Stanley, unofficially, from time to time. A twenty-year-old can be very tender to an ancient mistress.

"I know I never saw you. I blur everyone in my personal vision. I never get their own music. . . ."

After a while her psychiatrist thought it would be better if she didn't see him again. □

