

# The First of One Hundred

*Richard Coleman*

The window held a clouded image of the tree strewn yard, close-set elms, oaks, figs, walnuts, peach, orange, lemon, pomegranate, avocado . . . she pronounced the syllables, av-o-ca-do. They were fine syllables, fine words, fine trees. And beyond was the plain, the buttes, the thunderheads, the last eight years of her life. The ruined remnants of truth, life, love and the sensuality of the unknown.

It was supper, again. His palm softly on the door. "Dear, maybe tonight you'd like to come out, to see what you've been missing." Not realizing that she did know what she'd been missing, those eight years. Those years of regret, of pain, of migraine headaches and stalled cadillacs. This wasn't some game. It was a fixed playing of the dice, the only real bit of soul she could manage to contain. It sat on her dresser; it hovered about the pictures of high school and the desperate years; it was in the tone of the radio when the old songs played; it was her destiny forsaken for the ease of love and payment.

Supper was easily missed. He was easily missed. His paunch, his sedate qualities. His observance of life like a steady film. Nothing unexpected, nothing too grand, too unique. It could be explained, understood, but not appreciated in its swollen mystic nature. The plains rattled with the shock of thunder and bolts of electricity. She dragged her nails across what remained of her youth. "I don't accept this," she said. "I've no reason to. I can see out this window into the garden, the yard where my dreams act out their silly dramas. I can kiss Aunt Kate and the uncle she married, but never loved, each morning, here in front of my mirror, here on the dresser of my past age. If the night is heavy with static, the humidity oppressive, if the lightning manages to stab a stray, hulking butte, then I can recall my high school years in vivid color, with all my loves alive and the heartaches fresh and uncontrolled. I can smell supper simmering below. My favorite again. He tries, but he has no strength. He is the sorrow of novelists, the uninspired artist of the new wave." And here she turns her gaze from the door back to the black and blue stillness of the past, to the squirrels that despite the impending storm still rip the green walnuts from the trees and toss them on the roof.

After he's left for work she unlocks her door. The heat is unbearable. Summer is pale and blistered. Weeds sprout where nile lilies should be. A hummingbird has built a nest in one of the low slung branches of a young tree. The sun, a muddy silver, stands treetop and bathes her lost and lonely legs in its sometimes-light when not wrapped in a thunderhead catafalque. Her mind is light and dizzy, the everyday expression of release, that room now silent and reflective above.

She wanders the garden, its green perimeter a patch of parasitical nature on the surrounding desert. Here is her life, this square of insignificance amid the barren stretches of the common. There is no harshness in her looks, no hatred in the stirrings of her fingers as they ply through unkempt hair. There are no seasons of triumph or dismay, no mortifications of the spirit, no internments at midnight when the moon has perched itself on the breaking cliffs. Here, where the healing aloe grows, there is only breakfast before ten and supper. There is finesse and lace to wear. There are small dreams that become demons in the night and run scowling across the plains. There are her pets, and the husband who returns every evening with the same haunted look.

Inside, the kettle is whistling and the oatmeal has foamed past into the spitting range. She lifts both, still hot and screaming, into the sink. The steam sets the fire alarm buzzing and the house becomes what it seems, an asylum, a reverberating den of sound and mania. Her eyes wide, she plays the part of the madwoman, finally sitting on the porch to watch the mailman deliver the latest adverts, the paper with its blackened heart, and the monopoly of lottery bills.

He says to her, "Mornin', missus." And she hears more than this. She hears his heart a hundred paces away. She tastes his sweat in the humid heat. She feels the tenseness of his legs as they lift his body. She hears her own breath as it inhales, exhales, inhales, exhales, pauses. As it sucks the world dry of oxygen, as she removes from this planet her bit of forgiveness, as she waits for the skies to fling open and someone almighty to end the dilemma. She is not an easy woman to love. She knows this and says, "Good morning." And the world is set right once again, if only for this fragmented instant.

This day, as she calls it, is spent in the repast, in the fixing and mending of fences, in the avoidance of the past. She works around the dirt and seizes upon the breeze of distant, blackened earth to recline in the chaise as the patterned movements of god's reckless sperm travel the world's open width. She unties the lashed front of her blouse and guides her breasts to the sun and shadow's face. In the heavy, weighing scent of heat, the drops of moisture slip brow to breast, stomach to groin.

She says, "I don't ask for much. I will just lie here and enjoy the sun, and the rain if it falls. I will pretend that at five-thirty no one will be coming home, that I am not as aged as the latest layer of sediment that now builds in the creek bed, that I have willed my life this way. Contentedness is not a multiple of enjoyment or adventure. It is a prime number. It is what some search for." She recites poems and practices the advocacy of Darwin upon the animals, higher and lower, that enter the fenced yard. She watches the sun paddle to stay afloat and imagines that this is survival, and once again she has managed to keep up with the ancient reptiles.