

TOM TAPP

W I N T E R

THE WINTERS SEEMED TO BE GETTING LONGER AND THE years shorter.

He stepped out of the idling sedan and turned to wave but it sped off, trailing a white sheet of exhaust. The snow and frozen slush near the gutter were mottled brown, the color of his overcoat and the suitcase in his hand. Instead of going inside where the wind wasn't, he walked across the street to a phone booth and made the call.

He slid the glass door closed to keep out the wind.

"Jenny, put mommy on. Yes honey. Put mommy on."

"Darlene ... yes ... I — all right. Goodbye."

He crossed the street again and went up a flight of stairs next to an alley. At the top of the stairs he moved down a hall past doors until he got to the one marked 2B. He took out a key on a gnarled wire chain and opened it.

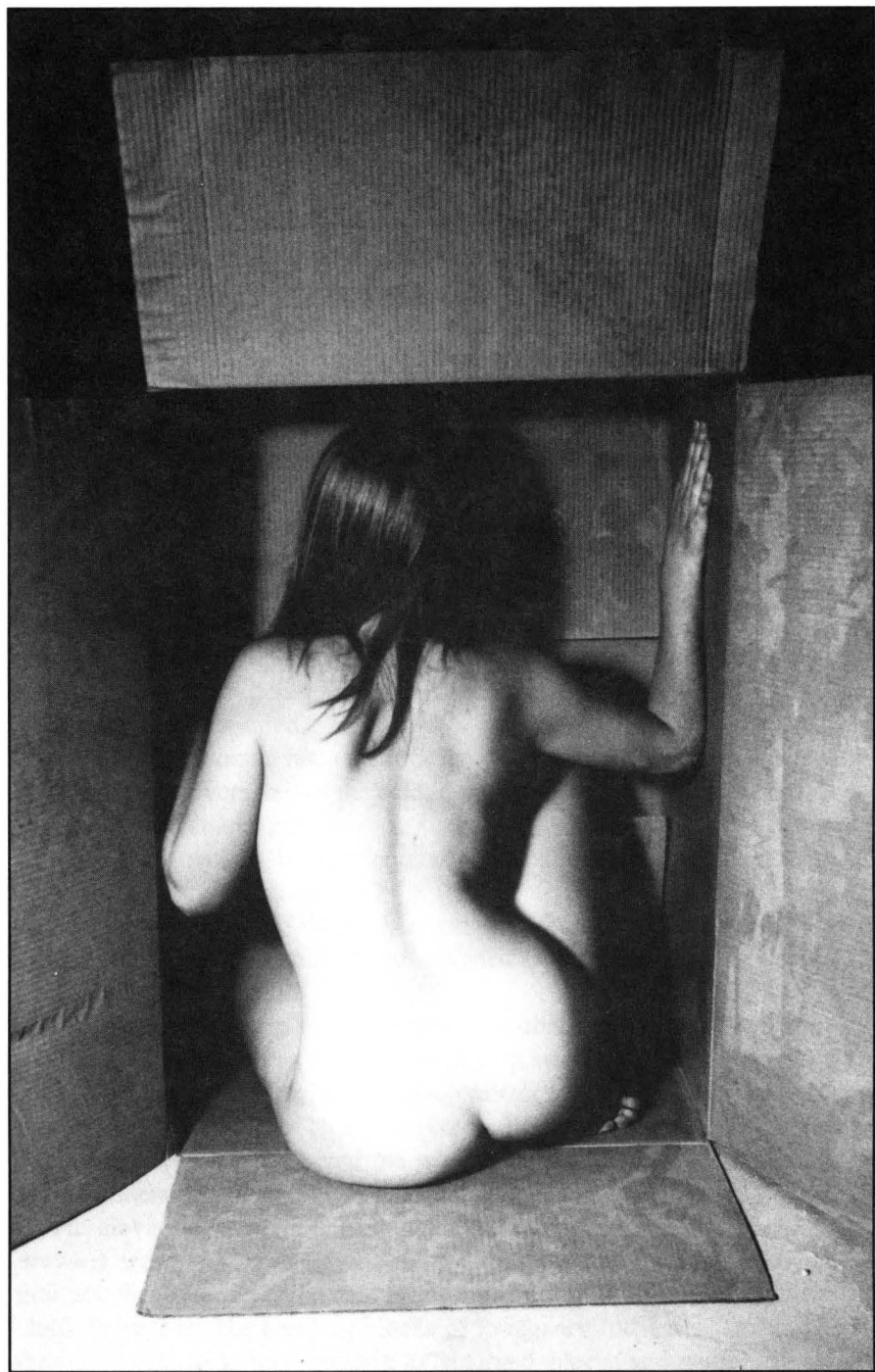
Inside were the usual amenities. Bar soap, clean toilet, water glass, ice bucket.

He went down the hall and filled the bucket.

He put the bucket in the middle of the bed next to where he had placed the suitcase. Opening the suitcase, the man removed what appeared to be a jar of pickle relish and placed it in the bucket. He read the label through the ice. It said: *serve well chilled*.

He assembled a rigging from the other contents of the suitcase. A plastic funnel was attached to a small valve with a hook on the side. This was connected to several feet of half-inch tubing. To the end of this was attached a soft rubber nozzle, not unlike a saxophone mouthpiece, but smaller. He took the whole thing into the bathroom and mounted it on the side of the shower door.

He turned on the radio and listened to a fight before noticing the beads of condensation forming on the jar. He took a towel, wrapped it around the jar and



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went into the bathroom. The man cracked the seal on the jar and it snapped as the air released. It smelled faintly sweet. The jar was held over the funnel and tilted so most of the contents spilled in. As the black stuff made its way down the tube toward the floor, the man dropped his pants and forced the soft rubber of the nozzle up his ass. Bending over the toilet, his knees went weak and he sank to the floor when the cold substance entered him.

He thought of her and the way she had been. Soft and sweet, her sagging old chin held up only by the gate of her collapsing mouth. Skin so smooth, almost like a baby. Her cunt had looked gray, sagging and hairless except for those few stubborn bristles that held on. They didn't seem human, more like a horse's mane or paintbrush hairs. The folds of her stomach were crossed with children and scars. Maybe some from operations, maybe some from lovers who had been too rough. Now it was his turn and he found himself enjoying it, smoothing the sagging breasts that parted as easily as her knees when she was on her back.

He was younger, but not as young as he used to be. She had invited him home from the bar near the hospital where he had just gotten a checkup.

"Come on, it's dark out," she had said outside the bar. "Nobody here but you and me." She nudged him by the elbow, half drunken.

So he had gone with her in the old gray sedan. Partly to keep out of the cold, partly to keep from going home, partly because she would give him money, partly because he wanted to.

And the old woman had taken it. She wheezed and coughed — but so did he. Under the covers, out of the cold, it was amazingly warm and soft.

She let him smoke in bed.

Soon her breathing became regular and slow in its ragged rattle. He carefully peeled back the covers.

The floor was cold in the kitchen and the refrigerator was stocked with the things old people eat: bran, prunes, canned fruit, ice cream. He opened the freezer and found a bottle of vodka.

The glasses had soap stains on them and made the vodka taste cheap.

The kitchen table was white Formica with small gold flecks: the night sky in reverse. On it was a lighted make-up mirror and a bag full of lipsticks and rouges. An ashtray full of cigarettes, colored stains at the end of each, sat next to the mirror. He remembered the woman's painted nails, seeing the coarse grainy underside of them when she smoked.

He moved around the house opening drawers and checking shelves. The drawers were full of things once wonderful to him as a little boy in his grandmother's house. Dull scissors, a deck of cards, hair curlers, pennies. To a child, these were the building blocks of imaginary fortresses; stolen, carried through rooms to a secret deposit; to be turned, placed and muttered over.

There was a garden outside. Summer fruit drooped on the stalks. He recognized corn, bell peppers, and tomato bushes. It all moved crisply in the wind.

In the bathroom were used Q-Tips, multiple bottles of aspirin, and a crushed tube of KY jelly.

The old woman was standing at the door when he turned.

"What are you looking for?" she wheezed, bleary eyed and shaking in the cold of the house.

"I don't know," said the young man.

Then holding up his glass, "Vodka, I guess."

"Well, all you're going to find in the bathroom is rubbing alcohol. Come on and get out of there, I've got to pee."

He shuffled past her, turning sideways, and stood just outside the door. The woman closed it behind her. He heard the stream in the toilet, sometimes strong but mostly intermittent and strained. He heard her cough and spit when she was done.

"Getting old is awful," she said when she came out. "Don't let anyone tell you different."

He was mute.

"My neck hurts. Will you rub it?"

He nodded assent.

She led him back to bed. She turned on her stomach and he mounted her carefully. He massaged the folds of her neck and soon she began her regular difficult pattern of breathing. Out her bedroom window was the garden.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" That was the question that everyone asked when you were young.

Once, a barber asked him that question.

"A bum," he responded.

The man was shocked and didn't know what to say.

His mother was embarrassed and hit him as soon as they left the shop.

Outside the cold air stung the garden.

He wanted some of his mother's stew at that moment, but was disturbed by the old woman's voice.

"Okay. I guess it's time to take you home."

He realized he had stopped rubbing.

At her intimation he got up, put his pants on, and waited out in the living room for her.

She came out and handed him a small stack of bills.

"Anything else?"

He thought.

"Yeah," he said, "do you have an old suitcase I can have?"

The woman was surprised. "What do you need that for?"

"To pick up some things."

"Well I guess we could have a look in the garage."

The old door was heavy and sodden with rain. He helped her lift it and she went in. It was dark inside and he wondered how she could see. She came out with an old, wide traveling case that had once been quite nice. She handed it to him and led him to the car.

He gave her directions as she drove. Then he began to cry.

The woman stared straight over the wheel, not noticing.

The car was warm and he liked it. He sank into the seat and listened to the tires on the road and kept sobbing.

"Are you going to do that all night?" the woman asked.

He looked at her and felt very small.

"Well?"

"I don't know what else to do," he said quietly.

"Do you have a family?"

He was surprised. "How did you know?"

"You have a ring on."

"Oh."

The old woman curled her lips around a cigarette and lit it. "What will your wife say when she sees you like this? I'd kick your ass."

"She won't," he said.

She pulled the car up outside the low suburban house he had directed her to. Without a word he got out and ran up the steps, suitcase flapping at his side.

When he came back out he walked slowly, overcoat pulled tight. He felt the wind-dried tears stretch the skin of his face. The woman opened the door for him.

"Where now?" she asked as she drove off.

He gave her new directions.

When she stopped he stepped out of the idling sedan. The old woman sped off. The car trailed a white sheet of exhaust. The snow and frozen slush near the gutter were a mottled brown, the color of the suitcase. His feet were loosing the warmth of the car's heater. Instead of going inside, up to the room and out of the wind, he walked across the street.

He slid the glass door closed to block the wind.