



Why?

By Nels Hanson

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The fan turned like a lost ship's propeller plying a wide Sargasso Sea. Out the window the blue gum grove above the vineyard was growing black and I watched the outline of the Coast Range move and go still, the silhouette of a woman turning in her sleep.

Why didn't Kate leave her room to meet her love, lift the screen and descend the trellis of yellow roses in a dress whose cut and color like a talisman, a moonstone, would determine the night, tell what would happen as my heart raced until dawn.

Why?

At my feet lay the purple dress, its rhinestones and Joaquin's hidden diamonds beginning to light up with Venus and the early stars—

Home? Am I home? I had wondered that first morning when I'd awakened in the room at the top of Kyla's farmhouse beneath the elm, on an island at the center of a green sea of vines.

My driver Eddie Dodge was gone, I was alone, now there was no smiling girl named Kate, no young specter of myself at the doorstep to reassure Dolly Mable that finally the nightmare had ended and never again would the beautiful wings leave her.

I'd instantly begun to doubt that Kyla was the Gold Lady who appeared after the Butterfly's short fearsome flight, the figure standing in shining splendor and watching tenderly from the aura of morning sun in Acacia.

Kyla was kind and efficient, but distant, like a hired nurse—Kyla was Kyla, not some saving angel.

Eagerly I'd searched her face for the little girl that I'd cherished and remembered half a century, that I'd caught a glimpse of in the worried caring woman reaching toward the window of the blue '36 Cadillac after Eddie Dodge had finally found the farm.

Kyla's mother had come home, like the blue bird in the children's story we'd both loved, we were together again, a miracle beyond hope!

But I discovered only a fatigued, anxious, middle-aged farmwife.

I felt disoriented, nervous, terribly on edge.

Where was the Butterfly? Was it here? When? A minute ago? Now? The purple dress? Who had Murrietta's diamonds?

The door was shut, open, shut, shut, open. Kyla hurried back and forth with toast and tea and clean linens, a softer pillow, the portable TV, a fan, extra towels she said she'd put in the bathroom across the hall.

Each time Kyla wanted to call a doctor, but I told her no, all I needed was rest.

"Here, let me at least open the window."

"No, please don't."

I watched the long open rip in the rusty screen.

"But you've got to have air."

“No, it’s all right, really, I’m cold all the time.”

“You are? Let me take your pulse.”

I pulled my arm away, turning my head in embarrassment for Kyla and myself.

Kyla asked me what I had told people in town, when Eddie Dodge and I had stopped in Lemas for directions. Kyla suggested it would be better if I went by “Mrs. Grayson” and kept to the alternate history Kyla had worked out. Baylor Clark, the town gossip, was already snooping around.

The first days I lived in suspense, listening to the sounds of the house, Kyla’s footsteps approaching my room, vague voices at lunch and dinner, the slamming of a screen door, tractors pulling out, the difference between the pickup’s engine and the car’s.

Now and then I imagined I heard a lighter step pass my door, and sometimes when I moved quickly down the hall the bathroom air was sweet and moist as if a girl had just bathed and then powdered before the full-length mirror that faced the medicine cabinet’s small mirror above the sink. I found just the usual things, the only clue a bottle of oral iodine for a Florence Rhodes, prescribed by Dr. Wagner, the expiration date 1947.

Once the large mirror was still partly fogged and I thought I saw where a finger had touched, written something in the steam before the droplets ran down the glass.

Edee? Edna? Eden?

Sometimes I imagined a muffled radio played along the hall, over the programs I watched on Kyla’s TV—

I tried to keep track of the political news, how the Democrats were preparing for the convention by the Golden Gate. It scared me, so much hung in the balance, like a last single apple dangling and twisting on a stem, not just America but the whole world.

I often saw the vulnerable Earth, blue and spinning slowly through the lonesome cold and silence of black space, when I closed my eyes and said a prayer to the Gold Lady.

Ronald Wilson Reagan had brashly threatened the Russians head-on with his missiles, the “Peacekeepers.” On May 7th the Soviets pulled out of the L. A. Olympics.

It was 1984, Orwell’s Year. Any fool could see all of history was ending, the world reaching its climax.

“We begin bombing Russia in five minutes,” Reagan joked over an open mike.

Once I saw Delmus, Kyla’s husband. He came around the side of the house, lifted the shovel that leaned against the elm tree, then walked in long strides back toward the barnyard. He appeared a handsome, tall man, with broad shoulders and a narrow, comical face, like the actor Jack Lemmon.

He got up early, before six. Breakfast was at seven-thirty, lunch at 12 sharp, supper around seven, with my own dinner coming a little later.

I’d forgotten my clock, but I didn’t want to ask Kyla. I could figure time by the angle of the sun, and the shrill town whistle from Lemas. Anyway, my heart beat like a clock.

(Since Reagan had become president, the concerned scientists’ “Doomsday Clock” that measured the chance of atomic war, the time to Armageddon, had been moved

up—now its black hands pointed at one minute before midnight.)

Tick tock.

Out my west window I saw the vineyards, the plum orchard north of it, beyond that a eucalyptus grove that frightened me at sundown, when it loomed like a great black iron ship above the ocean of darkening vines and I remembered Lincoln's recurring dream of the boat that never reached shore, then Aaron's Anna lost on the Titanic.

Fear Death by Water.

Sometimes I could hear the neighbor's peacocks crow.

The first night I heard them, I sat up, calling for Kyla.

Kyla appeared in the doorway in a cotton nightgown.

"You all right? It's four-thirty in the morning."

"Someone's being attacked—"

"What?" Kyla frowned, her face half in shadow at the edge of the lamplight.

"Didn't you hear it, that scream?" I wanted to get up, to get my .32 Colt derringer from the trunk.

"Peacocks," Kyla murmured, turning back toward the door. "Mrs. Watkins' peacocks. You'll get used to them. Just try to go back to sleep."

Kyla's words had been gentle—"You'll get used to them"—and from a thousand dim faces I recalled tenderly Kyla's father. Was he still alive?

"Wait a little longer, / Till your little wings are stronger, / Then, then you can fly away."

How sweet Kyla had been as she placed her small hand over the final page that showed the two bluebirds, the mother bird and her chick, Kyla almost with tears in her eyes as she begged me not to read the last words and made me promise to never send her away.

But the peacocks wouldn't stop, they crowed and crowed like taunting demonic roosters, their calls awful parodies of a woman's desperate cries for help.

In the morning Kyla didn't mention the affectionate visit in the early hours, inquired only how I'd slept and what I'd like for breakfast.

I wanted to ask if she could say the little rhyme about the bluebirds, but I was afraid, I couldn't get Kyla's attention.

She seemed uncomfortable, agitated, afraid to stand in the same room with her mother, as if together we shared a crowded cell. She kept exclaiming about the closeness of the air, how unhealthy it was, then suddenly darted past the foot of the bed for the window.

Kyla threw open the sash, exposing the wide, jagged tear in the screen. She turned to me, smiling, breathing deeply the morning breeze.

"There," she said, "isn't that better?"

I nodded and waited, my hands clenched under the sheet until Kyla went out and I moved hastily to the window to slam it shut.

Each morning we argued about the window, I couldn't rest or get a sound sleep, my

heart kept speeding up or faltering, like an engine unable to maintain its idle.

Every night Aaron Markham's blue unblinking man's eye watched at the keyhole, before a remembered whistle began, a tune like a round that went on and on in circles, like the Ferris wheel, at the top of its arc failing to break free and reach a fitting climax, always starting over in search of the ending it would never find

With one wing, in nightmares, the Butterfly twirled down in broken spirals.

Sometimes I recalled Kate, who seemed increasingly unreal and was beginning to fade like a phantom, just as the Gold Woman in Acacia had started to blur and wane in brightness like the moon, become another mistaken vision I'd constructed spontaneously in self-protection as death grazed past me.

I knew now that the girl had been a dream, the failing heart's projected image, some strange memory of myself as once I must have been, before Aaron and the Ferris wheel. Before San Francisco, Dr. Bolger and the Butterfly—

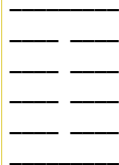
I missed my house and books, my old solitary life, the morning Chronicle and coffee, the good columnists and political commentary, the simple daily chats with Hack Wilson over the phone, always glad he was just across the street at the Standard station, but I knew it was too late to go back, I couldn't live there again after the thing that had happened before the rush of returning wings.

Still, I felt hopelessly adrift on the unbroken expanse of vineyard that reached almost to the Coast Range—I imagined a woman locked in a cabin on an abandoned ship taken by the wind and waves—only here and there the white boats of houses and barns, out the north window the tips of conifers and the shine of the water tower that marked Lemas.

"Where am I?" I finally asked the Book of Changes, closing my eyes, the coins warm in my still hands.

The Lincoln pennies fell a sixth and final time across the wrinkled sheet and I saw two heads and a tail. With a pen I drew the solid sixth line on the pad, so the hexagram looked like parted lips:

27. I / Corners of the Mouth
(Providing Nourishment)



above KÊN KEEPING STILL, MOUNTAIN
below CHÊN THE AROUSING, THUNDER

"Pay heed to what a man seeks to fill his own mouth with."

My eye fell from THE JUDGMENT to the THE IMAGE:

At the foot of the mountain, thunder;
The Image of Providing Nourishment.
Thus the superior man is careful of his words
And temperate in eating and drinking.

Reluctantly, I glanced at the footnote from Mencius:

"The body has superior and inferior, important and unimportant parts. We must not injure important parts for the sake of the unimportant, nor must we injure the superior parts for the sake of the inferior. He who cultivates the inferior parts of his

nature is an inferior man. He who cultivates the superior parts of his nature is a superior man.”

For man I read woman: Body. Bodie.

At first I took it as an admonition, a warning.

I'd been eating too much, Kyla was a good cook. As if she fattened an animal, Kyla fed me too well, like the pig in the pen by the barn.

And in the late afternoons, I'd begun taking a bottle from the trunk, having a warm cocktail before supper as I watched the sunset and saw the Coast Range like a dreaming woman reappear in dark outline.

Recently, I'd exceeded my small daily ration of Camels.

Already I'd been circumspect in my talks, I hadn't pushed Kyla to reminisce about her childhood in Acacia or what happened later with the Lawrences in Fresno. I didn't ask about Kate, sure she wasn't real, that Kyla would frown and answer, “Do you imagine there's someone living next door, just out of sight? Kate? Kate who? What person do you mean?”

Body politic? I hadn't been reading widely, as I used to do, I wasn't getting my paper or the national magazines, The Nation, The Progressive and Mother Jones, though I'd kept up with the Democrats as closely as I could with the TV news and when Kyla remembered to bring the Fresno Bee.

And what else did I think about, really think about, except the Butterfly?

“Many men will leave the Earth on the wings of the Butterfly, and when you die, Pretty Lady, it will fly away!” exclaimed proud Dr. Bolger. “What a wonderful way to die!”

But I'd missed some of the text at the end of THE IMAGE:

“God comes forth in the sign of the Arousing: when in the spring the life forces stir again, all things come into being anew. He brings perfection in the sign of Keeping Still: thus in the early spring, when the seeds fall to earth, all things are made ready.”

“All things are made ready,” I repeated, looking out across the vineyards' May green. “All things are made ready.”

It became like a little prayer that I said to myself, when I felt sad or nervous, especially at night, when I couldn't sleep, my heart hurt, and I felt the Butterfly shiver and tense its wingtips at my knees and shoulders.

I no longer wondered who the Gold Lady had been or if she'd been anybody at all, now I didn't pray to her or see her brilliant form when I closed my eyes on a world that grew steadily darker, as if a huge new planet, black and made of freezing iron, were eclipsing the sun, moving into position to lock perfectly forever across its bright face.

Patience!

Seven days after consulting the oracle, as desolately I poured another Wild Turkey at sunset, suddenly I felt relieved and exultant as Scrooge on Christmas morning—

On the nightly news I noticed the young congresswoman from Queens, she looked strangely familiar, now the reporter mentioned her as a long-shot vice-presidential candidate—

I got up from the bed and quickly moved to the set, examining the woman's shining

face and eyes, as the commentator described her underprivileged childhood with a widowed mother, her husband and family and education, how she'd put herself through school selling handkerchiefs at Bloomingdale's, her work as a lawyer before she'd entered politics as a protégé of House Speaker Tip O'Neil.

She was born August 26th, on Susan B. Anthony's birthday, the same date the 19th Amendment, Women's Suffrage, became law in 1921, the year before I had cast my first vote for the Democrats. I'd forgotten that 1984 was the centennial of the birth of Eleanor Roosevelt.

Now my hand touched the screen, like someone blind I compared Ferraro's smooth cheek and lips and soft blonde hair to the woman who stood briefly yet forever smiling kindly at my bedside in Acacia in the risen light. They had the same smile.

"I've seen her," I said when Kyla brought my dinner.

"Seen who?" Kyla stopped short, balancing a plate of meatloaf and carrots and a glass of milk.

"Ferraro," I said, "I knew her right away."

"Oh—"

Now Kyla carefully set the milk on the night table.

"Just now?"

"A minute ago. It was Ferraro—"

"Is that her name?"

"Yes, she's going to run for vice president. With Mondale."

Kyla looked at me with concern.

"The Gold Lady is?"

"Yes," I said, "I mean no. She's from New York—"

"Who is?"

"Ferraro."

North Oaks, Minnesota. Land of a Thousand Lakes. That's where Mondale would announce it, at his family's summer retreat!

Atlantis, I thought suddenly, as if someone whispered in my ear.

"I didn't know they'd decided that already—" Kyla watched me spread the napkin across my lap.

"They haven't," I said, trying to muffle my excitement so I wouldn't startle Kyla. My hands shook.

"But they will. What did Tiny Tim say? 'God bless us everyone.'"

"Well— I'm glad. Are you ready? Here you go."

"I am too—" I was hardly able to hold the plate without spilling. I fumbled with my fork. "So am I—"

"I hope you like it."

"Oh it's wonderful, just marvelous!"

"Well, you're welcome. It's so important that you eat, to build your strength. That and rest."

"I'll sleep well tonight!"

"You know, I've been meaning to ask you—"

"What's that?"

Kyla had no conception of the historical weight of what was occurring, she was like someone asleep, who'd led a sheltered existence and didn't recognize the most important day of her life, of every woman's life in America and across the globe—of every woman who ever lived and died or waited to be born!

"If the radio bothers you, when you try to nap?"

"Radio? No, it doesn't bother me a bit. I never hear it. I watch the TV, to see Ferraro —"

I felt like singing, "All things are made ready, / All things are made ready."

"If it does," Kyla said, she watched as I tried to spear a carrot, it kept falling from the fork, "I'll tell Kate to turn it down."

I shook my head slowly, careful the plate didn't slide to the floor.

"Oh no, Kyla, no— Let her play it. Let her play it all she wants."

It was true, no hallucination or desperate wish.

"You let me know, if you change your mind—"

Kate was real, like the woman in gold I'd described to Kyla that first day.

Mistakenly I'd thought Kyla was the One, lost my faith and then half an hour ago got it back in a rush, realizing the Lady with the heartrending smile was in careful disguise and running for the second-most-important office in the world.

Kate was real. I almost whispered it aloud.

"I'd nearly forgotten about Kate," I lied, pretending to gather the carrot slices with the tines of my fork.

"That first day I felt a little confused—"

"I told Kate not to bother you, that you needed to rest and settle in."

"I'm feeling better now, more at home."

I looked up now at Kyla, wanting to scream, "Where is she this instant? Let her come running, let me take her in my arms, hold her close forever and stroke her lovely face!"

"Maybe she and I can visit—"

Kyla moved suddenly to the end of the bed, at first gazing down at the purple dress.

Cautiously, in a lowered voice, she reminded me that I was Mrs. Grayson, from Merced.

Not to be rude or insensitive, Kyla explained, but Kate knew nothing about me,

maybe it was better that way. Why give Kate something to wonder about, after all these years?

“You told her I was dead?”

“I said I didn’t know. That I grew up with the Lawrences, in Fresno—”

Anyway, I probably wouldn’t see much of Kate, Kate stayed to herself a lot, reading, studying on her own. She was going to college.

“When?” I asked.

“This fall. She has to prepare.”

I nodded bravely, as if I’d been slapped and now tried not to cry. I felt devastated by my daughter’s obvious reluctance that I spend time with my granddaughter, my own blood—Kyla didn’t want Kate to even know that Dolly Mable was alive.

On this day of all days!

It was like a quarantine, if Kate came too close she might catch a latent, fatal family disease that would destroy her moral character and ruin her life, make her sprout wings and fly from city to city like a harpy performing carnal acts with untold multitudes of soldiers home on leave.

“I’m the friend of your parents, the one who worked with your mother in the store but was scrupulously virtuous and never intimate with your father?”

What did it matter, if Kate existed and I never saw her?

“Just say you knew me, when I was young.”

“That’s true,” I said, looking closely at Kyla. “Do you remember—?”

“Not really. I’m afraid I forgot.” She glanced over her shoulder toward the window and I tensed.

“I’m not too warm.”

“Delmus is so busy. I wonder if the insects would come in? I’ve got to remind him to fix the screen.”

“At night the mosquitoes are bad.”

“The porch light draws June bugs and moths.”

“I don’t want to get bitten,” I answered. “We better leave it closed. I’m all right for now.”

“Oh, well,” Kyla said, “sometime soon. It’s a shame the north window doesn’t open. You could get some cross-ventilation—”

“All things are made ready,” I reminded myself, setting the plate aside and turning toward the window with the broken screen as Kyla closed the door. All things are made ready.

The next afternoon—in the middle of a nightmare so intense Ferraro couldn’t reach me, it was New Year’s Eve and Aaron announced that Anna had returned as a child named Lei Wang—someone knocked at my door and I wanted my gun.

But I was in Lemas, in Kyla’s old farmhouse beneath the elm, not in Aaron’s white mansion on the cliff above the Pacific, the blue flag with the gold-embroidered A flying from the pole atop the highest turret.

The knock was softer, tentative, not Kyla's.

Swiftly I smoothed my hair, straightened my nightgown and the wrinkled sheet, then took two slow deep breaths as I realized that all of my life had been a chain of doors opening inward to nervous rooms where I waited alone and half-prepared.

"Come in," I said, trying to keep my voice from cracking.

The door swung ajar as if pushed by a breeze and something like the embodied starlight slipped through, a gliding quiet goddess bidding her human hours until night when the dew and stars and crescent moon appeared.

She was just as the first time when I saw her on the front step, an unearthly living twin of the striking girl who wore the butterfly brooch and watched now from the picture on the night table.

"Hello," I managed.

I greeted my lost self, the fresh intact living ghost of my youth standing before me in the flesh, before the Harvest Fair and Aaron Markham—

"Hello," said the girl, returning my stare, then shyly dropping her gaze. "How are you?"

"Fine," I said, "much better. And you?"

"Okay—"

Kate looked at me again, boldly and straight on, so I saw my powdered face reflected in the green eyes of the young woman I'd been a lifetime ago.

"I guess."

"Have you been studying?"

I didn't know how to address Kate's august presence, her person as immediate and immaculate as the Gold Lady's.

I noticed the cast of the slender wrists and lovely hands, a perfect match of my own, before the kidnap and the night car journey to San Francisco.

"Not much."

"You haven't?"

"I haven't felt like it."

Kate glanced down at the velvet dress, dipping her head as gracefully as a swan.

"It's been kind of hot," I said, watching the girl's perfect brow.

She shook her head and her rich hair swayed, flashing five colors, brown, chestnut, red—

"The heat doesn't bother me."

"I hope nothing's wrong."

Kate hesitated, half-lifting her green eyes so I leaned forward with anxious attention.

"It's all right," I said.

"It's kind of personal."

"Of course."

"I don't know—" Now Kate put out a sudden finger, touching one of the velvet's shining diamonds, by instinct she'd chosen a real gem.

"That boy who brought you," she began. "Was he your chauffeur?"

At first I thought Kate somehow spoke about Ramon, that like eyes and hands we shared the same memories, then that Kate was I and I was a ghost, a phantom from her future.

"Chauffeur?"

"You know, your driver," Kate said. "That boy who brought you."

"Just for the day."

I wanted to reach out and touch the girl's arm, to feel her skin's warmth, her heart's pulse. I watched her every movement, the slightest inflection of brows and eyes and mouth. Any second she might disappear, leap back across the silver brush and monogrammed mirror into the photograph in the leather frame.

"You paid him?"

"I gave him my car."

"You're kidding," Kate said, looking up from the glittering dress. "That was very generous of you."

"I don't need it anymore. I don't drive."

If Kate asked for the dress with its memories and diamonds, quickly I would give everything to her. All I had or was I would hand instantly to the girl. But would it be enough?

"Besides, the boy was nice, very kind and courteous, very understanding."

"You knew him, before he drove your car?"

"No, that was the first day. He works for a man I know, a man who runs a service station."

"He's about 19, isn't he?"

"He was that age when I met him," I said, smiling kindly. "He must be 55, 60."

"No, the boy," Kate said, flushing. "Eddie."

"Oh," I said. "Yes, 19. Young."

"He's sort of handsome, don't you think?" Kate smiled, a dimple suddenly appearing on her shapely chin. She waited.

"Yes, he's handsome," I said, "very very handsome." I nearly raised a hand to touch my face and feel the dimple.

"He lives in Acacia," Kate said softly. "Do you know where?"

"No," I answered. "I'm afraid I don't—"

Kate's forehead shone smooth and clear, her soft auburn hair thick and beautiful,

with red and copper streaked under and through the darker browns, like my hair once.

"I just wondered." Kate lifted her face. "Don't tell Kyla."

"Tell Kyla what?"

"That I asked about him. She doesn't like me to go out."

She looked away, toward the bureau.

"So no one ever asks me. Maybe they wouldn't ask even if I could."

"Of course they would. They will," I said firmly. "You're a very pretty girl. A beautiful girl—"

Kate pushed back the hair from her cheek.

"I have a scar, see—" She tilted her head. "I fell against the iron headboard when I was five."

"It's the minor flaw that always gives a woman mystery. I can hardly see it."

"You think so?"

"I know so. Here—" I reached toward the night table. "Look."

Kate stood beside the bed, examining herself in the upheld mirror.

"I'm not beautiful, like you—"

"Nonsense. Look at your hair first, auburn hair, all streaked with caramel and red."

She dipped her chin.

"Now look at your eyes"—"our eyes," I almost said. "That special shade. Emerald? Or ocean green, like a cresting wave. The green light inside the wave? What would you say?"

Kate smiled.

"You have a lovely nose and a pretty mouth and teeth."

"I do?"

"Look closely."

Now Kate lowered the mirror the Butterfly had perched on May Eve in Acacia.

Her face was a living mirror, reflecting time past and recovered.

"Mrs. Grayson?"

"Yes—" I was breathless.

"I've looked through the Acacia phone book but there aren't any Dodges." Kate's smile had disappeared. "I don't know how to find Eddie."

There was something heartbreakingly shy about her, like those plants that droop their feathery leaves if someone speaks too loudly or lights a match in the room.

"Delmus says when you feel like you're alone on some strange planet, you need to remember you're not the first, somebody's been there before you— Like in that

movie, "Journey to the Center of the Earth—"

"Oh, honey. It's so hard to be young."

"It is. I'm on Pluto." Kate's weak laugh broke in the middle.

"It's like 3. Chun / Difficulty at the Beginning."

I reached for the I Ching.

"You have to sort out the threads from their tangle, before you bind them into skeins. 'Separate, then unite, to find your place in the infinity of being.'"

"I don't understand."

"You need a string, to find your way out of the maze—"

Kate needed someone motherly who wasn't her mother, someone who could be objective. Someone with a wide experience of life, who knew how all the pieces fit together, how each life was a river with many bends and switchbacks, shallows and falls.

You were the boat and also the river. You needed to stay out in the middle where the channel was deep, away from the shore and sandbars, where people waved and called to you from the trees.

You needed to go with the current and yet not. To row and not to row. Sometimes the best thing to do was reverse oars, hold back, don't let the current sweep you out too soon but wait and then glide to the open sea when you were ready.

At night there were wreckers, they'd light a fire to lure you in, make you crash on the rocks and loot your cargo.

With her voice breaking, Kate spoke about Eddie, about the way everything looked different after he left.

How the leaves of the vineyard were etched sharper, greener, between the rows the hot sand glistening like quartz, the barn's roof stark against the bright blue sky.

And how she felt different. How everything was a part of her. The yellow roses at the window bloomed within her own breast.

"Now it's like I've swallowed the thorns," she said, bringing a hand to her chest. There were tears in her green eyes.

"Do you have a telephone?" I asked gently. It was as if she had spoken of Ramon.

Kate nodded.

"Will the cord reach in here?"

Kate came and knelt at the bed.

"Thank you," she said, taking my hands in hers.

"It will be all right," I said.

How could I tell the girl that somehow I was only helping myself, that through her the past could be rescued? That in some way it would be Dolly in a white blouse and pink skirt running through the spring night to meet Ramon Zapata?

But it was more than that, more complicated and more simple. In deep sympathy for the girl I felt a cleansing wash of sympathy for myself, as I must have been at the

Harvest Fair, when I stepped innocently into the swinging white carriage of the Ferris wheel.

Kate brought the phone and I called the station and talked to Hack. I reassured him that I was all right, that it was true I had given Eddie the Cadillac.

“Yes, dear,” I told him. “I love you too. Always.”

I asked him to get Eddie on the line, then held out the receiver.

I nodded and Kate took the phone.

“Hello?” she said.

There was a pause.

“Yes.”

Another pause.

“Me too.”

It was Eddie who asked first, he’d been thinking about Kate but was too nervous to call. Anyway, her number was unlisted.

“Yes, at nine.”

They had made a date to meet in the orchard after dark. Kate ran to choose a dress and as the door closed I looked out at the sunlit vineyard.

A million grape leaves stirred in the afternoon breeze rushing down the far canyons from the sea. Each leaf had a certain shape and notched edge, a secret name like a star. I knew them all.

And the stars and the grains of dirt like stars. I saw it all, every stem and clod.

I was all of it, it was all of me. Always and ever. I was large and small, God and Kate and a bit of sparkling dust on the Butterfly’s motionless, resplendent wing.

All things are made ready—

At dinner, Kyla told a strange story about a big, blue-speckled dog that had come to the door. She had shooed the dog away and gone out to hang the wash. She returned to the kitchen and found the canister fallen from the top of the refrigerator, sugar spread all across the floor. The grains were undisturbed, not a paw print. The hamburger thawing in the sink wasn’t touched.

Had I felt an earthquake?

In the twilight, by pure chance I saw a shooting star, just as I put down the newspaper Kyla had brought me, that showed the first picture of Ferraro.

The sky was a fading gold. I glimpsed a brown rock shoot past the window with thin spiraling white smoke like smoke from a cigarette trailing from its rumpled surface.

A chasing five-foot silver tracer raced two yards behind the meteor toward the vineyard.

It gave me an odd thrill, seeing the coffee-colored stone the size of a golf ball, the delicate steam and then the finely drawn gleaming contrail streaking like a bright wish across the evening sky—

I lay looking toward the west, thinking of the rock’s heat making vapor and light, a

stone from dark space falling at an angle against the huge rock that was Earth. It had nearly hit my window.

From my pillows, watching as the darkness seeped through the pale film of sky, I sensed great worlds sweeping past, casting lunar shadows, exerting clockwork, geometric gravities, undiscovered planets aligning along a single perfect plane.

“All things are made ready.”

It was night when I heard the screen open and slap against the window frame and feared it was Aaron at my window, he was going to help the Butterfly escape.

“If you wish, we can meet later—”

He'd whispered as I held the gun and he lay in the white suit turning red, the purple dress with Murrietta's diamonds still under his arm, the wedding gift for Lei Wang who was Anna.

I pushed myself upright, thinking of the gold gun locked in the black trunk. Then something shook along the side of the house. I threw back the sheet.

From the window I glanced down just in time to see Kate crossing the lawn in quick strides, then abruptly stopping, turning back to look at the house.

I lifted a hand to wave, but Kate turned again and entered the tall darkness of the vineyard, her white blouse flashing once and disappearing like a thought.

I couldn't sleep, imagining the girl in the pink skirt moving alone among the grape leaves and hidden crickets, toward the shadowed orchard before the blue gums where like Pluto, King of the Underworld, Eddie Dodge would step from behind a plum tree.

Kate was an explorer gone to discover her own new world. Each woman was the first, and each maiden voyage as strange and dangerous as dead reckoning.

If you landed, the found thing found you. Like a stranger, you looked back across the changed water at the odd towers of home. I remembered the flashing meteor and Aaron's black ring made from a fallen star.

I lay awake all night—

Had something happened? Was Kate all right? It was all my fault. Was there a sound, just then, a second ago? It was late, too late. How late? I'd have to get a clock. Where was the Butterfly?

Toward morning, my heart all worn out, I heard the trellis shake, then a little sound. I got up and quickly lifted the window and spoke through the torn screen.

“Kate?”

Kate turned on the trellis, among the yellow roses.

“I'm all right,” she said.

“You sure?”

“Yes.” She clung to the thin redwood crosspiece.

“I'm glad you're back,” I said. “Come talk to me tomorrow, if you want. Careful.”

“I do.”

And then she moved upward through the dark sleeping roses.

The next day Kate was lovely and bursting, mind and body, full of answers that bred questions—

As she held her sandals and hurried barefoot back across the dewed lawn, each grass blade was sharp and cool and sweetly bitter, like little swords against the soles of her feet. It had all happened, just happened, naturally, as if she and Eddie had played parts in a play, except it was real. Real was better than make-believe.

But then they had already loved each other in their dreams, they'd told each other so.

It was all one world, a seamless garment of love.

She'd climbed the trellis and when her lips brushed a yellow rose she'd kissed it. The roses were loving and alive, everything was alive and she'd never really known. Didn't anyone else know? Why didn't they say anything? This was reality, the way things really were. It made her so happy she began to cry.

"You need to read Plato," I said and smiled, "about the shadows and the cave."

"I will," Kate said. "I want to know."

That evening a dove landed and cooed from the elm as if it spoke and I had composed a poem for Kate, "A Mourning Dove Recalls A Place," swiftly taking down the words to the song among the silent leaves.

This summer night dove's song recalls
A place by quiet waterfall—
There grass and water sing love's name
As new as springtime, old as rain

it began.

"You're a poet!"

"If I am," I said, "you're the poem"

Green eyes reflected green eyes, like living matching statues our lips formed the same smile of relief and recognition.

Kate began visiting every day after breakfast, slipping in when Kyla washed the dishes.

She remained innocent, naive, without confidence. She didn't even know she was gorgeous, obsessed with the little mark on her chin, as if some scar could harm her beauty instead of heighten it, be a visible sign that all good was an overcoming of suffering.

Kate was bright but she knew almost nothing of politics or the nightmare of history.

"You're going to college this fall?"

"Kings River, or Fresno City, for two years. I got accepted at Stanford but we don't have the money. I didn't get a scholarship."

"Just as well. You know he was governor, he owned the Central Pacific. Crooked as a stick, rigging the freight charges on the wheat farmers. Mussel Slough? Anyway, you don't want to study in the Reagan Library, next to that phallic Hoover Tower."

"The Golden Spike's in the basement, in a safe with a window."

"They should've put it through his heart. You know, in Utah, where the two tracks

met, Stanford swung and missed.”

I explained to Kate the history of the Valley, how the wheat farmers had fought the railroad’s hired guns at the Slough over by Laton, then about Maggie Rucker, the San Joaquin’s Calamity Jane or Annie Oakley. Maggie had started the Valley’s first creamery just down the road at Dry Creek.

On her other, secret ranch, up by Badger, she’d hid Sontag and Evans, after Circle Corral and their shoot-out with the railroad’s posse.

I told her about the farmers turned train robbers running in the mountains, staying with the poor homesteaders who had the pet bear, later with the Indians. After they were captured, they’d broken out of jail in Fresno and stolen a team of horses.

The trial hinged on whether they could make it down to Acacia in time to rob the train, hide the gold, then get back and lock themselves in before the deputy came back from church.

Could two horses with a wagon run that fast? Had Chris Evans’ loyal daughter sneaked them the keys?

In the salt grass between Goshen and New Lund, \$5,000 in gold coin robbed from Leland Stanford’s Central Pacific train lay buried. All the men with their divining rods and metal detectors had failed to find it, just like they’d never found Murrietta’s treasure—

(I didn’t mention the jealous phone calls from Sally Stanford, San Francisco’s reigning “Queen of Pleasure,” over the Governor’s passionate preference for me, which Stanford had diplomatically left out of her memoir, *The Lady of the House*. Her real name was Mable Busby, she’d changed it because of her admiration for the Palo Alto football team.)

And always, at the end, after Kate told about Eddie, I spoke of my love for Ramon.

Ramon Zapata looked just like Aaron’s oil portrait of Murrietta that had hung above my carved bed in San Francisco, if I hadn’t known better I’d have sworn he was Joaquin come back to life, to reclaim his treasure and lost love Belle Solar—

“Buena suerte, Señorita,” Ramon used to say, “Good luck, Lady.”

From the driver’s seat, at the beach at Pacific Grove with Aaron and I in the back of the long silver Rolls, Ramon had begun to sing as the Monarchs flew in above the October waves:

“Mariposa, Mariposa, donde es mi esposa linda, linda como tu, Mariposa?

“Butterfly, Butterfly, where is my pretty wife, pretty as you, Butterfly?”

That was before Dr. Bolger arrived, with his leather bag of needles and inks

In return, Kate brought her clippings from the paper and through hot July we counted off the days until the Democratic convention in San Francisco, then cheered and hugged one another when Ferraro was presented as the nominee.

“A mighty woman with a torch,” I quoted from Emma Lazarus, “Whose flame is the imprisoned lightning, / And her name, Mother of Exiles.”

“You knew,” Kate smiled, radiant. “You knew all along!”

It was such an important, historic day, I was grateful to share it with Kate and Ferraro and all the women whose hearts I could feel beating in my breast.

Mother. Daughter. Holy Sister Ghost.

“How did you know she was the Gold Lady?”

“I saw her, the morning of the night I almost died. May Eve. In Acacia. She brought light.”

During the tribute to Eleanor Roosevelt, I reminisced about FDR and how much I had loved Mrs. Roosevelt.

“It’s better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.”

Eleanor had worn a candle on her helmet when she descended deep into the ground with the coal miners in Kentucky. Franklin hurt her badly, taking a mistress.

If you did some good, did you have to do some bad? I wondered.

And Truman, Adlai, JFK, Martin Luther King. Lincoln. All the dead were mentioned, their spirits felt suddenly close and I remembered Joaquin Murrietta’s tender kiss.

“Someday,” I murmured, “oh my God, some day.”

1948. 1984.

There was talk of an upset victory, like “Give-’em-Hell” Harry’s over Dewey.

In my joy I was tempted to show Kate the Butterfly, but not yet, I wanted to wait for just the right moment.

I’d wear the velvet spangled with the diamonds from under the flat stone at Cantua Creek—Aaron put Ramon in the trance and again he was Joaquin and galloped with Three-Finger Jack to escape Captain Love’s murderous posse—

I’d tell my amazing story and then slip from the purple dress

A week later at the Olympics, in the City of the Angels, Pearl Bailey led the crowd in singing “When the Saints Come Marching In” and Rafer Johnson the decathlon champion ran up the stairs to light the flame with the torch from Greece—

And after that Kate hadn’t come to visit or left the house to meet her true love

Why?

Nels Hanson earned degrees from UC Santa Cruz and the U of Montana and has worked as a farmer, teacher, and contract writer/editor. His fiction received the San Francisco Foundation’s James D. Phelan Award and his stories have appeared in *Antioch Review*, *Texas Review*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Southeast Review*, *Montreal Review*, *SNReview* and other journals. “Now the River’s in You,” a 2010 story which appeared in *Ruminate Magazine*, was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

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