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Love's Body

Sitting across from me at the kitchen table of his apartment on Dolores Street, just a couple of blocks up from where I'd been busted, Misha rolled a joint. We were kicking back after a savory fried-rice dinner Gloria had fixed to celebrate my return from zones unknown, and now we were sipping spearmint tea by steamy windows and relishing the pleasures of friendship. The tea was hot and tangy, sweetened with honey; my feet were snug in cheap new moccasins from a Mission Street discount store, and the army fatigues felt comfortably rough and warm. Gloria cleared away the plates. Misha passed me the skinny reefer—no bulges, thin as a knitting needle—his distinctive rolling style. I took a toke, filling myself with the cheery spirit of the season. I felt a soft light enveloping us. A moment's peace at last.

"Beautiful, isn't it," I said, handing the joint to Gloria; she declined and I passed it back to Misha.

He knew I was talking about more than the marijuana. "Hard to beat," he grinned. "How come you didn't call me sooner?"

I shrugged. "I thought if I stayed there a while they'd make me a doctor."

His dark eyes narrowed into crinkly slits as he laughed. He pounded the table with his palm, the tea mugs jumped. Gasping and wheezing through his wild beard, he tilted backwards in his chair, wobbling precariously on its two legs, then righted himself, regaining his composure.

I laughed along with him. "I'm not kidding. The doctors looked just like me, only straight. I could do what they were doing—sit around asking questions, have conversations—it's the oral tradition, my specialty. You should've heard my epic raps decking the halls of the Hall of Justice—I thought they'd give me a Pulitzer or something. Make me a Yale Younger Poet." I'd already given a condensed account of my fifty-odd hours behind bars. "I figured at least they were trying me out as an on-the-spot historian. You know, like someone who could call the apocalypse play by play."

Misha relit the joint. His Giacometti frame was loose, clearly relieved to take a break from law school studies. On the floor in the corner lay a pile of magazines and newspapers. The latest *Life* had a demented-looking hippie mug on the cover. Gloria picked up the magazine and excused herself, saying she was going to read in the other room, but Misha stopped her. "Wait a second. Did you see this? This is the guy they say masterminded the Sharon Tate murders in L.A. last summer. Charles Manson. Looks a little like you, doesn't he? They say the dirty work was mostly done by a bunch of stoned-out girls. Mondo creepo."

I looked at the picture. Manson. Man-son. How did people come up with these names? Son of a man. No relation, I hoped, to Joe Mann, one of my psychiatric pseudonyms. Those eyes, wired into voltage higher than mine, blazed darkly off the page as if from a distant star. I flipped through the article, unsure how to take it—as news, fiction, countercountercultural propaganda? Like the moon landing, it begged credulity. "It's enough to give hippies a bad name" is all I could say as I handed it back to Gloria.

She said, "If you ghouls will excuse me, I'd like to read about it too," and took the magazine away.

"It's weird," I said to Misha. "When I was in the Fillmore the other night—the night I was looking for you—this lady calls me 'Zodiac.' And that guy getting stabbed at the Stones concert. And these freaks on the rampage in L.A. It's like people are taking Jagger literally—I'll *stick my knife right down your throat*," I did my Jagger imitation—"instead of literarily. I mean, knife-wielding flower children carving up movie stars? Somebody's got to be making this stuff up."

"Yeah: God. It's the Big Fiction, Steve. Like Mailer said, history as a novel."

"Life as legend. I'm hip. It's been happening to me."

"Entertainment as insurrection. Manson was supposedly inspired by the Beatles. Acidic messages in the music."

"Maybe he should have taken a few Roloids."

"How about you? How are you feeling? Ready to face the outside world again?"

"Absolutely. I feel really good. Ready to improvise with any reality. I've been tested, Misha. I've learned more in the last two weeks than in a year and a half of grad school."

"So you want to go back to Santa Cruz?"

"Can you take me?"

"I have a ton of studying to do. But I could put you on a bus. Maybe Julie can meet you. We should call her."

On cue, the phone rang. Gloria picked it up in the other room. It was for me. My estranged wife.

"God, what happened to you?" she started out. "Where've you been? I've been calling everybody every day. Nobody knew anything. I'm so exhausted, I've been so worried, I thought you were dead, are you okay, the people at the lodge hadn't seen you, I even tried calling April, nobody had a clue, are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Try to take it easy. I'll tell you about it tomorrow. Can you meet me at the bus station?"

"Yes. Of course. Of course I can meet you. When? What time?"

"I'll check the schedule and call you back. I'm okay. Don't worry. Just a little adventure. Give me a few minutes and I'll tell you about the bus, okay? Everything's all right. I'll call you right back."

We made the calls, made the arrangements. Misha and Gloria set me up with a quilt on the living room couch and we all retired. I lay there sleepless, wrapped in the quilt, consciousness charged, not reflecting exactly but reviewing in speeded-up time what I'd been through, the strange encounters, trials, conversations, hints and signs of what I was getting into, what I was into and going deeper with no clear destination. Was my journey ending or just beginning? Surely the revolution was still on. I had a role. Through the wall I could hear the sounds of sex—Misha and Gloria were getting it on, a pounding, groaning fuck that went on forever, bringing me into the apartment again, its funky smells and sensations. I imagined their climax to make it happen. Sex was so messy and scary, it complicated everything. Created such disturbances. But it was also the only source of peace.

"You sure you'll be all right?" said Misha as we rolled to a stop in the loading zone of the Greyhound station.

"No sweat. Thanks for coming to my rescue."

He handed me bus fare plus a couple of extra dollars. "Be careful. Stay out of institutions." His eyes gleamed, ambiguously ironic. "Call if you need me. I'll probably go to L.A. and see my dad for Christmas, but otherwise I'll be home. I'm way behind on my reading. Law school sucks."

"Later." I slammed the door of his rusty blue '58 Chevy, the *Chula Chonga* he called it for its resemblance to the lumbering wrecks that Mexican farmworker families navigated through the Salinas Valley. It handled like a tank. We'd driven it to Los Angeles last summer. Coming back at night up 101 we'd witnessed a fatal

crash at Death Curve just above Gaviota and later been caught in a tumbleweed storm in killer fog north of King City, Misha asleep in the passenger seat and me steering with all my strength as the weeds stampeded across the road like buffaloes lurching through our headlight beams, a driver's nightmare but no big deal for Misha, who merely grinned in that cryptic way of his when I told him we'd almost died.

The *Chonga* pulled away and I strolled luggagelless into the terminal, felt people's eyes on me, tested the ticket clerk's telepathy by walking up to the window and standing there waiting for him to issue me passage to Santa Cruz. When he played dumb I nodded knowingly and said where I was going.

"One way?"

"One way." The only way, way of the unwinding road, wherever it goes. Even the clerk was a philosopher, an accomplice guiding my mysterious journey. What was that Merry Pranksters slogan? Either you're on the bus or you're off the bus. Everyone was tripping now. And I was on.

Bayshore Freeway, headed south this time, leaving the driving to them, gazing out the window at the paved landscape, eyesore of S.F. International sprawling into the bay, huge jets soaring off spewing their fumes. The driver took the San Mateo exit and proceeded down El Camino Real, stopping in every suburb on the peninsula. The ride went on as if forever, this is eternity, passengers in the half-filled bus assuming a universal anonymity, we were anyone and everyone, no one, one another, rolling along together, separately, kept apart by the seat backs and some unspoken one-way rule of mutual reserve, sitting in rows, facing the same way, grammar school students subjected to a lesson, gear-grinding math or music of the diesel drone. I listened to see if it scanned, searched the sound for poetic undertones. Nothing came clear. Was this one of the institutions Misha had warned me to stay out of? Some kind of mobile nuthouse? Jails on Wheels? I'd seen those buses with the sad-faced inmates staring out through

the mesh. This didn't seem to be one of those, but who could tell for sure, everything was changing. I felt restless, torn between staying "on the bus," which presumably would take me to Santa Cruz and Julie, or bolting for the exit at the next stop and god knows what.

As we pulled into Palo Alto I chose to play it safe, making a conscious effort to keep my seat. My body stayed there, by the window, about halfway back on the left, while the psyche, like Blake's "Mental Traveller" in that mind-blowing poem we'd vainly tried to analyze in one of my graduate seminars, wandered through many a thicket wild in search of something I couldn't begin to name. Quite a few riders, maybe a dozen, got on. One was a young woman, possibly a student, who placed her canvas shoulder bag and an instrument case—it looked like a mandolin—on the overhead rack and took the seat next to me. She was wearing blue jeans and a burgundy sweater and carrying a paper-back copy of *The Possessed*. Once she was settled in and we were back on the road I said to her, "Are you really reading that, or do you just carry it around to impress people?"

"Most of the people you see on the street are not impressed by Dostoyevsky." She said "you see" as in UC, it sounded to me like a subtle putdown of California's public university system, where peons like me got our education while the cream of the elite ascended to Stanford. A clever cookie, quick on the draw. "Are you really in the Army, or are you just wearing that costume to depress people?"

"Actually I'm missing in action. I wear this outfit to confuse the authorities—parents, professors, all commanding officers. I bailed out of the ivory tower without a parachute. Landed in a barrel of pickles. It greened me. Good camouflage, don't you think?"

"Some camouflage. You look like what's-his-name. Charlie Manson. AWOL. If I were you I'd shave and get a haircut. You could get busted."

Who is this person? A guardian angel? Secret agent? For whom?

What does she know? "You could use a haircut yourself. Let's ask the driver to stop at a barbershop. We can treat each other to a trim."

"No kidding," she said, looking at me through rimless glasses, thick brown hair draping over her right breast in a braid. "How come you have that uniform on? You're not in the Army."

"You're right. I got busted. Lost my clothes in jail."

"Busted for what?"

"You tell me. Disorderly consciousness. Disturbing the police. Aggravated surrealism. Unsafe changes."

Her eyes stayed on mine, amused, intrigued. As if to herself she muttered, "What a trip."

"Yeah, well, anything to serve my country." We both laughed, I'm not sure at what, exactly, maybe just relief at the ease of our rapport, delight in the hip swiftness of our banter. I liked her. She was sharp. An improviser. "What about you? What's your trip?"

"I'm a musician. Songwriter. Been holed up with my band at our place in Portola Valley. All-woman group. Psychebilly bluegrass. The Kickass Sisters. We're not into the flower-child thing. Mostly just playing music, tightening our licks. Writing songs. Laying low before we get famous."

"How come you're on the 'hound?"

"Oh, I'm paying a courtesy call to my folks for the holidays. They live in Los Gatos. Where're you headed?"

"Santa Cruz. Under the Boardwalk. I'm subterranean homesick. A poetry addict. My head's a jukebox of modern verse. I might have been a musician if not for baseball. Was always a banjo hitter anyway. What do you think of Dusty Essky, the balalaika-picker from St. Petersburg?"

"He's got me in his clutches. Really messing with my head. Roman Polanski meets the Rolling Stones, if you know what I mean."

I knew what she meant. Pity and terror in the public domain. Stories within stories. Everything returning to the theater of current events. This is the way the world was spinning, intricate

swirls of interconnection, no individual detail without its web of associations, a natural continuity yet dangerous too in its revolutionary resonance, multiple waves of implication spreading with every beat, with every note, with every word and image, and we were in it and of it, riding this wild world's allusive waves, up to our wits in history, in fiction. Everything burned with meaning, glowed, radiated risk and urgency, a kind of magical contamination. Anything you touched or said or did could make you a mutant, a monster, an immortal. You lived and you took your chances. My companion understood.

Los Gatos. Bobcats. She closed her book, gathered her gear, said, "See you 'round," and was gone.

The bus climbed into the mountains, winding slowly over 17, hugging the right lane. My eyes drank in the sunny green light angling across the hills, that naked solstice low-lying sunlight sharpening everything it touched. Even in the crummy stuffy bus poisoned by its own sick fumes I could taste the freshness of the sky outside, the redwoods whipping by. This is what I'd missed. The earth and its air, breathing and growing. Emanating serenity. For now.

Julie was waiting for me at the Front Street station, the black Porsche parked across the street. She looked superb, bell-bottom hiphugger denims, green turtleneck sweater to match her cat-like eyes, fringe jacket just like mine (now warming some smack addict in City Prison), brown zip-up boots on her long legs. Long wavy hair, parted in the middle. Our problems aside, she was one fine woman. Impossible to ignore. And she knew it. She'd calmed down since our telephone conversation. Was playing it cool. We hugged, crossed Front, got in the car. She drove.

"You want to come home with me?" she asked.

"Sure. For a while. I've got to go up to the lodge at some point soon and check on my stuff."

"I was up there a few days ago. Everything was fine."

She'd taken over. "Okay. Anyway." No point in discussing that.

We drove to the cottage in Rio Del Mar, our honeymoon house, now hers, where the freight train rumbled by twice a day, and at night from the back porch you could hear the surf breaking half a mile away, just beyond the sewage treatment plant. The hillside between the house and the railroad tracks was covered with hot-poker plants, those asparaguslike spears with red-orange tips, and pampas grass, which resembled wheat—or what Julie and I thought wheat should look like, never having seen it except on television. For the first time since our split I was her captive, counting on her for transportation, grateful that she was there to bring me back into the familiar world after my excursion in purgatory. I gave her as simple a synopsis as possible of where I'd been, what happened to my clothes and my car, and why she hadn't been able to track me down. "I went down the rabbit hole. Through the looking glass." I had to translate my story into code, testing her revolutionary intuition, scoping her responses for what she knew. I felt uneasy trying to explain what I didn't fully understand myself, and wasn't sure what to reveal of recent insights. Julie was hip but she was so excitable; I wasn't convinced she could process the information.

A lot of my things were still at her place; I'd change clothes there. Before I could get the fatigues off we were kissing, cupping each other's buns, teeth clacking, pressing our pelvises together. We paused long enough for her to put on a record. Quicksilver Messenger Service, one of her favorites. *Oh God, pride of man, broken in the dust again*, my cock throbbed to the rhythm and she was all over me, licking and nibbling, rubbing her gorgeous body against mine, both of us naked on our former bed, clothes thrown everywhere. Over the past few weeks I'd felt that sex, omnipresent as it was, was somehow secondary to the larger changes embracing all of us, that erotic energy propelled our lives but sexual fulfillment was a detour or distraction from the absolute transformations at

hand. Except for an occasional encounter with Julie, I had almost transcended sex, more by circumstance than choice—it just didn't seem convenient or available—no woman would have me, or I couldn't stay in one place long enough to have a woman. But people were doing it, I knew that much. Jesse and Tanya at the lodge on Thanksgiving, giving that exhibition for their guests. Misha and Gloria last night. And now it was my turn, our turn, sliding through Julie's wetness with an aching load, her legs locked on mine, hips whipping, rocking together, brimming, both of us sobbing with relief as the tears flowed, juice and come poured forth in hot sweet spurts, the pungent funk of our sex surrounding us, an aura of gratitude and satisfaction.

After an interval she said to me, "Stay, Stephen. Let's get back together."

Oh, no. This isn't what I had in mind. "I don't know. It may not be possible. There's so much going on. I need to get my orders."

"Orders?"

"I have responsibilities."

"What do you mean?"

"I've been called up. Drafted. Active duty. Dig?"

"What? *Drafted?*" She didn't dig.

"Everything that's been happening to me. It's basic training. Like when you're tripping or really stoned and somebody puts on Zappa or Lenny Bruce or *Blonde on Blonde*? A major mindfuck, only more intense. Way more important, not just in your head but in the world. Haven't you noticed? You were the one who said so first: 'Sixty-nine is gonna blow everybody's mind.' We're chosen."

"What for? By whom? How do you know?"

"That's the whole thing: it's a riddle. A mystery. Slow-motion revelations. We have to pay attention. It's happening, everything's coming together. We're part of it."

"Maybe you should talk to Dr. Hopkinds. Just tell him what you've been through, what you're thinking."

"Are you kidding? Lightning Leo? He's probably CIA. He'd just

pump me full of Stelazine, neutralize my native electricity. He hates me. He thinks I fucked you up. Anyway he's your shrink, not mine. Last thing I need is a shrink. That's why they let me out. I'm lucid. Clearer than ever. Pure."

"But look what's happened to you. You lost your car. You lost your clothes. You lost *me*. Everything that defined you is disappearing. Who knows where you'll get locked up next time, or what kind of shit you'll wander into. You can't live like that. It's dangerous."

Fuck. Just when I thought I'd cut my mother loose I'd got this other one. "I can take care of myself. You don't know what I've been through, how I handled it. I don't need the protection. People are looking out for me. The bus, the clothes—I'll deal with them, don't worry."

"But I can help. I can help you, like I always have. I'm the one you can count on, not these mystery people. Two years ago when you were sick at Bard, didn't I fly back there and nurse you?" I'd had an attack of gastroenteritis that almost did me in. "I got you to the hospital, didn't I? I emptied your fucking urinal. Sat by your bed with an eye on the IV, watching to be sure it didn't run out and stop your heart with an air bubble. Even your mother almost blew it on that one. You could've died. Haven't I proved my love? So what if you fucked that little bitch. It doesn't matter. We're married. You're mine."

It was a rerun of the argument she'd made last January for getting married in the first place. I lay there entangled in guilt. I'd gone from public institutions—the university, prison, hospital—to intimacy central, the slammer for runaway husbands. Wedlock. It was ridiculous to think that I was free when I was dependent on her for getting around, for shelter, for sex. Even for comradeship. She was the closest thing I had to family. Who did I know that I could really talk to? April, but she was shackled up with her physicist. Misha, but he was in San Francisco struggling through law school. Who was the new Norm? And who and where was Norm? Did he exist, or had he too been an agent playing a role,

an angel—or a phantom, someone I imagined, filling my own need. I couldn't respond to Julie's words. She had me. I was stuck. Domesticated. What was happening to my epic quest? Penelope's web was a trap.

She said, "You got so skinny. I'll make sandwiches."

We ate. Smoked. Talked all afternoon. I showered. Put on some other clothes. Faded cords, old desert boots, long-sleeve T-shirt under a loose cotton sweater with a burnhole over the heart. My black denim jacket would replace the hip fringes. A spiral of destylization. I was adaptable.

In the morning we drove to the mountains together—I took the wheel this time—to check in on my cabin at the lodge. Julie had been there in my absence asking about me, so everybody knew who she was, no introductions needed. But if anyone was there they weren't visible. Nona's car was parked in front, but she must have been in the main house, maybe upstairs. We drove back and parked by my cabin. There was no lock on the door, but everything looked exactly as I'd left it, books lined up on the mantel, sleeping bag on the bed, typewriter on the table, Altamont news-photo tacked to the wall, clothes in the dresser drawers. Julie said I should collect my things and move back in with her. How would I get around without the bus? It was getting colder. Rain was overdue. These cottages weren't meant for winter habitation. Living up here would be a major hassle. Musty dampness. Mud. And isolation.

I walked back out on the porch. Stood there surveying the terrain. The two big maples were naked now, dead leaves littering the ground. The air was good, filling my lungs with fresh green power, always a perfect complement to the pot. While Julie was inside pattering, organizing my stuff to get me moved (on the assumption I'd see it her way), two kids, young boys about eleven or twelve, came up from the riverbank and past the cabin. Their names, if I recalled correctly, were Bobby and Tim—they'd stopped and talked to me a few times before on the way to or from

the river, friendly little guys. They seemed to admire my so-called lifestyle, a hang-loose longhair rocking on the porch. Who knows what the appeal was? Maybe they wanted to smoke some dope. I never offered them any, but that didn't discourage them.

Bobby was bigger and a little older. He walked right up and said, "Hey, merry Christmas." I'd forgotten it was the twenty-fourth. Tim echoed the greeting.

"Yeah, what do you know." The Christmas bullshit made me sick.

Bobby reached into his pocket. "This is for you. We found it stuck in a tree over by the river." It was an old Case folding knife, probably a fisherman's, about six inches long, heavy, its antler handle engraved with a roughly handcarved V. Somebody's initial or V for victory. Peace. The boys' gift to the hippie in residence. As if they knew I'd lost my knife in jail.

I felt its weight in my hand. Opened the slightly rusty blade, still pretty sharp but well worn. Smelled the steel, intoxicating in its strange cold way. "Wow. Thanks, guys. Have I done something to deserve this?"

"We thought you'd moved away," Tim said. "You haven't been around."

"Yeah, we missed you. You're the coolest old guy we know around here. We thought you'd like the knife. See? It has the peace sign."

I was speechless. Touched. Julie came out on the porch. "This is my wife. Julie. Bobby and Tim. Check out this knife they gave me." Julie examined the knife and handed it back, not overly impressed. Tim and Bobby gawked.

After an awkward pause, "Well, merry Christmas."

"Yeah, merry Christmas. "

"Same to you, gentlemen. Thanks a lot. Hope you get some good stuff. Stay loose." They walked on out toward the road. I handled the knife a few more seconds, admiring its feel, its heft—its character—then slid it into my jacket pocket.

Julie stroked my hair with her left hand, pressed her breasts against me, said in her sexiest voice, "It would be so easy to move you out of here. Come on. Happy Hanukah." Kissing me on the mouth, she slipped her tongue in, slid her right hand down my sweater, under it, into my beltless pants. My penis stood at attention. Everything else went soft.

I said, "We should discuss this."

"Let's."

We went inside for a conference, closing the door behind us.