

The Sitzer

by Ann Bogle

1.

I want to call the girl Fred. Her real name is Frederika. Fredrieche. Fredrieche Klangviert. Bang quarter or something. A clanging sound. Her parents are immigrants. She goes by Fred. She wears white t-shirts (without logos) and blue jeans, old, inherited from men. She dresses like Juni, the other girl starving in the other story, but *sie sieht* like a scarecrow *aus*. "No easy histories," the doctor tells her.

The man's name is Kyle, an awful name. Kelly, worse. Kevin, I can't stand it. Kerry, impossible. Keith? Kim? Kim the man and Fred the girl. (Avoid saying woman or lose your place in line.) Kip, but he's not like that. Kim is sort of interesting because the real person's name is Mike; Kim is Mike backwards. Ekim. Consider how ordinary Mike is, though. The man needs a name. Johnny. Sounds like a penis. Jim. Too much of a guy to be with a Fred. Mik. Another real person whose real name was Mark. I called him Michael. He didn't mind. So take a guy name, Mitch, expand it to Mitchell, but that's his real son's name and his middle name. Chris: Christopher. He's not a Christopher. Nick: Nicholas. An immigrant's child. There might be a Greek digression related to another, minor character later, but I do not want to learn Greek at this time. Jim might not be so far off, afterall. Then Fred could call him James, and the boys could call him Jim, and the five disciples could call him Jimmy. Jimmy the lock. That would be him, at an earlier stage. Jim and James are real people, too, though, people I may carry about, and the novel is not about them. Tom, Tommy, Thomas, but I know a real Thomas. I know a Peter (two, in fact, another tricky name). Phil means love. Glenn, two "n"s. Glen, one "n." Victor: Vic with a "c," a stalker memory. Dean. Kyle again. I don't like that name. He's not a Don or a Tim, both people I know. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John. George, my father. I keep returning to Jim. If I call him Jim, and if Fred calls him James,

it must be accepted that I am not writing about those real people. I am writing about Mike. Chuck, Charlie, Charles. (All real people.) Sam is the name of two little boys I know, but it is a good ex- con- sounding name. Sam, Sammy. Jim, Jimmy.

Why tell a story? Why tell a story about a man and a girl (as in Hemingway, men)? Why remainder the past? People who read like to read stories; the rest of people don't like to read at all. The story I have in mind is a cliché. It would have been a better story to tell at twenty-five, when I actually had the ammunition. It will take a reader a day or a week or a month to wade through it, but it will take me a year to write it. The twenty- year-old reader will read a twenty-year-old tale; forty, forty, and so on.

What if I don't want to separate from reality? Do you? What if, reading, you want to think of yourselves? What if I want to think of myself and not distrust the source of the story as not real?

The point is to establish an ethical tone from the beginning. The narrator may turn out to be a noisy one along the way, but at least the story is not about the narrator! The story is about Jimmy (James) and Fred. Jimmy has a mother, a son, an ex-common-law-wife, a set of disciples, a past, a commitment. Fred has the usual; in addition, *sie hat ein bißchen Ruhe*. She is slightly deaf in one ear with a feeling for *mischung* people's voices, even voices she hears only once, as she bluntly demonstrates to people she has known since childhood.

Something she would not know about men: Jimmy has heard, perhaps guessed it, perhaps even before he meets her - his folks are mostly French - *{dass sie etwas rot (usw.) mit einem Ochsenchwanz getan hat}*, and something else he can barely decipher - something painted like race, as he begins to think of it.

She has told him about that part in *Candide*, where the red sheep

mingle at the sides of the boat to the bob of the sea. She likes quoting from books; it is her favorite hobby or custom, one she gives up early to be around him. He likes dicing lines from songs, so she switches to his way out of fairness; after all, songs are more universal. To her, since she has never listened closely to lyrics much, it feels as if he is teasing her, sending her spendthrift words as "vine."

Fredriche Klangviert, but now I think her name should be Frederika.

As it goes with a lot of immigrant parents, her parents want their daughter to fit in. That means going to college. ("Kohl-ledge," they called it.) Fred would prefer to have been born over here rather than over there, to be Jewish rather than to be anti-Communist, but she had nothing to do with it. She was simply born, in Dresden. An aunt and a cousin also came over, just after the Wall, so Fred has never lived with them.

The cousin (Klaus) is her father's cousin. He and her father (Henrich) print classical music scores in a tiny storefront, no more than an office, in Spanish Harlem, three blocks from the five-story walk-up where they live with Frederika's mother (Gertrude) and her mother's sister (Gudrin).

Her mother and aunt serve *Kartofelsalat*, hot.

Her mother got her ears pierced for Frederika's B.A. graduation from Integrated Studies University at Buffalo. The ears swelled and became infected (she had tried to wear danglies, against advice), and her mother had to hold a tissue to them throughout the ceremony, even when she stood to applaud.

There is a bit of history, easy as histories go. Maybe I don't need it to tell the story. Worse, maybe I don't need much history to live; maybe

living histories down is alphabetical.

2.

I wish Jimmy and Fred had met each other on a regular day. I wish she had not walked into her regular bar at one that morning and that he had not been drinking there with his friend. She had been tired from working, happy about it, too, relaxed for a change; she was not on a course to shipwreck reality, just to sip it, reflect.

Jimmy and Bob were friends who had been in a band, and who were now forming a new band, a declaration of intention that Fred had had no reason not to believe. Still, not one of them said, "This is the birth night of -ISM GISM (Initials Stand for Misery)," because no one had thought of that yet.

Fred was 28, medium in height, not thin, hair wavy, eyes quiet. Jimmy was 32, taller than she was, though not tall as men go. His head was wrapped in a blue bandana that seemed from the start more like a bandage than a kerchief. Fred would find out later that Jimmy was bald, except for two patches near the ears where the hair sprang out (the reason he called himself "Harry" and "Curly"). His cheek bones were high and tight, harder and blunter than hers. His eyes were blue and dark, distant, yet personal, almost too distant and personal, as if he could project images from both inside and out. Jimmy gave Fred a song, written in blue ink on a folded-up piece of notebook paper, which she accepted as if it were an apple, because, as she told him, she wrote things, too.

Fred was engaged to be married (to a man) and to move to New York. Jimmy was out of something recently himself, though he didn't really say. Jimmy thought Fred must be unhappy (all women were) because, as she had put it, she was "supposed to be getting married." She should not have said it that way. She should have emphasized that she was unhappy because she was losing her job because she was graduating, how higher education worked: If she

had not already become a teacher, she could go on being one. Jimmy had not gone to college; he had taken a few courses but never graduated. Fred knew many people who had not yet finished college. They were in her classes.

Bob and Jimmy asked her as the bar was closing if she wanted to go to Bob's to smoke a joint. She told them that she didn't smoke pot. "I don't smoke pot," she said. I don't go to bed with strangers, she was thinking. I don't trust men. I don't drink with people who might become students. She felt too lonely to be alone, however, and it was too late to go to sleep. "For a little bit," she said, and Bob leaped from his chair, lurched from his perch, as if on a bet, a dime, a dare.

Bob's apartment was small and upholstered; the walls but not the ceiling were carpeted. A drum set almost blocked the doorway from the living room to the kitchen. A person had to scrape by it just to pass. "Coming through," Fred said, when one of them crossed from one room to the next. And a person had to scrape by Bob to get from one seat in the living room to the next, because that was where Bob was, one seat to the next.

The couch was black. Fred sat in it, and the cushions slithered under her as she talked so that twice she nearly slipped to the floor. In some crucial way, she regretted the decision she felt at that moment to let more Texans get to know her, or to get to know more Texans, because, for one thing, she was leaving, and for another thing, Jimmy and Bob had not gone to college (the sole purpose of her life until then), nor to graduate school, another set of initials (B.A., M.A., Ph.D.), nor known many people who had, nor cared, except that in not having gone through all that schooling themselves, they had learned on their own, instead of the hard way, that schooling was for fools. ("Idjuts," Jimmy would have said, had she known him better.)

Bob was a mechanic and Jimmy was another kind of mechanic. They played a tape for her of their old band, Disaster Master, recorded

four years earlier in a studio in Houston for the regular fee. They had had to pay the fee themselves and play the tape to friends and strangers who could do no more for them than approve. To her it sounded like bad jazz. Bad jazz, not real jazz, not Thelonius Monk. Her husband-to-be played real jazz. Real jazz bothered her, too, because it was so noisy, but bad jazz bothered her more.

It would have been a sign of bad schooling to tell them that, so she smiled and listened and asked semi-intelligent questions about what she had heard. The men (a little boyish, she might have thought) answered each question, grateful that she had asked. She supposed that all artists rehearsed that way, gratefully yet with attitude, as if they were giving the interview to *Rolling Stone*, or, in her case, since she wrote poems, to *Paris Review*. If she spent any more time with them, she would have to explain what *Paris Review* was. She would have to explain what poetry and "literary journals" were and why they mattered, even though hardly anyone read.

Fred, who by that point had already wanted to call Jimmy "Jim," talked a river. Jimmy, who had already called her Freddy, took a mojo bag from his back pants pocket and asked her to write something that he could put inside. She pulled a Zig Zag from its orange packet and misquoted Johnny Cash singing June Carter, "I fell - in - to a burning ring of fire. I went down, down, down, and the planes went higher. And it burns, burns, burns. The ring of fire. The ring of fire," and copied it onto the rolling paper. Jimmy tucked the paper inside the mojo and held onto it. There they sat, until almost light, thinking almost nothing in common.

3.

That is not the beginning of the story. That is the end. I had meant to tell the story from its natural beginning and proceed, step by step, the way life flows, to the end. Instead, I started in the hereafter and must now turn back, not in time, but in energy, to the true beginning, which I will reach somewhere near the middle, then

muck forward again until I return to the place where I should not have started and slap on the real conclusion.

Fred taught at the public university of Houston (The University of It, she called it, but its actual name was Hortense U.) and at three campuses of the community college. At Hortense she taught reading and writing, and at the community college she taught basic grammar. Mainly, she graded papers, a chore, a ritual of drudgery that took up some part of every weekend for four years. At the end of this initiation, as humorous to God, she felt sure, as any hazing, she would be Frederika Klangviert, Doctor of Philosophy, or Dr. Frederika Klangviert, Ph.D. ... of It.

The schools paid her, though not much, so she could live, though not well, to study in linguistics and write poems, something she tried to do modestly on the side, while she traversed these courses. She doubted that anyone would deliberately, physically slay her (not even God, despite His persistent and, she thought, unearned reputation as Merciful), but she also doubted that anyone would care if she died before she had finished the degree. Perhaps Someone hoped she would slay herself. Without evidence, the newspapers would not be able to call it a Suicide, and her parents, who would come from Spanish Harlem to collect the body (after what was left of a long education), would not be able to sue the University (rather than the Community College, because the University paid her health insurance) for Wrongful Death or any other Wrong Doing, because it would not be clear What Had Happened nor even Who Had Done It. If someone did find evidence of Harm, it would be in the papers, and her parents would need to go to Houston, and a lawsuit would ensue, and someone would "win." The best the University could hope for would be Not To Lose, unless fairness was at play. Frederika could collect for injuries - think of the therapy bill alone! - and expect to continue in her field and her life, even though she was still not worth much financially, only about \$9,000 per annum, of which \$2,000 she dutifully returned

in tuition.

That, she wrote down facetiously in her sorry-face journal, was what it felt like to fall behind in grading papers.

Teaching itself was fine, even fun. Every semester new sets of hairs and names and faces refilled old seats, and she learned that if she could not speak for a particular person, at least she could speak for all of them. She stood instead of sat to give the appearance of being the size she was and no smaller. She did not have her mother's height. (Her mother did not even have her mother's height, anymore; her mother had begun life tall but had shrunk a little.) Fred had muddled it straight through college (her only life until then) and had come out believing that even if she would never seem strong, swarthy, butch, or scary, at least she could try not to seem like a titmouse. She had learned to project to the back of the room, to the students nodding in the back row. The more she projected, the more they nodded, as if they were on a commuter flight to Boston.

It excited Fred to read, for example, in Chekhov's story, "The Lady with the Pet Dog," that not only did 19th-century Russian men eat watermelon, they ate it slowly and with contempt for young wives with pet dogs who wept after making love in seedy, seaside hotels.

"Let's read the passage together for people who do not have their books. They're heavy to carry, I know. A hassle. Why is the woman crying? What is her relationship to the man? Why is he just sitting there eating a watermelon? Why isn't he crying?"

Some of the students became more interested in the discussion when they realized that the man and woman in the story were married, but not to each other, and that they had just had sex.

A student in the front row shifted in his chair. Fred called on him. "What are you thinking?" she said. "Are you uncomfortable with

this?"

"Well, I just. I don't know. I doubt whether people did that back then."

"You doubt people did what?"

"People didn't ... people like that didn't ... just take off their clothes like people do now. They ... "

Fred gave this lesson every semester. It was a shame that there needed to be a volunteer, but more people learned more that way. This particular student, she thought his name was Dillon, would survive. Fred grasped the wooden edges of her podium and bowed her neck slightly before rearing it back up.

"Every generation thinks it invented sex and adultery," she said, "but not every generation thinks it invented nudity. Did late 20th-century America invent nudity?" The whole class laughed, except two women, who were sitting close enough to Dillon to see his sturdy face in profile. They glared so hard at Fred she thought they could direct whistles in traffic. They would stick up for Dillon (only Fred knew his name), if it was all they did all semester. And, Fred imagined, it might be all they did all semester.

Fred checked her mailbox repeatedly on days she went to school. She smoked in the graduate student lounge between classes and tried to guess, when the door swung open and shut, who had come into the room judging by the feet under the mailboxes. Running shoes with strong calves (Will Strom); running shoes without strong calves: This could have been almost anyone. Why was it ever possible to tell? No arch support (Dennis Bork); no leg hair (Dan Fine); basketball size (Sam Struthers); never tied (Tom Dole). The women were no easier, really: Trippy little heels (Betta Staranglia); black flats and leggings: the several sufferers of M/W complex. With

this set, one went by overall leg attitude: terse, angular, lopsided, and so on. The other way to tell who it was, besides really knowing a particular pair of shoes, was to call out, "Who is that?" And the person would say, after some time had elapsed, "Are you talking to me?"

Her best friend was Cindy Mary Tipshore, nee April 17, Aries, the same day as her other best friend, Ginger Felix Campo, also nee April 17, in a different year. Ginger was an actress, not a graduate student, so Fred reached Ginger by phone. Cindy Mary was a graduate student and had a mailbox next to Fred's. When she and Fred coincided in the lounge, it was without planning. They smoked as many cigarettes, butt to butt, as time allowed, and spoke rapidly, yet with concision, about notes they had written but that had not yet been received. Cindy Mary had a boyfriend (in fact, she lived with him), but she gave a lot of time to Fred, who didn't have a boyfriend, at least not one she lived with, and even if they could call Abe her "boyfriend," he lived in Manhattan, a way other town.

When Cindy Mary walked in, Fred was pulling on a cigarette as if biting her finger out of a glove. Cindy Mary had arrived all in one piece, seeming jaunty in her own private juxtaposition of moving pieces - a floral midi skirt (Fred thought it would still be called that), black velvet jacket with tiny brass pitchers for fasteners, 1940s shoes that Cindy Mary had had resoled three times just since she had lived in Houston (from treading on the gas pedal), as if she were curator of her own closet, and Charlie Chaplin vest (with its photographic image of Charlie Chaplin tapping uncertainly across her breasts, as if Cindy Mary had stood up in a theatre and been caught in the light of the projector)—but she had dissembled, charmingly and at once, when she had opened her book bag, and all her papers had spilled out. Cindy Mary's beauty came in part from looking as if her limbs were hooked together with bobby pins.

Fred said, "Do you teach Chekhov?"

"Not yet," Cindy Mary said, digging for a cigarette. "It might make me want to retire, and we don't even have jobs yet."

"We don't even have sex yet," Fred said. "But we know it's a custom."

The door to the lounge swung open and shut. "Who's that?" Cindy Mary called to a pair of feet under the mailboxes.

"Don," Fred said in a whisper.

"Don," Cindy Mary called.

No one said anything for a few moments, then whoever it was turned on his feet and left the room.

"I didn't think it was Don," Cindy Mary said. "I heard he was in North Carolina."

"Why would Don be in North Carolina now?" Fred said.

"Pneumonia," Cindy Mary said.

Fred hit hard on her cigarette. After a while she said, "He's a good writer."

"Nice guy, too," Cindy Mary said. "Do you think he's a nice guy?"

Fred kept a calendar on the wall in her kitchen that showed the days remaining until she would be a doctor: one hundred and three, including weekends, before she would be Frederika J. Klangviert, Ph.D., specialist in linguistics and unheard-of author of three poems written in the two years and a summer since she had had her last boyfriend (not counting Abe). The poems were called "Gun,"

"Missed," and "You."

Fred had met Abe in high school. He had been her chemistry teacher. He was also coach of the traveling debate team. Her parents found out about it when the team returned from winning a national competition in Ohio. They didn't let her say goodbye to her friends at school or empty her locker. She had to pack her bags for Buffalo that night, while her parents took turns trying to convince school officials over the telephone to let their daughter graduate half a year early.

They still spoke of love and marriage, though a lot had happened since high school. Sometimes Fred wanted to marry Abe because he was her other best friend, and other times she wanted to marry someone she didn't know.

4.

The person whose feet Fred could not have identified belonged to Aaron, one of Jimmy's disciples. "Aaron" doesn't occur to me because I like it; it occurs to me because it tells me to do something: Run an errand, it says. You owe me, it says. I owe someone; that is clear. But, I owe my mother more than I owe "Aaron." He would say that only he can crown me, royally, with his royal spear (his rod. Now it's coming back to me: D.H., H.D.). Listen, I am about to say. But he's off, his tattooed arms and back turned towards me, as if I am not here, remarking to a twenty-year-old girl. I would not want to be married to this guy, and believe me, I do think I owe his wife something. If I were her, I would be tired of being poor, covered in poverty. His children are tired of it, too, at least they will be by the time he casts his next shadow. Men are that way. They leave the light bill for women to pay; then they pack a candle.

Had Fred really been watching the signs, been really inhaling them, she might have thought that Aaron - whom she had not yet met and who had not yet met Jimmy who had not yet met her - might have

shot heroin in a holy-brother way with other people she had known, but it would have been pure speculation to think that back then. It would occur to her only after she had stopped writing letters to each of them.

Her lecturer in the Essay was nicknamed Meb, not Abe (her husband-to- have-been). She did not know Meb's real name, but she would have called him Alistair had it been her baby. Some days Meb (Alistair) looked like he owed a lot of people money; other days, he looked like he was just about breaking even.

Fred was glad, when she met Meb (Alistair), that she was a poet off to one side and not an essayist, if being an essayist did that to one. She told the person sitting next to her in the Essay that she thought Meb (Alistair) should drink less coffee. She said it that way, using both names, over her knitting - she had been building on a v-necked green sweater for several semesters, and she toted it with her everywhere. She didn't think Meb (Alistair) could hear her from under his great bushel of barn hair.

It was the last class she needed to become a doctor, and Fred did not want to pay. She already owed everyone: She owed her parents; she owed the bank; she owed Abe; she owed every school she had ever attended; and, she liked to think, she owed herself. One day (her most merciless plan) she would pay herself in cash. She would buy shoes with it, good ones from Latin America. She would put men, like Lilliputian shoe trees, inside her shoes to preserve their shape. And she would not buy loafers. Loafers were too hard to break in, and after that they just got sloppy.

5.

When Fred met Jimmy she struggled at first with his past-tense misses and nominative make-believes, but he won her over quickly with his courtesy.

For breakfast they drank Bud. They had breakfast at 2 or 3 in the afternoon, earlier if Jimmy was due at traffic court. Jimmy was pulled over more often than anyone she had ever known. He knew so many people at traffic court that she thought it resembled an ecumenical organization.

Jimmy had nothing: frayed t-shirts, workman's pants (he had learned mechanics in prison), steel-toed boots. Jimmy called Fred a lady, poetess. The first time she had told him linguistics, somewhat proudly, somewhat hesitantly, he had said: "KNEE-CHEE."

Fred went agreeably to weekly jam sessions at The Bar of the Common People. Her own interest in flight was beginning to show and expressed itself in solo dancing.

While Jimmy was on stage, Fred talked with the bartender, a sound poet from Missoula. It was difficult to hear what he was saying so she wrote notes to him across the bar. She wrote about the weather. She wrote about trade winds. He wrote that he had not known that she was going to be a crazy one.

One night cops arrived - someone in the neighborhood had complained about the noise. The cops repeatedly asked to see the liquor license and repeatedly stated that the piece of paper pinned to the wall above the cash register was merely a receipt for a license, not a license.

Fred grew impatient with their circular remarks. The sound poet had told her that he had sent off for a license weeks earlier but that it had never come in the mail.

"I know they have a beer and wine license," she said.

"Where is it then?" the cops said.

"You tell us," she said.

That was on a Wednesday. On Monday, the police closed the joint, right down to the basil growing fragrantly in the back, the rose bushes, the chive, the Wisconsin.

When Jimmy introduced Fred to his seventy-five-year-old mother, Fred was stifling a sneeze.

"Doctor," he said.

Jimmy's mother was the smallest woman Fred had ever seen. His mother's sister was in the next room. It turned out that she was even smaller. The two of them, Sugar and Bea, appraised Fred in the kitchen, necks tipped back, eyes set north.

Fred waited until she had a chance and slipped into Jimmy's room to call New York. She whispered, "Maybe I better come."

"Whatever," Abe said.

"Ken," she said, more loudly, as if one word could explain it. "Kin."

"You know what to do," Abe said.

Fred hung up and went back to Jimmy and the little people. She put her arms around his neck and kissed him, and everyone seemed to feel better because of it.

When she imagined the future, it was from the inside of a Harley shop. Fred would keep the books and teach humanities. Jimmy would fix bikes. They would have a little daughter named Betty, and because of their influence, Betty would grow up to be a screwed-up knock-out.

Even before Jimmy bought the school bus, he looked so much like Ken Kesey that she pictured a literary life, not the one she had imagined at nineteen, but a literary life, nonetheless, one rooted in oil and soot and loud motors.

One night they were riding in the Olds on their way to hear a band play. Fred liked riding in the Olds, though she didn't know that it was an Olds. She always just called it "the car." She turned to Jimmy and said, "I know what I want. I want to be one unearthly housewife."

Jimmy slipped the car around the next corner as if ditching a funeral. Then he took his eyes off the road and put them on her. "That's not all you want," he said.

"That's what I said. That's what I want."

"No mental activity in that," he said.

"But I hate my friggin' mind," she said.

Jimmy's four-year-old son lived with his mother in a different state, one of the wide ones, Wyoming or Montana. He visited twice a year.

He brought Fred into the bathroom to show her what would happen if he mixed French bathpowder with Medicinal bathpowder in the bathtub and turned the jacuzzi on it. Two days later he combined French bathpowder with Medicinal bathpowder in the sink to show her what carefully regulated drips would do to it. Both times, his punishment - time alone not moving - led to ecstatic forgiveness in his father's lap.

Sometimes it seemed that nothing in her experience could help her locate Jimmy. Her friends expressed quiet disapproval that she would get involved with a man like him - then or ever, and she knew

that she should not give up her chance to marry Abe, who was more like her, but she could not blame herself for it.

Fred and Abe would not have lasted as long as they had if Abe had not been so kind, so consistently. Kindness was hard to shake. Fred felt incapable of it.

Fred and Jimmy made love, without fanfare, five times a day. Jimmy had transcended the desire for the long fuck; he had spent his wishes on speed and coke and ashes. The thing he wanted now was legal money. The thing she wanted for him was legal soul.

When she wasn't making love with Jimmy, she imagined meeting Abe at La Guardia. She would be holding two carriers, full of cat, the boy heavier than the girl, so her shoulders would be lopsided. She would feel that she had arrived at her historic own. She would be glad, too. Emotion would weigh more than she could carry in coach. She would be looking forward to good coffee, to the farmer's market at Union Square, to long walks down Broadway - weather or not permitting - to intermittent bursts of love, to jobs, to small roaches (smaller than in Texas), to Metrocards, to taxi rides out of the city, to cotton sheets, to books galore, to decent cheese, to bagels, to nighttime's empty streets, to blizzards, to two area codes, to the rest of her life.

6.

It started where it started for a reason, and I have to go through with it, to sing it as if I could say it. I talk as if I could not have walked another kilometer without a towel and a toothbrush. I try to carry supplies with me, in case of out-of-town emergencies, including the emergency that arises from time to time to be away from town.

The young man, oh, the sixth, I now see, who does not deserve a blot in this ink patch, the sixth after all this time not counting, not

caring, comes along at the last minute to sabotage the grace of his uncle/nephew/father. If he had known (the sixth or was he the seventh young coupler), if he had seen, that not everyone suffers as he does, if he had spared us the danger of his rise, but he could not, because he moves in one direction; he could not care less for the shock he dispatches with his eye. Rafferty, his name is, the car dealer's incubator.

Fred received notification from Hortense University that she had not received a bachelor's degree from her alma mater, as the paperwork had documented, and that she might have to stay another several years just to be done with it. When the news came, by mail (how did one school know what the other school had not taught her?), she was wearing her best bathrobe (she had three), a long blue one with orange piping at the collar that reminded everyone who saw it of a queen's noose (though no one would have said it).

She brought the message to the living room, where Jimmy sat watching television, with his legs up and arms folded, and asked him to look at it. She wanted him to tell her that she had gone blind from needlework. To say that it said something else entirely: *A gas co. representative will check meters in your neighborhood next Wednesday.* Instead he said, "How badly do you want it?"

"Come again?"

"They're not happy with your performance for some reason."

"I can't imagine what I have not done for these people."

"Narrow it down to one."

She thought for a moment and said, "This is what I do: I walk from my car in the far parking lot to the classroom and face the faces. I look at my book. If they already know what I know, we start to talk

about it."

"Try thinking of what you did. You must have done something. Or else it's a clerical decision."

Fred was sensitive to clerical errors; she had been a three-term secretary herself and never one to misfile. "I opened a letter that didn't belong to me."

"When?"

"In March. I returned it when I discovered the order of events. I apologized for it. It was in my mailbox, and I didn't read the address exactly before I sliced into it. The people who were supposed to get the letter - what was it doing in my mailbox, anyway?"

"What did the letter say?"

Fred drew in her breath sharply. "I can't tell you."

"You might as well tell me. They're not going to let you go until you do."

"Why would ISUB tell them I have no degree? I have a degree from ISUB."

"Call them up and see."

Fred sat on the futon that almost filled her living room, as if to start the years that would model her face to a T. Her apartment was sunny and beautiful, but so cramped that her shins got banged up from walking into the edges of the futon's pine frame; she rubbed one of them with her foot. Then she benched her gaze toward Jimmy, as if that could turn him into a James.

"It's not up to me, Fred," he said a little unhappily.

She wanted to tell him, "This is here, not them."

Whenever she tried to disagree with him, the day always came. Knowing it scared her more than he did. He would turn out the light (he might be paying for ice cream for all he seemed to care), and it would take her to buy a diamond.

Fred called ISUB offices on a Monday. The numbers had changed by one digit, but no recorded message even said that. It was something she would find out later, so many years later that only humility would suffice.

7.

That was all he wrote (that day). Next to us there were four - not how many there were and not an estimate - there were "four."

It was not long after this, perhaps it was the same Monday that Fred had tried to call her former university, that she saw the writing on the wall, only it was on the light switch. The writing seemed to list, and it definitely mocked her. She wanted to tell Jimmy about it, but Jimmy was not with her and not in his usual places. She was grateful that the writing was not completely distinct. It was a little blurry, but she could read some of it well enough. She covered her cats' eyes, in case they could read it, too. Then she remembered that they didn't seem to read in general, why would they read a light switch?

In the morning, the voicer, who had sidled in where her thoughts had been, had come and gone. She began to pray, on her knees - all her floors were hard - not for the voicer to return but for God to remember her name. She did not try to imagine God before she started to beg Him. The voicer returned, but it did not seem half as demonic as it had the night before while it or it and all its countrymen had moved their sentences across her light switch like a

reel. She asked silently - she had ceased to pray - whether there would be "two" to talk between from then on, and it said, "nota dif.," distinctly two words. Then it asked her to shut its eyes, her eyes, she imagined, so she did, and there was nothing, just a hum. A monster on the bedstand had stopped, (but it had not stopped working).

The idea - since she had received so large a gift - would seem to have been to work in a coal mine, although she doubted she would have to pick up and move to a coal mining location - and to shut up and dust. Her apartment was dusty. After she had eaten but not tasted her breakfast, and cleaned the entire house (not a real house, but "house" sounded better than "apartment"), she called Jimmy maybe eight times. He didn't answer; he didn't call; he didn't come.

She collapsed to a sitting position, "Indian style," in the middle of her living room without its real furniture to the floor, now clean - what a feeling of freshness that gave her - without regarding the spines of her books, and bawled to the highest bookshelves, beyond the bay window to the sky, impervious and blue.

She needed to touch Jimmy. She wanted to get up on her knees, but the voicer seemed missing. She thought of asking it impertinent questions; she wanted to fumble and croak, even to risk coming off as a "wise- cracker," but she knew it knew nothing.

