

The Strange Ones

by Jack Swenson

The next morning I stood in the hallway outside of her bathroom watching her brush her hair. She was naked as a newborn. "I need somebody to love me," she said. "I need somebody to carry me home." She was a frail beauty, a foundling, a girl of the streets. She had nowhere else to go. That evening we drank wine in the living room, and my wife told the youngster about my "stable." I went to bed and dreamed about a girl half my age showing me her wedding ring. In the morning, I lay on my side and ran a finger down the girl's back, lightly tracing her spine. I remarked on the whiteness of her skin.

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"It's not the end of the world," I said. "Maybe you should talk to your psychiatrist," my wife replied. We stood apart looking out at the reflection of a red sun on the mirror surface of the water, and I thought to myself, this is what my ancestors saw. Same trees, same lake.

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Later we sat outside and talked about some mutual friends whom we hadn't seen in quite a while. I asked my wife if Barney was still in love with the preacher's wife. I looked up at the summer sky, at puffy clouds floating slowly inland, and I remembered another day some years before on a blanket up the hill from a cabin in the foothills under a sky that was a brighter blue. My wife got up and went inside. California was a nice place to live, she said, but it was a bit nippy on the western edge. I picked up a pencil and began to write my epitaph.

