

The Instrument

by Joseph Young

She wore no bra. As she jammed the truck into park and pushed against the heavy door, he saw the points of her nipples against her dress. Ice filled his belly, the most beautiful pink-colored ice.

"Look, it's free," Libby said. She circled an ancient organ, the plastic keys ivory with time, wood panels dried and split in the heat of its tubes.

He shut his door, rounded the bed to shut hers, and approached the instrument. "What makes you say that?" he said. "There's no sign."

"Well, it's just sitting on the curb. It must be free." She formed chords on the silent keyboard, punching down dramatically with both hands. James wasn't sure—he wasn't a musician himself—but it looked like she had no idea what she was doing. "Good fucking Christ," she said. "It's heavy as hell."

She let the organ fall back onto all four legs and turned to look at him. "I need a smoke, hey what?"

He followed her to the curb and sat beside her, smoke haloing them both. He'd known her for three months and although he would swear he fell in love with her at first sight—were he brave enough to tell anyone he was in love with her at all—the truth was that her smoking had repulsed him until only a short time ago.

"Do I need an organ?" she said. "What makes me think I'll play it?" She swung her knee out, brushing it against his, pushing her dress between her thighs. "I mean, I'm a sculptor." She looked at him again, cleared her throat, pulled her knee away.

James would not disagree; she was a sculptor. She poured cement

into molds of two by fours, built pink and bluish cairns, cemetery-like slabs. He didn't care for them, much, though he cared a lot about how much she cared.

"Yep. It's true, you might not play it," he said. "In fact, it's pretty doubtful." He shrugged. "If you're anything like me."

She stood and went to the organ again, leaned against it. "I won't be much help with this," she said. "Let's get that dude on the corner."

He turned to look up the street, at a teenaged boy smoking a cigarette, squinting under his cap at the sky. The boy's shorts came to his ankles.

"He's hardly bigger than you," he said, but she was already on her way, the swish of her dress against her legs.

"Hey," she said, and the boy startled, dropping his cigarette.

"What?" he asked.

She pinched the cigarette off the cement, handed it back. "Have one of those? I'm out."

The boy fished his Camels from his shorts and held them toward her. James came up and stood next to them.

"Thanks," she said. She smiled, her loosely set teeth taking the light. She let the boy's eyes crawl across her chest a moment. "Can you help us? Lift that organ into my truck?"

The boy blinked. "I guess."

The three of them traveled the half block. They stood around the organ, pressed its keys, measured it against their palms.

"That too heavy for you?" she said to the boy.

"What? Nah."

James and the boy stood at the opposite ends. "You gonna help?" James said. Libby's hands rested on her hips. "Or probably not?" The day was getting a little hot, he could feel the sweat on his legs. She glowed a bit, her earlobes pinking. "You *do* want this thing?" he said.

She laughed and opened the hatch. "Okay, boys!"

They found another kid, wispy beard, smoking another cigarette, and he helped James carry the organ up the three flights of stairs to her place. She offered the boy a glass of water and a pear from her countertop.

"Shit, girl," the boy said. "You giving away fruit?" He took it, red tongue a dart around his teeth. "I'll eat your fruit any time." He skipped away down the stairs, singing with the echo.

They sat on her couch then as the new heat glimmered between the plaster walls. Cement dust from her sculptures swirled in little eddies across the floor. She leaned on a pillow, the puffed sleeve of her dress slipping down her shoulder.

He nodded. "You're losing that."

She shrugged, her shoulder baring another inch. "That okay?"

"No," he said. He tried to make it bright, playful, though it graveled in his throat.

"Well," she said, "okay." She tilted her chin toward the slabs of

concrete, the haphazard piles in the corner. "Should I work then? If it's 'no'?"

He measured the distance between them, the two and a half feet, the beer bottle stuck between the cushions. The organ stood quiet near the wall. "No," he said. "Don't work."

