

To See the World in a Grain of Sand

by Peggy Duffy

Eighteen years old. How I yearn to see the world, to hop in a van and fly down the highway. Like my mother did when she was my age.

Times were different, she tells me. The world was different. There was sex and drugs and make-love-not-war. And there was the Pill. But there wasn't AIDS.

She was sixteen when she met my father, seventeen when she ran away from home. By eighteen she was clear across the country, living on a commune, fucking to her heart's desire.

What's it like, sex? I ask her.

You see that picture? she asks, nodding to the large canvas covered with a film of dust propped up against her bedroom wall. That picture's the only thing she never sold. She hocked it a few times but always got the money to get it back.

That's me, she says. Your Daddy painted it right after we made love. He called me his wild flower. That's what sex looks like.

That naked lady, her skin all tan and golden, with round tits and an even rounder ass, can't be my mother. My mother's always been a skinny woman. Now she's the skeleton in the bed, skin stretched taut and white across her face, hooked up to a morphine drip. She squeezes the pump and releases a hit of dope.

Oh, years ago, this would have been heaven, she says. She lays her head back, experiencing the rush. Legally. How many years did she wrap a rubber cord in a tight knot around her arm, the end clasped between her teeth while she jammed a needle into the crook of her arm?

Mama, you stupid shit, I want to tell her. Did you sit for Daddy when he shot you up that first time, all full of desire, like before you posed for that painting? And now that I'm eighteen and no one can

take me away from you anymore, you're gonna go and die on me just like Daddy did.

What am I supposed to do, huh?

You're eighteen years old, you can do anything you want.

Like you did?

No, not like me baby, you gotta do better than me. She squeezes on the morphine pump, but it's too soon. The device is hooked up to a timer and she hasn't waited long enough.

Outside her window the winos sit on benches in the summer heat, their shirts thrown over the chain link fence. I watch them clasp their paper-clad bottles, studying their hands, trying to imagine if one of them could have ever held a painter's palette and brush. I want to carry her outside, lean her up against the fence and let her show me just a little part of the world.

Can I have it? The painting?

What you want with the painting? she asks, but she's distracted, her fingers pushing, pushing on that pump, waiting on a hit of heaven.

