



SALT

by Jami Lee Montgomery

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I met Sel at an art gallery open house. She was with her girlfriend. I was with my boyfriend. Her girlfriend was bored. My boyfriend was bored. The art was mostly boring paintings. The sculptures were fascinating. I found out later that Sel's father was the sculptor. Her full name is Zelica Louise DeLot. She was Only there to support her father. He had been preparing for this show for over a year and all of his sculptures were between the size of a beach ball and a coffee table except one. It was a life-sized carving of Sel's mother in red granite. She hadn't known he was showing it and I found her standing in front of it silently crying one slow tear at a time.

I had never met this woman before, and I had no idea who she was. All I saw was a beautiful young woman who was entranced and in pain. She stood so still staring up into this face as if she knew it. She hardly blinked. She didn't notice when anyone spoke to her and she didn't seem to notice when her girlfriend left. I watched her. My boyfriend was antsy to leave and pick up a bag of weed from his friend. I sent him to go alone and told him I would be there when he got back. I watched her. The excuse of studying the sculpture would have been enough if she had noticed me staring but she didn't.

It could not have been more than twenty minutes. In a serious art exhibit, twenty minutes staring at one piece is not uncommon or even remarkable, but I was beginning to be uncomfortable, convinced that someone would come to shoo me away if I didn't move. Worse, that someone would interrupt Sel's reverie if she didn't move. I began to fixate on how awful I would feel if that happened. Suddenly, I was standing beside her and had slid an arm around her waist and was holding her in sympathy.

She should have yelped and turned on me and demanded to know why some stranger was being so familiar with her. But she didn't. She sighed, deep and audibly and two large twin tears fell tracing parallel paths on her cheeks. They landed on my arm. I whispered with my mouth near her shoulder, "Are you okay?" That is when I began to know her.

"I will be fine." she turned slightly toward me, leaving the wet track to dry on her cheeks. "This is a sculpture of my mother. It is taken from a picture of her at an airport of all places. That pensive look on her face is because she was waiting for my father to get off a plane. He snuck up on her and snapped the photo before letting her know he had arrived." Sel turned to fully look at me for the first time. Her face creased in a full frown of confusion and concern. I let her go and stepped back immediately.

"I apologize. I only thought you looked so sad and wanted to reach out to you. My name is Melody Rhodes. My boyfriend's uncle is apparently one of the artists showing tonight. He promised to let him use some family cottage if he came to help with the showing."

Sel smiled and then laughed a timid expression of mirth. "You are Scott's girlfriend?"

I smiled a tight-lipped and rueful acknowledgement. "Your father is the uncle?"

Sel dashed away the tears from her cheeks and threaded her arm through mine. She turned briefly and kissed her fingertips before pressing them to the cheek of the statue, then she turned back to me and said, "I think you may have better luck getting the keys to that cabin from me than Scott. My name is Zelica. Everyone calls me Sel." She pointed us into the crowd and slowly marched us in search of her father.

She seemed to be looking for someone else while she sought out her father. After seeing her locate then dismiss four brunette women in a row I guessed, "If you are looking for your girlfriend, she caused a quiet little scene at the coat room about thirty minutes ago and left."

Sel tsked and shook her head, affecting a sling of her hair over her shoulders. “She was always too bitchy for me anyway.” Catching sight of her father, Sel moved us through the current of people and abandoned my arm for her father’s. “Daddy, this is Miss Melody Rhodes. She is absolutely in love with The Fretting Frau.”

The older gentleman’s lips pursed out in an unamused frown. “Stop calling her that, Sel.” He turned to me, “We only call her that in the photograph. The sculpture is called, “Dutiful Wife.” She is not for sale, but I have to bring her out and show her to the world once in a while.”

“She is lovely. Why was she carved from a photo? Is that how sculptures are normally done? Without a live subject?” I had no idea how apt my words were.

Sel snagged three flutes of champagne from a passing server and passed them out to us. Her father sat at a table as she handed him the drink. “My mother passed away just a few months after that photograph was taken. She couldn’t be a live subject if we tried.” She leaned down and kissed the top of her father’s thinning pate. “And we both miss her very much.”

I sipped my champagne. The stuff tasted like cotton candy. I am sorry to hear that. How old were you when she passed away?” I wanted to ask how she had died and why they had been at the airport and why she called her the Fretting Frau and why that bothered her father. “The statue looks like she is a very young woman.”

Sel smiled into her champagne, twirling the flute gently in her fingers. “I was not quite ten. She had been planning a birthday party for me and gone to the store to pick up streamers. When she got back, I remember she took some aspirin and said she had a headache. Then she fell off the step ladder while hanging the streamers. She had an aneurysm burst. One minute she was setting up a party and the next she was gone.”

Sel’s father patted his daughter’s hand and said, “We both miss her every day.”

Sel grinned, “And I celebrate my birthday on the other half of the year.”

I smiled and tried to help them let the mood turn. “I can’t blame you for that.” I sipped at the cloying drink again and asked, “Would anyone like something less sweet? Water? Soda?”

They both nodded and I promised to return soon. I walked into the crowd and toward the bar. On the way, I navigated past the chest-high plinths that displayed the diorama-style sculptures that were the main part of the three-dimensional show. I read the small tags with the artist’s name and the title for each piece as I passed them. “Flight” seemed to be a city skyline on a flat piece of stone. If you cut it into two pieces, it could have been bookends. “Light,” a round disc roughly three feet in diameter, carved on one side, appeared to be a cloudscape at first glance. On closer inspection it seemed to actually resemble the way light refracted when you looked up at the surface from underwater. The clouds would have been on the other side of that veil. The name of the artist was Piedre DeLot, Sel’s father.

A short and starvingly thin woman with maroon hair passing through the thin admirers of the paintings on the wall was one of the two painters on display. She must have played to some audience as several of her paintings were marked as sold. The very black hair of the other artist stayed stolidly still between two of his massive paintings and a steady trickle of interested persons approached him. He had also sold several of the paintings he displayed.

A tiny blue sticker topped every DeLot sculpture indicating it had sold. I felt somewhat irritated about this. Some part of me wanted to have one of these beautiful creations and was too late to the sale.

I requested and received three icy bottles of water and made my way back to the table. Placing a napkin on the table in front of each of us, I passed out the waters and listened to glean any hint of what they had been talking about. “She was never going to work out and be right for me, Dad.”

“If your mother had been there during your formative dating years, maybe you wouldn’t have fixated on girls. I would like to be a grandpa one day. I don’t think science has figured out how to merge two eggs yet.” Piedre chided his daughter and, while it sounded obnoxious and absolutely awful, it had the ring of some old and practiced joke that had never been funny, repeated in the hopes that familiarity would earn it some humor.

Sel grunted a very undemure snort of derision and replied, “You know, I think they actually have figured out a way to do that. Anyway, I am single again and would be thrilled to drive you home.”

“How will you get your car home? If we drive your car, how will we get your mother home?” Piedre waved a roughly calloused hand, “No I will just wait the show out and have one of the warehouse men help me load her up in the truck and ...”

“I can help.” I spoke up. “I rode here with your nephew and he has cranked off somewhere and abandoned me. I can drive the truck or the car, either one, if you would like.”

Sel punched me in the shoulder in a friendly but altogether unladylike way. “See, Dad? You do not have to stay and wear yourself out.”

Between us, we managed to flag down Piedre’s agent who was fussily counting money. She arranged for the statue to be loaded back into the small box truck that appeared to be Piedre’s daily driver. Sel drove the truck with her exhausted father and I followed them in Sel’s twenty-year-old Lexus sedan. The route took us on a brief excursion across the beltway and then north and west into a still-rural suburb with actual farms and fields. I hadn’t been in an area less crowded than the downtown residential neighborhoods since college. The stars looked like they were poised to hurl themselves at us if we gave them a stationary target.

The house we finally pulled up to was a small, clapboard thing with huge screened windows lacking any glass in them on the front side. It appeared shabby in the dark. I watched the truck pull around back and disappear into a barn. I parked the Lexus in the front, facing the insubstantial looking house. When the lights from deep in the house finally came on, they backlit an enormous screened porch. What I had mistaken in the dark for the entirety of the house was still the largest single part of it. Sel opened the screen door and waved at me to join them inside.

Walking through the porch area, I realized the kitchen was housed here on this porch. It occupied the right-hand, exterior wall of the porch and the right-hand interior wall up to the door. The countertops were long and clear of any clutter. There was a large ovular table with six chairs off center, closer to the outer wall and its massive screen windows. I turned my head to look to the left and had the impression of a wood stove in the center of that space with lumpy, shadowy things arranged around it, before Sel pulled me through the door of the house. The house itself was very small. Light, sandy brown colored rough cedar wood and dark red brick was the overall inspiration and foundation of the room. Lightweight but chunky furniture scattered the open space and a cold fireplace occupied the wall farthest from the door. A spiraling staircase led to a loft over my head, open to the other side of the room so that a fire in the hearth would cast flickering light up into the cozy nook. I turned my head side to side, looking for Piedre.

Sel motioned to a door in the back of the room. “He is settling in with mom. His workshop is back there. It is four times the size of his house.” She must have noticed that I began looking around again to judge the size because she said, “His house is attached to his workshop and my house, this house, is attached to his with a breezeway in the back. This is my little roost. There is another apartment area through there, connected with a bathroom.”

She motioned to a chair and I sat. I would need to call a cab or Scott to get back to town if Sel didn’t want to drive me, but I wasn’t in a hurry. “This is an amazing space. The brick and wood are so warm-feeling and massive while being quaint and humble.”

Sel actually laughed at me. The sound was startling and a little rude. “You sound like one of Dad’s art friends.”

I could feel the hurt expression settling on my face. “I am a writer. I appreciate precision of language and concise description. I was trying to pay your decorating tastes a compliment.” I stood and reached into my back pocket to try to find a way to leave. My phone had no service.

Sel was suddenly in front of me. She took my two hands between hers, my phone pressed hard and cold between my palms, and held them to her chest. “I apologize. I appreciate the compliment and I have always felt the same way about my home. I designed it and supervised the build. It was started when I was fourteen and I only just finished the addition so that I could have a roommate. Come with me. Let me show you.”

She was standing so close to me. I noticed her scent. It wandered into my mind and distracted me. Sel smelled of cedar and sandalwood, cinnamon, cardamom and anise seed, and salt. Her hair, thick and dense, wafted a salty scent like the sea when she tossed it. Like she was annoyed with it and absently just getting it out of her way. She struck me as beautiful in at least three of my senses. I smiled at her and nodded, sliding my phone back into my back pocket.

She led me through the whole of her great room house, pointing out small details that she had designed into it to fit some small habit or need that she found important. One such was the way each jointed frame of exposed wood was puzzled together with an intricate fit of a bulb into a sleeve so that, even if the nails snapped and the glue deteriorated, the wood itself would cling one piece to the other and stay solid around her. She lit a fire in the place in the wall and pointed out how the hearth was of a single piece of carved stone, wrapping around to frame the fireplace and jutting out across the floor six feet in a spilled milk pattern to protect the wood from any stray pieces of ash or ember. She pulled me up to the loft, climbing the stairs and sweeping her arm out wide to show me the vista of the room below. Open and flowing, the room did begin to seem like a vista. As we reached the level of the loft I saw that the front half of the roof slanted upward away from the ledge of the loft. The front wall of the loft area was a broad expanse of sheet glass, triangular in shape, sweeping up to a pointed arch. The glare of the fire light from below made the glass wall solid.

Sel walked around the bed and sat on the far side very close to the window. “Come sit up at the head of the bed and look up.”

I obeyed and copied her posture. Leaning back on my elbows and lowering my head back, I looked up through the glass. The light from the fire was at the wrong angle to make anything look solid now and the stars, so menacing earlier when I was driving, looked like the eyes of doting aunts and uncles now looking down on precious children.

The sun blazed through my eyelids and seared the sleep from my mind. Sel turned on her side and the scent of her hair wafted back to me. With it, the deep feelings of the night before. My feet were still firmly planted on the floor on my side of the bed and Sel had wriggled and curled until she was fully on the bed and her upper body was curled around and near my head. Her voice was soft, whispering. “The sun always hits me in the face at the same time every day. It is so much more reliable than an alarm clock. It is just after seven in the morning. Would you like some coffee?”

I grinned and rubbed my eyes vigorously with the heels of my hands. “Is the guest room set up with this cosmic wake-up call as well?”

Sel nodded, “It can be. There is a smaller plate glass window. It catches the same solar vista so someone could set up a bed to catch the same rays.” She bounced to her feet and over to an alcove where clothing hung from hooks and hangers and drawers were built into the wall. She pulled the linen dress from the night before over her head and I turned my face back to the view of the morning sky. I noticed that the panes of glass were doubled with a thumb’s width of air space between them. It must have been sealed incredibly well. The chill of

the morning outside had condensed dew onto the outside of the window but nothing misted the space between. Sel threw a pair of cotton shorts and a t-shirt to land on the bed beside me and said, "Meet me downstairs when you change. I will show you the apartment."

I nodded and noticed she had changed into a similar set of shorts and shirt. She had pulled her hair up into a loose bun and the locks that escaped it betrayed her use the night before of a straightening iron. Small, tight waves were appearing in the unruly escapee strands. I looked for my purse and realized it was still in the car. Standing, I looked over the room and discovered a thick comb and some conditioning spray. Looking in the ephemeral reflection offered by the window, I confirmed that my own hair was a tangled nest of brown straw. I sprayed a little of the conditioner on it and flipped it over, bending double to study my kneecaps. I was merciless, pulling at the snarls until the hair gave up and suddenly lay flat and limp but tangle free. Flipping my hair back over my head and catching it up with both hands, I wrestled it into one fist while retrieving a hair band from my pocket. The ugly, loose but high ponytail was my signature style in those days. I shed my chafing and uncomfortable jeans, bra and blouse, the soft shorts and t-shirt soothed my skin and felt as calming as a friendly hug.

I put my socks back on and bounded down the stairs to find my fascinating new friend. She was on the porch, the sun dappled leafy shadows through the screen of the walls. The chill in the air was being chased away by the warmth of the oven. She must have only just turned it on, because I couldn't smell anything coming from it yet. I pulled a chair from under the table and grinned to see a folded fleece blanket in the seat. Spreading it across the hard, wooden seat and arms, I perched on the seat with my feet pulled up and crossed in front of me. The chair didn't look very proportionately large, but it accommodated me sitting like a child with room to spare. I flipped the side edges of the blanket down over my knees and grinned when Sel handed me a cup of steaming hot coffee. She placed cold cream and warm honey and several bowls and spoons of various things on the table in front of me. I began to sniff and scoop things into my coffee and gasped at the suddenly spicy aroma that escaped when she opened the oven door a few minutes later to remove a small tray of thin biscuits.

"These were my favorite thing my mother used to make when I was a child. They are made with dried orange peel and cranberries. You can drizzle the honey and powdered sugar on them or eat them plain or with just a bit of butter if you want. I like them covered in drippy sugar most days but today I want them plain with my black coffee."

I was smiling so thoroughly my cheeks were beginning to hurt. There were four on the plate and I picked one up carefully between two fingers. They were very hot. It wasn't soft like a biscuit. It had a firm, almost crispy, outer crust and was flaky when I bit into it. The flavor was aromatic and filled my sinuses with citrus and cranberry and something else I could not quite determine. Sel noticed the way I studied the biscuit and chewed slowly. She giggled and said, "You will never guess. It is cinnamon and cloves. I call them crescent moons."

I studied the biscuits on the plate and nodded. "They do look like crescent moons. You just need a little gray icing to drizzle on them for moon dirt."

Sel laughed and picked at the edge of her biscuit. "They are made by, first, folding the batter until it fully submits to the baker's authority. Then it is rolled into a length of doughy rope. I use this old scoop." She paused and reached behind her to the counter. She held up a broken and battered piece of plastic for me to see. "I cut the dough-rope into two-inch-wide crescents with the side of the scoop."

I nodded and eyed the piece of plastic that she claimed had once been a scoop. "You will have to teach me some day."

She twisted again to replace the alleged scoop on the counter. When she had settled back into her chair again, she said, "My mother inherited that scoop from her mother who used to hold it by the bottom and cut circles from the flattened and rolled out dough. One day, mom tried to surprise her mother with a batch of these

biscuits and broke the bottom off of the measuring scoop. My grandmother found my mother crying in the middle of a catastrophe of flour and dried fruits. My grandmother told my mother that she had accomplished a wonderful thing. You see, these were supposed to be crescents all along. My grandmother had just been waiting for the scoop to break so she could make them properly.”

I was deeply perplexed. I studied Sel’s face and saw the endearment with which she recalled the tale. The story made no sense at all, but it was a child’s memory of the story of another child’s memory. It didn’t have to make sense. I smiled and sipped my coffee. “Does it make you feel close to your mother to remember that story and make these biscuits?”

Sel leaned her head to one side and smiled. She ran a fingertip along the edge of her coffee cup and said, “Yes. I always feel closer to her when I am cooking one of her old recipes or sharing stories about her.”

We sat there talking about food and mothers through two pots of coffee before I realized I needed to use the facilities. Sel grinned and bounced in her little-girl way back into the house and led me to the bathroom. She showed me in and it was nothing seriously special. It was nice with walls made of cedar planks like what might be found in a sauna. The shower was very large, the size of a walk-in closet. She left me there and continued through, indicating I should follow when I was done. So, I did.

The doorway on the other side of the bathroom led to a completely different design of apartment. First, it was designed to be an apartment. The floor was white tile, not wood. The windows, while large and light-bringing, were not massive or anything that could be described as features. The stairs were pushed off to the side of the main room, opposite the bathroom door. There was no fireplace but there was a decorative heater in the living/den space which opened up to the left as I walked into the room. To the right, the floor raised up four inches to a dining platform which raised another four inches on the other side to be a raised kitchen separated by a service bar.

I looked at Sel for permission to explore and she gestured, granting permission for me to poke into everything. I went to the door under the stairs first and found that it opened onto a deck, not screened, but with a small covered area directly surrounding the door. The stairs off the deck led to a gravel drive and parking area. From there I could see Sel’s father’s studio and he was up and busily carving away at something.

Back inside, I walked up the stairs and began to appreciate the black and white motif which was broken downstairs in the living area by woody brown and in the kitchen by stainless steel. Here in the bedroom, it was broken only by texture. Everything was black and white or a shade of cream or grey, but the area rug was shaggy, and the throw pillows on the bed were satin and shining. The comforter was overstuffed and downy, and the drapes were coarse woven fabric that only decorated the massive little sister of the great triangle window of Sel’s room.

I needed to live in this apartment.

I walked back downstairs and into the kitchen area. I poked at the gas stove and stroked the small coffee maker. I tried to notice the light fixtures and the cabinetry door hardware but all of the details were right and all of the rightness was becoming too much to take in and catalogue at once. I walked to stand behind a chair at the table and asked, “How much are you asking for this place? Do you have pet or roommate regulations?”

Sel was sipping her coffee and didn’t look up. “I have an ad that is supposed to start running next week. Asking is \$800.00 a month plus utilities and deposit. Pets are fine but that is another deposit and zoning laws being what they are, no more than two people could occupy this apartment so…” Sel shrugged and finally looked up, sipping her coffee.

I sipped my coffee and asked, “Can we negotiate?”

Sel sputtered. “You want the apartment?”

She looked around and made a face of distaste before rolling her eyes and waving to me. “Well let’s go back to my kitchen and we can talk about it.”

I wasn’t sure why she suddenly seemed disappointed. I followed her and took a seat in the chair I had been so cozy in earlier. Sel fished a folder out of a drawer and thumped it down onto the table. She shrugged again, as if in the middle of a conversation with herself. “Do you have pets or a roommate that you want to move in there with you?”

I laughed. Sel looked up and seemed startled by my mirth. “No. It would just be me. I only asked because I was trying to talk myself out of wanting it.”

Sel still looked confused and even a little sad. “Will you be able to swing \$800 a month and utilities?”

I thought about it. “No. Not really. I would need to buy a car to live this far out of town and that would bring my budget way down.”

Sel actually started to look happier again. I began to feel a little hurt. If she didn’t want me to rent from her, she should just say so. “You said you are a writer. What kind of writer?”

I cleared my throat becoming uncomfortable. “I write copy for a few magazines, ad agencies and brochure publishers. That pays the bills... most of the time. But I write my own mind, alot of poetry and short fiction. That makes me a writer.”

Sel smiled again, all of her warmth coming back. She leaned in, “It isn’t really \$800 a month. I only say that to weed out the undesirables.” She saw the look on my face and laughed. She stood and brought back the coffee pot and refilled both of our cups. While she put another pot on to brew, she said, “Dad and I are artists. We need artists in our lives. \$800 a month for that little studio is average downtown. Out here, it would be alot for a single person plus the commute. For the right price, we can put up with someone without art in their soul. That person would love the black and white and think it was chic.”

I laughed, “I think it is chic but only because of your accents. How much is it really?”

Sel dipped her head on one side and said, “\$200 a month plus utilities and the expectation that you will be a good neighbor.” She paused and looked me over, “Do you really need a place? Are you really looking for a place to move?”

I nodded slowly, smiling. “Scott wanted me to move in with him. I think he just wants someone to cook and match his socks. I was trying to think of a way out of it and this might be a godsend.”

Sel wrinkled her nose like she smelled something bad. “I am delighted to be able to save you from Scott’s socks. When do you want to start moving in?”

I looked up through the branches and watched the sunlight bouncing from leaf to leaf in the wind. Why did I feel so cozy here?

Sel borrowed her father’s box truck and we drove together to pack and move my things that day. I asked Sel more than once if she was sure I wasn’t keeping her from her life or other plans for that beautiful fall Saturday. She related how she had been planning to go grocery shopping with her now-ex-girlfriend but had no other plans. “Since she decided to Houdini on me at the show last night and I haven’t gotten a single message from her, I am pretty sure she and I are done. I should probably message her to let her know just in case she hasn’t figured it out.”

She picked up her phone from the console and handed it to me. “Could you take a note for me?”

I took the phone and sighed. “This is a morbid career change for me.” I navigated to the name in her contacts that she provided and typed out the short message. It was terse and unpleasant. “We are done now. Go find someone more suitable to your needs. It was nice to be a part of your life, but that’s over now. So long.”

“I should probably message Scott and let him know what happened to me.” I picked up my phone and turned it on. I still didn’t have signal that morning when I had last checked. As the screen lit up twelve messages greeted me. Ten of them were from my roommate, Jill, and two of them were from Scott. “It looks like Scott crashed with my roommate last night. They are probably both asleep still.” I tapped out a message and sent it.

I had almost forgotten the phone in my hand when it buzzed with a reply. “We are up. I am glad you are safe. When will you be here?”

I relayed the necessary ETA to Scott and the necessary directions to Sel and, very shortly, we pulled up to the townhouse. Scott opened the front door as I reached for the handle. Scott was shirtless and walking around in baggy shorts. He said, “Jill isn’t here. She went to the gym.” Scott pulled me close. His breath smelled surprisingly fresh. We exchanged a quick kiss, and he listened to the plan. He became grumpy briefly before going to find a shirt and shoes to help us.

I packed boxes quickly and Sel and Scott ferried them out to the truck. Scott complained, “You are only moving one box for every two of mine.”

Sel stuck a foot in front of him and giggled as he stumbled. “That is because I am sorting the boxes in the back of the truck as we bring them out.” She deposited the box she carried on the floor of the truck and climbed inside.

Scott grumbled and retrieved another box. Back at the truck once more, he squinted up at Sel. “So, you really just stole my girlfriend?” Scott passed the box up to her.

“I didn’t steal anything. She helped me and Dad get Mom home last night. When she saw the apartment, she fell in love with it.” Sel passed down another stack of empty boxes.

The two of them walked back into the house and I slid an arm around Scott’s sweaty waist. “I think it is going to be perfect. The quiet is amazing and I will be able to get all of my writing done without having to wear headphones all the time.”

Scott ruffled my head and pushed off to grab another box. Sel walked into my old bedroom and began transferring clothing from drawers, into boxes. Grabbing another empty box, I took it into the bathroom and piled all of my soaps and accessories into it. Scott took that box from me, and I carried another empty box into the bedroom to help Sel. She was holding a pair of shoes in each hand and staring at two overflowing boxes. “I think I need another box.”

I giggled and handed her the box I was carrying. I picked up a full box of clothes under each arm and walked them out to the truck. Scott took them from me, placed them on the tail of the truck and leaned back. He took my hand and asked, “Are you sure this is what you want to do? You could still come move in with me. I have a spare room so you could have your office space and personal space.”

He looked so sincere. His eyes never wavering or blinking, just waiting for my answer. His hair was much lighter than his cousin. Sel’s hair was almost pitch black with brown highlights when the sun caught it. Scott’s hair was a disheveled palette of tans and browns. Their skin tones were the same. But his eyes were never going to have that violet sparkle that hers had when the fire flickered in them. I smiled at him and laid my hand over his. “I think this is the best idea for now. I am not ready to live with someone that I have a serious romantic interest in. I need time to be myself, a single person, in love with another single person.”

The startled look on his face was priceless. I don't think he had ever thought of us in terms of a loving relationship as opposed to his girlfriend and his convenience. Maybe that is harsh or unfair. I know he had told me he loved me more than once and it was his idea to move in together, but the look on his face honestly more resembled that of a trapped animal than a disappointed man in love. We were young and we did not need to pressure each other. I smiled at him and he smiled back.

Sel came tramping out of the house with another box and ordered us to break it up. She handed the box to Scott. He took it and the other two farther into the truck. I walked back inside with Sel and she said, "That was the last of the non-furniture in your bedroom. Do you need to pack any of the sheets or blankets or anything? There is only one set of linens for that bed in the apartment."

I shook my head. "I think they are all different sizes. I will have to buy new ones. That just leaves the kitchen and my office." I led the way down the hall and into the last room on the first floor. It was a dark and musty room with a single dingy window set high in the wall. I have no idea what it had been intended for when it was designed but it had served for four years as my writing office. I began to remove drawers from the desk to be carried to the truck as their own packed boxes containing my laptop and peripherals. Stacking them outside the door I motioned to Scott to let him know that these were ready to be loaded. Sel was quickly packing a box with all of the books, pictures and postcards from the small shelves. I carried my inspirationally comfortable chair out and then began to unscrew the bolts holding the desk together using a nickel.

Sel laughed when she saw what I was doing and fetched a small coffee cup to catch the bolts as they came out. The desk broke down into the top and two drawer towers that could be easily moved. That done, I stuffed the nickel back into my pocket and lifted a drawer tower. "Take the other tower, Sel. The top is the heaviest piece."

She grinned at me and followed me out, the cup of bolts securely tucked into the bottom of the tower. Scott retrieved the top and loaded it all on the truck, making the odd quip and exchanging banter with Sel. I took the last box into the kitchen and loaded it with my one cast iron pan and lid, one large stew pot and a handful of wooden or silicone cooking utensils. Two sets of cutlery and a large water pitcher went in with several boxes of flavored teas. A single kitchen towel was poked into the crevices and I was done.

Scott followed us out to the house, stopping along the way to pick up some food. By the time he arrived, Sel and I had nearly finished unpacking everything from the truck and unloaded most of the boxes. Scott graciously unloaded and reassembled the desk for me. It sat incongruously in a corner of the living room under a window. I left the box with the books sitting on top. Finally, calling it good enough, we wandered over to Sel's kitchen and sat around the table to eat.

It was warmer now, the light had shifted and Sel turned on a string of paper lantern lights that leant a cheery atmosphere to our little group.

I unpacked the assorted Chinese takeout while Sel set out plates and utensils. Scott went to invite Sel's father and was soon back with a dusty old man in tow. Sel kissed her father's cheek and instructed him to brush the dust off outside before sitting down. Piedre grumped as he shuffled toward the door, "Your dear mother never made me brush the dust off."

Scott and Sel said simultaneously, "Yes she did," which was punctuated by the screen door thumping shut. I laughed and sat in the same chair that I had occupied that morning.

As everyone settled in to enjoy a meal together, I couldn't help comparing the faces. There was nothing of Piedre in Scott, but the effervescent light under Sel's skin must have come from Piedre. The statue of her mother showed the same proportions of her face and the shape of her features. Scott shared some of those. The adorable uptilt of the end of his nose and the slightly too round shape of his eyes were family features. The only

other example of them I had seen was in cold and unyielding, unchangeable, fixed stone. All of the life in those features came from Piedre.

I watched with amused tenderness as the old man gesticulated his points and told us the story of his latest inspiration. It would be two paired columns, each rough and purposeless alone. Together, though, "It will be a masterpiece. Each gives the other meaning and potential that it would not have without the other present."

"What will be their shapes?" I asked, seeing in my mind's eye some Doric columnar ideal.

Piedre scoffed with a moist sound, blowing air across his limp lower lip. "What shape... The shape is not the important thing. The purpose and meaning self-contained in their pairing... that is the important thing." He smiled brilliantly and raised his glass. The nearly clear liquid of pale beer sloshed a drop or two and he tipped it up, draining it. He thumped the glass down and stood. "My masterpiece will not create itself. I am going back to work now. Melody, welcome to our home; your home now."

As he passed me, he paused to kiss the top of my head and then shambled away singing a soft song I had never heard before. Scott watched Piedre leave and then turned to Sel, "Dearest Uncle might be losing his grip."

Sel threw a noodle at Scott. "Leave Dad alone. He always sounds so foggy when he talks about a project immediately upon being inspired. Give him a week and he will be talking angles and light."

Scott grunted a laugh. "Speaking of which, did you get that project for that office complex downtown?"

I turned and looked as confused as I could, "What kind of project?"

Sel smiled wryly and said, "I haven't heard back on that bid yet. The courtyard for that old apartment complex came in. It is just a little job but the space has potential. I have a few drawings if you want to see."

I nodded and Scott said, "Of course. Do you have a landscape guy yet?"

Sel laughed and said, "If you want, you can be the landscape guy. It won't pay big, but it is a job without any expectations from the owners. So, you will only be limited by my imagination."

Sel lifted a portfolio case out of a cabinet on the other side of the room and brought it back to the table. Scott and I cleared the mess away to make room. Sel laid open the portfolio case right on top of everything and started pointing at places on the drawings.

There were pictures stuck here and there on the poster-sized sheets of paper showing a fountain or brickwork or plants that she had begun to imagine. Two larger photos were printed onto the page with her drawings, near the bottom. One showed the courtyard from a balcony view above it and one showed the same space from the arched street entry. I did not recognize the apartment complex and sat back in my chair to sip my beer while the two of them talked over my head about landscaping and design. I had never seen Scott so animated about anything. I knew he was a gardener or some sort of landscaper, but I had never heard him talk about it as anything more than mowing lawns and trimming hedges. I was suddenly a little angry at him for keeping this side of himself from me. He was much more attractive as he showed this depth of care for something.

The two of them settled into the discussion and began to make notes and small sketches in the margins. I must have dozed off. Scott managed to carry me to my new bed and strip me down before I woke up. He had tucked me in and was returning from a shower. He walked up to the bed and stood very close to where I sat in the dimness. I could smell the fresh soap scent on his skin and feel the heat and humidity rolling off of him. "Do you want me to stay the night or would you like to have the place to yourself?"

He was like a new man. The preppy college football enthusiast was gone and the sincere adult wearing only a towel stood before me. I pulled him down to sit next to me. I lifted his hand and rested his palm on my cheek. “Why aren’t you like this all the time?”

He grinned a sideways smile and asked, “Half naked and in your bed?”

I groaned. “No. You are like that all the time. I mean the real guy, the person who has a family history and is connected and passionate about something. I really enjoyed seeing that side of you tonight.”

Scott looked timid and bashful, suddenly unsure if he wanted me to have that image of him. “I will work on it.” He stood and said, “Thinking about it, I probably should get back to my own place. I have an early job tomorrow and the truck needs gas.” He trailed off as he walked back into the bathroom. When he reemerged, he had exchanged the towel for his shorts and was pulling his shirt down over his head. He walked back to my bedside to kiss me lightly on the forehead.

“Thank you for helping me move and not being angry with me.” I laid back and adjusted my head on the pillow to see him better against the backdrop of the bathroom light. His face was almost completely in shadow. All I could see were a few deeper shadows that reminded me of his features.

“I can’t be angry with you for wanting to have your own space. This is a great place. I think you are going to love it here.” He caressed my cheek again and let his fingers trail down over my shoulder.

We exchanged a light kiss before he stood and left in what seemed like a single motion.

I lay there staring at the light he had left on in the bathroom for a long time. I was thinking about how close I had come to moving in with a man that I had never known until this afternoon. I thought about how sad I would have been if I had known all that time we had been together until now that this extraordinary man was hiding himself from me. Would I ever have known this side of him if I had just agreed to move in with him? I began to get angry. We had dated for almost a year, and he had never been serious and sincere with me. I had never had the chance to know the real man. All he ever showed me was the irresponsible and ridiculous boy.

I flung the covers back and stood. I walked to the bathroom and turned the light off before stomping over to my desk. I consider it, now, to have been providence that kept me from stubbing a toe as I navigated the darkness of my new home. At my desk, I cleared the surface and set up my laptop. Letting it sit and illuminate the room, I walked into the kitchen and set up my electric tea kettle. I went through all of the ritualistic motions that preceded a long writing marathon. Finally sitting, I began to type. I poured my emotions onto the page allowing the little recycled electrons to form the shapes of meaning in a poem that spanned the past year and the past twenty-four hours. Then, I wrote the real story.