

SPIRIT GRAMS

"Shit, this hurts!"

The pain in my chest feels like it's shooting straight into my heart.

"Isn't it a bitch?" Kaiulani drags on her Marlboro Light. "It's like 'Did anybody get the number of that semi that just hit me?'"

I pour more vodka into my glass. It's been years since I went through this kind of horror. I'm surprised and devastated to find how little has changed.

Five hours ago, I was in dance class thinking, "Call...don't call...call..." Bumping and grinding, wondering what love's got to do with it as I reviewed the three quickest ways to scare a guy off:

(1) Call him.

(2) Drop in on him.

(3) Infer that you want a commitment.

Venus is retro. Mercury's retro. Communication will be difficult. But that's never stopped the truth from coming out.

After class I sit in my car and cry. I feel so alone. Why should I keep wondering if he can help? Why not just ask? Because he hasn't called. He's been back three days and it's like he's still gone.

Edward told me he got Shane's postcard yesterday.

So where's mine?

I'm aware that I want Shane to rescue me, which is the last thing my co-dependent self needs. If Tony were here, he'd probably say, "Keep your fence strong. Don't drag him into it." But Tony's not here and I miss Shane. I miss the peace of his World.

Forcing myself to drive, I pass pay phone after pay phone. Unable to stand it, I stop at a busy corner, get out and dial. I listen to the phone ring with a growing sense of foreboding. Even if he's there, my desperate call gives him the upper hand.

He's there.

His voice sounds distant, weak when he says hello.

"Hi, it's me."

"Hello you," now it sounds warm, familiar.

"What are you doing?"

"Getting ready to make dinner. Want some?"

"Yes."

"Come on over."

"I'm calling because I'm going through some heavy shit."

"Oh."

"It's got nothing to do with you." Why am I lying? "But I need to talk."

Turning onto these familiar Echo Park streets, I'm already comforted. It feels right to be back here. But the thought of living with a man feels premature and scary. Do I want to give up my space, the first I've had in a decade? Do I want to form a couple when I'm not yet even fully single? With someone I hardly know?

"I think you're just looking for a friend you can fuck from time to time," Tony had told me when we last talked about Shane. Then why am I letting this crisis push the envelope? Is it really all part of my Great Experiment to find out *What would happen if...*?

Carrie's Lab.

His house is so dark at first, it looks vacant. He's stretched out on the loveseat watching a nature program about seals. I hesitate in the kitchen, waiting for him to greet me. He does. In a casual, distracted sort of way. He sits up and after saying hello, continues to watch the seals, as if unable to tear himself away. When he finally gets up, he yawns.

"How ya doin'?" I ask.

"Oh, fine."

"Jet lagged?"

"No, not really." Half an hour later he will mention that my phone call woke him up. He'd been sleeping on that couch for the last three hours. At work, he'd fallen asleep for an hour at lunchtime.

It's hard for me not to touch him, but he simply walks toward me with his standard hospitality, "Juice?"

Sure.

On the kitchen table, I see it. My postcard.

Even as he holds out the bottle ("This one okay?") I feel as if he's still talking to me from France. I pour it myself while he puts sausages into a pan. Unable to stand my own tension, I go to the patio, sit in the chair by the ferns and steal one of his cigarettes from the small table.

When he comes out to join me, his eyes widen into perfect O's: "Smoking! You're smoking!" Forgetting the night when I bummed one in the Polynesian bar. Taking one himself, "Okay, let's hear it."

I tell him about Eva. Our fight.

"Sounds like something else was bugging her."

I tell him that I suspect it might be jealousy. Maybe because of my friendship with Tony.

She only just revealed that she had a crush on him. I never realized...

He shakes his head in amusement, "You girls...you girls..."

"I told her I'm moving out."

He flicks ashes into the jar lid he's set on the table, "Yeah, roommates are tough to live with. I couldn't have one."

I have my answer.

Coming over to pick up the cigarette pack, he holds it out, "The last one..."

"...before the firing squad," I say, leaning my head back for the blindfold.

He laughs, lighting his own, "Before you go back to Pope WhatsHerName."

Dinner's ready. He tosses raw baby spinach and cilantro with olive oil, setting it next to a platter of Phoney Mulroney's turkey, cilantro and beer sausages and steaming rice. Placing chopsticks for each of us on either side of the salad bowl, he urges, "Go ahead. Eat."

I haven't eaten all day and I've never been less hungry.

He lifts a spinach leaf: "This will be my first salad in three weeks." Biting into it, savoring it as if it's caviar, "Mmmmm...." It is delicious. I pick at it.

We try to talk. I tell him about this new magazine I found, *Chopstix*, which devotes itself to building Asian American self-esteem. Margaret Cho's on the cover.

"Cho's sitcom is a miracle," he says. "Look at me. I've barely eked out a career playing bit parts."

"There's also a story on the *Miss Saigon* controversy." About Asians objecting to a white actor cast as an Asian.

"We're not saying don't play us," Shane says. "We're saying, 'That's okay if you let us play you.'"

"You mean you want to play an American. Instead of an *Asian* American."

"Exactly! I saw *Miss Saigon* in London and at intermission the woman I was with said there was too much 'testosterone' on stage. I asked, 'Would you say *Glass Menagerie* has too much 'estrogen'?"

No. But I know what she means. Time to switch topics.

"Some articles struck me as defensive. Like the one about how Asian dicks are just as big as anyone else's."

"I thought that was good."

"It seemed weak, putting it in print like that. Instead of whining about it, why not just have a dick that's as big as anybody else's?"

"Because it's an issue. Whites have made it an issue."

"Really? I never heard of it."

He rolls his eyes incredulously, "Yeah, well, I grew up hearing about it and the school I went to was pretty mixed."

"So maybe that's why I don't know all this stuff. I went to an all-white school in Florida."

He sets his chopsticks down, face tense. "Well, let me tell you, there's plenty of folks out in the world who aren't from Florida and they make it an issue."

"It reminds me of the Women's Movement..."

Why can't I let it drop? He's getting so upset. We've never argued like this. But I keep at it: "Like when *Ms.* magazine came out and people were asking, 'Why are these women writing about being strong? Why not just be a strong woman?'" He doesn't answer. "Then I realized that they have to do it to get people's attention, get them thinking. That's how they form an identity as a cultural force."

"*Chopstix* wouldn't exist if there wasn't a need for it," he says. "You know, when I saw Lou Ann in Switzerland, she said, 'Why can't people just get along?' She's sitting with me and two other Asian Americans and I told her, 'Easy for you to say—you've got blond hair and blue eyes.' People like you can 'get along.' When you're a person of color you're always in danger. Your life's on the line because of other people's prejudice."

"Plenty of people are prejudiced against blondes, too," I point out, feeling the bog rise to my neck. "My friend, Rosie, has to cope with people assuming she's dumb because she's blonde."

He shoots me a look of disgust, "You can't talk about her problems and racial problems in the same breath. In high school I had Latino buddies. When we'd get stopped by the cops, they'd work *them* over."

"Cops are assholes," I murmur, wishing for common ground, but not willing to surrender.

"Blondes aren't pulled over for being blonde."

"Sometimes they are. I was once. A cop gave me a 'warning' *and* his phone number."

"You're mixing apples and oranges. I'm talking about life-threatening situations."

"What about Nicole Simpson? She was blonde and she got her throat slashed."

He stops talking. I push my still full plate away. Why couldn't I let him make his angry points and feign agreement? I watch him push rice around on his plate. To think I was just bragging to Edward about how "in sync" we are.

The silence is killing.

A thought occurs, *Now he's going to offer me something.*

"You should take some of this fruit home with you," he nods toward the bowls of fruit I'd placed everywhere. "I'll never eat it all."

A peace offering? Cultural reflex? Or is his kindness how he fills a Vacuum?

"Better eat that," he nods at my plate, "or I'll have to throw it away."

"I can't," I'm already gathering the plates to wash them. While I take them to the sink, he goes into the garden and lights up. I watch him from the doorway as he contemplates the ferns,

back taut.

"If you have any suggestions or hear of a place for rent, I'd appreciate it if you'd let me know," I say softly, trying to sound casual, but it comes out stilted, contrived.

He flicks an ash at the concrete, "You could try my landlady's place up on the hill."

"Which hill?"

"The one at the end of the block."

Memory. *Following him up the steps to the apartment building on the pre-dawn hill.* That awesome view.

"We can go look at it if you want. I'll take you there."

In his living room, he holds out two jackets, "Which one do you want?" I take the blue one. We take off up the street. He's three paces ahead. I force myself to keep up. This is no after-dinner stroll. To our left is Elysian Park, where fog is rolling in, wrapping the pines and eucalyptus in an enchanting mist. When I mention it, he doesn't respond.

The place is just as I remember it. A couple of Frank Lloyd-influenced forties-style buildings sprawl across one corner of the vast hilltop property. One blue and one peach-colored.

"I think she rents these places for four-fifty a month."

He must have it wrong, I think. Or maybe that's what they were two years ago when he moved into his place.

Since it's too late to knock on the landlady's door, there's nothing to do but stand at the courtyard's hillside edge and immerse ourselves in the panoramic view, which projects for our viewing pleasure downtown... Century City...the Observatory...the Hollywood sign and Shane claims, on a clear day, even the Pacific Ocean.

We stand side by side in silence looking out. I'm fighting the urge to kiss him as I did in that elevator. As we kissed that first night in Topanga. Right now all I want is to stand here at the edge of the world and make out with him, but he keeps his distance. As we head back to his place, he's even farther ahead of me than he was before.

"Did you encounter any prejudice in Europe?" Why am I back to this topic? There must be other ways to get conversation going. But this seems to be the Topic of the Night. Besides my living situation.

"Are you kidding? They hate the Japanese. When we were in Nice, some vets went into a café and couldn't get waited on. On their way out, one of the vets who spoke French, said to the waiters, 'During the war, we saved your ass.'"

"Were you with them?"

He gives a short, angry laugh, "If I had been, I would've torn the place apart."

Is he capable of such violence? He seems to think he is.

Back at his place, he puts fruit in a bag for me, urging me to "take it home." Lingered with my bag of apples and oranges, I ask: "Do you want to be solitary tonight?" Taking in air, he looks as if he's contemplating a chess move.

"Never mind," I tease. "You took too long to answer." He doesn't smile back.

"Yeah, I guess this jet lag is catching up. I need to sleep."

"Oh I almost forgot..." I ask if I can store my valuable stuff at his place. My computer is still in his room anyway.

"Go ahead."

We go to my car and he helps me carry two boxes of videotapes from my hatchback—placing them under the fly fishing table on which my computer still sits. On the way back to the car, I realize he's said absolutely nothing in the last few minutes. It's as if we're strangers. Worse.

Because when we were strangers, we had so much fun.

"You seem reserved."

"Yes. I am reserved."

Deja vu. I remember this behavior from years ago when I was single. My hand is on the handle of the car door. He's a few feet away, politely waiting. My heart now feels as if it's turned to lead. Mercury's laughing at me from its heavenly illusion, but I can't stop myself.

I have to know. "Shane, are you going to keep seeing me?"

"I don't know," he says softly, truthfully.

I want to scream but when I open my mouth, it comes out a sharp laugh. "Somebody told me this would happen when you came back from Europe. Because your perspective would've changed." Before he confirms or denies, I turn back to the house, "I have to get my stuff. I can't leave it here."

Now I'm way ahead of him, aware of how upset and vulnerable I look, but the fact that he says nothing to contradict, merely follows, says it all.

You are shyly falling in love, as if for the first time. I throw the boxes into my car, "Is that okay?" he asks with characteristic care as the box he places tilts precariously.

"Fine," I say, slamming down the hatchback. Again at the driver's door, I lean back against the car, hugging myself as if to let go would spill my guts all over the pavement.

"I feel like a fool."

He digs his hands into his pockets, eyes the ground, "When I was in Europe these past weeks, I thought a lot about what happened with Grace and why. I came to realize how needy I was and that maybe I was getting involved too fast for the wrong reasons. And these last couple days I did a lot of thinking about you and I don't want to repeat the same mistake."

I can't answer. I'm trying to reconcile "Did you want to suck my cock even before we met?" with "Maybe I'm getting involved too fast..." Why don't they ever say that last one first? Why can't I?

He shifts his weight from one foot to the other, "It's not like I'm seeing anybody else or that I want to see anybody else...I need some time alone. I haven't been by myself in three weeks."

I choose my words carefully, hearing the crack and groan of the thin ice under them, "I can understand that you don't want a relationship just to have a relationship, I feel the same way. I need to heal, too. So I understand. But I like you." He says nothing.

Then he stands next to me, leaning back against my car, mirroring me: "Well heck, we can still hang out."

What does that mean?

He draws me to him, one hand encircling my shoulders, the other cradling my head against his chest so I'm wrapped inside the cocoon of his body. His hand pressed against my hair, my nose pressed into his soft neck, we stay like that a good long moment.

As we part, he says, "Sorry about the Canyon Crisis, but I just can't..."

"I know. It's okay."

He kisses me lightly. I'm reminded of every last night I ever had with any lover. Everything but "I hope we'll always be friends."

My head throbbing from the beat of my heart, I turn on the ignition and fight the urge to drive off a cliff. I've got to be with someone right now before I fall completely apart. Kaiulani lives ten minutes away via the Golden State Freeway. I can't stop at a pay phone to call her, I might walk into traffic. Praying that I will make it safely to her condo, I drive with my head buzzing.

Was it Lust or was it Memorex?

Maybe there are no answers. Anyway, if it was lust, it sure ain't now.

Kaiulani opens the door looking exquisite in red silk P.J.'s

"I'm here to join the Club."

Kaiulani's large eyes grow even larger, "No, oh my God, no!"

Shivering, I try to breathe, "He says he doesn't know if he wants to see me anymore."

Kaiulani screams and holds me. I finally start to cry.