

Naked Chinese People
(sample story from *California Transit*)

We were always finding naked Chinese people in the shower. We called them Chinese, though one was Korean and one was half-Korean with a father who was an American G.I. She was the first. She'd wandered away from a rave in the desert and came upon our cabin where she walked right in and stood under the shower until the water ran out. We found her slumped in the stall, incoherent and already almost dry. The other Korean had been invited to a friend's, took a wrong turn, ended up at our place and, unwittingly, made himself at home. The third, who may or may not have been Korean or Chinese, was jabbering incomprehensibly in what may or may not have been his mother tongue. He spoke no English and could not give any account of himself. The police arrived accompanied by two white men who claimed to be doctors, but something about them seemed undocorlike, including the fact that one of them spoke to the man fluently in his own language. Also, they had arrived within minutes of our phone call, though we are not on a paved road and are aware of no hospital in the vicinity.

Things come in threes, and so we could have gone on as we were, expecting no further intrusions, but after the third Chinese man was carried off by the so-called doctors, Richard and I decided it was time to put a lock on the door.

It's in and around our weekend cabin in the desert, now equipped with a lock, in which the events I'm about to narrate took place. The lock on the door is irrelevant, as are the naked Chinese.

We call it a cabin though it's actually a trailer which the high winds might at any time overturn. The winds scare me. There have been times driving out there when tractor-trailers going through the Cajon Pass have been blown right over on the freeway and so when a truck passes me, or I pass a truck, I'm always braced for disaster. Even so, we used to go most weekends.

Up until the dirt turnoff, there's only one road and yet we often feel we've taken a wrong turn. In one direction, the way is flat and without interest. In the other, it's a marvel of rock formations and distant peaks, high cacti and even lush stands of leafy trees. Even after years of making the trip, I often panic part way there to ask, Where are we?

The land about seems so flat, I can't explain how hidden our place turns out to be from view, how you don't see it until you come right on it.

There are other trailers scattered about the land, none within sight of ours, but all so similar and surrounded by Joshua trees that vary only in the slightest degree, you can understand how people might confuse them. It's as if the desert's already laid out in a grid to be filled in with one cookie-cutter dwelling nudged up against the next. Our weekend homes retain their mass-proliferating quality though empty miles still intervene between them and one person hangs wind chimes and another chile ristras on the door because for all our fear of difference, uniformity has its own fearful shame.

So it wasn't all that strange that Chinese strangers came to our door by mistake, or that my ex-husband, who would be alive if he had only found us, lost his

way.

When I was a child, riding the subway, whenever I saw a Chinese person, I used my index fingers at the corners of my eyes to pull the skin aslant. Happily, I chanted *Chinky Chinaman*. I loved the Chinese and did this to greet them, to say *Hello! I see you! Welcome to America!* It never occurred to me these Chinese people might be in fact Americans. Ah, to see through the eyes of a child! It never occurred to me they would interpret my greeting as anything other than a friendly gesture.

But all that's past. In 21st-century America, history no longer counts and race, I'm told, is history, so I'm not sure a story can be "about" race anymore. Of course it can be, but maybe it shouldn't be. Race is background, perhaps, environment. The way we see things, informing the way we see others, speak to others, think of others, but as an undercurrent, rarely admitted, just there, a constant subtext. The Other used to be invisible. Now unavoidably visible, we (in this case White) see and in our clearsightedness dismiss without seeing. Irrelevant.

I was telling you about the cabin.

All of a sudden, it seemed people kept giving me things I couldn't hang on the walls. For example, a poster for a French film, *Comment faire l'amour avec un négre sans se fatiguer*. I'm more comfortable saying the title in French, although the poster displays it prominently in English: HOW TO MAKE LOVE TO A NEGRO WITHOUT GETTING TIRED. There's a white woman and a black man reclining, but not together. She lies in the foreground reading a book, dressed in socks and underwear.

He is stretched out on the bed, draped in a sheet. What appears to be the Washington Monument rises from his midsection. His face is covered.

We tacked the poster up in the cabin. It was a private joke, just to emphasize how private the cabin was supposed to be. A place to get away, a place where no one would ever be invited, especially not Richard's grown children. A place so far from others, I imagined Richard and I would have very noisy sex.

One of the police officers was black and I wondered what he thought of the poster.

Did he wonder why Richard let me hang it? Did he think we chose it together? Or was it Richard's choice? Was it some pointed reference to me?

Which part embarrassed me the most? The word *Negro*?

Sometimes I wonder how did I become a white woman married to a white man. When you have an unhappy childhood, surely the Other always looks better. White woman/white man. I imagine that's what the black cop saw. I felt defined, confined, less than who or what I am. I wanted to say: *but that's not me*.

When Skee and I were still married, I never stopped to wonder who I was, though eventually I had to wonder who he was. A brain tumor will do that to a person, though the tumor is not what killed me. I mean *him*; I meant to write "him." It killed, rather it did *not* kill *him*, at least not directly, but I didn't write "him," I wrote "me." You see how closely the two of us were tied together.

I had never wanted to be "taken care of" by a man, a phrase I always heard as

threat. But when I lay my head on Skee's chest and he held me, I felt safe and cared for in a way I'd never before known. It was not that I felt he would protect me, but that I didn't have to protect myself against him. I suppose what I'm describing is trust.

Early on, Skee warned me: "A black man isn't used to being loved. There's times I'm going to push you away. I don't want to—it's the panic. Please wait it out when it happens. Please let me go and let me come back. Remember that I wouldn't panic if I didn't love you."

So when things started to go wrong, I attributed it to blackness. I was patient.

I may be a white girl, but my life hasn't been without pain. When I was twelve, I was raped by a man dressed up as a priest. We were Jewish, but I had been raised to respect priests and nuns, partly out of pity. They hadn't chosen such a life, I was told. Their parents had given them to the Church. It sounded so much like human sacrifice, like throwing young girls into volcanos, I was not surprised that what the man did to me was so painful. I arrived home dazed and bleeding and told my mother. "Did you come?" she asked. I had no idea what this meant. The priest had said "Come with me," and afterwards, I'd come straight home. Yes, I said, and she hit me.

Neither my mother nor the police seemed to think it strange that a priest would rape a child. They only knew he was a fake because he'd drawn a knife across my thigh and left a wound. "A priest wouldn't do that," said the cop and I said, "He said he wouldn't hurt me."

In *The Turner Diaries*, women like me get hanged from lampposts.

"Let me in!" he kept saying, while I kept saying, "Where are you?"

What if I'd said, "You're not acting like yourself." What if I'd said, slyly, "Hey, shouldn't we have an annual physical?" What if I'd seen a man changing every day before my eyes, instead of seeing a black man?

What if they'd diagnosed and caught it earlier? They saved his life, but could they have saved his mind, his brilliant reflective consciousness, the man who had been my life-partner until he was suddenly, irrevocably, gone?

After we divorced, there were nights I slept with his science journals piled around me, or clutching one of his notebooks written in his almost microscopic hand. During the good days, there had been times when we just looked at each other and burst out laughing at the sheer unlikely joyful luck of having met. Once he was gone, I spent hours at his computer, trying to guess passwords, half-believing that the answer to this misery was there to read in one of his locked files.

I didn't know where he had gone. I didn't know he'd lost his job. I didn't know he'd been arrested. And at the university where he'd taught (and then grabbed his crotch in front of students and grabbed at women's breasts) and in the courtroom where he was arraigned (after a wild scene in a 99¢ Store), no one saw a man who'd lived for years an honorable, exemplary life. No one saw that what was happening wasn't normal.

"Let me in!" Skee was just trying to find me in the cabin where I'd gone for the

weekend with Richard.

The night Skee and Richard first met: Skee showed up at my apartment. Richard and I were half-undressed on my bed. It was the third night we'd had sex. We were new enough I was still keeping count. I would have ignored anyone else at the door but it was Skee and I leapt immediately from the bed, covered up and let him in. It was clear something terrible had happened. He wouldn't tell me. He kept saying *If I couldn't have come here, if I couldn't have come here, but of course I could, I knew I could*. Do you know there were mornings I walked out the door to go to work and found him sitting on the sidewalk, banging his head against concrete and then all I'd have to do was say his name or touch his shoulder and he'd stop? Do you know what it is to feel so much power over someone, the power that you alone can make him stop hurting? I made up the couch for him and went back to bed with Richard and though we had to do so quietly, we made love. His fingers were electric on my body and it wasn't that I felt I was making love to them both or that I was jubilant to be with a man who was so vigorous and healthy when Skee, much as I loved him, was so ruined and it was not the *frisson* of having sex with my new lover while my ex-husband lay only several yards away. It was that Richard had not known who Skee was or why I was so quick to care for him, he merely saw that Skee mattered to me, and he had treated him in a gracious and welcoming way and then left the room to leave us alone and I knew then I wanted Richard because I knew he would never try to come between us. In bed, though we muffled our sounds, I looked up at him and said, "I'm falling in

love with you. You know that, don't you?" and in retrospect, I think that was the closest I ever came to loving Richard.

I loved our cat. Though she was an indoor cat, safe from city traffic, Richard and I never had her declawed, thinking that someday we might move to the country and she'd enjoy the outdoors. The first time we took her to the cabin, she was afraid to go outside - inconvenient as we hadn't brought the litter box. The second time, she ventured out and something ate her.

Don't say I loved seeing Skee reduced to *this*, a black man like a pet or a helpless child.

What's true is marriage is indeed a contract in which each of two adults has responsibilities. It was only after Skee's brain was mutilated that my anger against him disappeared. I could no longer hold him responsible and so could regard him again with that original and so emotionally satisfying unconditional love. There was nothing to resent, no reciprocity to expect. It was the passionate attachment one might feel for a Down's syndrome child or for God. A commitment so unabashedly and exaltingly one-sided, it could only end with death.

When he died, I stopped feeling. I could no longer bear to have Richard touch me. Let me be specific about the kind of touch: Richard lost all interest in sex years ago but we had continued to hold hands or throw an arm around a shoulder in a friendly and fraternal kind of way. This was something I could no longer do.

There was a kind of overload which seems strange because I felt so little. What

I felt was not sensation itself, but the feeling of always being pestered. Richard talked too much. It may not have been very much at all, but whenever he spoke I wished he would be still. His words meant nothing to me. They were pebbles thrown against my head. And when he touched me it was like having a rough seamstress fitting clothing I hadn't ordered to my form. His hands were like dead things up against me, perhaps they disgusted me because they proved to me my own unresponsive flesh was dead.

I wanted to roll myself up in a ball and cover my head with my arms. All I wanted was to be left alone.

The cat would have understood. She was dependent on us, she formed attachments, but we knew not to touch her when she didn't want to be touched. After she was eaten, there was no one, no one left to understand me. Sometimes I thought about being eaten by a tiger. I wanted to be eaten alive though I know the way it works is first a swipe of the paw to break the neck.

And I thought of what it had been like to lie in Skee's arms so many years ago and no matter how our senses merged, it was always possible, except in the most profound darkness, to see where he began and I left off.

"Let me in!" he said.

When people lose their way, you try to help.

We drove the naked Chinese woman to the nearest emergency room, a good half hour away. The Korean man laughed, dressed, apologized and drove off in his car, a Volvo. With the third man, the police and the men who called themselves doctors

appeared at our door as if they'd been tracking him.

I remember the beautiful delicacy of Skee's ears. How pleased I was he never pierced them. They were perfect.

And I remember lying with Richard, him inside me, and how I jumped up at the sound of Skee's voice on the answering machine. "Here I am, Skee. It's all right. I'm here." And if I'd been there for him when he first got sick maybe none of it would have happened. And I felt a moment's guilt towards Richard, but he showed no sign and never said a word and so I told myself I hadn't hurt him.

It's a misconception that people die because something inside goes wrong. I think we die from the outside in. A bullet, for example, penetrating a body, or in my case, it started with my skin. If I turned on the fan, and stood in front of a mirror, I could see the breeze move my hair, but there was no tingle in my scalp. My arms stopped feeling the air. The circulation of my blood, it seemed, had retreated deep into the interior leaving no sensation where my body met the world.

Early in our marriage, when Richard first let me down, I remember how hurt and anger tied my stomach up in knots. Then, in time, it seemed I no longer had a stomach. My mind could register the disappointment, but to my surprise, there was no more physical response. My husband didn't make me happy, but at least he no longer made me sick.

I was driving to the cabin alone one night when I heard a siren and saw a

motorcycle cop in the rearview. I had no idea what I had done. I pulled over. He stopped yards behind me and as I watched him walk towards me, I felt something I had forgotten beating hard inside me.

How do I remember my best-loved best? When he held me close, or when he hit his head against concrete till I said no?

He wandered the streets and sometimes slept there. I gave him a cell phone and paid the bills. "So you can reach me whenever you need me."

Maybe the doctors who came for the third Chinese were real and there was a mental hospital in the area after all. I wished I knew where because I understood it might not be a bad idea for me to go there.

He took a bus, he hitchhiked, he walked, who the hell knows how he got to the desert.

The phone rang. He said, "Let me in. Please let me in."

He had been here before. We had brought him.

I opened the door. Skee wasn't there.

"Please," he said. "Please."

"Are you in L.A.?" I asked him. Our phone rings both places. I said, "We're at the cabin."

"I'm at the cabin," he said. "I'm in the desert. At the cabin. At the trailer. Please," he said. "Please."

"I don't see you," I said. "The door is open."

"Why have you locked me out?" he said.

I said, "The door is open." I said, "I'm right here. Where are you, Skee?"

"Let me in!"

He was at someone else's trailer. A black man trying to get in.

"Where are you?" I said. "You're lost. Don't do anything. Where are you?"

I heard shouting, and then I heard gunfire.

They said the suspect turned with something in his hand. The mobile phone I gave him.

People deal with grief in different ways. I went to a rave just like our first naked person. Paid ten dollars for a map and drove out into the barren flats.

In the Sixties, we were so uptight, for a white person to dance with abandon and throw her body around was shocking liberation. In the Sixties, we tried to overcome history but we did not pretend it didn't exist.

In the Seventies, we had the Latin hustle—hustle almost a dirty word, how surprising then how orderly the movement, how precise the steps.

At the rave they dance as in a trance. In the firelight, everyone's skin glows. You can't tell color. And these days everyone wears dreadlocks. Not everyone, of course, what I mean is anyone who wants to. The locks bob and tremble and flail, like a headdress, in the firelight, and I think of the Spanish padres watching the Indians dance, how they saw not men but devils.

Everyone was uninhibited. I felt very old. I was sure they were using drugs I'd never even heard of. At my age, everything *me fatigue*. No one cared what I did. No one watched me. I squatted in the dirt and cried for my sweet darling cat who got eaten.

I wasn't stoned. But these days, I don't like driving because I find myself forgetting to look or staring without seeing or seeing without registering or looking in the wrong direction and so I drive very slowly because I can no longer remember to be careful.

The Highway Patrol pulled me over for going too slow.

It was the black cop, and so I thought, *He's not the one*, and I wondered if he remembered the poster.

They say sometimes it starts with a peculiar smell. Sometimes with an auditory hallucination. Do you think it can start with thoughts of race? Thoughts of race as a symptom of psychopathology, the first manifestation of psychotic break.

We went back to Los Angeles and a terrible man stormed in firing in the Jewish Community Center and then he killed Mr. Joseph Ileto who was delivering mail.

Richard said, "Where do you think you're going?"

I was going out into the street. I imagined wearing a sign that said *Race Traitor*. I imagined shouting, *I'm a Jew! I loved a black man!*, shouting *Kill me! Here's my heart! Shoot me_now!*

I hardly leave the apartment. Richard goes with me when I need Advil, as if a pill made in a factory can ease the pain.

The girl behind the counter looked Filipina.

"My condolences," I said. "For your Mr. Iletto."

Just because she's Filipina, or looks it, does that make his murder important to her, does that entitle her to condolences from strangers?

"Do you think," I asked, "that when one becomes acutely aware of race, it's advisable to put oneself under a doctor's care?"

I said, "I'm not going to hurt you," which is what the rapist says to the woman or the child, so it's no wonder the Filipina girl seemed frightened.

I said, "They shot him."

By the register, they were selling guardian angels in the form of pins you pin to your lapel. I took one from its cardboard backing and, before Richard could stop me, stabbed it into my hand, just to see.

I remember slanting my eyes on the subway and calling the naked people Chinese even after we knew that they weren't and I remember the watercolor set I got for my birthday as a child. It had a color called French Green. Later, when I lived in Maine, there were houses painted in just that color and the people who lived in those houses were invariably of French-Canadian descent. French Green, the Yankees said, and French was not descriptive but pejorative. And remember when they called black people "colored." If they'd been called brown, it would have been fine, but they were

"colored" which meant someone had done something to them, they had been painted. If I got close, the color would rub off. If it came off on my skin, I wouldn't mind, but if I came home with brown stains on my clothes, my mom would hit me.

After I brought Skee to meet my parents, no one mentioned race.

And I think about the scar on my thigh that Skee kissed and Richard pretended not to see. And I think that Skee is dead and that They killed him.

We stay in L.A. I don't want to go back to the cabin. We've left the door unlocked in case anyone needs to get in and sometimes I wonder if I had made Skee go to the doctor if they could have saved all of him. Or if he had been diagnosed before our marriage crumbled, would we have stayed together? Would I have devoted my life to caring for him? I think he and I both know I would have been willing. It's not so easy to say whether he would have let himself be cared for.

In the poster, the man lies draped in a sheet, his face covered. His prick stiff with - it could be rigor mortis. He could be dead.

Driving down Highland I went through a red light on purpose, hoping a cop would stop me. I wanted to see if my heart would pound.

He asked for my license.

I asked, "Were you there? I want to know what happened in the desert. I want to know what happened to my husband."

"Stay in the car," said the white cop, but I opened the door and stepped out,

daring him to hit me.

"Are you the one?" I asked. "Are you the one who killed him?"

I could see he wanted to shoot me, but he didn't.

"Racist pig!" I said. "If I were a black man, you would kill me. If I were a Latino male, you'd cuff me and shoot me in the head." I had the sudden thought that I could pull up my dress and show my thigh and say, *Look! Look at this! Do you see what that white man did to me?* I could say, *Hang me from the lamppost!* Instead I said, "Reverse discrimination! What are you going to do? Ticket me? Send me to Traffic School?" I said, "Just because I'm a white woman. Kill me. Why don't you kill me? It's skin privilege, dammit. Why won't you kill me?"

When Skee acted crazy, that was normal for a black man. When I acted crazy, it was decided that what I needed was Richard's care and the latest meds.

Richard takes care of me, at least for now, and at least for now I let him.

This is normal life. He goes to work. Like a woman, I stay home. Most nights, we stay in and watch TV.

On Fridays, we go out to eat.

We go to the Korean barbecue. I'm learning not to stare at the Korean people, but discreetly, very discreetly, I watch to see what they do. Use the lettuce leaves like a tortilla, wrap up meat and kim chee and eat it like a taco.

My heart is hard. I'm going to get better.

All around us, Asian people are eating. They are fully clothed, and so are we.