

ARTS & LETTERS

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MIDNIGHT BLUE

One day, suddenly, while Ray was working the internet for a hotel room in Amsterdam, she saw a man standing outside her window. This would be strange and frightening under any circumstance, but considering her office was on the tenth floor of a tower in downtown Haifa, she felt awed by a man who could stand with no obvious support at this height.

She had been sitting at her desk, looking through views of canals and footbridges, and did a double-take. Yes, there he stood, calm and handsome, outside her office window. He did not look at her even though she kept staring straight at him. Losing interest in the large beds and thick flowered drapes of Amsterdam hotel rooms which roamed the screen, her surprise when he disappeared seemed even greater than at his sudden appearance. The sheer supernatural athleticism of his feat threatened her sanity. And when he stood again he lifted a long pole with a sponge at the end to the window and began soaping the pane with long swift strokes.

He did not seem to see beyond the flat surface of the window. Ray was invisible behind glass. Even when the colored balls of the screen saver began drifting across the monitor, she continued to watch him draw the squeegee down hard over the sudsy field. Straight lines of glistening translucency appeared each time. And when he bent over again, he never reappeared.

After a few seconds, Ray rose from her chair. She leaned into the glass and for the first time in the two years that she worked in the building, saw the narrow iron grid below each opening, a catwalk for the window man. She wanted to stick her head outside, to see, like a sweeping beacon, in which direction he went, west towards the sea, east towards the mountain. But it would not do to be so obvious. Though it was unclear what would be so obvious. Instead she sat back down in her leather swivel chair, touched the mouse, and the canal and narrow bridges of *Prinsengracht* re-appeared.

Over the next two weeks Ray saw the window cleaner a great deal. Not outside her window, but in the corridors, on other floors, and in the building lobby where she stopped every morning to buy a sweet roll and coffee. Once she stood alone with him in the elevator. She stared impolitely and

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noticed the pressed clean quality of his pale blue coveralls, a sharp jaw line, a wedding band. It seemed so easy to watch him for he was nice to look at and seemed oblivious to the attention, to the situation, to her. He remained very still before the control panel and kept his eyes fixed on the red light moving over the numbers above the doors. Shy, maybe. Frightened, dumb? She couldn't tell and wondered when he would return to the 10th floor with his bucket and his sponge and his squeegee, bending over and straightening up. The man had wonderful posture.

Amsterdam: three nights in a small hotel, canal view. Good food, drink, sights, sex, even some dope in a cafe. Relaxing, refreshing, and Ray tried not to hope too much. She could not count on the "perfect weekend" to inspire a much sought after pregnancy. And she could not help but hope it might. Every month in the past four years had offered her another auspicious omen to track. She tried not to let this stubborn longing overwhelm the pleasure of the trip.

She had surprised Jack with this celebration of their ninth anniversary and he had been in especially good form, which was not always the case. Often at home he appeared testy around her ovulation. He resented the prescriptive nature of the sex and complained about the lack of spontaneity and passion which seeped through to the remaining days and weeks. Ray knew he was right, yet felt little choice.

He had been working, six months running, on large murals for two museums, one in Mainz, the other local, in Haifa, and the work was going well. These were partnered cities and the pieces were twinned but not identical. They weren't even that similar. He was calling them "Fraternal Burden" for now.

Ray had wanted this weekend away to bring relief to the multiple procreative burdens. And it had. Jack didn't once mention the agenda of pregnancy. In the Van Gogh museum their talk was on the paintings. He just loved her all weekend long, pleased with her surprise. And she fell into this love, not allowing herself to think of outcomes, not letting her mind wander to what-if's.

That was three months ago and now she considered if it would be possible to re-write a new script for her life with Jack. She was trying on an alternative approach, saying to herself that sometimes things just don't work out. The week before, she and Jack had taken a long bath and had an unhurried night of sex. It was just like the first years of their marriage and she thought before falling asleep, Jack's large thick hand on her thigh, yes, I could live with this, this could be enough. Yet in the morning when she woke it was raining and she couldn't help but think: rain, sign of plenty, maybe this month.

This cycle of heightened expectations and abysmally low disappointments, was beginning to give her vertigo. And yet for all her toying with different stories and optional endings, she wasn't willing to let go. Jack was though. He was even willing to return to New York. What the hell, he said to her, if you're going to give up one dream, you can just as easily give up two. She wasn't sure why he linked Israel with a baby. Maybe because she felt so passionately about both. Maybe because his emotional interpretations of the world ran to black and white, even in his paintings. Other colors were used, but they were subservient to emboldened blacks, whites, and grays.

Her hunger for a child was too great to be pacified by retreat. She had much more fight in her still. And if only the pain of uncertainty, of permanent loss waiting in the wings, would go away, the whole experience would be less trying and much easier to bear.

Maybe it was evolution. Maybe it was her body's way of increasing her chances of procreation, multiple donors theory, et.al. She came up with no better explanation for her ongoing interest in the window washer. If she saw him waiting by the bank of elevators, her step picked up a bit. When she was near him, she watched him closely. She amused herself by leaning towards him in her mind. And lacking courage to speak to her friends candidly, she did not yet know how common it was for a woman, married for many years, to want another man. Simply. Carnally. She even thought of him during their weekend in Amsterdam. Not intentionally. But the bartender in one pub resembled him. It didn't matter what he was called. She didn't even care what his voice sounded like. She imagined the feel of his

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mouth on hers. A warm silky press which swallowed her whole. She wanted him to take her breasts in his hands and squeeze them together, to suck them before entering.

There were days when driving home to Zichron Ya'acov along the sea, she imagined stopping to meet him behind the dunes. A short rendez-vous before washing the lettuce for the dinner salad she would share with Jack. There were nights when she lay prone in front of the television, watching the news in English—CNN or Sky—or followed the same news in Hebrew, the latest suicide bomber creeping closer: Herziliya, Hadera, Haifa, and Jack would be massaging the soles of her feet, and she thought of the straight long spine of her mute window washer.

Of course she didn't have the nerve to actually approach him. And she's not sure she would want to even if she did. She loved Jack, even though he drove her crazy sometimes. And she wanted a baby with him. She was intrigued though by the touch of another. Maybe that of a baby's, maybe that of a man's.

The week before, she began shiatsu treatments. The very painful pressure points were blockage, she was told. Psychic, not merely physical encumbrances. Now she was responsible for the misery of infertility. Jack thought this nonsense. The body was the body. Four year olds got cancer for goodness' sake. Did they bring this on? No, she answered, her hand resting on his neck, no, they didn't, knowing he was thinking about his brother Joshua who died at six from a brain tumor. Everyone in his family had withdrawn then. His mother into her bed. His father into his work at the insurance company. And Jack, fourteen years old at the time, began to paint seriously and declared he was an artist.

This was still the way Jack reacted to bad news, and even to not such bad news, but to anything he perceived as a threat. He would lock himself in his studio and paint for hours, music blasting, red wine or bourbon, cigarettes. Ray learned not to go in. When he was ready, he would come into the house proper, take a long bath, and emerge, clean, sweet smelling, and ready for love.

In the first few years of their marriage, when he retreated into his stu-

dio, they had lived then in an apartment in Haifa and his studio was in Hadar, her feeling of severance from him was enormous. She would pace the apartment thinking their marriage was over, wondering what to do. Not practically. She could always take care of herself. What would she do with all the love she conjured for him?

During periods of his withdrawal, she would be too anxious to leave the apartment. Pre-mobile phone days. He might come home and she would be out. Once in a while she was capable of pretending that her life wasn't on the verge of collapse and she found herself able to go to a movie or to the beach. And then he would return, calm, penitent even, and fill her with the love which had been absent for hours, sometimes days.

It had taken them a long time to decide to have a baby. Much longer than it usually took in Israel, but then they were New Yorkers after all. After about five years of marriage they knew they were ready. Jack was selling, both in Europe and in America. Ray had been promoted in her advertising firm to project manager. She could now afford a leisurely maternity leave. Jack said, whatever you want, baby, and so a baby it was, and so a baby it wasn't. The thing they had so assiduously avoided for years, what everyone else seemed to do so effortlessly, was now absurdly beyond their reach.

And so began the rollercoaster of tests, treatments, and examinations. One of Ray's rants was the way gynecologists wouldn't give their patients a sheet to cover themselves with. She asked every doctor why this was and learned to bring her own from home. Most of the doctors, particularly the male ones, thought she was overreacting, especially once they recognized her accent. Spoiled American. It costs money to launder so many sheets. Unaffordable under current conditions, a luxury even. She tried to justify it to herself, country at war, resources stretched beyond sane limits, but after enough consultations, she realized it was actually much simpler than that. The doctors just didn't give a shit. The humiliation and vulnerability a woman may feel—legs splayed, feet held high in stirrups, bright lamps enabling a strange man to peer and stick his hand inside of her, probing the parts meant to help her realize her evolutionary purpose here on earth—was not even a point to consider. This was no big deal, they declared calmly

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and aggressively to her question. She comforted herself at these moments imagining she was the urologist and he the patient. After he dropped his pants, under the scrutiny of large strobes, she parted his flaccid penis from his balls and fingered and pressed into his testicles to judge the texture and diameter of the veins inside. When he expelled a grunt of squeamishness and discomfort, she would tell him to hush, that it really was no big deal.

The problem with her was the lack of a diagnosis. Nothing wrong between her and Jack and she stopped all hormonal treatments after a few months. Her body did not react well. It basically did not react. The doctors were surprised and said it was not worth continuing. And each month, sex, then waiting, the blood and then the crash. The despondency usually lasted twenty-four hours. For then, she would remember that in two more weeks she would ovulate again. Another chance. Hope on the rise.

The last time the blood arrived early. This was good because it caught her off guard. She had not had time yet to weave her narrative of hope and expectation. She was waiting for Jack to come home in the evening when he called to tell her a man had just blown himself up on a crowded street in Jerusalem. She opened the television and saw the usual scene: ambulances, police, soldiers, intelligence, and *ZAKA*, the special squad of religious men who gathered body parts from the street, from the walls of buildings and parked cars. She became so absorbed by the scene that she did not hear what Jack was saying.

“The two art supplies stores I usually use are closed,” he was almost shouting at her.

“Oh,” she said, watching skin and muscle being lifted tenderly with tweezers into a plastic bag.

“That’s all you can say is ‘oh,’” Jack hissed. “I’ve worked all fucking day on this Mainz canvas, the thing is killing me this week, it’s just not going, I’ve lost the thread of it, and I need these paints to continue tomorrow.”

“It’ll be fine tomorrow,” Ray said matter of factly, watching the scene at the blast unfold with increasing horror. There was an infant in a soldier’s arms. She was crying loudly and her face was red with blood. Ray assumed it was not her own. The soldier was obviously looking for the mother, for

the father. Maybe they were already on route to the hospital. Maybe they were already dead. The camera followed him and she watched as he gently passed the baby into the ambulance, into the arms of a seated medic. She would be taken to the hospital until a relative came to claim her.

Ray thought of driving as fast as she could to Jerusalem to the baby. Maybe she would be allowed to bring her home, make her a warm bath, clean off her face, softly, make it okay for them all.

“I can’t believe those stores, since when do they close at fucking 5 o’clock? What kind of sissy hours are those? Five is still the work day. I’m going to go crazy with these Israelis. They’re not letting me live.” He paused to breath. “There’s one other store on the other side of Tel Aviv. I’m going to see if it’s open. Don’t wait for dinner.”

Ray closed the phone without saying good-bye. Body parts were being scraped off the streets of Jerusalem and Jack was ranting about art supply stores. And what about the baby the soldier was carrying? Did someone clean her mother’s blood off her face? Was this what was meant by boiling a kid in its mother’s milk?

Ray felt a cramp roll up inside of her and knew that this month too she would bleed from her uterus.

It was already hot at ten the following morning when Ray was looking for a building on quite a typical Bnei Brak street. She was buoyed by the normalcy of the scene. Mothers pushing strollers. The elderly filling benches. Apartment buildings standing on columns. Large ficus tree portals separating the sidewalk from the building paths and entrances. Not what she had expected when the saleslady in the shoe store near her office told her about the woman in Bnei Brak who specialized in reading the fortunes of “spinsters” and “barren women.”

For Ray, Bnei Brak was that other world sitting alongside Tel Aviv: ultra-religious, poor, tons of children, tons of rules and superstitions. She would have never thought she would go there for help, but that was before she just couldn’t have a baby. And in spite of Jack’s preoccupation with himself, in spite of the demented homicide bombers and the culture that

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exalted them, in spite of the country's serial crises, she wanted to remain there, in her house with a sea view, and a baby in a cradle being rocked by the breeze.

She found number twenty-four and within minutes was in the living room of the Krieger family. Mrs. Krieger brought her a tall glass of cold orange soda and asked her to wait a few moments until Ruchama, her daughter, was ready. Ray looked around the room and saw the familiar artifacts of a religious family. A large bookcase filled with tall volumes of the Talmud and other commentaries on the opposite wall. A long dining room table, covered in a white plastic tablecloth, took up a considerable part of the living room. The sideboard's centerpiece was a pair of tall silver Shabbat candle sticks. Numerous little holders, a candle for each child in the family, surrounded them. Pictures of rabbinical luminaries hung on the otherwise bare walls.

Ray sat on an old brown couch and wondered for a moment if she were crazy to have come to this other world to find out anything, anything at all that would be relevant to her—a secular American immigrant and feminist, for God's sake, an unbeliever almost. A sign of her desperation, she thought to herself, and when Ruchama walked into the room holding Mrs. Krieger's hand, Ray's breath stopped.

It was difficult to tell how old Ruchama was, meaning, like many people with Down Syndrome, one could venture a guess, within a decade or so. Ray thought Ruchama was about twenty, but she could have been thirty or maybe even forty. She was dressed in a long dark skirt, and a long sleeved white shirt was buttoned up to her neck and down to her wrists. Her hair was gathered neatly in a long braid, which gave her a girlish look, but the lines around her eyes, belied this. Ray thought more like forty, than twenty.

Ruchama was looking at Ray openly, warmly, as her mother walked with her to the couch and Ray smiled when she sat down next to her. Ruchama smiled beautifully back and she took Ray's hands into her own. Ray had no idea when she spoke with Mrs. Krieger that Ruchama had Down Syndrome. She had imagined someone reading coffee grinds, or tea leaves, or playing cards. Not that Ruchama couldn't use such props. But seeing her, Ray thought this unlikely.

Ruchama held Ray's hands tightly in her own. Too tightly. Ray shifted. Ruchama's hands were sweaty and they were moving now, floating away from Ray's hands and up her forearms, along her elbows and upper arms. They rested on her shoulders.

"Look at me," Ruchama instructed Ray. "Into my eyes."

Ray obeyed. Ruchama quietly turned Ray's head in one direction and then in another. She leaned towards Ray and with a slight lisp whispered in her ear, "You will have a baby, a boy. I've seen him, I've heard him cry."

Ruchama leaned away slowly. "Ema," she turned to her mother, and stood. She was unsteady on her feet for some reason and Mrs. Krieger took her daughter's arm and led her out of the living room.

You will have a baby, Ray said to herself. You will have a baby, a boy. She opened her purse to fish for the money she intended to contribute to the Krieger household for these prophetic words. You will have a baby. Mrs. Krieger came back from the hall and when she saw the money in Ray's hand she said, "No, no, not for us. Please put it in the box on the sideboard. You see the money is for families in real need. Poor families. We are rich with health, God, with family. You too, God willing, will be rich with a baby."

Ray stuffed two bills of one hundred shekels each into a tall metal box. Considerably less than a private doctor's visit. A photograph of Rachel's Tomb was on the box. Jewish patron saint of barrenness, whose hunger for motherhood made her Israel's first permanent exile. On the way home with her husband and sister and their children, Rachel, the beautiful long suffering matriarch, died giving birth to her second son, Benjamin.

Were it safer, Ray knew she would have already pilgrimaged to Rachel's tomb on the outskirts of Bethlehem along with the thousands of other women who converged there to beg for intercession. She would have already received from one of the women who spent their days in prayer there the red thread, considered blessed by the matriarch, and, worn as an amulet around the wrist. But these days she was afraid to travel over the Green Line.

"How does she do it?" Ray asked Mrs. Krieger by the door to the apartment.

“Do what?”

“Know what she knows?”

“She just does,” Mrs. Krieger smiled. “I can show you dozens of women, just here in Bnei Brak, but they come from all over the country, who’ve married and conceived soon after visiting with Ruchama.”

“Is it something she does actively or does she simply see what is bound to happen anyway?” Ray asked, anxious to hear something to help her believe the words she had just heard.

“Only God determines what will or will not happen, you know. Ruchama is one of the chosen, as are many people who are special like her, who can see through the veils.”

“Many people?” Ray asked surprised, wondering if she wanted to hear anymore, not wanting to lose the effect of that line: you will have a baby.

“Yes, in our community, we believe because the range of choices for people with Down Syndrome is smaller in this life than it is for most of us, that this is a sign that they have fulfilled many of their moral and spiritual struggles in previous lives. They don’t need to spend so much time making decisions. And among them, there are those, like Ruchama, whose souls are so evolved that they have some small insight—which is great compared to ours—into God’s intentions.”

Ray did not know what to say. She had heard enough. She opened the door, said thank you and good-bye politely. Mrs. Krieger held back her flight.

“Do you go to *mikve*?” she asked. “If you don’t, it won’t happen. The laws of family purity are essential for bringing children into this world. If you have not been going, this may explain your barrenness.” She smiled warmly and did not wait for Ray to respond. Chances are she already knew the answer. “How important it was for you to come here today. Yes, it was very important. Now go to the *mikve* and you will see. Ruchama’s words will come true.”

Ray turned and ran down the three flights of stairs to the street, taking them two steps at a time, the way she used to when she returned to her second floor apartment from her best friend’s on the fifteenth floor of their

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Manhattan high rise. At the last pair of steps of each landing she held the banister post tightly and swung herself around using the momentum of the descent. It was exhilarating and risky. As a child she had injured herself a number of times doing this same exact swing when her foot did not make the tread around the bend safely and she tumbled down the concrete and metal stairs. Thirty years later, Ray was even more conscious of the risks. She wouldn't tumble so gracefully this time, but it didn't matter. She had to leave that place, the apartment, the building, the neighborhood, the mentality that would make a seer out of this woman and see her innocent mutterings as stars of wisdom from another realm. Did Ruchama even know what she was doing? People's lives were altered by the scripted words she spoke.

As soon as Ray hit the street she hailed a cab and asked to be taken to the Tel Aviv beach. At the restaurant, she buried her feet in the sand and watched adults, children, and dogs doing whatever it was they did best at the beach. She could not manage to drink the double espresso before her, but was comforted by it anyway.

An hour later she was on the train to Benyamina, hoping it would remain uncrowded and quiet so she could sleep, hoping a bomb wouldn't go off and she would become one more victim in the storm of terror which racked the country weekly, sometimes even daily. As soon as the train started to move, she closed her eyes and drifted off. She slept briefly but was woken abruptly at the Ramat Aviv station, when scores of university students got on. They were loud, they were boisterous. She opened her eyes reluctantly. A handsome young man had sat down heavily beside her. He looked back at her and smiled. "Sorry," he said in English, not because he knew she was American, but because it was fashionable, and turned in again to his mobile phone.

She closed her eyes once more but there was no way she could sleep. The density and noise level were too great and she figured there was no point in changing cars. Like in New York's subways during rush hours, all cars were the same. There was no escape, except in the mind.

She allowed herself to imagine the pressure of her neighbor's thigh spreading inward, to her thigh, and up slightly, to her vulva. She felt the blood surge into the membrane, filling it slightly, moistening the opening

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beneath. She imagined the window washer sitting on the other side, his leg up against hers, his hand resting on her inner thigh, the pinkie excavating for the distended vulva through the layers of her black skirt.

The conductor called out Benyamina and she waked panicked, did she actually fall asleep, had she already missed her stop? But no, it was okay. She smiled at the student and said, "Shalom." He had missed out on the excitement, not being privy to the movie which had just screened in her mind.

Her car was where she left it in the parking lot, and when she drove into Zichron she didn't turn down her street. Jack was probably making supper, waiting for her to come home so he could tell her about his day: either the ongoing nightmare of the previous day's frustration, or resolution and he was flying high: a new bottle from the local vineyard open and breathing, hugs and kisses all around.

But she couldn't go home, not yet. Instead she teased herself by driving through town and did not stop until she reached the exit on the other end. She found herself going northeast in Wadi Milik. It took a few moments before she realized she could go to the *mikve* she had been told about by her friend, Sari. An old stone building, built around a natural spring, stood in the middle of the fields of Kibbutz Alonim. Religious men used it on Friday afternoons, before the Sabbath. Secular young men hung out mid-week, immersing themselves in the cold water, sunning themselves in the nude on the low flat roof. Sari had seen it when she visited friends on the kibbutz and as much as she talked about the quaintness of the old structure, the simplicity of the box, Ray suspected she had been most impressed with the group of naked young men on the roof.

Ray didn't want to go, but Krieger's words were propelling her forward. How could she be so sure this talisman didn't have some special power? Masai women in Tanzania went to the active volcano they called *Ol Danyo Lengai*, the Mountain of God, to pray for children. They pilgrimaged to its base, and with lava spurting from its cone, prayed that the waters of the earth, breaking along the mountain's slopes, infect them with parallel powers of bringing forth.

She seemed to find the *mikve* as if by radar. A thick darkness filled the

field. The only marker to indicate this was the place to stop was the tire marks and square of crushed flora, weeds really, along the side of the road. She pulled in and walked slowly down the dirt path. The weeds were so high it was like walking through a tunnel, birth canal, she said aloud, as much to hear herself thinking as to quell the voices of fear rising inside of her.

This was not New York, she had to remind herself as she approached the stone building and wondered how she would have the courage to step inside its dark, almost untraceable, entrance. She was vulnerable as a woman alone, in an empty field, at night. Yet there was little chance that someone would come along, it was quite desolate, and if someone did there was little chance that he would harm her. She was safer here she calculated than on a bus these days.

She walked inside, holding her breath in case there was a stink of urine, or worse. But there was only the dampness of the walls and the sharp rise from the weeds in the fields outside. The pool of water was absolutely black. And now that she had overcome her fear of being alone in the middle of the field she wondered how she would manage to immerse herself in the blue-blackness of the waters. She needed to undress. She needed to go down into it. Dug into the ground like a grave, the *mikve* was filled with the waters of the womb.

And when naked she slid into the cool dark water, she remembered that the Talmud claimed all waters in the world were sourced in Eden's river. She held her breath, closed her eyes, and went down. She let herself float, suspended, buoyed by the water. A corpse seeking rebirth. A body desperate to enclose the waters of Eden and its fruit within her own patch of garden.

Shivering with the cold air of the night, Ray climbed out of the water and dried herself with her camisole. She dressed quickly. Using a small wooden ladder which was propped up against the outer wall, she climbed to the top of the *mikve*. There were stars in the sky, the proof of limitless possibilities. At first it was difficult screening out the golden arches of McDonald's and so she turned to face the fields, the kibbutz up the rise, the town of Tivon beyond that. She stared up at the sky and picked out the few constellations she knew: the Dippers, Leo, Aquarius.

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She thought she felt differently though she wasn't sure how. The waters penetrated to her core and like the lava in Tanzania they covered her fears, knitting her wounds. When she scanned the sky some more and located Gemini, she concluded it could be a sign. For she always looked for the twins, but rarely found them. Since she was able to now, and while she didn't expect twins, one child would do, it was nevertheless a sign, possibly, like all the others. Something to hang her hunger on.

Like a window fogged from heat, the dome of the sky dipped lower and the clarity with which she saw seconds earlier, vanished. A film seemed to cover her eyes and she imagined the window washer pulling the long squeegee over her and bringing into sharp focus that which had just become inexplicably blurred.

She realized it was tears only after they fell. And it was he who wiped them away. She imagined he was lying there on the roof of the *mikve* with her, slightly touching, like the man on the train. Then he was on top of her, and indigo, like that round midnight, slapped at their bareness, at their boldness, two moths in a pornographic cocoon.

She pressed her eyes shut and pulled the small of his back into her. Her legs wrapped themselves around his hips, and he stroked her insides, wetting her, cleansing her, a pane of glass, lustrous, hard, and brittle, a fusion of sand, soda, and hope. Ray opened her eyes and sought out the paltry light. And there was just enough for her to see the story of fortunes being told in the twinkling of the little stars above.

