

Shimmer

1.

I'd like to yank the ring off and throw it at his head, but that wouldn't be fair. Occasional visits from my old lovers and male friends leave Phillip unperturbed; why should I tense up around Nikki?

Anyway, she's his cousin. You don't feel jealous of somebody's cousin.

From the kitchen stool where I usually sit to do my homework, Nikki watches me with large hazel eyes. Her feet hook the rungs on the back of the stool while her top half quivers and sways like an underwater plant in a current. She's just invited us to spend part of next summer with her on a small island in the San Juans.

"So, Amber, what do you think?" Phillip prompts hopefully.

I knew who he was when I married him; I have to get used to this sort of thing. I turn my head so that I can look out the east dormer, see the neon for Schwabe's Auto Repair flashing up in jagged pieces through dark dripping branches of pine. We live in the attic of an old house at the shabby end of Fifteenth.

"I'm afraid I'll lose my job."

He laughs, because I've been threatening to quit every day for the last six months. The funny thing is, I'm not kidding. I really am afraid to lose that job. I work a swing shift at Roundup Pizza. I wear a mustard-colored shirt with mother of pearl snaps, brown culottes. To take my mind off how much I hate it, I creep into the wine cooler periodically and stiffen my coffee with a little Hearty Mountain Burgundy. There's nothing I have to do at Roundup Pizza that I can't do drunk as well as sober.

"Quit!" Phillip dares me for the eight millionth time. "There's always my income." He pays his half of the expenses with his photographs; weird, smeared glimpses of reality. My theory is that people buy them because they want to teach themselves to see that way. I wish my poems had the same power to haunt.

“So you’re planning to go straight out to the island?” I ask Nikki. She won’t stay. It’s only March. By June she’ll be in Boston or Santa Cruz or Paris. The island is tiny, with no electricity. No one lives on the property but a sixty-year-old aunt. What’s there for someone like Nikki?

Nikki, who won’t wear shoes, not even in Portland, not even in the winter.

Nikki, who wrote a complete book of fairy tales in rhymed verse when she was nine.

Who built her own two-story playhouse on her family’s island property at twelve.

Who is just about to dismay her relatives by announcing that she’s dropping out of Reed, the most unstructured college on the West Coast, because it’s too structured.

This is my first opportunity to meet Nikki in person. But even before tonight I found myself probing every scrap Phillip let fall about her with a fine-tuned, scorching attention.

I want to be her.

Unexpectedly, Nikki laughs.

“Come on, Amber, quit begging the question,” Phillip says.

“I’m not begging the question, I just don’t know.” I look at my hands in my lap. Thin fingers, large knuckles. Blue. Phillip likes to keep blue light bulbs in all the fixtures; it took me a while to get used to that.

“Maybe she needs to think,” Nikki says. Her voice reminds me of the surf, breathy and gravelly at the same time. Throwing itself forward in a rush, then retreating. The voice was the first aspect of Nikki I encountered tonight. I got off late, came dragging myself up the stairs like a piece of dead meat to hear a strange woman’s voice in the kitchen.

“Why?” What’s to think about?” Phillip asks.

Nikki turns my way, watching me with a glistening naked shyness. I don’t mean nakedness at skin-level, but nakedness beyond that. What’s left after the skin gets peeled away. “Whether she could stand a month of me?” she ventures.

“Don’t be silly!” Phillip tells her.

“Oh, Nikki...” I say.

At first glance, Nikki was a relief. She’s a late bloomer who hasn’t caught onto the potential of her looks. Shaggy hair, baggy sweater, misguided attempts to hide puppy fat and acne long gone. My relief, however, was premature.

“It’s not you at all, it’s just...”

They’d both looked confused when I appeared in the kitchen doorway. Not that they were hiding anything--they were just so absorbed in their conversation that they found it difficult to be recalled to a context.

“Can we talk about something else for a minute?” I say now. “Does this have to be settled tonight?”

“I’m bothering you. I shouldn’t have stayed so late. I didn’t mean to come at all, it’s just that talking to Phillip always helps me.”

“Are you sure you need help?” The challenge slips out before I can stop it. Nikki strikes me as someone uncannily in touch with her own nature. Her choices may look confused or even feel confused to her, but on some level I bet Nikki knows exactly what she’s doing.

She shakes her head, laughs--a flurry of discomfort. When it passes, she looks straight and despairingly at me and explains, “I *quit* everything.”

“Don’t worry, Nikki,” Phillip tells her gently. “No decision is final. That college isn’t going anywhere. School should probably be prohibited anyway, for everyone except people like Amber.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I can feel my chin jutting out.

“People with a sense of direction. People with a very good grip on their reasons.”

The words sting. If being like Nikki means having no reasons, I don’t want mine.

After the door closes behind her Phillip takes my hand, looking puzzled. “You keep saying you want to get away from the city. I can’t understand why you don’t want to visit the island.”

“I do want to. It’s just that...”

“What?”

I don’t answer.

“Amber, why are you so afraid? There’s enough love for everybody. There’s enough love to go around.”

“I know.” Enough love--he means the universe is made of love--energy is love, the love of the Conceiver. I know that. But I want a smaller, more specific thing. Particulars are painful.

“When will you trust me?” he says.

“I do trust you.”

“Well,” he says, “then when will you finally relax?”

2.

Sitting on a mattress in the small, crooked playhouse that Nikki built. It smells like apples and it's cold. The door is open and I can see past the tree, across the field to where the sun is just beginning to hit the fence. My hair is ratty from sleeping. I reach into the dim corner behind the mattress and hunt through a pile of clothes for a sweater, pick a gray wool one with holes. When I raise my arms to put it on I can smell my sweat. I'm shivering and the surf-sound shivers the air--distant, closer than a heartbeat.

Eventually Phillip comes back from Rachel's, holding an old dishtowel wrapped around a jar of hot tea. Rachel is Phillip and Nikki's great-aunt, the one who owns property on the island. Crouching with the jar on the floor between his knees, he rips open a lemon. Mashes it into the tea. When he smells his fingers, juice runs in rivulets down his arms. He doesn't look at me, he's in the tea. I take a discarded peel, get lemon on my hands and rub it on my elbows.

"Nikki and I were talking about going fishing," he says, passing the jar to me.

"Thank you." I gulp some of the pungent liquid and hand it back.

"I don't suppose you'll come. You know what, Amber, she wants us to stay another two weeks."

"My job--"

"You hate that job."

"But I said I'd be back." I wonder: leave alone? The mail boat is the only way on and off the island. It runs every other day, costs eight dollars. I don't have eight dollars.

Nikki appears suddenly in the sunlight by the open door, and fixes her huge-pupilled eyes on Phillip. "Rachel says she'll help us drag the boat down to the water. Are you ready to go?"

"She doesn't need to help us. We can do it."

"She wants to make sure we don't ruin her boat."

"Are you coming, Amber?" Nikki grips the doorjamb, swings her weight into the shadow then out to the sun, in and out, in and out.

There's something different about how she is with her body; I noticed it the moment we got off the mail boat. Not that the leaping, flamelike quality of movement wasn't present last March. No, what's different is the way she's positioned in relation to it. Before, it frightened her. She had her back turned against it. Now she's slowly turning to see her own grace, and it seems to astonish rather than frighten her. Astonish and delight. I wonder what's happened.

"I thought I'd take a walk," I say.

“Wouldn’t you like to come with us? There’s room in the boat for you, too.”

“I don’t like fishing.”

Though I’m actually pretty good at it; the spasmodic jerk it takes to hook a fish is a style of movement that comes naturally to me, one of the few. Unfortunately hooking a fish isn’t all there is to the process.

Memory: Fish swinging through the air, arcing in agony at the end of the line, me lurching desperately to catch it. Fish in the water at my feet, blood in a delicate cloud around its head, unlidged eye staring up at me with exhausted patience. Trying to strike it against a rock with the quick efficient snap I’ve seen my father use; clutching the slippery body until its gills slice the web between my thumb and fingers. My blood, its blood, sticky; its shuddering; that glassy, staring, wild eye. And a blasé, disgusted voice in my head: *Amber, you’ve got to deal with this.*

Over time, fishing has lost its recreational quality for me, though the urge to hook a fish, the sportsman’s urge, continues to have a certain pull.

“I’ll visit Rachel,” I tell Nikki. “Then I’ll go for a walk.”

“Phillip and I seem to be doing a lot of things that leave you out.”

“That’s okay.” I set my face between my hands, looking at some wildflowers I put in a jar when we first came. The water in the jar is brown, clotted with streamers of yellow-green slime. Very aware of her there in the doorway, motionless now, watching me with those huge-pupilled eyes. She shimmers in the light--like a fish.

“But wouldn’t you like to go out in the boat? I know, we’ll row out and just fool around a little, then row you back in.”

“That’s a good idea,” says Phillip, finally looking up from the tea.

“Well, if you’re sure you don’t mind, I’d love it,” I tell them, hoping I will. I just want them to feel better. That’s what they want too, they want me to feel better. It gets complicated in a hurry.

Later we assemble around the blue dinghy. Rachel arrives last. Cropped yellow-white hair and pale green eyes; she makes me think of a lioness. Several other people own land on this rocky outcropping in the Puget Sound, but it seems natural to call the island Rachel’s.

The old woman is aware of the undercurrents. She keeps her eyes on her liver-marked hands as she and Phillip roll the dinghy down the beach, but I feel her testing the components of

the situation. The qualitative differences between me and Nikki, the differences in the lines that bind us to Phillip. Testing for what generates the tension underlying the silence.

Has Rachel ever been in love? Face impassive, she wades out to her knees in water, holds the boat steady while we climb in, then shoves us off. There isn't any dock.

"Keep the boat away from the rocks!" she calls, her first words of the morning. Her protectiveness is justifiable; Rachel built this boat. She watches us drift out slowly.

Phillip begins to row. He doesn't do it very often so it takes a long time to get anywhere.

"It's so hot," Nikki says when we're about fifteen yards from shore.

Lifting the oars into the boat, Phillip wipes his forehead with the end of his shirt. Then he takes his shirt off. I flip a little water on him.

Nikki says, "Sitting on this water is like sitting on a grill."

On the beach, Rachel puts down the hand that was shading her eyes and starts back up the path.

"Maybe we shouldn't be on it. Maybe we should be in it," Phillip says.

"Obviously!" In a startling swift gesture, Nikki pulls her denim pinafore over her head and, in nothing but a pair of slightly tattered panties, plunges in. The boat rocks violently. Black hair streams over her cheeks. Her breasts float waxy-white and weightless under a thin veil of green.

"Come in, it feels wonderful!"

A slight hesitation, then Phillip pulls his pants off and leaps in with her. This time I think the boat really will tip over, but it doesn't.

Nikki splashes Phillip in the face.

Phillip grabs her head and pushes it under.

"Come in, Amber!"

"I--Doesn't somebody have to watch the boat?"

They seem all one tangle. Under the scooping water their limbs bump and blur. I picture myself floating stiffly off to one side, bumpy ribcage exposed beside Nikki's gaily bobbing breasts.

Sometimes you'll see cats that aren't quite kittens anymore move in a certain way; they arc their backs into exaggerated curves, then take a tumble, playing with the sensation of catness. Right now, Nikki reminds me of that. Phillip shakes his hair out of his eyes and lifts a hand streaming water to salute my rigid misery. I am struck by his blamelessness.

When I told him in March that I trusted him, I meant that I trusted him to try to bring out the part of me that is capable of that same untouchable innocence. Where actions aren't hooked to anybody or anything outside.

I don't trust him to be kind to my ego at all. I never have. That's why I don't relax.

3.

They drop me further down the beach. ("Are you sure this is what you want?")

Two gulls fly low beside me, then wheel out over the water. I dig my heels into the sand as I walk but still I feel unsteady. Phillip once said to me, "Amber, can't you see? A sense of belonging is something you choose. Nobody else can confer it on you. Nobody else can take it away."

I step over a long streamer of kelp, gleaming on the flat tide-pocked surface, and intersect a trail of Nikki's footprints. Her footprints are everywhere--in the soft fine dust on the road, in the mud by the edge of the pond, between the driftwood logs on the beach. In all the time we've been here, I have never seen her in shoes.

Stamping, I make a print beside hers. Her foot is short; wide at the heel and toe, narrow in the middle. Those valentine ladies made of two hearts stuck point to point. My size eight tennis shoe track is about twice as long. Beside Nikki's soft-edged print mine is graceless, overstated, overdefined.

"Amber," says Rachel, surprised. She's out surveying her work on her latest project, a new root cellar. When I feel excluded from the Phillip-Nikki alliance, Rachel's place is where I always wind up.

"Hi." Ashamed to be pestering her again, I stuff my hands in my pockets and look down at the large slabs of concrete she poured two days ago. The one that will serve as the root cellar's floor is poured into a notch dug into the hillside by her front door. When the other slabs are thoroughly dry she plans to tilt them on end to serve as walls. I'm not certain how she plans to move them. They look awfully heavy. I don't know how she's going to do the roof.

"Look," she says, indignant, pointing at a crack forming in one of the slabs. "I must not have gotten it level underneath. Have to figure out what to do about that. I suppose I'll have to move it and start over."

"You won't try to lift anything without help?" It's easy to forget how old Rachel is because she's so fiercely capable.

“Of course not,” she snaps, irritated. “I thought you were fishing.”

“I just went out for a ride. I don’t like to fish. Or rather, to deal with the fish once they’re caught.”

“You shouldn’t have worried. Those two aren’t going to catch anything. Coffee?”

“Yes!” With Phillip I drink tea; he doesn’t like the buzz you get from caffeine. But Rachel loves coffee almost as much as I do.

She drops her shovel and we go in the house, a geodesic dome made from Plexiglas panels ferried in on the mail boat two at a time. She told me how many panels it takes to make one dome, but I forget now. A lot.

The interior of the dome is basic. A concrete floor littered with cat hair and the bones of small animals the cats have killed. Bed to one side of the entrance, kitchen to the other. In the center a spiral of stairs leads up to the loft, Nikki’s domain.

I sit down on the steps, perched too high to reach the card table but near enough that Rachel can easily hand the coffee up to me.

“Bread?” Without waiting for me to answer she slices the bread. “Butter?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

I only shake my head. She shrugs, handing me the bare bread. When the coffee is ready, she launches into a story about fishing off the coast of Hawaii in the fifties. Rachel may be the first woman who ever got a job on a commercial fishing boat.

“I wish I were as resourceful as you.”

“You are. And you have a good mind.”

“Am I? Do I?” I know why she thinks so: I nod all the time, never argue with anything she says. Nikki, on the other hand, argues unceasingly.

Rachel says, “There’s nothing wrong with your basic equipment, Amber. Which is why I sometimes wonder what you’re doing.” She refers to all these days I’ve spent waiting for Phillip. Killing time. There’s a silence.

I say, “Rachel, will you lend me eight dollars?”

She understands immediately. “Eight dollars isn’t enough to get you back to Seattle. Here--” She lifts a plastic placemat, a laminated photo of Mount Rainier crusted with a black layer of honied coffee and residue of various meals. Hands me two soft flattened bills, twenty-five dollars.

“I’ll pay you back.”

“I know it. I’m going back outside, I’ve got to get some work done.”

“Mind if I stay here and read?”

“Of course not.”

But when she leaves I don’t move. Gloom gathers behind the card table in folds, softening the spilled clutter of European periodicals that arrive with every mail. On the counter flies buzz around an open can of evaporated milk, some breadcrumbs and eggshell.

This money. I took it. What will Rachel think if I don’t leave? What will Phillip think if I do? One of Nikki’s paintings is propped on the counter, a swirl of paint. Her creations tend naturally to motion, like her.

Fidelity: Quality or state of being faithful. Full of faith in what? In me and Phillip as partners. Must fidelity be threatened by the presence of another? Phillip would say no. I feel yes. Yes, because something opens when you make love. Being open to two or more people is not the same as being open only to one. It’s less stable structurally. So far it’s only been me and Phillip. If I leave?

There are many different ways to make love.

Those two in the water.

But who am I to interfere? I think once somebody you really love loves you back you can never quite be the same again, no matter what happens after that.

At last I get up, but not to retrieve the latest copy of *Soviet Literature*. To climb the circular staircase to the loft.

Nikki’s loft: Fiberboard floor, the color of ripe peaches. More cat hair. A foam pad covered with blankets. An easel made from two-by-fours, clearly Rachel’s work. Paint smudges on it. Paint on the floor.

Over at one side of the space, ten or fifteen canvases lean against the wall. Nikki has been working, working hard. Full of surprise, I look closer. They’re seascapes--different attempts at a similar view. Nikki hadn’t struck me as one to do something, declare it a failure and start again. She seemed more like someone who would say: any act you can appreciate is on purpose; there are no failures, just inadequate appreciators, just this crazy incomprehensible mystery working itself out around and through us.

There’s enough truth in that stance that you can go a long way on it--look at John Cage, Marcel Duchamp. Nikki could’ve gotten a long way on it, somebody like her.

‘I quit everything--’

But not this. Rachel's influence?

I look through the canvases one at a time, carefully. Don't understand what she's attempting to capture. Why is this particular corner so viciously scrubbed away? Why the slash-marks through this seascape, so similar to the one downstairs? I don't understand her aesthetic, but I do understand that the time with Rachel has taught her to work, and work has given definition to her shimmer. Will I ever acquire shimmer for my definition?

I turn away sharply. I wish I could write something that would let this pressure out.

Nikki's bed is positioned directly under the skylight. Her nightgown, tossed across the pillow, is caught in a blaze of sun. I pick it up. For somebody who opts for practicality of dress during the day, this is quite a departure. A cinched waist, loose-flowing, calf-length skirt, layers and layers of filmy white fabric, gauze that fractures the sunlight into iridescence. How does she keep from getting impossibly tangled when she sleeps?

Thumbs through the shoulder straps, I hold the nightgown up to me. I can see, through the translucent Plexiglas panels, Rachel's red shirt bright against the trees. Hammer blows ring out, echoing all the way down to the water. Whatever she's up to, she'll probably be a while.

I unzip my jeans, shove them off. Take off my shirt. Slip the nightgown over my head.

Any time you look in a mirror to see whether you look foolish, you're going to be looking foolish. I know this but still go creeping downstairs to inspect myself in Rachel's watery full-length mirror.

It's worse than I expected. The gown hangs in flaps under my arms. Turning sideways, I squint at the sticklike shadow of my legs. I should have known. It's not in the body, anyway, the thing I want to release. No nightgown is going to do the trick. Then--

"Ah-uh-*ahh*--"

A soft thud; a ponderous cracking, like certain kinds of thunder.

I slither over piles of newspapers, frantic, to the door. Rachel's on the ground, propped on one elbow, her body from the thighs down pinned under a slab of broken concrete. Her pale face stares up at me, filling my vision.

Dear God, she didn't listen. She must have tried to lift the cracked block by herself. And now-- A cold voice in my head says, *Amber, you're going to have to deal with this.*

I struggle with the concrete, manage to lift it a few inches. Rachel shakes her head. "Legs don't work," she whispers. Her face is shriveled and super-concentrated, not a lioness now but a gargoyle. There's no way I can lift the concrete and pull her out at the same time. "Post office," she whispers, and a string of saliva spins down from her lips like a spider web.

Post office. Where they can radio a helicopter. It's five miles across the island to the post office. My body feels like vinyl. I start to run.

Feet thudding. Soft dust packed hard in the center of the road. The air has turned into petroleum jelly, everything's sticky, slowed-down, stuck. *How foolish I must look.*

Branches whipping, gauze fluttering, a sound like bird wings. Sticky armpits, sticky skin, the shape of nipples under sweaty fabric. Cotton clinging, sweat dripping. Startled child on a bike veering out of the way just in time. "Hey--"

Dappled light. Feet pounding. Heart thudding.

At the post office the road widens. Faces turn my way, astonished. *How foolish I must look.* I retreat into the feeling of my body, working hot and hard inside the sweaty nightgown. Retreat from my body to the simple will to help Rachel, a will that cuts like metal through my embarrassment, through the surprised looks, through the moist, clinging air.

In the building an unforgettable expression on the face of the portly middle-aged man who sorts the mail, a sudden crease at the corner of the mouth as eyebrows leap and nostrils flare. I gasp, "The radio--"

All this, however, is quite simple compared to facing Nikki, who is back at the dome when I return, moments before the helicopter. They've moved the concrete. Nikki bathes Rachel's head with a washcloth. Rachel, conscious again, clutches her hand.

"I'll go back to town with her," Nikki shouts at Phillip through the gale the helicopter creates.

I skirt the clearing and follow Phillip into the dome, where he's hastily sorting through Rachel's belonging for things she might want: bathrobe, reading glasses, radio. Trembling, I stuff a paper bag with clothes.

Rachel is already in the helicopter by the time we run back outside. Halfway into the cab, Nikki turns, looking at me. At her gown. I want to call up that steely will I discovered at the post office but it fails me; this shame is for something deeper. I look down.

"We'll mail your things to your mom," Phillip shouts.

"Rachel said to tell you not to worry, she'll be back on the island in time to dig potatoes!" Nikki shouts in return. Amazing Rachel.

My silence seems as graceless as my flat stained feet in the dust. I think, *this is not who I want to be.*

Shimmer begins by not lying about what you are.

One moment before they lift off I raise my head, meeting Nikki's level gaze through the glass. Nakedly. Not nakedness at skin level but nakedness beyond that. What's left after the skin gets peeled away.

She smiles.

Later, back in Seattle, I receive a package. No note. Just the neatly folded nightgown.