

Al Dente

In one of those truly insightful moments--insightful because you do not pollute it with direct premeditation or question its occurrence--Hector Mona-Feeki decided against his appointment with the football halfback Sylvester LeRoom. The arrangements reached Hector by fax--a growing sheet of copy-bond with huge handwritten letters. It read: "Leggo of yer meat, Mona-Freaky! The halfback on the ten." Responsively, Hector slipped his generous manhood back into his distended red bikini briefs and moved to the machine.

The message originated in the adjacent office, where Carmine Aldente suppressed eruptions of the giggles. At six foot four, two hundred eighty five pounds, Aldente loomed above his sender's copy like an ape above the funnies. At intervals, he scratched the thick tufts of hair on the back of his hands. He nearly choked. It was all he could do to crumple his witty note and gag himself with it.

Aldente and Mona-Feeki were friends from their days together on the Montclair High School football team. After seven years without significant advancement toward graduation, the boys had amassed a statewide reputation as

remorseless bruisers with a shared chip on their shoulders, as if to punish the erudite. Particularly, they stalked anyone wearing eyeglasses--a sure sign of potential brainpower. In one game, as the half came to a close, Aldente intentionally fumbled a snap from center in order to pop a blitzing safety, who was hesitating near the line of scrimmage. The boy seemed to sense his impending danger, and engaged in a stationary trot whose closest physical relative was treading water. When Aldente unloaded the ball on him, the boy tried to drop it, but Mona-Feeki had returned from an end-out pattern, and intended vengeance. Leaving his feet, he hit the boy hard enough to dislodge his helmet, snap the elastic of his sports glasses, and break his bulging nose. Somehow the glasses got crushed on the field.

To varying degrees, Aldente's actions took place within a charmed shroud of mystery. Mona-Feeki had no idea how his friend had arranged the appointment with the halfblack, as they had taken to calling him. Nor could he figure the precise motive for the assistance. The previous week, with two bowling racks of empty Zimas between them, Mona-Feeki mentioned his excitement over the halfback's recent rushing exploits. National sportscasters were suddenly calling him Dartman as an insufficient description of his piercing athletics. Sports

Illustrated featured him as a cover article. In all the hoopla, Mona-Feeki came damn near confessing his inexplicable homoerotic sentiments of late. The next day, saddled by his hangover, he believed that he had. As a consequence, he adopted the habit around Aldente of quickly terminating suspicious conversational advances with the gruff dismissal, "It was the beer talking, you heathen. Or clear malt beverage. . ."

The problem was, Mona-Feeki was suspicious of just about everything Aldente had to say since their discussion. For instance, visiting the only toilet on the floor required of Mona-Feeki that he pass Aldente's office, the door of which was always open for precisely these occasions. Inevitably, Aldente barked some remark about Mona-Feeki's zipper, which was supposedly open. To a man of Mona-Feeki's anatomy, this jest carried unavoidable weight, because what if his zipper was open? On the millionth chance that Aldente was telling the truth, it was incumbent on Mona-Feeki to take him at his word. Lest he forget, he tended to stop dead in his tracks and pay his respect to the prank right there in the hallway, beneath the fluorescent track lighting and the faded poster of the Madonna. "The beast is secure," he usually announced. But lately the triumph of this rejoinder was surfacing as a parody of itself, and Mona-Feeki wrestled with

the distressing revelation that he wanted to file for sexual harassment, as if Aldente knew something.

Or in another workplace ritual, Aldente transferred all incoming wrong numbers to Mona-Feeki under the ruse that his former girlfriends were unsatisfied with their present relationships, and wanted him back. In this manner, he played with Mona-Feeki's gullible craving for apologetic mothering. On one occasion, Mona-Feeki fielded the call without letting the second party speak; for five straight minutes, he poured his heart out to a Lebanese Pizza Hut employee, who eventually bubbled, "So I must, yes, half pepperoni and dee barbecue bif." For two months, Mona-Feeki could not eat a pizza without biting his tongue.

In this way, the situation of the halfback involved impenetrable layers of complexity. On the one hand, there was no reason whatsoever to trust a damn thing that involved Aldente. Why had he taken so vested an interest in arranging the meeting? Why had he not foisted his own presence at the meeting into the plans? Things could not have been as simple as he professed--that the halfback would be happy to meet Mona-Feeki, who might pay him back with reduced rates and special attention in regard to the business conducted by the office. Nor was

such recompense obligatory, explained Aldente, snapping a suspender. On the contrary, the halfback was pleased to meet a fellow sportsman, talk to someone whose world experiences admitted camaraderie. Maybe they could go to a club, make it an evening. . .

Then there was the other side of the equation. What if Aldente was telling the truth? "This was not a big deal." Here, an egocentric application of reason prevailed against Mona-Feeki, enticing him to perceive that he too had played football and was not now so inflated by the prestige of it as to disdain the common man. In fact, he soon realized, the only people he had ever disdained were not common men at all, but the other players. In direct proportion to his high school success, he had reviled the not-yet-men, who weekly squared shoulder pads with him, and fed his hungry assault. There was a paradox here. He knew he did not disdain the common man and he knew he did disdain the athletic man. Meanwhile, he was presently a common man, who hankered uncomfortably for an exceptional athlete, whom he might otherwise disdain were he still playing football. He concluded his feelings were beyond his powers of assimilation, and that feelings in general were the province of girls. Again, he longed for a mother figure.

In the end, he abandoned introspection, filling its void with concerns about wardrobe. In the back of his closet, for reasons long forgotten, Mona-Feeki stored a shoebox containing a silk print tie from his only trip beyond New Jersey. Its pattern mingled angular dragons with bold, neon letters, reading "Hong Kong" in such a way that through compact repetition the words gave the impression of "Kong Dong" as they drained towards the belt line. Puffing his lip, Mona-Feeki shimmied the box from its perch, like a critical brick, beneath a dozen other boxes. For a second, they remained in place. Then, obeying the unspoken law of physics by which reality is obliged wherever possible to digress into a cartoon, the boxes ruffled their collective feathers and swamped Mona-Feeki's feet, as if to mock them. Among the debris of lids, football cards, shoe horns, and travel size toiletries, Mona-Feeki spotted a pair of loafers--known on his fashion circuit as a pair of cleatless--and pinched it between his fingers before exiting the closet.

In the bedroom, he crowded his lumbering frame into a full-length mirror and worked on his tie until a perfect dimple formed in the fabric directly beneath the knot. Satisfied, he wiped his sweating palms along his thighs, and proceeded to fasten his French cuffs with the palsied grace of a damp-handed surgeon awaiting the rubber gloves. For a jacket, he decided on a vintage tuxedo piece

that was recognized today as a blazer by its grainy fabric and miniscule lapels.

When the clock reached 9:25, he was freshly ensconced in a fog of cologne.

Still, the night air reached his senses, and unexpected sluggish tears diffracted the world into a kaleidoscope of headlights, traffic signals, oncoming faces. Before Mona-Feeki knew what was happening, he was huddled against a busy ATM mooching each new customer's receipt for the sake of a tissue. His knees chattered volubly. A curious burning ignited his crotch, as if it were wet and terribly dry at the same impossible time. He picked up a sudden, ghastly chill from the gentle, August wind. A young woman at the machine distractedly punched her numbers, observing Mona-Feeki through the filter of her bangs. She saw him slump against a mesh garbage can, and knock it over. As he rose from the waste, the woman bungled her transaction. He approached her with an outstretched arm and a dazed, blubbering expression. From expelled special sauce, a Big Mac wrapper stuck to his elbow. The woman snapped shut her purse. The screen read, "I'm working on it." As the cash rolled into view, the woman was halfway down the block, not looking back. Her hips rocked furiously above her hemline. Recovering, Mona-Feeki tugged out the money, counted it at sixty dollars in twenties, and leered at the remaining patrons. "Anybody touches

her card," he threatened, "and I'll bang out their kidneys." Widening his shoulders, he strode into sparse traffic sporting a giant boner he alone had failed to notice.

With no luck hailing a cab, Mona-Feeki wandered across the street toward the vibrant green neon of a liquor store display. Inside, he repeatedly demanded four bottles of the advertised brand, despite the immediate compliance of the married Chinese owners. By the time he was willing to pay, their efforts on his behalf amounted to a total of thirty-two bottles, which Mona-Feeki purchased on MasterCard after chewing out a noseless thirteen year-old checkout clerk for not honoring American Express. Then he sniggered abruptly. "Not a visa in the house," he punned, snorting with laughter. Sliding the bottles into two cardboard boxes, the husband and wife contrived to laugh along. They shook their heads and waved their arms like mechanical dolls. Mona-Feeki locked a box under each arm and left the premises.

His mind was empty of thoughts, spent. For the better part of an hour he roamed the sidewalks following unquestioned cues from his feet until finally his burdened arms registered some weariness. His puzzling surge of adrenaline was wearing off. At a phone booth, he put down his freight, dug a quarter from his

trousers, and dialed halfway into the number of his former fiancée Betty Tongue, whose nickname was Buddy, but Mona-Feeki called Lou. The last three numbers escaped him.

Very much like his feet, his fingers directed only superficial expeditions. Here, their initial alacrity resolved into a stuttering assault on the eight key. Mona-Feeki drew from it an incredible variety of Morse code, which chattered into the ear of the random homeowner at the other side of the first seven digits. Meanwhile, Hector drifted into a mild hypnosis, the informing pocket watch of which was the figure of the eight. An invitation to infinity, it conjured visions of Lou's uneven, almost nippleless breasts. Mona-Feeki concentrated on their resilience and rosebud hue. He tried to imagine himself at arm's length, pulling pleasure from this source, having a thrill. Was there anything that amounted to forever, or for that matter, lasted? Why was his past so elusive of him? Shortly, the earpiece ventured an answer. In reciprocal aural Braille, the other party assailed the three key. The way the tones nourished Mona-Feeki's communicative pauses gave him the creeps, and he hung up.

There would be no calls to directory assistance. Instead, Mona-Feeki hoisted his parcels and set off across town for Lou's apartment, disregarding her

injunction that he never show up unannounced unless he had found her grandmother's pearl earrings, the pawn-shopped equivalent of which he lost in less than an hour on a trip to Atlantic City. At first, Betty was not upset; she didn't know. Nor would she have bounced Mona-Feeki with such inflexible resolve had he not kept his mistake a secret for the next four months. As it happened, she found out through Aldente, whose belated condolence over the loss was an exercise in confusion for Betty, who thought he was coming on to her. So he was. But he also claimed to feel for her tragedy. Poetically, he understood the remorse at dropping into a sea of bartered heirlooms a treasure so many centuries in the making. "Take a look in your panty draw," he added. "Fatboy raped granny's ears."

But Mona-Feeki could attend to that mistake no longer; it too was a fallen scab from an outdated wound. The most he felt for his blunder was the reliable resurgence of animosity toward the cocktail waitress whose moustache distracted him from rearranging his bet. In a matter of twenty seconds, his mind dashed across topics as broad as excessive adrenal hormones in woman and memories from his adolescence of woman on steroids to why larger frogs move slower across major roadways, or whether they only seem to on account of their

visibility. When the dealer offered another card, Mona-Feeki took it without thinking, capsizing a nineteen that otherwise would have doubled his winnings. As it was, it pulled them forever from his grasp, and the tabletop void between his damp, resting arms became an immediate symbol of his imminent love life.

On the corner of Betty's apartment, Hector experienced his first pang of what the hell am I doing here, I must have sunk pretty low, so why the hell not anyway. It occurred as an ominous rumbling in his stomach, which he methodically calmed with some liquor, pulling heavily off a central bottle. In the lobby, he threatened to chop-block the doorman if denied unannounced entry to the building, and mounted the elevator as if laying without shame in another man's coffin. At floor 10, he shrugged his shoulders and stepped toward apartment G, from which he heard the scream of an overworked blender. The hallway offered a short poster tour of cubist and impressionist masterpieces, which taken together seemed to polarize the spectrum of human visual invention. Mona-Feeki stopped in front of Picasso's Guernica, and whinnied. He was reminded of a coloring book he attacked with only black and pink crayons as a child, dismissing art and the fairies who made it in bold channels of pink that

later filled him with overwhelming pride. "Tonight," he decided, "I'm gonna drink until this picture makes sense." He unscrewed a bottle.

Yet his oath did not require of events surrounding his intoxication that they too make sense. Nor did they cooperate in this regard by their own initiative. As Hector reached for the doorbell, the other elevator opened, disgorging into his wake a festive group of semi-drunk women in elegant clothing. Without so much as acknowledging his presence, they collectively stumbled down the hall, giggled past him, and let themselves into Betty's unlocked apartment, into which Hector caught glimpses of more celebration. There were balloons lining the far wall of the entryway. A mountain of coats rose from an armchair. The mirror above the Formica table reflected an image of a man sitting before the piano with a crowd of guests egging him on, the outcome uncertain.

Mona-Feeki slipped in without announcing himself, heading directly for the bedroom, where he planned to think out his next move. There, he found Betty's cat Carrumba in the feathery process of cleaning herself. Disliking interruption, she darted under the bed, moaning slowly. Highly sensitive to his present acts of intrusion, Mona-Feeki crouched beside the bed, lifting the bedspread enough to peak into Carrumba's spacious and lint-ridden lair. In the resulting shaft of light,

her eyes glowed like tiny embers, pearl-white. Mona-Feeki reached inward, hoping to atone for his disruption by scooping the cat lovingly from her hiding place into a session of petting on his lap. He felt fur, the thick shag of the carpet. He couldn't reach. He pulled back his hand. The eyes were in it. They had rigid, golden optic nerves, and shone. Mona-Feeki gaped in utter disbelief as hunched over, he stared downward into the fertile mother-shell of his wrinkling palm impossibly at the earrings of Grandmother Tongue, somehow recovered. From the floor, he uttered devout prayers of profanity to a host of nameless gods and lower deities. He concluded in his native language of Spanish. "Carrumba," he whispered. Like an authentic amen, the word seemed momentarily to say everything possible at once and forever, and implode into pearls.

But still, it couldn't be true--not unless the truth was a monster unrestrained by interpretive lassoing. Mona-Feeki approached the beast from all conceivable angles. Betty had recently found the earrings during an unrelated visit to a pawnshop. Betty had never lost the earrings in the first place, but fooled Mona-Feeki--"Fooled me!"--because she wanted to teach me a lesson, which might presently translate to take a closer look at the jewelry you steal or the bill can claim anything. Yet that answer made no sense either. Rather, speculate

about the grandmother, whose infrequent memory in Betty was a sure sign of deformity, of more ears than two, of upward of four ears, all needing pearl earrings and all getting them from a twelve-handed husband with a thick bill-fold and a knack for pick pocketing. Too crude. They were not extra earrings from a set of sixteen. More likely, they had found their way back thanks to, whom else, Carmine Aldente, who stuck them under the bed as a slight stab in the back should Mona-Feeki receive forgiveness in the form of woman-of-top. From the other room, Aldente's laugh soared slightly higher than its surrounding companions. It approached the bedroom. On Mona-Feeki's side, the doorknob turned slowly. The door rasped over the carpet, popping abruptly open. Carrumba darted to the closet.

"I'll be a monkey's hole," slurred Aldente, focusing his stare to an elusive center. The bruiser was approaching full intoxication, as indicated by the flush of red climbing his neckline and chin like the mercury in a thermometer. The top three buttons of his dress shirt were loosened across a thick patch of chest hair, and his hands hung from the white cuffs like raw meat. He extended one in a gesture of sincere and tender enthusiasm.

Mona-Feeki hesitated. His eyes widened like saucers. The sneeze came from nowhere, unannounced. It doubled him over, expelling enough phlegm to demand immediate attention, which he applied at once, cunningly, popping the earrings into his mouth like uppers, and with the same fiery effect. They slid down his throat in a viscous blanket of mucus, as if to the seabed of their origin.

"I ain't shakin' that now," belched Aldente.

"Yeah," laughed Mona-Feeki. The men embraced, inspired by the familiar feel of each other's biceps at their necks, like good denim against the thighs, to wrestle Greco-roman style, Aldente quickly losing his balance beneath the faster grapplings of his opponent. Mona-Feeki's arms seemed to come from nowhere, an amplified echo of the sneeze, powered by the same internal force and lubrication. In seconds, the men toppled to the bed, where Mona-Feeki took the winner's due.

"Submit?" he asked. "Submit?"

"GRffddzzzz--"

"Remember this event, and shudder." On that note, Mona-Feeki let him up, and Aldente babbled about the appointment.

"The halfback can wait," explained Mona-Feeki. "I had good news about Lou's earrings. I had to come over." But Aldente registered not the slightest hint of surprise, excitement, anxiety, frustration, brooding, wistfulness, jock itch, or anything, all of which qualities Mona-Feeki sought along the forehead and temples, where Aldente's brain, when free of booze, transmitted its usual relays, like an electronic flow of words across a light box. Instead, Aldente slipped into a blank state of unconsciousness, drooling on a pillow.

Deftly, Mona-Feeki slid Aldente out of his clothes, careful to clear his oxford collar of the accumulating spittle. When Aldente was down to only his rumpled boxer shorts, dress socks, and sleeveless t-shirt, Mona-Feeki tiptoed to the bedroom door and pushed it all the way closed along the carpet-stubble, which grated. He turned around and leaned his back against the doorframe, the knob touching his buttock.

Aldente's feet hung over the end of the bed. His abdomen rose and fell in cadence with his breathing. At the low times, Mona-Feeki observed the temporary lines of his friend's frontal pelvis above the waistband of his underwear. The sight held his attention. Next, his eyes wandered along the inside of Aldente's right arm until reaching the squat tarantula in the pit. He

shaped his mouth into an unconscious facsimile of the neckline of Aldente's undershirt, running imaginary lips along the bold Adam's apple slightly higher. Instead of himself putting on Aldente's clothes right away, he returned lightly to the bed and caressed Aldente free of his few remaining garments, which he did not put down, but rather tucked and still held by hand between his own neck and shoulder.

Aldente's nude body was enormous, important even in sleep. Its sprawling accumulation of hair danced with highlights called forth by the overhead light and also the freestanding lamp that Mona-Feeki directed from the bedside as if searching, a charmed veterinarian, for renegade fleas. His fingers spread across Aldente's chest, tracing circles around the nipples and sinking to the broad *latessius dorsi*. He moved down the great V of Aldente's back, hour glassing his hips and scooping gently at his splayed rear end. Then back up to shoulders and neck, across the chin like a dangerous summit. Running his fingers through the short hair of Aldente's temples, Mona-Feeki himself became sleepy, and sighed. The party in the other rooms bulged into prolonged applause, for which he pretended he was the recipient, murmuring humble gratitude. Absently, he poked Aldente in the eye, eliciting a gruff exclamation containing what was

certainly the word Betty. The rest was unintelligible, and resolved into restored snoring.

Mona-Feeki stood up with another, this time leaky, hard-on, which he carefully extracted from his pants. He took off his shirt and replaced his whole outfit with that of Aldente's. Fortunately, it was loose around the crotch, and also the shoulders. The suspenders required adjustment, and so did the cuffs of the pants. In a short time, he arranged himself as desired, and left the room, his two cases of liquor tucked under his tingling arms.

In the kitchen, a blonde woman manhandled the blender, which bled strawberry daiquiri into the tornado of its blades. From there, despite her efforts, the juice blasted against the walls, her dress, the refrigerator, the ceiling, creating a curious dot-matrix of pentagrams and subway art. Mona-Feeki ran his finger along one of the thicker emissions and licked it clean.

"Needs more rum," he said.

"The daiquiris?" asked the woman.

"No, the guests." With that, he plopped his cases on the counter, extracted a full bottle, unscrewed it, stuffed the cap into the woman's abundant cleavage,

and pulled a long drink, the intensity of which could be measured in bubbles running upward in the bottle.

"Carmine Aldente," he said, introducing himself.

"Sheila," said the woman. They both took a moment to examine her boobs.

"They're very nice," said Mona-Feeki. The woman frowned.

"And?" she encouraged. Mona-Feeki hesitated.

"Round?" he said.

"That buys you another guess."

"Available?"

"At Doctor Flavor's," said Sheila. "They were only a thousand--each, that is. You were supposed to say big."

"Too obvious."

"Are they?"

"No, I meant big is too obvious. Of course they're big. The biggest at the party."

"Really?"

"Trust me." Extending his context, Mona-Feeki reached forward a finger still wet and cold from the spattered daiquiri and wormed out the bottle cap,

which he brought to Sheila's ear and mock-removed as if ending a magic trick. She feigned surprise, insensitive to the red trail of liquid running down her breast. Mona-Feeki concluded she was originally flat-chested. According to Aldente, this conclusion was a fitting explanation of almost all female quirks and idiosyncrasies, and extended to areas of hygiene as well. Occasionally, Mona-Feeki questioned this logic as it sized up even more buxom women, but now it was not his place to question. Instead, his role was to live as Aldente, like whom he was dressed. He reached a mechanical arm forward and squeezed Sheila's right breast like a supermarket grapefruit.

"Dat's a tit," he aped. "Meet me in the master bedroom in five minutes and we'll play Iguana."

In the neighboring living room, a group effort at American Pie proved that the kitchen shudders were not thick enough to spare innocent ears, of which there were none. Mona-Feeki tugged at his lapels and pushed through the swinging door. A tiny brunette shouted, "Carmin!" grabbing him by the arm, and tugging him toward the terrace door, which was behind the group of singers. Mona-Feeki shrugged her like a fly and somehow her Contac lens fell in her glass of champagne, which she continued to drink.

"It's happened before," she explained between gulps. As the glass emptied, Mona-Feeki handed her an abandoned replacement from the tiered stand of chocolates on the mantelpiece. She grabbed it and disappeared into the huddle around the piano. At the far end, performing a classic double take which suggested rehearsal for some other time of necessity, Betty spotted Mona-Feeki, and excused herself. She came around the group with a sinister smile on her face.

"What are you boys up to?" she chirped. But Betty was far from a bird, varieties of which creature, say the peacock, possess elaborate markings and rituals that distinguish between the genders. Rather, she smoked a cigar during parties, as now, wore her hair in an unkempt buzz of probable military specifications, had thick gnarled knuckles the pretzelled repose of which suggested hard manual labor at the expense of her nails, favored square-toed boots as footwear, spoke a chugging stream of curses during angry moments, and preferred the word cunt to any of the delicate euphemisms her post-industrial commercialized urban society it seemed almost daily came up with. That was one of her greatest beefs, as she called them--that nobody talked to the point where it mattered most, was very literally a matter of life and death if you wanted to get biologically technical about it, and just plain pissed her off. Unlike

a bird in this fashion too, Betty's mental transitions did not soar smoothly on wings from one distant branch to another, but squirreled the tree trunk's core and so popped up, disappeared, and resurfaced elsewhere, time and again, with a logic that somewhere had a nut as its center.

"You look good," she said, but may just as well have been talking about herself. On the wall behind Mona-Feeki hung the mirror in which the reflection of the pianist had first presented itself. Now Mona-Feeki stood slightly aside of it, so that for him the reflection, had he chosen to look, would have been the rubber tree plant, loaded like an ashtray of soil with the under smoked cigarette butts of Carrumba's stool, perhaps smoking still. There, a pair of imminent lovers sustained a silent conversation over potent, unlittered fumes that neither had the courage, as they approached intimacy, to question aloud. There would be time to discover, and deal with, those lingering odors that stubbornly, despite cultivated avoidance, did not seem to go away. Why bother about them now? said their flushed faces.

Betty Tongue's face said power--the expression reserved for the acme of a successful stab at party hosting. She noticed it directly in the mirror as an ironic chip on Mona-Feeki's broad and at the same time droopy shoulder. The clothes

were not his size; nor was he a man who felt at home, deprived of much practice, in garments roomier than himself. They did not conduce to flattering suggestions, as with Betty, of a faultless physique somewhere within. Rather, they spoke of a consumer with little sense of his appropriate size and strong points. Meanwhile, Betty, loosely swimming in a black silk baby doll dress supported by two thin, side-roaming straps above a superbra chest looked like a black-and-white cookie off the desert tray of a five star restaurant if that's possible. Her masculine features, especially in the mirror, retreated to a secondary status that was attributable to a skillful dose of powdering. What was prominent instead was the creaminess of her skin, the icy blue of her eyes, which this evening were not to blink, the Asian influence that broadened her cheekbones without detracting from her face, the penciled thinness of her jet-black eyebrows which broke slightly at the extremes like the groomed tail of a lion.

Without the mirror, Betty's hips commanded the greatest attention. They pushed the shadowy forms of fleeting crescent moons and sickles into the straight edge of her dress, and then vanished. At times, her pubic bone surfaced like a reef being combed and let go of by black waters and wind. Her stomach

was an occasional concavity, across which the silk rippled like an old, venerable drum skin retired from tribal duty for the devotion of its beat. Mona-Feeki got lost at her kneecaps, which bulged beneath the skin of her legs like ashtrays swallowed by albino grass snakes. He remembered Betty's ability to push them in clear circles around her joint, and how she demurely assented to his fascinated eagerness to see her do it again and again from a variety of body postures, including kneeling. There was nothing she would not do for him in those days, and most of all she understood him, knew before he did that his ignorance was becoming a blanket that the approaching summer of his personal enlightenment was forcing him to kick off, lest he sweat himself silly among nightmares of a failed desert vision quest. How would he ever replace those bonds?

"I have great news."

"You killed Carmine," guessed Betty.

"I found your grandma's earrings."

"Oh, Hector," she complained.

"Lou, I did."

"We've been through this a million times." But Betty's voice had condensed to a compact whisper, as if to spare the smooth festivities any impending turbulence.

"They're right here," said Hector, gripping his stomach.

"I want you to leave."

"Not until I shit." He winked.

"What have you done with Carmine?"

"Who wants to know, huh?"

"Did you eat him too?" The impersonation had been convincing, and Betty took a half step backward. Mona-Feeki advanced. He grabbed Betty by the waist and pulled her against his chest, her head meeting his breast bone with the mild, mysterious clang of metal. She struggled within his embrace, and got a knee into his crotch. Unlike the last, this sound response was moist and mushy. Mona-Feeki collapsed to one side, clutching as much as he could of his enormous, wounded manhood. Toppled, he freed the mirror for Betty's full observation of herself, irate. She stormed into the daiquiried humidity of the kitchen, yanked open the utensil draw, and returned to Mona-Feeki glaring, distracted only once by a desire to refill her wine glass and project merriment. She bent down beside

her former lover with a knife and fork and whispered instructions in his ear about chewing very carefully. Next, she helped him to his feet. Once there, Mona-Feeki was able to join the party more amicably, for that one evening pregnant with tiny twins that would shortly determine his next circumstance in the universe, and jittery with the uncertainty of it all. In his excitement, he sang four rounds of Randy Newman's Short People, drank and distributed numerous bottles of his booze, and by the end of the night locked numb tongues with the pianist in a prolonged, sun rising French kiss until one of their bowels, it was hard to tell whose, began slowly to rumble them apart.