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Happy

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LINDA TY-CASPER

DURING THE WEEK she clerks in the craft shop where, looking across Sausalito Bay to Angel Hill past the marina and past houseboats floating no higher than eight feet above mud-bottom at low tide, she thinks of going to Muir Woods. But she never goes.

It's only ten, fifteen minutes away by U.S. 101 or California 1. Twelve miles north of the Golden Gate Bridge, it's open all year round, up to sunset.

Four days a week she answers questions about vases edged with pumice, the pink stoneware throats fleshlike, quietly alive. *No it will not separate; the rocks are part of the process*, she tells customers, and thinks of the fog that waters the needles of redwoods rising up to 367 feet along the upper coast, a narrow strip indicated by a red gash in the map on the information booth by the entrance to the marina; imagines the stellar jays that, above the silver salmon and steelheads, pupulate the sorrel carpet of the Woods, scolding the wind.

It's been only months since she moved to Sausalito from the barrio in San Francisco which hangs about St. Patrick; where Mass was said after Ninoy Aquino was assassinated in 1983; and where her mother used to take her, until she learned to make excuses so she would not have to walk home Sundays with people who exchanged hardluck stories since emigrating to the West Coast.

Sausalito is a different mindset, lifestyle. Safe from common memories, she can call herself Velvet. *Just Velvet?/Just!* And wear her hair thick and long, a rippling dark shawl; or shaved to the ear on the left. And stand beside vases taller than she, drawing stares with her silence. Stand almost without moving, without blinking; someone

posing for the light, allowing it to move about her the way cameras move around a model picking out shadows.

Barbara hired her on first impression. She went to the shop in a long cotton cape with its bright yellows and greens, strange windows on a purple field. *I'm Velvet*, she said. Very ethnic with her straight bluish-black hair and broad cheeks, a tiny mouth stained coral red, spread woundlike; stark.

People looked in, saw the vases and her—shadows of each other—and entered to see if she speaks; if so, what she might say. Some days she wears tartans, the badge of clans in Scotland. Instead of a gold safety pin she lets the skirts fly. On her dark skin people see cultures in collision, coalescence. They come in to see if her flesh is warm. Some days she wears a *saya* with butterfly sleeves; other days, unbroken white with a Tausug belt from Mindanao.

Where do you shop? Customers ask. *Here and there*, she answers.

Barbara wears jeans and loose Madras. Beside each other, they impersonate the architectural collage of different styles of houses side by side on highways like continents that have slid into each other. They used to live on a street named Sta. Barbara, very close to the old Spanish walls beside Manila Bay. It amused Barbara to be told her namesake is the patron saint of soldiers.

Since moving to Sausalito, a year after her parents died in that car crash, heading for Big Sur past Monterey, Velvet has not gone anywhere. She sits on her window sill watching boats that seem anchored with concrete bottoms to the Bay, making distance slowly toward Angel Hill.

Been to Muir Woods? Barbara asks her Friday. *Go. Go see trees the height of five-story buildings with no taproots to the water table. It's coastal fog that waters them. Some are a thousand years old. Go this weekend.*

No hurry then, Velvet thinks. They'll be there longer than forever, with towering white fog to feed them. Fog running along the coast much like the faint capillaries of color on the tender vases Barbara fires.

She does not want to go; or talk about her great-grandfather who jumped ship when he saw her greatgrandmother pass by the Luneta in a two-wheeled *quelis*. Long ago in memory not hers. Why mention her cousin in Metro Manila who trains pigeons to race? His birds land on trees or electric wires, and not until they get down to the ground are they considered to have returned.

She is weeding out all memories from her life. Though they can enter her thoughts while she stands, as dark as the bark of redwood,

shimmering inside a caftan beside a vase slashed across by stones that mimic riverbeds dried by summer. She thinks many things she will not say, waiting for Sunday when she might just go to Muir Woods across from Mt. Tamalpais on U.S. 101.

Velvet likes to think of redwoods covering much of the Northern hemisphere 140 million years ago. According to the tourist map, three noted species remain, each within a limited range with roots no deeper than 13 feet into the soil. Spend the day, the brochure suggests. Walk past Cathedral Grove to Fern Creek. Take a different trail each time. It's mostly level. Mostly paved, except for trails that lead to Mt. Tamalpais. In a rainstorm the creeks become torrential running down to Muir Beach.

There's poison oak and stinging nettles, according to Barbara who named a vase Nettles. Once you get the rash, you get it for seven consecutive years whether you brush against them again or not.

All of Barbara's vases have names. Saragh is radish-white with purple veins. Velvet calls it, *Anglo Nude*. Muir has redwood cones along one side; rough as bark hiding heartwood. A couple from Seattle bought Muir and ordered a birdbath to match.

Customers think the bases are Velvet's creations because she explains the technique, while in the backroom Stanley fashions crates for the vases. Barbara thinks Stanley is *tres* creative. *With him it's instinct. Look at his hands. Did anyone teach Van Gogh? You're creative, too, Velvet. Right now, with yourself. You look like my vases.*

She lets Barbara talk, like the radio in her apartment going on and on like another person in the bathroom, turning the place vibrant with silence. She keeps the radio on day and night. *Yah, yah*, she talks back to it. Occasionally, depending on how she feels, she'll throw it a smile; or crack a joke. She calls it, *Happy*. She sits across from it while she paints her toes the pink color of Barbara's Zamboanga vase, winking back at the faces on the wall tiles, marble veins creating the impression of photographs in an art show.

Her favorite is the one with downcast eyes, lower lip hanging like a cigarette. It reminds her of Markham who works as a guide in the Hess Winery built in the old Christian Brothers monastery carved out of hills, with the sky stretched over the vineyard. State-of-the-art equipment; galleries of modern Swiss and American artists. It's \$2.50 to taste the wine.

She never took his invitation to come tour the winery. She has no strong desires though she's nineteen when peak sex drives supposedly move coffee breaks into bedrooms. The other girl who worked

for Barbara, but left after training her, talked of tussles among white lace pillows. She told Velvet she comes from a wealthy Shanghai family; asked, *How about you? I don't remember*, Velvet answered.

She has all she wants, her own apartment and the birdbath into which Barbara pressed ferns and berries; which sits on her deck like a guest enjoying the view of the Bay and the Hill. Nothing else worth stealing. No rugs on the floor. Just clothes in the closet. And shoes.

Heading up to her apartment after work Friday, Stanley asks her out for a drink in the bar two flights up from the shop which is six flights down from Velvet's place.

"Fine," she says. She can stand an hour or so talking about work and Muir Woods.

Right away Stanley says, "What matters is being happy. It does not come from being married. My parents are divorced but they're happy."

"Oh!" The lights on Angel Hill are like fireflies. She feels them along her arms, in her forest of hair.

"And happiness certainly does not come from perfection." Stanley reaches for her hand, counts her fingers.

The stone in her ring sparkles. It used to fit her mother's finger but it feels too large, although it fits hers, too.

"With a car I could get a job in Nob Hill. Standford Court, the Fairmont. Been to the Sky Room? Tourists spoil it. It used to be the haunt of those who can afford to rent artists for their amusement. Different lifestyle."

The Campari has made her weightless. As if she has been confined all day, she wants to stretch up to the stars; but it might mean something else to him.

"You always this quiet?" His ears are pressed to his head like a child's hands. "That's a pretty ring. From someone?"

"What kind of car do you have in mind?" she asks, thinking how tight his face looks, eyes slashed against the glare of the lights reflected on the window behind her. He would be perfect on a bathroom tile.

"So what is happiness?"

She lets him talk, lets him pull statements out of air like shoppers rummaging through boxes of miscellany while she sips her Campari and thinks of going to Muir Woods, returning by Bohemian Grove along Redwood Creek; thinks of the women who talked and talked outside the shop that morning, then after one left, the other two entered saying to each other, *I wish we can remember her name*.

"It probably won't happen," Stanley is saying.

"What?" she asks, feeling rude for sailing away in her thoughts. The lights on Angel Hill are sticking to his hair. Barbara says Stanley can carve space, hollow it out like another Henry Moore given the chance to earn more than just a living.

"Life can still come to nothing. People move out of their lives all the time. Shall we check the tide?" he says.

"I'll sit awhile, then I'll turn in. I'll see you, Monday. Maybe Monday, we'll check the tide. Thanks for the drink."

"Won't be there Monday. Gave my two-weeks notice." He pushes in his chair.

"Oh." For a moment briefly he makes her think of the poet from Mill Valley where redwoods were milled until 1910, who wrote a poem to her on a napkin: White bird in her head/peach fuzz between/her breasts . . . She slips off the ring. "Take it."

"Are you serious?"

"Get yourself wheels. Whatever."

"I'll pay you back."

"No promises. Don't worry, I never liked it." She stares into her drink while he walks away, slowly as if he might come back. *No promises*, she thinks. Promises list what comes after dying; list memories. Does he think it's a piece of glass!

When she looks up, the stars are white ants that have dropped their wings. She writes her own poem: No promises/ intentions/ enough. No sister, no brother/Parents dead/ No one to pray for/ Just born/Born out of no generation. *So*.

She runs up the four flights to her apartment. Out of breath she turns on the radio. Two quick tugs loosen her pantyhose. At the window she looks down at the marina, winding the legs about her arm. He is nowhere below.

But more stars have come out. She looks for the one that came to life when she was born. Her mother said there is such a star.

"But what will I do with it?" she asks, turning to the radio listening in the other room, ready to argue.