



EIREENE NEALAND

*Goat Milk and Honey*

JEAN PRESSED HER KNEES TOGETHER AND SUNK INTO THE BACK-seat of the U.S. Information Agency's Volvo, trying to hide the smell of her three-days-worn sweatshirt as her fellow intern, Christine, chatted easily in the front seat with the USIA Public Relations Director. Though they had known each other only four hours, Jean had twice already been forced to endure Christine's jingle about her father, who, Christine said, cooked books for rock stars in New York. Sill unable to match up with her own family connections, Jean looked at the Stalin-built high-rise that loomed outside the car window. Its twenty-five floors of sagging balconies—Jean would later write—kaleidoscoped geometrically like the way that bees see.

The director, mid-sixties and mild-eyed as a retired circus bear, pointed across the parking lot at a tattered Bulgarian kiosk, stuffed with Rice Crispies, local yogurt and Scotch.

"Budding capitalism," he told the girls. "The marketing data you collect this summer will bust this economy open."

Both twenty years old, the two girls were eager to bestow democracy, postmodernism, feminism, gay rights, racial equality and American prosperity on the newly unleashed Eastern Bloc.

The director directed their attention to a small white O that glistened rakishly atop the gray everyday of Stalin's mighty mausoleum for working people.

"During the Cold War we ran satellite code through that dish," he said. "Now it's for cable."

The director led his interns into the high-rise. The drab living room of their eighth-floor apartment was empty except for a nylon-covered couch, left shoved against the wall.

"If you want a television, snoop around in the other rooms," the director said, waving like a beneficent Czar on his way to the door. "Most are unoccupied."

He tossed the keys to Christine and frowned at Jean, who had slumped against the wall to pick at a hole in the cuff of her sweatshirt.

"I'll send a translator by," he said. "Tomorrow you can start putting the screw to your neighbors."

The director's exit launched a cloud of dust. Christine, overtaken by allergies, nearly fainted her way to the balcony. A washing machine was wedged, inexplicably, between the railing and wall.

Christine jabbed helplessly at a button that did not turn it on. Outside it was sweltering; also choked with dust.

"How do they expect us to live in conditions like this?" Christine asked.

Jean joined her roommate at the balcony's edge. Together they stared into the alley behind their building where garbage was piled.

Six other high-rises, identical to their own, crowded the huge parking lot. Beyond them a red-cheeked Bulgarian toddler, unsupervised among tinkling goats, beat his chubby fists, flinging handfuls of pebbles at clover flowers that surrounded him in a small, sparsely treed field.

Christine pointed. "How cute."

Jean's eyes misted over: see he, the oppressed, whom she had come there to save. The girls stared at the boy until a bee, rising on vents of composting garbage, made Christine scream.

Jean waved until it wheeled off.

"It's not just flowers," she said. "They like your red hair."

Christine reacted with an icy smile, lips flat against glittering braces. Jean covered her embarrassment by bending down behind the washing machine. She identified the problem immediately.

Frayed wires twined together, the spin cycle started.

"All summer I did laundry on a washboard," Jean said. "I volunteered on

a kolkhoz in Sokol."

Christine pulled a stack of white blouses from her suitcase and searched for a washing machine setting that did not exist.

"The Russian countryside sounds very quaint," she said. She meant quaint in a nice way, fairy-tale like, but Jean snatched her oil-stained duffle-bag from the entryway and, without even asking Christine which room she wanted, closed the door to the first one.

Jean's sheets were too small to tuck in at the corners. The bedsprings poked while she, back against the headboard, chewed already ragged nails, listening to her fellow intern open and shut drawers in what sounded like a much more spacious master bedroom down the hall.

Even Christine's snores came out queenly. The next morning Jean's under-eye bags joined Christine's, rimmed with mascara, as they prepared to start work, softening up the foreigners in their hall.

"On commercials democracy fit like a tight jeans," a beekeeper with chipped teeth told the girls when they, translator in tow, stopped him in the stairwell. "U.S. were winning by the television radiation more than atom bomb."

The beekeeper claimed to be twenty-five but Jean and Christine, consulting in giggles, measured his wrinkles and gaunt stoop by American standards. They wrote the man's occupation and age as "goatherd, close to fifty" and sneered at the sweet, almost rancid smell that breathed from his clothes.

"Carnauba wax," Christine said. Jean guessed fresh pears.

"You can take the day off," they told their translator. "All Communists had to learn Russian. We want to practice our language skills from school."

Conjecturing next about a wrinkled woman reading a book underneath a swarming bee tree, they did not notice their translator's grimace. Christine swept off to the movies while Jean added finishing touches to their interviews. The document they turned in the next day reported that Bulgarian citizens are paranoid about the new telephone lines the USIA helped fund (as a way to open the country to AT&T).

The power lines are down. It has been dark for a while. Nearly midnight, Jean thinks dramatically though it's only nine-thirty. Christine, once again, is out

at the movies with State Department staff and off-duty marines. Jean was invited but she felt she couldn't afford even one movie ticket.

"Mass media homogenizes," she had said. "I'd rather stay home and read."

Alone in the dark apartment, Jean replays the sound of Christine's fluted *Ta-ta*. She wanders down the hallway that separates their two rooms and slips through Christine's door, left ajar, fingers the pretty pink bedspread that Christine's mother sent out from Boston. *Textured like beeswax*. Jean lies on it then rubs her nose on perfume samples glued into the pages of a *Cosmo* magazine that Christine has carelessly left out on the pillow. She slips her nose into the crack of Christine's closet door and breathes in the fabric-softener smell. Compared with the bouquets of blue-flowered skirts and button-up sweaters flowing off these hangers, her own closet seems a dark, gaping hole.

She pushes Christine's closet door but can't roll it back all the way because there are too many pairs of shoes on the floor: eight-inch open toes, purple pumps, dancy rhinestones. She edges out the pair that Christine wears to work. Modest heels, the solidity of class. Polished black leather, the sheen of New England, complete with a pilgrim-style buckle strung across the top like a banner.

The brogues are too big of course, Christine is so tall. Jean's bare feet slip against the wide arches. She squints at the dresser mirror and pats her unruly curls down. She squirts perfume on her neck and straightens her posture, feeling her thighs stretch. With the weight shift, her hips wriggle, her hair swings. Time for work? In imitation of Christine she gracefully arches her arm, longer, lighter, and paler in the hall light. She flicks her wrist up to glance at the face of her watch.

It's midnight. The movie is over and Christine is still gone. One of the marines must have taken her out for an American milkshake or, at this hour, her first fizzy drink.

Jean shrugs off the thought by princess-prancing down the hall. She sweeps through the foyer and closes herself with exotic Bulgarian cockroaches into an elevator that opens like a refrigerator and is barely larger than the cooler she imagines Christine has at home in her cabana to hold sodas for abundant guests swimming in Christine's parents' Olympic-size pool. She squeezes the warm key in her pocket but doesn't think once of locking their apartment door.

Released into the starless Bulgarian night, she sways slowly past the

yogurt stand, towards the tram line, now closed. Creeping up from behind, a lone pair of headlights brighten the road gradually, like a sunrise. The ruts in the road cast blue mountain shadows. White stones are polished to snow-peak glints. When she raises her arms, the leaves on bushes flare; a taxi rattles past on the dirt road.

The headlights swerve off to one side and Jean sees the romance she wants, the national flower flushed peach—humongous, ripe Bulgarian roses—an opportunity to match her roommate in glamour. Jean breathes in the fragrance. Even if the flowers are from an imaginary hero she'll bring back a story better than any the marine can show Christine at the movies. Humming softly, Jean reaches into the bush, careful to avoid pricking her fingers on the thorns she knows are hidden in the dark space between blooms.

Inside the taxi, the beekeeper and driver argue over the lead story in the *Democrat Weekly* which claims there is now proof that in 1978 Georgi Markov, a Bulgarian dissident leaking secrets to the BBC, was injected with poison from the tip of a KGB umbrella during a visit to London.

"Shiftless Gypsy," the beekeeper argues. "Why should the media make such a fuss over the death of a man who deserted?"

"I've heard the CIA hides tiny cameras in bee eyes," the taxi driver replies. He tells the beekeeper a rumor that the mafiosi have been smuggling guns, submerged in honeycomb, down to Turkey.

"Something about the smell conceals," he says. The beekeeper changes the subject by pointing to Jean just outside his window.

With her limited Bulgarian, Jean is able to understand only a few words as the beekeeper and taxi driver wind up their conversation:

"American... girl."

"No... too drunk... look you're home."

"Americans... next door... I know her." The car door slams and Jean stops picking flowers, turns around. In the dark no one sees the rose pollen smeared on her shorts. The beekeeper grabs her tee-shirt, scratches her face and yanks her hair, fighting like a girl. Jean herself is careful to punch with her thumb on the outside like she learned on the kolkhoz. She clutches Christine's brogue protectively to her stomach. The other shoe has slipped off, toe stubbing into black dirt under the roses.

Wooly from drinking her first champagne, Christine fans her arms out so the bedspread stretches like bee wings, flapping to draw moisture away from the hive. She yawns and rubs her eyes, uncomfortable to be seen without her makeup but eager to report in to Jean.

"We did it," Christine says. "The marine and I... you know—"

Jean depresses the foot of Christine's bed and continues to babble about roses, waving her arms as if she hasn't heard Christine's insinuations, as if her own story is dramatically superior; perhaps she has just lost her virginity too.

"And you didn't even—" Christine begins but her throat constricts, her breath catches. She bites her own lip. Just mentioning the marine makes her thighs ache—"scream?"

Jean squints at Christine's forehead intently as if she's watching a fly clean its hands. Her roommate shrinks back into her blanket, draws the edge protectively over a small blue bruise the marine drilled into her thigh. There's a mark on her neck too. Christine tips her head to allow Jean to see it.

Jean doesn't see. She licks her lips and bounces the bedsprings.

"You don't have time to scream in a situation like that," she says.

Of course she had screamed, she'd screamed the whole time. That was what made the van rush to her rescue. But no one screams in novels. It's all over so fast, villages pillaged, girls ravaged in one quick paragraph, reported only as background for heroes who slash up villains not in order to rescue hapless peasants but to win the love of a princess, unsullied in the glory of her flowing red hair.

Jean rises to pace in the trench between Christine's dresser and bed.

"We fought through the first gunshots," she says. "It was like John Wayne movies—two warning shots fired first in the air."

He did not look like Wayne but rather was squat and humpbacked, like the Igor character from *Frankenstein*.

"His name," Jean says, "was Sergei."

She lets her eyes bulge and pauses, imagining the white nubs on the bedspread to be the size of the goosebumps on Christine's arms.

"Was he cute?" Christine asks. "Did you ask him to lunch? We could double. My marine and I, we would like that. We'd pay. We could—"

Jean is not listening. Her head cocks to catch the sound of a goat that

bleats seven times, below their window. When it becomes clear that the goat will not bleat again, she looks quickly over her shoulder and closes Christine's bedroom door.

"A minivan veered around the corner and lit up the side of the road," Jean says. "There were more shots, close now. I kept fighting the goatherd but he fell back to a crouch. Then we both froze."

A claustrophobic privacy. Christine shivers. There's a savage Slavic glint in her roommate's eyes. She wonders if she'll have that too when she is more experienced about sex. She used to like it when Jean called her naïve but there was a sneer in the marine's voice when he used the same word.

"I would have come sooner," the man in the minivan had said, "but from your wild hair I thought you were a drunk gypsy, enjoying it." He almost hadn't bothered getting out of the van but, drawing in to laugh, he caught the brogue buckle in his headlights. Italian-made, he noticed. Cut-off jeans then became an odd foreign fashion.

"A minivan?" Christine asks. She suppresses a yawn. "I would have let you borrow the brogues."

Jean blushes, stares hard at her feet.

"A minivan," she says firmly. "German import. Only the mafiosi can afford them."

Jean tells about the cold café, the goosebumps on her legs swelling to small welts as she waited out on the sidewalk at the flimsy plastic garden-party table. One-forty-six, it was still dark out and most of the stars were hidden by clouds.

The square-jawed Bulgarian ordered for them both: a six-wing bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken. When Jean went in to carry the Pepsis the cashiers were dressed comically, as Southern buccaneers.

"I've never associated Kentucky Fried Chicken with pirates," Jean says.

"The Colonel was a sea captain," Christine says impatiently. Jean is surprised that Christine even knows of the fast-food chain. A vegetarian, she herself has never been to one in the United States.

She picks greasy chunks from the paper box and nibbles the fried dough, angry that her pimple-faced rescuer is so eagerly bloated, proud and unaware of the millions of dollars Kentucky Fried Chicken has spent importing American livestock to ensure the consistency of fast-food products at home

and abroad, Jean knows from reading unclassified embassy reports.

Sergei says he's an actor. He has the gun and minivan as part of his real work, smuggling chemicals down to Turkey for a vigilante group named G-17.

"It's an important sitcom," he says. In fact he only clerks at the desk, checks actors in, answers the phones when they're working.

Jean has never seen her rescuer's favorite American soap opera, *90210*, but she tries to be enthusiastic. Sergei, after all, has brought his Beretta from the car. From across the table it is impossible to make out the insignia on the butt of the gun but the meaning is clear: gray and cold-looking stretched across his thick leg, the barrel tapers, pointed accusingly, polished brightly as Christine's nails. She, Jean, is lower-class, a loser, someone to be taken advantage of.

The chicken in Jean's stomach compresses into a tight unladylike growl. She rumples her hair to make herself look as ugly as possible and picks at the strings of her shorts. *I have nothing*, she telepaths at the Bulgarian's pocked forehead. *There is nothing that you can take from me.*

Sergei notices only Jean's outward nervous smile. He's spent half a month's salary to take this American girl out. Adrenaline still pumps through his veins, *this* is democracy, he thinks: the rhythm, the tempo. He wishes he'd rescued someone taller, a blonde. Bulgarian women never leave the house without brushing their hair and fixing their makeup but here he is stuck, even if she is American, with a girl who dresses like a beggar. He hopes, at least, that the L.A.P.D. will give him a medal.

"My roommate will be worried sick," Jean says. This is the line she always uses to end a bad date. For the first time she engages her rescuer's eyes. He reaches across the table and drops two bullet shells in her hand.

"A souvenir," he says, enjoying the way her hand trembles. Her skin is soft. He moves his hand across hers so she can feel how his is callused. He closes both hands around her free one, the one not clutching Christine's brogue.

"Bark protecting the soft wood of an American pine," Sergei says. He stares into her suppliant brown eyes and, beginning to see beauty, closes her fingers over the bullets and squeezes. He does not mention anything about driving her home.

"He pressed me," Jean tells Christine. "I gave him the number at the front desk with one digit changed." Her mother had taught her that, to give out a

just partly wrong number, to change the truth just enough to make the lie come out easily, self-assured.

Christine shifts on her pillows and Jean digs deep in the pocket of her shorts for Sergei's bullet shells. She deposits them loudly on Christine's desk and proceeds to tell the worst parts: how, before driving to the café, the actor-mafiosi waved her into the back of the minivan, herded Jean's attacker through the headlights, forced him against the hood and then stepped three paces back, a fair target zone. When his captor wisely froze, the mafiosi shot twice, one bullet across each wrinkled cheek.

"Scars from that'll remind you not to play with American girls," the mafiosi yelled as the man scrambled away on all fours.

Sergei stopped to spit in the bushes before returning to Jean, crouched behind the backseat of his van. She kept her head bent, hands clasped over the back of her neck, the way she'd been taught to do in an earthquake. When Sergei motioned for her to take a place beside him in the front seat, she obeyed. In elegant British-English he reminded her to buckle her seatbelt.

"At least he didn't kill the goatherd," Jean says. She runs her hand along the mirror above Christine's dresser and, without looking at herself, leaves fingerprints there. "I would have felt so guilty, if my jealousy had caused a man to be killed."

Eyes lowered, she lets her hand shake. Jean knocks over a bottle of Magnolia perfume that Christine's mother sent only days ago. The spill spreads in a slow puddle along the top of the dresser, leaks drip by drip to the floor.

"Sorry," Jean says. "And you were going to tell me something too."

Christine directs Jean to the packaged Kleenex, stacked neatly in her underwear drawer, and shakes her head to settle the champagne.

Jean's blubbery apologies are no match for the heroine in her story. Bad guys often die in the movies, or are pushed off cliffs. In the film she saw tonight a man threw rocks at a three-legged dog. Later the dog slunk back to lick grease off the man's plate. Hard to know what to make of it, especially with the marine's hand on her knee.

Jean holds up a perfume-drenched Kleenex and sneezes. Christine tucks back a hair that's gone stray. Overwhelmed by the smell of Magnolia, she rises gracefully and throws her bedspread off, widens her eyes and puts a hand on her roommate's arm.

"The front desk," Christine says. "He'll never get through."

The next day the State Department realizes how many Bulgarians really have guns. The Bulgarian soccer team has won the World Cup. To celebrate, mobs of soccer fans drag tires into the streets and burn them along with trash mounded in the alleys from the previous week's general strike.

"Not that we don't always throw our trash behind buildings," a goatherd comments to an American journalist, shipped in to cover the riots. Those who have cars swerve in and out of the fires. Dogs howl and yelp. Bottle corks pop. Whoever has a gun shoots it, mostly in the air.

The tram lines are stopped. Christine listens lazily from her bed while Jean prepares for a two-hour walk to a lecture at the embassy, given by Sandra Day O'Connor. This too is part of the USIA's democratization aid.

"A Republican," Jean complains as she ties up her sneakers, "talking about Feminism."

"She is after all the first woman justice on the Supreme Court," Christine says. She does not mention that her father is a Republican, that she herself does not vote.

"Selling out is how she got there," Jean says. "We should go just to sneer."

"I'm waiting for a call from my Marine," Christine tells her.

"You're staying home for that?" Jean departs with an angry snort.

The call does come but it isn't the message Christine is expecting. Her marine has been instructed not to go out. He is calling Christine to cancel their date.

"My roommate's gone," Christine says. "I'm afraid for her."

Christine is afraid of many things. The marine is tired of hearing them. He has met a Bulgarian girl who is drunk. He thinks he will have a good time at the bar.

"Just keep the door locked," he says.

Christine hangs up the phone and bites her knuckles. She wants to bash the receiver and scream in both the marine's ears but he's gone now, can't hear her, of course. She slams the door like Greta Garbo and, rushing to catch up with Jean, clacks down the stairs in her rhinestone heels.

In the parking lot Jean is nowhere to be seen. It's noon but the sky is dark with stripes of black smoke from tire fires raging in the alleys. The rub-

bery air makes Christine choke. She feels for the inhaler she's been prescribed for allergies. Her breath catches when she realizes the dress she put on for her date doesn't have pockets.

"The inhaler must be in my purse," she decides. The air draws tight in around her. From every balcony in their apartment complex, Bulgarian flags flap, stamped with the green and gold lions that Christine does not recognize as derived from the crest of an old Bulgar baron. They look like the griffin logo imprinted on the cheap bottles of Lowenbrau beer that her marine drinks. Right now she wants to kick them all crushed. That's what Jean would do. Christine concentrates on stretching her lungs like thick rubber bands. She stamps on a piece of flapping newspaper but not hard. Her rhinestone heels aren't very stable.

"Jean would call this a revolution of oppressed peoples," she tells herself. She pushes through the smell of burning tires and stomps, fists clenched, across broken glass and baby diapers; potato peelings, cigarette butts, dog hair and old spoons. Even if she doesn't arrive in time for the embassy talk, she needs to sit down and have a bare, honest talk with her roommate.

At the tram stop there's no train, just a peasant squatting, small and unshaven. The way he grimaces reminds her of Jean's tennis shoes, so creased and dirty that Christine offered, just last night, to have her mother replace them.

"She won't even blink if I tell her my shoe size shrunk," Christine had said. "I could have you new shoes here in four days."

Jean hadn't been polite about the offer. She'd run to her room and slammed the door. Even the round puckered jealousy of this peasant's mouth reminds Christine of how Jean's face looked, refusing the shoes.

Rising from his squat, the peasant lifts one eyebrow and then the other. He stares back at Christine, falls into step beside her.

"American," he says. He looks at Christine's breasts, points at her red hair.

All of Bulgaria's heat seems concentrated in the sour milk smell of this dark, wizened man. Cars swerve on and off the sidewalks. Women shriek and dogs bark. BULGARIA BITES BACK, newspaper headlines yowl. SOFIA GOALIED ONTO WORLD MAP. Soot swirls in Christine's eye. She has to blink hard. No one has told her it's just a soccer match. The constant gun pops seem to mirror the pounding in her temple.

"I'm from California," she tells the peasant. That's where Jean lives. "Oakland."

Just having a conversation makes her feel strong. She's refusing to sit home alone. She'll go to the bar if she has to. She'll find a way to get into the barracks and confront her marine.

"California," the peasant says. "Los Angeles. Hollywood. Sex."

"No," Christine says, impatient with the way his accent slaps the *s*'s hard underneath. "San Francisco. Sailboats. Fog."

"Dude," he says. "Man. Surf USA. You live Beverly Hills 90210?" Jean would love this, Christine thinks. She brushes soot from her arm and waves to a thin man at the yogurt stand. He winks and the peasant beside her smiles. This is the kind of adventure Jean always has. Christine widens her shoulders and swaggers a little, peers into the smoke and points in what she hopes is the general direction of the embassy.

"Bibliotek," she says in Russian. "Can I walk there?"

"No Bulgari," the peasant says. "I Turkey. Drive truck."

He curls one hand around a mock steering wheel and makes the sounds of revving a Corvette. His other hand sweats onto a loaf of bread. He is squishing it.

"Bread," he says. "Hurry." He points to a Khrushchev-era apartment bloc on the other side of the field. Christine shudders. Khrushchev's buildings have the same repetitive cereal-box sag that Stalin's have but they are plywood prefab instead of concrete.

"Nice meeting you," she says. "Farewell."

"See you later," the man says. His smile starts from the crinkle of his eyes, slow, like a sneaker bending to run. "Alligator." He is grinning so hard he looks as if he has just won a prize. He grabs Christine by the wrist. A car charges the couple but veers to the side when Christine holds her ground.

"Later Alligator," the man jabbars repeatedly. "Bread away. Then walk." He points to a layer of dust on the bread. Christine recognizes the screwed tightness of the man's chin as somehow akin to her roommate's. She tries to endear herself to the bread though she can't like the man. Jean has often chided her for being a snob. Jean, at one with a worker's concerns, would see the importance of keeping bread fresh.

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The Turk's apartment is dark, slightly mysterious, unfurnished except for two plywood-framed beds, shoved each against a different wall. The floor space is so narrow there is barely room for the small battered nightstand, squeezed in between the beds for a table. There are no windows in the room just a small lamp, dimmed by a gray rag, suspended by a crudely twisted coat hanger. Christine has to squint to make out the faces in Polaroid portraits of four girls, tacked to the wall. Their hair is dyed blonde. They wear their makeup very thick.

The Turkish trucker motions for Christine to sit down on the bed farthest from the door. He clumps away to the kitchen but does not put the bread away. He slices it, shows Christine a plate with crudely cut salami, leaves his knife sticking in the uncut end of the log. He sets the plate on the nightstand and hands Christine green Kool-Aid in a flimsy plastic cup. She is thirsty and wants to be polite but the rim of the cup looks Doberman-chewed. Without even pretending to drink, Christine puts the cup down on the floor near her feet. She folds her hands and stares at a piece of salami fat, hanging white off the edge of the knife. She concentrates on that, afraid to let her gaze drop any lower, to the dusty bread. He's sweated on it, she is certain.

"I really have to be going," she says, "I was on my way to meet—"

The Turk creaks down next to Christine on the bed. His weight is heavy enough to make the cheap bed frame split, the tips of two nails squeak out and glitter. He smells particularly Bulgarian, like a dung heap with onions. Christine scoots a discrete inch towards the wall. She points to the Polaroid closest to her as an excuse to stand up.

"Your sisters?" Christine asks. "I could give them some beauty tips."

When Jean comes at her with the Pepsi bottle, Christine flinches. From the edge of her newly blurred vision, the brown liquid at first looks like a handful of mud Jean's come to fling in her eyes.

"What could you do?" Jean says. "He attacked you with a knife, held close on your neck."

"It was a bread knife," Christine says. "He'd been cutting bread. 'Fresh, very soft.'"

"It is silly holding up a girl with a bread knife," Jean agrees. She presses the bottle firmly against the bump on Christine's eye. Christine winces at the

cold touch.

It wasn't silly at the time. It was all too polite.

"Take off your shoes," he told me. "No shoes in the house."

"So neat for a crook," Jean says. Christine laughs and lets some of the numbness fly from her scabbed back into Jean's mistake.

"He wasn't just a crook."

He had frightened Christine with both the knife and salami.

"I didn't give up until I found out the door was locked," she tells Jean. She digs her chipped fingernail into the arm of their embassy couch, trying to feel herself aloof, as Jean always is when she narrates a new tale. "For some reason there was no handle inside."

It isn't working. Christine's back itches. Her neck feels wrung out. She looks at a tuft of grass sticking out of a hole in Jean's sneaker and memories buzz back through every pore.

The Turk's face had been so dirty, deep-creased. The bread knife wriggled and the veins popped out on his hand. One thumbnail was smashed. What really repelled Christine though was the knife steel, straight once and clean, now grimy, smeared with dark grease in the Turk's grip.

"Niet," Jean says. She shakes her roommate by the shoulders. "Out."

But Christine didn't say that.

"I have to go now," she had said. "Please."

She backed away from the knife until splinters pricked the back of her knees. There was the bed and then his arm around her, his tongue in her mouth, gummy and warm, worming that grease along the side of her cheek.

All around her the smell of goat dung rose like flames. Panic made her breathe hard, suck the smell in. She sneezed, violently, snotty but there was no Kleenex in the Turk's nightstand drawer. Christine hesitated and finally wiped her nose on the shoulder of her dress.

"Achoo. Achoo."

Desperate to stop her allergies as he had been to stop his previous victims' screams, the Turk lifted Christine by her hair and threw her face-first against the wall.

She scabbled at a tack to stop her fall, dragged one of the Polaroids down and then it was her own face was pressed against the foul-smelling mattress, too thin.

"I still have the picture," Christine says. All night she held the crumpled girl tight. She has the picture in her fist still but she doesn't tell that to Jean.

"I left it in my room," Christine says.

Her swollen eye is obvious enough proof but she knows that Jean will scamper off, thinking of newspaper stories later, vengeant publicity that could stop more abuse.

Christine concentrates on the moment, waiting for her roommate to turn the corner to the hallway before she picks up Jean's tennis shoes from the floor and, carrying them by the tips of her fingers, steps out to the balcony and lets them drop.

Eight stories down.

"It must have been terrifying," Jean yells through the wall. "You couldn't help but bawl a little."

Christine would have bleated like a herd of slaughtered lambs if her throat hadn't been clogged. The whole length of her shin broke into rash, irritated by the Turk's itchy blanket, when he flicked her skirt up, scratched his dirty calluses between her legs.

"Skinny as a goat in winter," he spat. He unslung his belt and slid his hairy hand up her back. Christine sneezed a sneeze that shook her, head to epileptic toes. The Turk mashed her face in the pillow and Christine bit gratefully into it until she realized the white, stained cloth was stuffed with straw. There were lice crawling in it. She coughed and tried to pull her face back but the Turk had his hand on her shoulder. He pressed her straight into the lice where she could see every one of each bug's six legs—the milky glistening on their slimy backs, their greedy antenna, bulging bug eyes.

Just when she thought she'd retch from the sickly crawl of the lice, the belt buckle jangled. She felt herself slammed by a sharp sting.

"I was glad for the pain," she tells Jean. "It distracted me from the lice." Her eyes are open in the embassy apartment but she does not see the space in front of her, is unaware that Jean is still far away down the hall.

"Thank God he didn't kill you," Jean yells but Christine does not hear.

"He made me eat lice," she continues.

The belt clawed her back, forcing her mouth to splay open. Her eyes were closed but she felt the bugs one by one crawl into her ears.

At the end of hallway Jean covers her mouth—styrofoam peanuts,



strewn pillows, the pink bedspread kicked off. She can't make herself cross the threshold of Christine's new, damaged room. Instead, she pulls the door shut and snatches the blanket from her own bed to wrap around Christine's shivering shoulders.

"It was rape," Jean asserts. "We'll call the press in, police."

Christine shakes her head.

"It was more painful with the marine," she says.

She had barely heard the snap of the Turk's jeans hit the floor. He grunted at her stiff back, the goat's butt nothing new. What really made the Turk drool was her underwear, black lace, poking through the slit he'd ripped in her blue-flowered dress, the swirl of colors—black and blue against her red hair and white legs.

"Castrate all men," Jean says. "How did the marine get into this?"

The Turk took hours to rub himself against Christine's dress. He ejaculated jerkily, spurted the wet on her hair. Christine's skin curdled. She felt herself strangled and panicked, thinking it a stream of lice on her neck until the Turk released her shoulder and she saw her necklace ripped away—the opal her great-great-great-great-grandmothers had handed down from mother to daughter since the Pilgrims came.

"Take it," she had said. "I don't belong in that lineage now."

The Turk didn't understand Christine's English. He clutched the gem to his chest and zipped up his jeans. He seemed to think it was over then and looked irritably at Christine, curled up at the foot of his bed. His face crinkled with disgust as if it were she who had dirtied his sheets with lice.

"Up," he said. "Out."

There were too many legs crawling, Christine could not use her own, only wanted to lie there, scratching her skin to let them out. It was the Turk who pulled her up by the shoulders, her flinching expectation that made him retrieve the knife from the floor.

"For some reason, he handed me the knife," Christine says. "He made me sit up and forced that horrid green Kool-Aid down my throat."

"That's what they dissolve drugs in," Jean says hopefully. "Did it make you feel drowsy?"

"No," Christine says. "It just tasted watered down."

"Ugh," Jean says. "Watered down Kool-Aid." She's never had Kool-Aid

and Christine can't explain.

The green drink, lukewarm, was the same temperature as the Turk's tongue. Drinking her early dread took her back in time. It seemed as if the whole cycle was about to repeat.

"That's when you remembered your embassy badge," Jean suggests. She picks up the Pepsi bottle and presses it against her own throbbing temple.

Christine laughs.

She had focused all her hate on the chewed cup and drank every drop. She herself cut her lip on the rim, the knife held loosely in the crook of her thumb to protect the Polaroid crumpled in her fist. The whole time she never let go of that picture.

"I held it in front of me like a shield," Christine says.

"Yes," Jean says. "Spionok, you told him, CIA. You made him unlock the door. You ran out, trembling. He tried to follow you but you threw the knife. It landed slashed across the path."

Jean flings the Pepsi bottle from her fist. It bounces dully on the living room rug.

"Like a cur he retreated, neck hunched into shoulders, tail between his legs," Jean shouts.

"Between his legs..." Christine shivers.

She's too ashamed to explain how she stood, rigid against the nightstand, until the Turk pushed her out the door, locked it when she pounded to get back in.

"Crazy American sexpots," the Turk had said. "Los Angeles. Wow!"

Out on the stairwell she was alone except for a few cockroaches that skittered back into the darkness as if repelled by her smell. The elevator was broken. Christine clacked down four flights of stairs and picked up a sheet of newspaper at the entryway. She held it behind herself, over the rip in her dress, so as not to attract attention. She made her way through the smoke, not coughing now or afraid to be jostled by bodies. Once or twice, when she thought it was safe, she let her own screams mingle with the soccer victory shouts.

Coming home: "Another package from your mother," Jean had yelled before Christine was even through the door. Scabs closed over dirt. Finding her roommate's door was closed, Christine obediently continued on down the hallway, retrieved the package from the entryway to her room. She

brought it to her bed and slit the tape with her jagged pointer finger, not afraid of breaking the nail. Out came a pink bathmat, twelve packages of microwave popcorn, last week's *National Enquirer* and a stack of college magazines her mother had sent.

Dutifully, she tiptoed down the hall and, as always, slipped the *National Enquirer* under Jean's door. She listened for a second, ear pressed to the wall but, hearing only fake snores, staggered back and threw the pillows from her bed. She shaped a hive from the Styrofoam peanuts her mother used for packing even the most unbreakable presents.

In the morning, when Jean yelled that they'd be late for work, Christine made an attempt to get dressed. She put on blush and base; polished shoes and clean socks. Her work blouse, porous and thin, irritated her already itchy skin. It covered the scabs on her back but of course Jean saw the bite over her eye, allergically swelled, bleeding where all night Christine scratched and scratched.

"I think I should go to the emergency room," she says, pressing her nails into her palms to stop herself from picking at the scabs.

Ashamed at not having thought of that herself, Jean drops the hanger she's been slashing in the air and digs the phone from under the couch, where Christine kicked it during her fight with the marine.

The phone lines are back up. The dial tone buzzes and stops and returns. Communism abolished phone books. Jean has to sit through several cycles of buzzing before the operator comes on.

"Hospital," she says firmly. "American."

"Probably they don't even have ambulances here," Christine says. She collects Jean's blanket closer around her shoulders and forces herself to fantasize about who her rescuer will be. Judging from Jean's stories, a hero is needed to erase the gritty creep in her jaw.

"Sunday," a disinterested voice says. "Americans no work." The operator hangs up.

Jean dials again. This time Russian won't do. She gropes behind the couch for the embassy's *Welcome to Bulgaria* folder, which has an "Introduction to Bulgarian" page photocopied on the back of restaurant recommendations.

"Emergency," Jean says. "Ambulance."

"Sunday," the operator repeats. "No work."

The next time Jean asks for the marines. The operator connects Jean to a

butcher shop, then to the Bulgarian police. They ask where she is calling from.

"Yes, two of us," she says, translating hard. She listens to the slur in their voices and realizes how lucky she was to have been helped by Sergei. If it had been the police they'd have wanted a bribe.

Jean slams the receiver down.

"I know how to get to the British embassy," Christine offers calmly, as if Jean's the one in distress now. "It's across from the library. We could walk there."

Jean runs. The Bulgarian sky is unclouded at this dawning hour, the innocent, clear blue a fresh hue that ought to soothe her frayed nerves. It only inflames them. Few Bulgarians are out, up too late celebrating their soccer victory, Jean guesses. She's relieved to see the gaudy white walls, flimsy waiting room chairs, the pile of glossy magazines set in front of the reception desk of the British Embassy's medical ward.

"Wait here out of the way," the doctor says. "I've been wanting to try out the ambulance." Jean sinks into a chair and distracts herself with horoscopes, sex tips and mascara ads, ready to leap up and offer her protection should Christine need a liver or kidney in the operation she imagines is now taking place. She is surprised when, barely twenty minutes after she's arrived, a blonde nurse emerges, her hand not supporting but pressing gently on Christine's shoulder. They haven't even washed her hair.

"No infections," the nurse says. "Now listen, you Americans watch so many movies, you overreact, ruin your lives by making yourselves into dramatic victims. That's a nasty bump you've taken but really you're no more hurt than if you'd fallen down and scraped your knee. Keep a stiff upper lip," she advises. "Don't make it into a movie."

The nurse lifts Christine's chin and pushes her forward. When Christine refuses Jean's arm the nurse turns away and smooths her starched skirt, cut professionally so it stops halfway up her thigh.

"We'll both stay home," Jean says, accepting the doctor's offer of a taxi to take them back to their apartment. "I'll call and tell them we're doing field research."

"Don't even bother," Christine says. "That fat director will be happy we're gone."

When they don't show up at ten, the director calls them.

"Christine's sick," Jean lies automatically. "I'm staying home to take care—"

"It's rather urgent," the director says. "The Ambassador has requested to see you."

As the nurse suggested, Jean chatters on about bathmats, yogurt and bread, pointing out four old crones who, in a moment of uncharacteristic concern, push wide brooms to clear garbage from the streets. The broom crones are followed by younger girls who scatter rose petals and freshly mown grass. Christine stops at a newsstand and buys a dictionary. Together she and Jean translate the latest headlines, big as the World Cup: BULGARS STAND UP, SAYS CZAR SIMEON II; CHILD KING HOMECOMING! INVESTMENT BANKER RETURNS TO CLAIM ROYAL INHERITANCE. Already royalists have hoisted bright, turf-green banners: LONG LIVE OUR SAVIOR.

Jean is skeptical about the return to feudalism but she tries to put a cheerful face on.

"This will be the turning point for Bulgaria," she says.

Walking slightly aside so as not to infect her roommate, Christine laughs—a new sound, like a branch breaking and a hive crashing down."

"The king will not come," she predicts.

At the embassy it is already known: Czar Simeon II has been detoured by a surprise birthday party that his fellow investment bankers sprang on him during his scheduled "quick layover and toast in Rome."

"The roses will rot in the streets for weeks," the Public Relations Director complains. He tells Christine to wait at the front desk. He waves Jean in immediately.

Christine sits.

Jean pushes through the heavy oak door, feet sinking too easily into the soft carpets. The Ambassador is balder than the director. He has bushier eyebrows and longer jowls. He leans back in a tall leather lounge and, one hand fondling a tightly sewed suit button, waves Jean into an armchair on the other side of his spacious oaken desk.

"The British Embassy had to report it of course," he says. "The two of

you, on a Sunday..." He cannot believe they brought their dirty laundry to the British; how could they involve the British in American affairs? "We've arranged to let her go home early if she wants."

Jean leaps up as if she's been slapped.

"Whoever did it is still out there," she says. "We've got to catch him. Have you negotiated an agreement with the Bulgarian police force? We should inform the press."

The Ambassador shuffles through the pile of newspapers on his desk. Most Bulgarian citizens read five papers and try to reconstruct the truth from what is left out but the Ambassador has access to the foreign papers too. The embassy staff highlights important articles and cuts them out, pasting them onto notebook pages with summaries about why this is important news. An Ambassador doesn't have time to look at everything but, just to scare his staff, he makes them bring him extra copies with the newspapers whole.

Jean scuffs her sneakers against the plush carpet until static electricity makes her hair stand. She clenches her fists and clears her throat several times.

The Ambassador reads the AP headlines cut out, sees there were elections yesterday, local ones that were declared invalid because only 14 percent of the population turned out. "This is what happens when you elect a poet as president," a goatherd selling yogurt is said to complain.

"It's the Americans," another agrees. "You can't even trade two fish for a chicken anymore. Those gypsies try to charge extra for throwing in the chicken's shadow so cheap."

The voters were mostly old people, Communists. Probably voted because they thought it was mandatory still, the Ambassador guesses. His thumbs itch at the thought of the restored Cold War funding that a return of the Communists will bring. This is especially true if the Republicans take back the White House. Chances are good, he decides, he will be able to buy his wife a new Lamborghini.

Jean leans in and sweeps a pile of newspapers off her side of the Ambassador's desk. She rolls the front page section of the *Washington Post* into a tight cylinder, ready to rap the Ambassador's nose.

"My roommate was raped," Jean says. Standing above the desk, her voice comes out, louder, surer, than she's ever heard it before. "The other night I was jumped on the side of the road."

The Ambassador's cheeks puff in and out like a sultan's. He leans farther back in his chair, tips his head to indicate a red button that can call security in through the door.

"And why didn't you report it?" he asks.

"Christine is straight 'A' at Amherst," Jean says. "Her dad is a rock star. Her mom ships us Macaroni and Cheese every week."

The Ambassador rotates his chair sideways. He smooths a wisp of hair back down on his bald spot and pushes a box of Kleenex towards Jean.

Her shoulders hunch. Her voice slips into the low buzzing mumble she usually has around authority figures.

"How would a girl like that tell a thing like this to her parents?" she whines.

"Exactly," the Ambassador says, standing to end the interview. "I think we understand each other. Now do you want to explain it to her or shall I?"

Jean and Christine meet years later at the Marin Film Festival where Jean's documentary, *Land of Goat Milk and Honey*, has been nominated for the Burnished Reel Award.

"Congratulations," Christine says. "I knew you'd do well."

Christine has recently been hired as a professor of Gynecologic Oncology at Stanford. She feels very smart in her new suit.

It's possible that Jean is wearing the same cut-offs she had in Bulgaria. She leads Christine to a reserved seat in the front row of the theater and slides in beside her.

"I hope you'll like it," Jean says. She squeezes Christine's hand and they both hold their thumbs.

*Land of Goat Milk and Honey* stars a beekeeper. He is thirty-eight now, though American audiences guess sixty, foreign audiences twenty-five. With so many wrinkles, viewers can barely make out the scars the beekeeper has on his cheeks. He walks out across a large meadow, open except for an ancient Bulgarian oak. Shaggy and behemoth-like beneath the low, unpruned branches, a dung heap smolders. The smoke is used to paralyze any bees at home in their hive. The beekeeper holds a cloth over his face while he lowers the honeycomb into a wood bucket. Intent on this task he does not see several bees on the ground regain movement. As he walks from the tree they sting him on his back, on his neck, and in several places behind his ears.