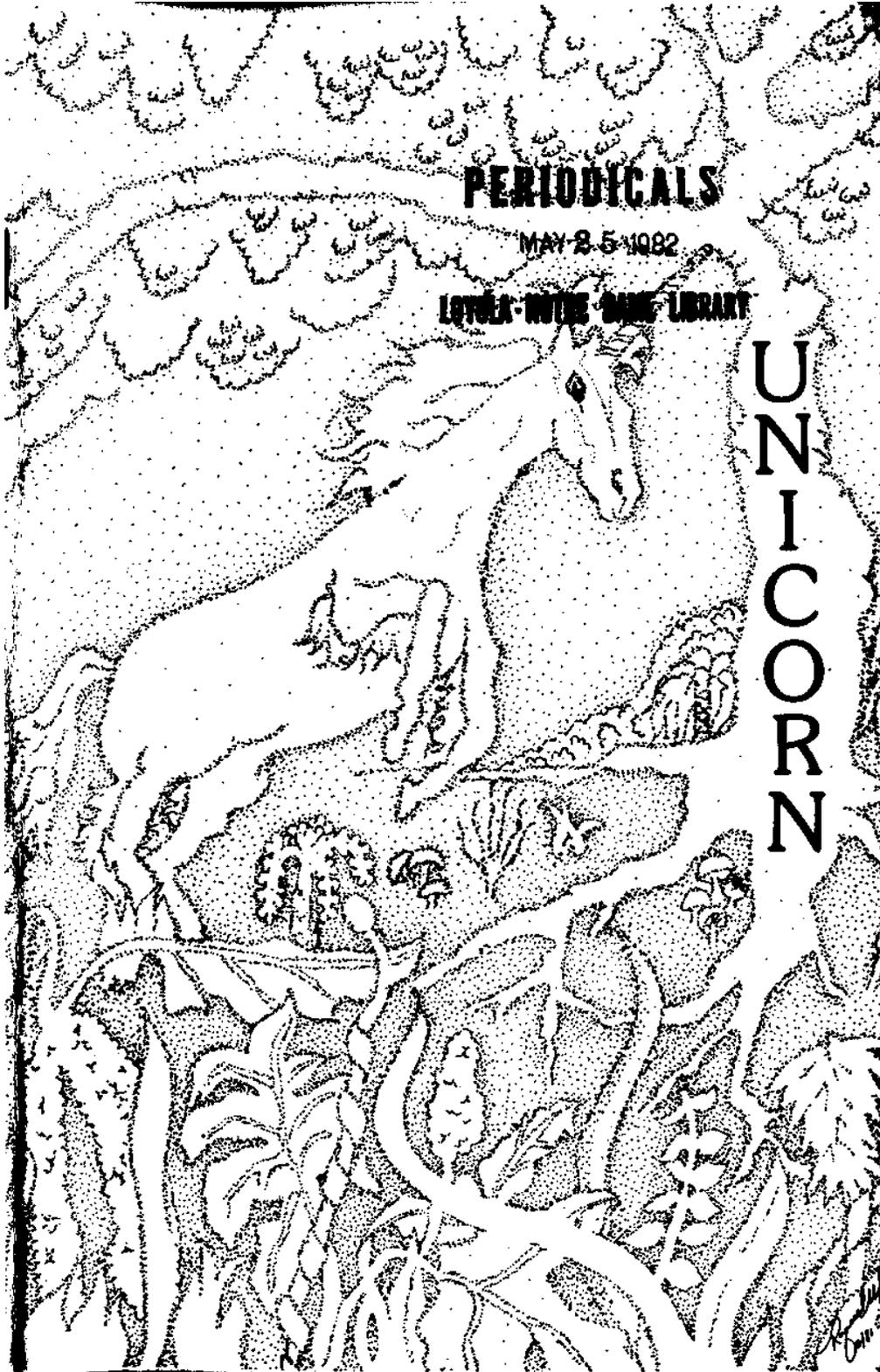


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UNICORN

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Cover art by Raquel Foglia

COLD SOUP

sitting
in my gazebo
picking at my gazpacho
i marvel at how
you managed
to slip me a placebo
 in place
of an experience

Alice Whitcher

HAZEL TELLS LAVERNE

last night
im cleanin out my
howard johnsons ladies room
when all of a sudden
up pops this frog
musta come from the sewer
swimmin aroun an tryin ta
climb up the sida the bowl
so i goes ta flushm down
but sohhelpmegod he starts talkin
bout a golden ball
an how i can be a princess
me a princess
well my mouth drops
all the way to the floor
an he says
kiss me just kiss me
once on the nose
well i screams
ya little green pervert
an i hitsm with my mop
an has ta flush
the toilet down three times
me
a princess

Katharyn Machan Aal

LAMENT FOR AN ARTIST

"suddenly i knew that all art
is just taking down dictation."

Pierre Delattre

Must you use my hand
to transcribe your speeches?
Time runs over itself
in its hurry, and soon
I will find myself old
with nothing to show for my life
but a drawer full of words
that only friends read
(remarking how clever I am.)
I could be plowing fields
building houses
bearing children
producing something tangible
to justify my years.
But I get called away
by your silly, haunting phrases.

I am staked to a page
by a pen that grows out of my hand.
What difference do you make?
Nothing new has been said in years.
Children get born
old folks catch something and die

and in between we're all confused as
ever
despite what poets say
or how rich my metaphors are.
If I could I'd quit you
but you're as close as a distorted
shadow
that I cast on the earth like a spell.
It's your magic.
It's your shadow.
Following me.

Grace Bauer

EIGHTEEN LIBRIUM

Where? In the bathroom. Look
In the mirror. Keep your eyes
Open. Stare

Until you see only a picture.
When you think you no longer
Exist, Open

The medicine cabinet. Choose the best
Bottle. Pour out the pills
One at a time. Examine and count
Each one as you set it far back
On your tongue. Be sure of the spot.
It must be exactly the same
As last time. Remember.

Last time you finished three bottles
And forgot all the answers. Later,
They will ask you: What?
How many? Leave the bottle.
Memorize the number. Be careful.

How many times do you think that God
Will let you out of the same cemetery?

Liebe Kazan

PURE RADIANCE

Her shining hair
surrounds a face
that is not
just a face
but a label
for the stellar features
revealed
 in precious veins
beneath it.

David Zeiler



AT THE TOP OF THE WORLD

said my great aunt,
it is not too cold.
Trees and animals still
belong there.

She held my hand tightly,
she was afraid
I would not understand.

While we live
at the world's thick center
we have a long way to go around.
Too long, and a hot journey
and all the cities to get through.

She let go my hand,
I was listening closely.

At the top of the world
she said
her thin fingers making
a second, smaller, circle

there it is a shorter way around,
we can go
again, again.

Sally Allen McNall

THE LADY AND THE UNICORN

La tapisserie

Lovely lady of youth

Gently fondling the legendary unicorn

In her lap,

Its magically powerful horn

Proud and straight;

Floating on an island of fragrant meadow

flowers

Flanked by moral oak and allegoric holly.

Nobility!

All come and admire —

La vie

Withered woman of age

Desperately clutching the torn plush unicorn

To her breast,

Its tragically impotent horn

Twisted and limp;

Trapped in a room of sterile printed flowers

Staring at iron bed and uncurtained window.

Senility!

The door is locked.

Janet Connor

BLUEBERRIES

Warm blueberries
ink blue with the dust
of summer's afternoon.

Blueberry shrubs
neck-high in neat rows,
sandy paths in between.

I pluck them in small handfuls
cupping my palm under
a branch to catch them. They drop
with light thuds into my tin
bucket and the dry wind
rushes in curling arcs
around the blueberry field.

The sun stings my sunburned arms
and the back of my neck
as I reach for blueberries.

I put three in my mouth
then bite down to feel the moist
warm breasts explode softly.
I watch you as I swallow.

In the next row you pick
berries from underneath
the shrubs. They're riper there.
All I can see of you
is your straw hat and your

batik skirt billowing
in the blueberry wind.

You can be beautiful
especially in this field,
your camera slung over
your shoulder, your childish face
poised in the sun as if
ripening. I imagine
wanting you but then

I realize it is just
the sensuousness
of warm berries.

Gabriele Glang

FALSE WINDOWS

Ice fog hangs in thick
curtains. The glass cuts
through a century of
temperature. We are used
to rooms with windows
which look out on trees,
grass, a few flowers.
Here to find such scenes
you have to have help,
paintings, imagination.

William Virgil Davis

MEMORIES IN FOG

Walking through a misty forest,
Wanting to catch a seldom ray,
Though twigs prick and break away.
A lonesome walk with careless thoughts
Is a poor punishment for age.

All roots are lost beneath the earth,
Or half-exposed under wild growth—
While awkward steps upon dormant moss
Bring annoying voices from a shrouded
world,
Wailing a tune of bitter silence.

And amidst the fronds of yellow-green,
The faded life of forgotten leaves,
Only brown and shrunken memories re-
main:

Weary tales of a once-clear mind
Are exalted spirits, adrift in fog.

Brian Lyles

MIRRORS

(The berry of the yew evergreen
promotes intoxication in many
species of birds.)

blood on the windows,
like neat berry juices.
i wake

to final collisions,
flat raps unechoed.
i see

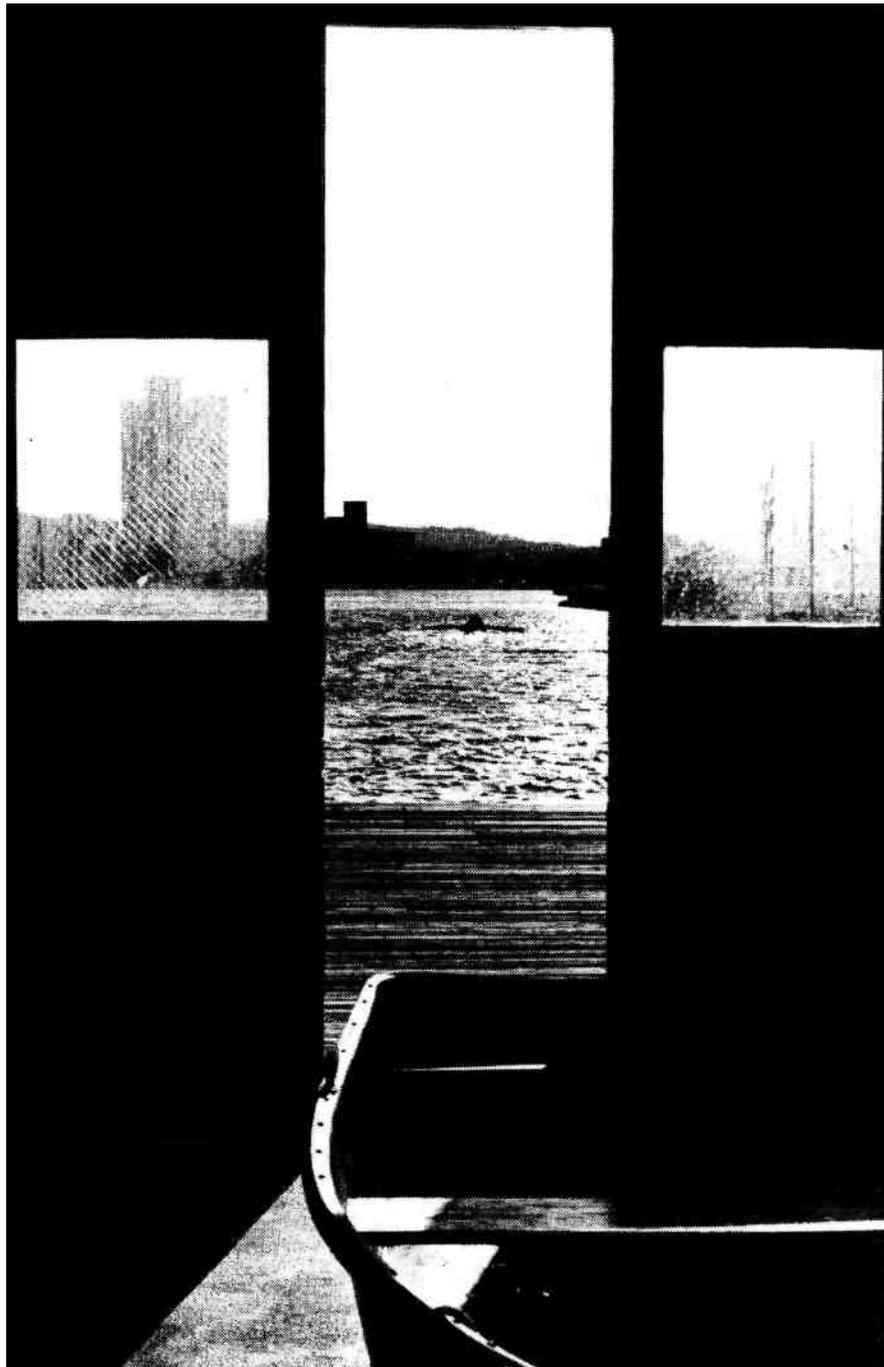
fall's passing flock, so
simple with yew-fruit.
how like

humans these birds to
let images lead them
to death for love.

Catherine Connor

Pop wore plaid
on dawning banks
as he steadied my hands
around the pole with his.
he let go just in time
for every gudgeon to mine.
laughing—i threw them back—
he bathed me and had me home
before they rose, mom and dad.

Catherine Connor



HERE OR WHERE

Writing is a mysterious thing;
It comes and goes
As the heavy gold pendulum swings.

Often the words will pour forth from the pen
And inspiration explodes—
Whatever you want to express, you can.

But the infinite agony when you can't think:
Blue walls outlining empty rows
Must have thrust aging Hemingway over the
brink.

He might have enjoyed the thrill of creations,
Feeding a concept as it grows,
But his own ego denied him elation—
Dissatisfaction just fueled his frustration
And his creativity froze.
Desperation then consumed inspiration.

Vivid offspring fulfill the few who survive
The draining, mortal blows.
But is it better to be dead or alive?

That man surrendered, his struggle ended,
Resting the prose
Deeply impacted in his peaceful head.

David Zeiler

MAN/MORNING INTERFACE

Now is a quiet so still you might call it
silence, but you would be wrong. No door closes
but those open scream with the interchange
of air, the windows press in. Do not
get up now, wait. Morning light bleaches
vinyl, your avocado, spindly, frail, pales
dull green, the mattress creaks weakly
beneath you. Can you face the percolator's percus-
sion, cold milk on corn flakes? In the apartment
above a woman starts to dance with the washing
machine; she chooses spin. Suddenly a cat lets out a
cry like a baby's, or maybe a baby sounds feline,
and you wish for death, just a moment's worth,
and it comes, a few more scenes of you a child
popping balloons, then the alarm clock rings.

Mark Scantlebury

ALWAYS TOLD

Always told the truth he did, and remembered lots of facts as well. Stories he'd tell... have us kids with eyes as wide as eggs fresh fried.

The one grandma I'd get all bumps to hear. They two living alone after children had grown wet wanting land. They lived out to the island, you see. Raising sheep to shear and eat. But mostly the lighthouse to keep.

To her, so he tell, that light was her life. And not just so sailors could see through the mist and ocean night. She kept it burning through summer sun, and ice chocking the shore of any boat tight.

Flash it she would in Morse kind of code. Dit dash, you know... that the way you space them means certain words. If some weather warning come by telegraph wire, why she'd send this right quick. And when all was well -you got to believe it -spiritual sayings she'd spell.

Oh, there was whole lists of them and grandad he'd rattle them off just as quick as he could breathe. And that's the truth. Just as he did tell.

Now the fishermen, they loved this woman. And more than being assured of her light. They learned that old kind of code and translated every word whether they believed it or not. But then when electricity proved a lot more bright, her kerosene lamp got put to the bushel. The house is still there and the light... not working of course. It's being preserved for a monument of sort. Grandma she died before I got born. Grandpa passed just a few winters ago.

Said it was time to cross back to the bright.

Paul Weinman

BENNY BELL

"SHAVING CREAM ENTERTAINMENT"
MAY 1972

Paul Funt
MAY 31, 1972



Dear Karl:

... He never liked playing their "silly" games. While the other children laughed and played, he could be seen walking off alone and finding him always led to a dark corner. This boy did not trust anyone and you never heard a kind word from him. He really did not go out of his way to pick on the other students, yet there was not a day that did not go by without him mocking someone. I say someone because the students were not the only ones who bore the wrath of his sarcasm, I had my share of run-ins with him, as well. This type of attitude made him more enemies than friends. As his schoolmaster, I saw a boy who hated.

He was an extremely bright boy and did very well in his studies, but he was even more clever. I remember hearing stories from the students on how they had been cheated or tricked in his games-usually losing their money. I often asked myself whether this boy should have been promoted to the secondary school even though he and the rest of his class were two years away from such a move. He was often disruptive during the lessons because he was able to catch on faster than the rest of his mates, he became bored and complained about the "simple mindedness" of my lessons. This brings me to another point. During his stay as a student in my class, my patience was continually tested. Nothing gave him greater satisfaction than to disrupt my class through his embarrassing questions. His repeated questioning as to my qualifications as a schoolmaster and taunts as to my ethnic background really tested me. Thinking back, I am unable to find reason for not pandying him in such instances as I have above mentioned. Despite his remarks and comments, I am proud to say that I was able to keep my composure and even use this foolery against him. It upset him greatly, he had just as bad a temper as he has now, when he was unable to annoy me or cause me to lose control over my class. It became a game of "wills."

As hard as I tried, I could not find myself hating this boy; instead I found myself pitying the poor child for his poor disposition and perhaps poor family life—I never once met his parents. So I made it my duty, so to speak, to try to help this boy get along in a world which he was constantly fighting against.

I started by trying to talk to him as an individual and not in front of his classmates where he might feel the need to hide himself. By finding out some of his interests and things he liked to do, I thought that I would be able to better understand this problem child. It was of no use. The boy seemed to reject my every inquiry and refused to see me more than as his teacher. I came away with the feeling that he resented authority and what I represented to him rather than myself as an individual. It was at this time that I had decided to appeal to the boy's family and see if I could draw any conclusions from them. They too were of no use and thought nothing to be wrong with their son Adolf. It was only later that I discovered that I had met the boy's aunt and uncle rather than his parents. It seemed that he was the third child of his father's third marriage. I concluded that this was the major reason the boy could not handle or bring himself to be a part of any type of affection.

Six months later he was promoted to the secondary school in Vienna where he went on to pursue the field of art, in which he left the school two years later to be with his widowed mother. Through friends and what news I could get, I tried to find out what had become of him and how he was doing. The last bit of information I had learned before his rise to power was that he had joined the army; so you see Karl how out of touch I have been. I decided to leave the school and I went to Berlin. I did some work on a newspaper and worked on my book. After a year, I decided to leave Germany and go to the Kingdom, I must say I could not have chosen a better time, agreed? When I first heard about his rise to power

and his hold on Germany, I was in total disbelief. I am glad that I had received your letter filling me in on the missing links. My only fear now is for the world; the boy I had tried to help handle his world has now become a man who wishes to handle the world.

Write if you are able and if you see the Fuehrer, tell him I said hello.

Your friend
Hansburk

Joe Walsh

JUST LIKE EVERYBODY ELSE

He stood by the slick parkway on the curb. He wore stained brown corduroy pants with ragged cuffs that dragged on the ground. His dusty, worn black shoes slowly rocked from side to side on the damp November pavement. A dirty white T-shirt covered his chest; a grimy navy blue jacket protected him from the gusty wind. His grizzled face betrayed vacant, listless eyes. He stood with rounded shoulders, suspiciously watching the traffic.

"Get away from that gutter, you mindless idiot!"

The sudden shout brought him back to reality. He turned and stared at the man's face. He opened and closed his mouth several times before he spoke.

"Sorry. I...I..." He threw his hands up in a futile gesture.

"Hey, man. It's your life." With a shrug and a shake of the head the man walked away.

Where was the bus? It was the blue one that looked like a bubble and the word on the top was long and started with a D. And you need two quarters and a nickle and a dime.

If I'm late again, I won't be able to go back. That's what Mr. Tillis said the last time and he got red in the face when he yelled and so did his ears. But I'll just explain and he'll understand because it wasn't my fault the bus was late and it's too far to walk and what if I get lost?

He knows I work hard and I do anything for him. He gives me my money and I can live in my own place and cook and watch T.V. till whenever I want to. And they'll never find me here because I'm just like everybody else. Just like everybody...

He didn't realize that he had stepped into the right hand lane of the parkway. He didn't see the silver Cadillac run the red light.

There was a sickening cacophany of screeching brakes, a strangled cry, and a thud as his body was thrown against the curb. One of the hubcaps rolled slowly to his side and fell with a clatter. He didn't even blink.

"Oh, mother of God! Somebody call an ambulance!"

"Is he breathing?"

"Damn city drivers. The whole lot are selfish slobs."

"Poor guy. Didn't even know what hit him."

See, the trouble is I can't move and my head hurts and I can't open my eyes. But I can think and I can feel where it hurts and I think maybe I broke my leg and I can feel the blood and I can see the lights and I can...

They can't take me to the hospital. They'll find out. They'll take my house away from me and Mr. Tillis will say you missed too many days and you can't come back and then I'll have to go. I'll have to go there again.

"Rapid pulse. B.P. strong. But he's losing a lot of blood."

"Better put a tourniquet on that leg. He might lose it, anyway."

No. I won't lose it. I need it to walk. I need to be strong.

I can do everything anybody else can and I need two legs like everybody else. They'll see. I'll walk cause I'm just like anybody else.

"We got an emergency coming through. Move aside, please!"

"Use examination room seven, doctor."

"Any I.D. on him? Wallet? Anything?"

"No."

"Check his shoes and socks. You never know where people put their money."

"Name's William Gorsuch. Lives on East Side. Can't find a Blue Cross or Blue Shield."

"Worry about that later. He's going into shock."

They won't find out. I won't let them. It smells there and all you can do is play checkers and I hate it so much and the food smells bad. And you can't wear what you want and they never let you outside. I won't lose my leg and they'll never know.

"Wait. He's coming around. Rapid eye movement. Color's good. B.P. 100 over 60. Pulse steady. Keep that cast elevated and give him an I.V."

"Yes, doctor."

"Take him to his room now. We'll fill out the admitting sheets when he can talk."

I won't go to sleep and I'll hear everything they say. I hurt so bad but I won't let them know. I'll open my eyes and I'll pretend I'm fine.

"William? William? Can you hear me? You've had an accident, but you'll be all right."

"I know...I think."

"Try to rest. We'll talk when you're stronger. Just relax and try to sleep."

"What's the matter with him?"

"This, students, is a case of shock trauma as a result of an automobile accident. Dr. Fine, recite the injuries and treatment."

They think I'm different. They're all staring at me and they won't leave me alone and they're talking about me. I want to go to sleep but they'll find out, they'll find out...

"William? Can you tell me what day it is?"

"Um, uh, um, Tuesday?"

"Good. Now, do you know where you are?"

"Uh huh. Hospital."

"Right. Now, William, I've got something to tell you that will shock you a bit. Because of arterial complications in your leg, we had to amputate. I'm truly sorry, but we did what we had to do."

"Am...amputate?" His eyes glazed over as he stared past the doctor.

"Yes, but through rehabilitation, you'll get along just fine."

"Reha...rehabil..."

"You don't understand, do you?"

"Uh huh. I can understand everything because I'm a regular person like everybody else. I need my leg to be strong and I need to be strong because I have to work to get money for my house and I'm just like everybody else."

The doctor stared at him and then glanced at the orderly with a puzzled expression.

"I can stay up as late as I want and nobody tells me what to do, except Mr. Tillis. He's my boss so he can tell me what to do, but most of the time I do what I want. But I can't go back because I hate it there."

His eyes widened with fear in the realization that he had betrayed his secret. The doctor suddenly affected a patronizing attitude. Sighing and rolling his eyes, he called a nurse.

"Case 4. Call the institution and have them reserve a room on the ward. God only knows why they let these people roam the streets."

"Yes, sir. Should I prepare an ambulance?"

"Right. And just put those clothes in the incinerator. He's got no more use for them now."

Debbie Donahue

THE CITY OF ICE

At first I seemed to be alone. The room was pitch dark and confusion reigned in my mind. Where was I? A hospital smell pervaded the air, yet I did not seem to be in a hospital room. I dared not move. My eyes struggled to become accustomed to the ever deepening darkness. They failed.

A luminous golden light began to glow in the far corner of the room. My gaze was drawn toward the figure bathed in that light. It was a woman, or rather the shell of a woman. She lay in a bed, hands crossed over her chest in death. Her face was calm, peaceful. Her eyelids were gently closed, dark lashes resting lightly on pale cheeks. Her lips were flaming red and curved slightly upward as if she kept some wonderful secret. And her hair— God, what hair! An ocean of wavy dark hair spilled over the pillows, her shoulders, all the way down to her waist. I stared, captivated by the thought of what this woman must have been. What a wonderful specimen of humanity she was, even in death. My wondrous musings were soon broken by an eerie feeling of lurking evil.

As I watched, the golden light dimmed and faded into a ghostly blue. A chill breeze seemed to come from nowhere. As the light washed over her body, she was transformed and I, though terrified, was transfixed. The woman came so completely alive that I doubted she had ever been dead. The blue of the light was reflected in the depths of her eyes. The blackness of her hair and the blue of her eyes was striking. She lay perfectly still, her steady gaze fixed on me. My breath came in labored gasps as her eyes held me in awful scrutiny. Suddenly she smiled and rose gracefully from the bed. She moved like a cat stalking its prey. I felt hunted, helpless. She beckoned me to follow her and although my mind fought valiantly against her power, my body followed her hand.

I was the puppet of her evil. But how could such a beautiful woman reek of danger as she did? Why was my mind in such fearful turmoil? I didn't know. I followed.

She was leading me to a window. Strange that I had not noticed a window in the room before. She wanted me to step out into the night. Didn't she know that I would fall and be crushed on the ground below? She was insistent and my body followed. Out into the starless sky we went, defying gravity. Her eyes flashed as she looked at the moon. She touched my shoulder and spoke, too softly for me to catch the words. Before I knew it she had clapped her hands twice very sharply. There was the crack of lightning and the roar of thunder and then all was dark.

I opened my eyes slowly coming out of what seemed to be a deep sleep. My mind was emptied of all thoughts, a strange inner vacuum. Finally I was able to regain some semblance of control and began to take in my surroundings. She had brought me to some mystical ice land. The blue light floated over crystal glaciers and gave a spectral quality to the huge icicles that hung from the ceiling. Although every aspect of the city spoke of frozen water and sub-zero temperatures, I was not cold. Every wall, ceiling, and floor was carved in clear, shiny ice. The blue light shimmered and danced. I could not distinguish its source. Where was I? Was this the center of the earth, another planet, a far distant star, or just an icy space somewhere in the vastness of the universe? And where was the woman whose power had brought me here? Suddenly the sound of high pitched chimes shattered the silence.

My amazement turned to terror as I saw the man the chimes had been announcing. He wore a blinding white robe and in his gnarled hand he clutched a gold scepter adorned by a blue gem. He had a long beard which was nearly as white as his clothing. He was tall, towering

above me like the mountains of ice that were his kingdom. But the most striking feature of all was his eyes. I had seen those eyes before. Of course, the woman. Those eyes could penetrate my very soul with their harsh scrutiny. I squirmed uncomfortably, feeling that he knew something about me that I didn't know myself. What was it? What had I done to deserve the hatred that radiated from those knowing eyes? What did this king of an icy land want with me? He pointed a long, white finger at a wall to my right indicating that I should look at it. A scene from my distant past, from a life I barely remembered, unfolded before my eyes.

Winter. A snow-covered mountain. Skiing with a beautiful girl. Laughing. Clowning. She tripped me and I pushed her. She lost her balance, fell, tumbled, out of sight. Panic. I followed quickly but had to stop suddenly. Horror. A huge ravine. An avalanche. She was lost. Terror, guilt, confusion. Running back, up, away. I never told, never told, never told...

A sickening fear grabbed my stomach. I turned to face the old man, stammering. Trying to excuse the inexcusable. I had been teasing, it was an accident, I couldn't tell, couldn't call the police. Didn't he see? Didn't he understand? It wasn't murder. It was an accident. Please, oh God, please understand. I suffered, really. The guilt, the pain, the loss, the endless lies. I died a hundred times a day. Please don't look at me that way.

A single teardrop froze on his cheek. There was pain and anger in his eyes. Contempt flared his nostrils, made him grit his teeth in barely controlled rage. He said in a voice brittle with hatred that I'd pay. Eternally. I was a prisoner in the city of ice. An innocent murderer locked in a cage of terror. He raised his scepter and the woman reappeared. I was stricken with the realization that it was her. I had committed her to the city of ice forever. And now she had also committed me.

I began to tremble in anticipation of the punishment that would surely follow the old man's words. He released me once again into the power of the woman. They exchanged a few ominous words that I didn't quite catch. I glanced quickly around but could see no one. Still, a sense of impending doom overwhelmed me. She beckoned and again I was drawn to follow. She was somehow different now, a strange satisfaction glowed in her blue eyes. We left the icy kingdom and I submitted to the darkness of the journey once again.

Awaking after a period of time I was shocked into numbness by my new surroundings. The scene I had witnessed on the screen of ice was recreated. As I stood at the top of the hill the realization of what was going to happen dawned on me. Below me was a blanket of white, deceptive in its beauty. At the bottom of that hill, under the covering of snow, was a ravine, the same ravine that had been her tomb so long ago. I turned to her, hands outstretched, pleading for mercy. Her heart was as cold as the city of ice from which she came. She knew no compassion.

With a strength which I never guessed she had, she placed her hands on my shoulders in a calculated manner and pushed. As I fell, tumbling head over heels down the steep hill, I heard demonic laughter ringing out over the mountains. Finally my fall ended. As I lay at the bottom of the ravine, suffocated by the heavy snow, I felt a change come over me. I knew without a mirror that my soft brown eyes had turned the same icy blue as hers. The guilt, the anger, all the feelings that I had lived with in torment were gone. I knew that soon she would come to me and take me back to the city of ice. I was one of them. Forever.

Susan McIntyre



A MESSAGE IN SONG

The applause from the audience shook the walls of the auditorium around her. Cassie Shears smiled out into the darkness. She reached for a towel and wiped her sweating face and hands. Dropping the towel to the floor, she placed both hands firmly around the microphone in front of her. She stared at the floor, waiting for the crowd to settle.

"Thank you everybody!" Cassie called. Slowly, the shouts and applause began to quiet as the audience waited for Cassie's encore, the biggest and best song of the evening. Carefully, deliberately, Cassie pulled the microphone from its stand, bringing it close to her lips. The soft melody of her voice poured forth, blanketing the room in its gentleness. The people sat mesmerized, getting high on the feeling her song was giving them. She moved her body slowly, seductively swaying from side to side, losing herself in the free verse she was singing. Then she picked up the beat, faster and faster, stronger and stronger, each word gaining force until the crowd was on its feet, clapping and crying for more, more, more...

So Cassie gave them more. And more yet. She jumped and gyrated across the stage until every muscle in her body trembled in agony. She sang and shouted until her vocal cords cried inside her for mercy. And so her song ended, leaving the audience breathless. Cassie bowed low. Then she introduced her band.

"I'd like to take the time now to introduce you to the wonderful members of TREASURE," Cassie exclaimed, gasping for air. "Craig Rogers on keyboards. John Pearson on bass. Eric Nelson on rhythm guitar. Tommy Brindle on drums. And Jill Shears on lead guitar." Cassie paused, giving the audience time to acknowledge the band properly. "On behalf of the entire group, I'd like to say it's been a real pleasure. Thank you and good night."

The members of the band turned to leave the stage. Cassie continued to face the audience.

The people were holding flaming matches and lighters high in the air. Cassie waved to them, relishing the power she felt in their presence. "Thank you!" she shouted again. She turned to follow her band out. The crowd was calling "Cassie, Cassie, Cassie!" over and over. Her name was ringing in her ears as she ran down the backstage hallway. She wanted only to get outside and into her waiting limousine. A shining silver door was in sight. She quickened her pace. A flood of comments followed her as she hurried.

"Great Cassie! Just great!"

"Best show I've ever seen!"

"Audience loved you!"

Someone slapped her hard on the back. She winced in pain. She thanked her well-wishers as she pushed the cold steel door open. The chilling night air was a shock to her sweat soaked body. She shivered as she hurried to the car. The wind whipped her long black hair across her face. Jill, TREASURE'S guitarist and Cassie's sister, stood waiting at the open door.

"Cassie, hurry up! Christ! Here they come!" she cried. Cassie knew that Jill was speaking of the crowd that was already pushing past the security guards, trying to get near the band.

"Relax, relax, relax." Cassie whispered, as she slid into the backseat next to Jill. "Go!" Jill shouted to the driver. The limousine pulled away from the screaming mass outside. Cassie sighed, leaning back against the softness of the seat. Jill stared out the back window.

"They're gone now." Cassie said flatly.

Jill shook her head. "One day, you're gonna get us all killed!" she warned.

"Never happen." Cassie said, yawning.

"Well, I wouldn't push my luck if I were you."

"And I wouldn't worry if I were you! Like I said, relax. I've been at this a lot longer than you have. I can handle

it. Really!"

"I'm not so sure. What about Rio? You damned near got killed, Cassie! And for what?"

"That was a long time ago, Jill. Long before you even joined us. And I wasn't even close to getting killed. You overdramatize everything."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I thought when they put you in the hospital in serious condition with cracked ribs, broken nose..."

"Okay, that's enough!"

"See? You know I'm right."

"I fail to see what that has to do with now, that's all."

"You almost got us mobbed tonight because you took so long getting outside. For what, Cass?"

"For the fans. They deserve some part of me Jill."

"Not your blood."

"Christ, there you go again. Not all the fans are like the ones in Rio! They make you, the least they deserve is a look at you."

"They get that on stage."

"Not enough."

"Cassie, your ego is unreal. Why do you always have to be told how great you are? Even at the risk of personal injury, you constantly have to be reassured that you are the greatest."

"That's not true. You owe your fans something. I see nothing wrong with letting them know I appreciate them. The incident in Rio is one in a million. And I resent like hell what you just said about my ego."

"Well, I'm sorry. But I think you need those people. You don't seem to see them for the idiots they are! They'd kill you in a minute for a piece of your hair! Sure, they buy your records, until something better comes along!"

"Let's drop it!"

"No! You know I'm right!"

"All I know is that you still have a helluva lot to learn."

"Maybe. But I think all you are there to do is play your

music. Not give them personal consultations."

"Then I don't know why you're in this business,"

Cassie said suddenly, closing her eyes.

"Because you asked me to, or did you forget that too?"

"I didn't forget."

"And because I'm a good musician."

"That's true too, babe."

"So that's why."

"Uh huh." Cassie leaned further down into the seat."

"Are you giving in?" Jill asked.

"For now."

"Why?" Jill asked again.

"Because I'm too tired to argue anymore." Cassie yawned.

"You tired? That's a first."

Cassie shrugged. Jill opened her mouth to say something, but she realized that the limo was pulling into the airport. Soon, they would be on their plane, on their way home to Phoenix. Cassie grabbed a blanket from an attendant as she boarded. She wrapped it tightly around her. Jill watched her with concerned eyes. She sighed deeply and followed Cassie on.

Once in the plane, both Cassie and Jill settled down to rest. Jill fell asleep almost immediately. About two hours later, she opened her eyes. She turned over on her side, checking to see if Cassie was asleep. Much to her surprise, she saw Cassie sitting up in her seat, furiously scribbling on a note pad.

"Thought you were tired?" Jill asked, with a yawn.

"I had an idea." Cassie replied, without looking over.

"Let's hear it."

"Not now."

"Why not? It is a song, isn't it?" Jill asked. Cassie nodded. "Well, just hum it for me." Cassie shook her head.

"Why not?"

"I don't feel like it." Cassie said at last, her eyes still not leaving the page. Jill sat up quickly.

"What's wrong, Cassie?" she asked. Cassie put her pen-

cil down. She looked directly at Jill. Her deep brown eyes pierced Jill's questioning green ones.

"Nothing is wrong, Jill. I already said I was tired. I spent the entire night singing. I'm in no mood to sing right now. That's all. Her gaze was so cold, Jill shuddered.

"I'm sorry." Jill whispered. Cassie raised an eyebrow. Then she shrugged, softening her features.

"Forget it." she said.

"May I at least see what you're working on?" Jill asked. Cassie handed her the paper. Jill read the words over carefully. "Cassie, this is really good."

"Easy Jill, I'm not sure my ego can handle such praise." Jill flushed. She looked up from her paper. Cassie was staring at her, cocking one eyebrow as before. "So that's it." Jill said. Cassie looked upward. "Cassie, I'm sorry. Really. I never meant to upset you. I was pissed, that's all."

"But you still think I have an ego problem."

"Well, yes. But, it's natural. When you're as big as you are, you're bound to get that way."

"Oh Jill..."

"What?"

"Feeding my ego again?" Jill flushed once more. She looked back at Cassie's notes. "It's okay," Cassie continued. "I understand. Let's drop it." Cassie turned over in her seat, pulling her blanket up. Jill looked over suddenly.

"Hey! Don't you want this song back?"

"No."

"Well, do you mind if I work on it awhile?"

"Please yourself. Just wake me when we land."

"Sure." Jill looked back at the notes. She hummed the melody softly to herself. 'This is so good,' Jill thought. She read the words to herself. 'If I could trust someone to care about me...They may know my pain...I'd love to find you watching me...Wondering about my mind...' "If only

you could say these things, Cassie." Jill whispered. "Why is everything a song? Why can't you just tell how you are? Is this the only way?" She looked back at her sleeping sister. She rubbed her chin.

"Is she burning out?" Jill asked herself. This was the first time in years that Cassie had actually admitted that she was tired. A slight feeling of uneasiness crept over Jill. 'No,' Jill thought, 'too sudden. Wasn't she great on stage tonight?' Jill shrugged. She looked back at her notes. Then she looked up again.

"Everybody gets tired now and then." she said aloud. She nodded, feeling better. Then she thought. 'Not Cassie.' But then, didn't Cassie have a right to be tired? She had been working much too hard these past six years. She worked ten of the twelve months in the year. She toured almost constantly, travelling all over the world. When she stopped long enough to go home, it was only to hurry off to the recording studio. When she was supposed to be sleeping, Cassie was sitting up, composing music and writing lyrics for her songs. Cassie, Jill thought, didn't know how to take it easy. TREASURE was one of the biggest rock and roll bands in the world and Cassie Shears was the powerhouse behind it. Jill paused remembering.

All through their childhood, Cassie talked incessantly of only one thing. She wanted with all her heart and soul to be a star. Her ambition was very strong and her voice was very good. All she had to do, as she often reminded Jill, was meet the right people.

When Cassie was seventeen, she had her chance. After singing in several bands while in high school, she met a man Tony Richards, a talented singer and guitarist. He was in the process of forming his own band. When he happened to hear Cassie singing at a party one afternoon, he invited her to join him. When Cassie accepted his offer, her life was never to be the same. Along with four other musicians, Cassie and Tony formed a band they called TREASURE. They started out singing in little

clubs and bars. Cassie's parents hated the whole idea. They had dreams of Cassie going to college and becoming somebody. Try though she did, Cassie could not convince them that she would become somebody doing just what she was doing. They told Cassie she was a bum. Finally she had to run away to escape the pressure.

Jill remembered begging Cassie not to go. When Cassie refused, she pleaded to go with her. Jill was only thirteen at the time, and Cassie told her she was too young. "But," Cassie said, "If you keep playing the guitar like you do now, I'll come back for you some day." The separation was difficult. Jill did not see Cassie for over five years. TREASURE, after working at a grueling pace for four of those five years, had finally cut an album that went gold. Cassie at long last became the star she so long dreamed of being. The only communication she had with Jill during that time was through letters and phone calls. Jill did not get these for the first two years. She discovered, on her sixteenth birthday, that her parents had been intercepting letters and denying phone calls. Jill, like Cassie, left home. She lived with her grandmother until she graduated from high school. Then she went to college, moving in on campus. She majored in music and played guitar and sang in night clubs to pay for the tuition and living arrangements. Cassie sent her money monthly to help her along. Still, Jill had not seen her sister in more than five years. She wondered if success had changed Cassie. She did not have to wonder for much longer. One evening, after she played Barry's Pub, and was on her way home, she was surprised to see a limousine pull up beside her car. The door opened. Cassie got out.

"Need a ride, pretty lady?" she asked. Jill stood staring, open mouthed. Grinning, Cassie reached for her, pulling her close. They hugged, saying nothing for a very long time. Then, without question, Jill followed Cassie into her car. She regarded Cassie carefully. She had changed a great deal in appearance. Her once long shining mane of raven hair was now frizzed and electric looking. Her

make-up was heavier. She wore tight black satin pants, high-heeled black boots, and a tight blue and black striped blouse. The blouse dipped daringly low, exposing her cleavage. Jill gulped slightly. Cassie laughed.

"I know what you're thinking. I look like a whore." Cassie said. Jill flushed. "I know I do." Cassie continued. "But I had a gig earlier this afternoon. This is just part of it, babe. Don't panic." Jill exhaled with relief. Cassie laughed again.

"You've changed some yourself, Jill." Cassie observed.

"Guess so." Jill replied. Cassie studied her carefully. Her blonde hair was much longer, though still curly as ever. Mostly, the changes were the normal ones that occur when a girl becomes a woman. Jill was very well built now, Cassie noted. She smiled at Jill.

"Guess you're wondering what I'm doing here." Cassie said. Jill nodded. "Two reasons." Cassie continued.

"One's personal. One's professional. I'm keeping a promise with the first. I'm hoping to get a new player with the second." Jill looked questioningly at Cassie.

"Remember I told you that if you kept up with that guitar, I'd come back to get you?" Jill nodded. "Here I am." Cassie said happily.

"What?" Jill asked.

"Tony left us." Cassie said, matter of factly. "I need a new lead."

"Me?" Jill gulped. Cassie nodded. "No way, Cass." Cassie cocked an eyebrow at her.

"What do you mean, no way?" Cassie asked.

"Cassie, I'm not good enough!"

"I heard you tonight. You're more than good enough!"

"You were there tonight?" Cassie nodded. "Then you should know I'm not good enough!"

"What the hell does all this mean?" Cassie asked angrily. "Do you like playing those stinking little clubs?" Jill didn't answer. Cassie's brows knitted together dangerously. "Jill, I'm offering you the chance of a lifetime! Don't you know how many guitarists would

love to play lead for us?"

"Well, get one of them!" Jill shouted.

"I want you!"

"Why?"

"You're the best I know."

"Come on, Cass. You gotta know plenty better than me!" Cassie shook her head.

"People aren't gonna settle for anybody who's not as good as Tony." Jill said.

"No, they won't," Cassie replied, "but they'll sure settle for better."

"Better?" Jill asked.

"Yes indeed. And you don't just play guitar. You play piano, bass, sax, drums, and God knows what else that I don't even know about. Tony couldn't do all that."

"Cassie, I can't."

"God dammit, Jill! I need a lead guitarist! Why won't you help me out?"

"Cass, what if I screw you guys up? You're selling platinum now. Not gold. Platinum! I've never performed like you do. I'd make a mess!"

"Tell you what. If you screw up, I'll fire you. Fair enough?"

"I'm still scared."

"I'll help you, Jill. Please trust me! Let's just give it a try."

"You promise you'll fire me if I louse things up?"

"My word of honor."

"Okay."

The plane was landing. Jill's thoughts were returning to the present. It was early afternoon before Cassie and Jill finally showered and got to bed. Jill awoke to the sound of Cassie's voice echoing from the foyer downstairs. She glanced at her clock. It was 6:00 AM. She strained to hear what Cassie was saying. She was on the phone.

"No," Cassie said, "No session today...What? Oh yes, I know. I'm very sorry about that. No we just can't. I'm

sorry... What? Look mister..." Jill climbed out of bed quickly. She ran out into the hallway, down the staircase and into the foyer. Cassie slammed the phone down. Jill was surprised to see Cassie dressed in jeans and a sweater.

"What was that all about?" Jill asked.

"Nothing."

"We're not going to the studio today?"

"No."

"Cassie, why not?"

"I can't do it today."

"Why not?"

"I'm too tired."

"Well, why aren't you in bed then?"

"I can't sleep."

"Cassie, what the hell's wrong with you? You're tired, but you can't sleep. You cancel out on an important session and act like it doesn't matter! You're bitchy as hell! Are you on something?" Cassie stared coldly at her.

"Answer me, God dammit!" Jill shouted. Cassie stood up.

"Cassie!"

"Leave me alone," she said quietly.

"We're supposed to record today!" Jill cried. "We're supposed to meet the guys at the studio by 8:30!"

"We're supposed to do this, we're supposed to do that..." Cassie mimicked.

"Well we are!" Jill shouted.

"Just call the guys and cancel."

"Yeah? And tell them what?"

"Tell them anything! I don't give a damn right now!"

"This isn't like you at all!"

Cassie threw her arms up. "Go without me then!"

"We can't record without you, for God's sake. You know that!"

"Then you and everybody else'll have to wait. I'm sorry." She turned to leave the foyer.

"Cassie, where are you going? Cassie! What's wrong?"

Cassie!"

"Leave me alone!" Cassie shouted as she walked away. Jill was left alone in the foyer. The marble felt cold under her bare feet. She reached for the phone. "What am I supposed to say?" she shouted. But there was no one to hear her. Tears welled in her eyes. "What's wrong with you?" she cried.

Cassie walked alone by the stables. She rubbed her throat. It hurt her. She was becoming more and more concerned about her constant sore throat. She popped a percodan in her mouth. "Am I on something?" She laughed. "Yea, pain pills!" She laughed again, bitterly. She sat down by the barn door, remembering her last visit to the doctor.

'Miss Shears," he lectured, "I'm afraid you will have to give your vocal cords a rest. You are singing too often and too hard. I'm afraid you have already damaged them beyond all repair."

Cassie laughed again. That doctor was at least 70 years old. He didn't know anything! All he could do for her was write prescriptions. She knew she had to go to a real doctor and find out what was really wrong. But she was afraid that he would tell her what she already feared. She was developing nodes on her vocal cords. It would not be long before her voice would be so raspy and hoarse that she would have trouble talking, much less singing. No one would want to hear her gargle on stage. She was soon to be useless. How could she tell Jill that? What would the rest of the guys say? She put her head in her hands and cried.

"Used up! Finished at 27! My God, it isn't fair!" she shouted, shaking her fist at the sky. She stood up, wiping her eyes, and walked into the stable.

"C'mon Dancer, old buddy," she whispered to her huge black gelding, "let's hit the road." It took a few minutes to saddle him. Once he was ready, she mounted him. She kicked him slightly and he galloped off. She rode long and hard for several hours. It was evening when she

returned. Jill was strumming her guitar when she came into the den.

"Hi." Cassie said softly. Jill turned around to face her. The relief in Jill's green eyes quickly sparked into anger when she surmised that Cassie was alright.

"Where the hell have you been?" Jill asked.

"Just riding."

"All day long?" Cassie was silent. "I took Lady Gray out," Jill continued, "tried to find you. You scared the hell out of me today."

"I'm sorry."

"Is that it?"

"What?"

"Is that all you have to say for yourself when you worry everybody to death?"

"Everybody?"

"The guys were here."

"Where are they now?"

"They left a little while ago."

"Real worried."

"Oh Cassie, look I don't want to argue again. I want to..."

"Did you get any work done?"

"Some. Listen..."

"Was that David's car I saw pulling out of the drive when I rode up?"

"Yes. Now Cassie..."

"Well then, how much work could you have gotten done?"

"He only stopped by. He didn't think we'd be working. It didn't matter anyway. We couldn't get much accomplished without our lead singer."

"Why'd he leave?" Cassie asked, deliberately avoiding Jill's piercing stare.

"I asked him to. But..."

"You? Ha. Try again."

"Cassie! Goddammit! That is not the issue right now."

"Did you two have a fight?"

"Oh for Christ's sake! Talking to you is like talking to a wall!"

Cassie raised a black eyebrow. "Want me to leave?" she asked.

"I want you to tell me what's wrong!"

"Nothing. I'm fine. I just needed a little break. That's all."

"You're acting like a nut."

"I'm sorry. I know. Look, I'll be ready to record tomorrow. Will that please you?"

"The only thing that will please me is for you to confide in me."

"Please, Jill. I'm okay. I just needed some time to think."

"And?"

"And that's all. I feel better. Ready to work again."

"Why don't I believe you?" Jill asked. Cassie shrugged.

"You got me hanging, kid." Cassie said. "Let's see our song." Jill sighed deeply as she handed her sister the sheets.

"Tommy says it's a chart buster for sure." Jill said halfheartedly.

"It's too good for the charts." Cassie said as she read it over. She whistled out loud. "I see you guys did get some work done today."

"You like it?" Jill asked, her anger already fading.

"It's great!"

"Well, let's do it!" Jill strummed slightly on her guitar. Cassie read the notes.

"Cass, that's your cue. See it?"

"I see it."

"Then sing it." Cassie shuddered inwardly. The notes were too high and she knew it. Perhaps another day. But Jill would never understand. Then Cassie had an idea.

"Jill?"

"What?"

"Why don't you sing it?" Jill laughed.

"No, I'm serious." Cassie said.

"You can't be. Look how high the notes go. Only two women in the world can sing that high. Barbra Streisand and Cassie Shears."

"Jill Shears can sing that too."

"Quit fooling around, Cass." Cassie's silence forced Jill to look up from her paper. Cassie's eyes were unmoving. She was not fooling around.

"You're serious, aren't you?" Jill asked.

"Absolutely."

"Cassie why?"

"It's your song now. It's your right."

"But Cass..."

"Just try it!" Jill shrugged. She sang the song for Cassie over and over that night. Cassie smiled. It did indeed sound beautiful. The morning sun was shining in the window.

"Well?" Jill asked, excitedly.

"Perfect."

"Ha ha!" Jill shouted in ecstasy.

"Okay now," Cassie interrupted, "one more thing."

"What?"

"I want you to back yourself. Do all the harmony, play all the instruments, all of it. I want this song to be all yours."

"You really think I can do it?"

"I know you can, babe." Cassie smiled. "And you will be great, I promise."

Cassie was right. After two long, difficult days in the studio, Jill had the combination and recording she wanted. And it was excellent. During this time, Cassie rested her voice. Everyone was so excited about Jill, it was easy to do.

When TREASURE returned to the road, Jill shared the center spotlight with Cassie. The audience loved it. Both Cassie and Jill were beautiful women, but each had a very different look. While their features were quite

similar, Cassie was darker. Her black hair and eyes were a sharp contrast to Jill's blonde hair and green eyes. The evening was going along beautifully. Cassie's voice was well rested and sounded excellent. She had just finished singing "Too Many Sinners" when she held up her hand to quiet the applause.

"And now...at ease...hey! And now, we come to a really nice spot in our show. I have a surprise for you..." Cassie cooed. "The band will now feature Ms. Jill Shears singing our newest single, "Trust Alone."

The audience grew quiet. Jill? Shears. Jill gulped. She unstrapped her guitar and walked to the keyboards. She sat down. Cassie winked up at her. Jill shuddered. She began playing the intro. Cassie stepped out of the spotlight. This moment was Jill's.

The audience sat in stunned silence. Her voice flowed like sweet wine from a bottle. Her fingers touched the keys lightly, easily. Her head was swirling. She sounded a lot like Cassie, but she was softer, far more mellow. And the crowd loved it. After Jill finished, the applause was thunderous.

"Huh? Huh? Huh?" Cassie cried into her mike. "Didn't I tell you?" The people were on their feet, shouting Jill's name over and over. Tears of joy ran down Jill's cheeks. Cassie grinned and leaned close to her.

"Do another." she whispered.

"Huh?"

"Do "Portable Musician."

"That's your song, Cass."

"Not tonight." Jill smiled at Cassie. The music started to play. It was Jill's moment again.

As time passed, Jill's voice grew stronger and stronger. Jill recorded more and more. Cassie's voice was in good form as well. Because she was sharing the singing with Jill, she was resting a lot more. Things were going beautifully.

"Let's go, Cass!" Jill shouted at the door. Cassie was ready. It was their last night in L.A. TREASURE had

been making incredible music every night. Cassie was flying high.

"Would you please welcome TREASURE!" The announcer called. Cassie and Jill proudly took their places on the stage. The music started up. The singing was excellent. Then, about halfway through the evening, something happened.

During the high "Cry, cry, cry" of "Lucky Loser," Cassie's voice cracked. It was so loud and so clear that Jill, who had been deeply concentrating on her upcoming guitar solo, stopped playing altogether. Tommy stopped beating the drums. Cassie turned her horrified eyes on Jill. Jill's eyes glowed at her, like green "Go" lights. Cassie leaned away from her microphone.

"Play, God damn you!" she hissed. Jill picked up the tempo quickly. The band followed. Cassie finished up the song. The crowd applauded softly. They too, had heard the mistake. Cassie shook her head. Jill slid over to her sister.

"It's not the end of the world," she encouraged, "C'mon, don't worry about it!"

"It doesn't happen to me!" Cassie whispered emphatically.

"Finish the set!" Jill commanded. Cassie nodded. Jill walked back to her mike. She started playing a new lead, tuning her amp very high. Cassie began to sing. Her vocal strain was evident. Jill injected loud, frequent harmonies as often as she could, hoping to help conceal Cassie's problem. Then it was over. There were no encores that evening and Cassie didn't even say goodnight.

Back in the hotel, Jill tried to comfort her. "So you had a bad night. So what? What does that prove?"

"I can't sing anymore."

"Oh Cassie, it's only strain. You need a rest. That's all."

"No. This has been coming. I've known it for a long time."

"What are you talking about?"

"My throat, Jill. It hurts all the time."

"What do you mean? It's sore?"

"No. I wish that was all. It throbs."

"Maybe you're getting a bug."

"No! Aren't you listening? I said all the time! It throbs!
For months, almost a year now!"

"Why didn't you say something?"

"You were doing the harder songs. I didn't have to."

"I don't understand."

"I gave you those songs because I couldn't sing them!"

"But I thought you..."

"Gave you a break? Ha, no. My reasons were selfish. I
can't hit the notes anymore. You can." Cassie paused.

"And now you know."

"Wow, Cassie." Jill said, dejectedly.

"What the hell are you moaning about?" Cassie
shouted. "You've got the golden end of the deal now!
You've got it all! And it looks like I might be out of the
picture for good!"

"You act like I want you out!" Jill cried.

"Don't you?" Cassie's eyes narrowed.

"Christ, I'm not even gonna answer that."

"You just did!"

Jill clapped her hands together. "I can't believe this!"
she shouted.

"Cassie, how do you know you can't sing anymore?
Have you seen a doctor? You may just need a rest. How
do you know you can't sing those songs? Have you tried them?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"I've tried them, believe me!"

"And you can't sing them?"

"No."

"I don't believe you."

"I don't care what you believe!"

"And I suppose you saw a doctor too?"

"No. Not recently."

"Not re...Cassie! For God's sake! Maybe it's nothing!"

"It's nodes, Jill. I know it."

"Nodes?" Jill gasped.

"Yes."

Jill recovered her composure quickly. "So what if it is? Some of the best singers in the world have gotten nodes on their vocal cords. They're still as popular as ever!"

"Stop it, Jill! Nodes ruin singers. You know that."

"Cassie, there's surgery now that can help. Besides, you can't diagnose this yourself. It could be nothing, like I said."

"Let's forget it, Jill. I'm tired."

"I give up!" Jill shouted, throwing her hands in the air. Cassie turned and walked into her bedroom. The next day, TREASURE took off for Washington, D.C. The road crew revamped the entire P.A. system, taking special care to adjust all microphones in an effort to conceal Cassie's increasing vocal strain. The concerts were fair, nothing of the exceptional calibre that was expected. Jill had not the heart and Cassie had not the ability. The tour continued in spite of this.

It was in the evening, the night before their last gig in Cleveland. Jill was on her way to her room. She thought she heard a noise coming from Cassie's room. As she leaned close to the door, she realized that Cassie was crying. Without hesitating, she pushed open the door and walked directly over to Cassie's bed. She leaned next to Cassie, putting her arms around her. She smoothed Cassie's hair back gently. It was a long time before Cassie could speak.

"I'm so sorry."

"Shh..." Jill soothed.

"But," Cassie continued, "I can't finish the tour. It hurts too much."

"You have to see a doctor, Cass. No more fooling around."

"I know. But the tour..."

"I don't give a damn about the tour. Those wonderful fans of yours are just gonna have to understand."

"I care about the tour. You owe it to..."

"Cassie, stop it! For once in your life, listen to me! You are what is important. Not the Goddamned tour or the Goddamned people! Only you!"

"You don't understand..."

"I understand better than you think. Let me call a doctor now. Maybe we can get something for the pain."

"I just took a demoral."

"A what?" Jill asked, in shock.

"A demoral. I needed it."

"You have pain that bad, Cass?" Jill asked. Cassie nodded, wiping the tears from her eyes. "Then you gotta see a doctor right now, right this..."

"Jill, I'll see a doctor. I'll go right to New York tomorrow morning if..."

"If nothing. You're going."

"If you finish the tour for me."

"Me? Alone? You're kidding! No way! I mean, I can't!"

Cassie raised that all familiar eyebrow. "Either you finish or I will," she said. Jill looked carefully at her sister. Cassie meant what she said.

"Cassie, without you there's no show."

"Bullshit, Jill. You're doing half my songs as it is anyway."

"But I can't talk to the people like you do."

"The guys will help you. Believe me, you won't even miss me."

"No way!" Jill cried.

"Okay, forget it. I'll do it."

"Alright, Cassie. You win." Cassie smiled slightly.

"You'll be great. I know it."

The next morning Cassie left for New York. Jill went to a morning TV interview. When she returned to her room, Craig was waiting. "What's the story?" he asked.

"She's gonna call me here after the concert tomorrow night."

"You don't think anything's really wrong, do you?"

"I think it's nodes, Craig."

"Oh Christ."

"I know."

"Hey, we'll do good tonight. For Cassie."

"Yeah," Jill whispered. "For Cassie." God, Jill thought. What if Cassie had nodes? What would she do? She knew Cassie would rather lose her legs than her voice. She shuddered.

The evening in Cleveland was a huge success, in spite of Cassie's absence. The second evening went just as well. The band worked very hard to compensate for its loss. The audience realized this and responded warmly. All Jill could think about though, was Cassie. As soon as the show was over, she hurried back to her hotel room to wait for Cassie's call. She had been there over two hours before the phone finally rang.

"Hello?" Jill cried.

"Jill, my ear!"

"Sorry. Well???"

"We were right. Nodes." The connection was bad. Jill hoped she had heard wrong.

"Nodes?" she shouted into the receiver.

"Christ!" Cassie cried. "Yes. Nodes." Jill's heart sank.

"What hospital are you in?" Jill asked.

"Why?"

"I'm catching the first flight outa here, that's why."

"Oh no you're not."

"What do you mean?"

"Did you forget the benefit in Houston tomorrow?"

"No, I didn't forget. But I just thought I'd cancel it."

"You made me a promise, babe."

"But Cassie..."

"Uh uh. You promised. Besides, there's nothing you can do for me anyway."

"I can be with you."

"Why? So we can stare at four walls together? Don't be ridiculous."

"Cass, you sound terrible."

"It's the connection."

"Yeah, probably. But Cass..."

"Heard you were great at the Center tonight. And last night, for that matter."

"You heard? Already?"

"Word travels, especially when you have connections."

"Guess so. I'm still not too used to all this."

"You will be, especially after you finish the tour."

"Aw Cassie, I don't want to finish it."

"For me, Jill."

"Okay. For you. But not for..."

"Let's not get into that again, okay?"

"Okay. But Cassie, by the time the tour's over, God, I won't see you for months!"

"Won't it be great? We'll have a vacation from each other."

"I never thought being away from you was so great."

"Even when I was such a bitch? Even with my ego?"

"Cassie!"

"Forget it! I'm just fooling around again."

"When will you be back with us?" Jill asked.

"Jill, babe, I gotta go. I can hardly hear you."

"It's the same here. Okay, you go rest."

"Thanks."

"Want me to call Steve for you?"

"No thanks. I'll call him."

"Okay."

"Take care of yourself, Jill."

"Damn, I wish you sounded better."

"So do I."

"Cass, could you give me some idea of..."

"Sorry, babe. I don't know myself. I gotta go."

"Okay. Get some rest."

"Jill?"

"Yeah?"

"Uh...Never mind."

"What?"

"Forget it."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Nite Jill."

"Good night, Cass."

"Jill?" But all Cassie heard was the sound of a disconnected phone. "I love you." she whispered, as she hung her own phone up. She turned to face the doctor standing at her bedside.

"Why didn't you tell your sister the truth?" he asked.

"I just couldn't."

"Cassie, there's not much time."

"I realize that doctor."

"This surgery is an absolute necessity. And you need it now. You already waited far too long. I also think that you will need someone here with you to help you through this."

"Doctor Cross, my sister is a very busy woman. She doesn't need any added tension in her life right now."

"Then call your parents. A friend. Someone. Are you married?"

"My parents are...dead. And no, I'm not married."

"Is there anyone?"

"Doctor, there's no need."

"Cassie, this will be difficult to go through alone."

"I'm not going through anything. I've thought it over long and hard. I am not gonna have the surgery."

"What?"

"I'm sorry if I've wasted your time."

"My time? Cassie, do you realize that this problem won't go away?"

"Yes."

"And the pain is only going to increase?"

"Yes."

"And that without the surgery, you will surely die?"

Cassie nodded.

"And, most likely within a short amount of time? A few months perhaps, no more?"

Cassie stared coldly at the doctor. "You are not cutting my lar...my voice box out. You hear me?"

"Cassie your throat is full of cancer. If we don't do this, it will only spread."

"I won't talk out of a little box! No!" Cassie cried hoarsely.

"You would rather die?"

"I don't want to live if I can't sing."

"Cassie, please think what you're saying."

"I have thought about it. Over and over."

"Think of all the people who love you!" the doctor pleaded. "Is this fair to them? You haven't even told anyone."

"I can't explain it to anyone. Not now."

"Well, if you don't have this operation, there will be no later."

"Doctor, please! Let's drop it, huh? I feel like shit and I'm very tired."

"Cassie..."

"Leave me alone!" The doctor turned to leave. Cassie called after him. "I'm sorry, doc. But thank you for all you've done. I really appreciate it."

"Cassie..." he whispered.

Cassie held up her hand. "Mind's made up."

"I'm not finished with you yet," he said. "I'll be back in the morning."

"Give up. Besides, I'm going home in the morning."

"Not if I can help it." Cassie smiled, in spite of herself.

"Goodnight, doctor." she said.

"See you tomorrow, Cassie." He closed the door behind him.

Once alone, Cassie reached for her notepaper. She had a new song idea. "Jill will understand when she reads this," Cassie said to herself. She wiped her eyes. "She has to." She titled the song, "Don't Cry, Baby."

Jill sat alone in her hotel room thinking about Cassie. "Nodes!" she cried. "What could be worse for you, Cass?" She wiped her eyes, as she reached for her music sheets. Hey! she thought, Maybe I can teach you to play. Yeah, you can learn guitar in no time! She smiled to herself. She looked down at the song she was writing. She titled it, "I Understand." "This'll be Cassie's song," she said to herself. "She'll love it! Everything's gonna be just fine..."

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