The Feast of All Souls

The Shaw house contained the best and the worst of the family. Its thick red brick walls three stories high and broad basement made for an accommodating and generous girth. There were no earthquakes in the Midwest to dislodge its iron window frames or to loosen its solid wood floors and carved staircases. It was a futile stroke to slam a door. No one would hear as its walls were too fortified. Its front door was notorious in the neighborhood, so heavy that children knew not to use it. More than one finger had been mangled, another lost in its maw. The house had absorbed its share of heartache, hangovers, birth and death. It was ample. The house just took everyone in, as long as they were family.

The radiators were crackling, the floors creaking with new and familiar footsteps on this November first evening with Simon Shaw's arrival back home. This was his first trip back since the funeral for his mother, Kitty, six months ago. The first of November was a holy day of obligation in the church, a significant date for a son of Shaw to return. It was the Feast of All Saints, a feast no one in the family qualified for and so the party had been planned for Simon the next night, the Feast of All Souls.

Simon had faith in all souls. He believed that everyone had an infinite capacity for goodness. He liked coming back home, usually until he got there. His family's prejudices from afar, he had managed to twist into funny idiosyncrasies. When he had bought his mother a ticket to Europe, to go with him after his father died, she refused because she was always nauseous. She couldn't be away from her own doctor. He had practically

begged her and then gave up, deciding in the end that it was laughable, the both of them, his insistence and her refusal. Why couldn't he get it in his head that his family was not really interested in the world outside the house of Shaw? Now here he was again, to deal with his sister.

Tonight, Simon and his sister, Roseanne, stayed in the sitting room after the rest of the family had gone to bed, the rest being Roseanne's husband, Ed and son J.J., and Roseanne and Simon's, Aunt Irene who stayed on the third floor and lastly, Simon's wife Victoria, known to the family only as Simon's guest—his Mexican model. Simon was a photographer for *Life Magazine.* He had discovered Victoria on a trip to Mexico.

Simon had sent the family maid, Mamie, on home to look after her own children. Her capable black hands had already seen to enough of the Shaws' needs he had insisted.

"Shall we have a nightcap?" Simon asked his sister who had kicked off her heels and was sprawled on the sofa, waiting to be waited on.

"I'm bound to have a headache as it is, so why not another drop?" He held up the whisky decanter and Roseanne nodded. Simon poured by sight, no jigger needed.

"To mother," Simon said, clinking his crystal with Roseanne's.

"To mother, and I suppose the pearls. That's what you're staying up for, isn't it? They're in the desk drawer. Go look." Simon opened his mouth as if to protest, then shook his head as much to himself as to Roseanne. He passed the piano, softly trolling the low keys.

"Stop. You'll wake up JJ," Roseanne said, starting to get up. Simon closed the piano lid, went over and opened the desk drawer, still strong with his father's pipe tobacco. He retrieved the white satin shell-shaped case, quickly slipped it into his left pocket and also

took a swig of his drink that he had kept firmly in his right hand. Roseanne was looking very pleased with herself, the queen of the country club set.

"These," he said, patting his pocket, "are only one of the reasons for getting you all to myself, my dear sister." Simon rested his glass on the mantle. From his other sagging pocket he took out a snapshot of St. Isaac's Cathedral in St. Petersburg with its sparkling dome. With a glance to the devils on her Capodimonte vases dominating the mantlepiece, Simon reminded himself of his mother's insistence that he always look after his sister. "I think if you and Ed look at my photos, you'll want to come on my next trip. Even if you aren't interested in Russia, Rosie, you'll swoon at the sight of the jewels in the Hermitage Treasure Gallery. There's a diamond spray of lilies there, so magnificent. Nothing like it."

Roseanne stared down at her diamond-encrusted fingers, looking bored. "Would you be bringing along your Mexican friend?"

Simon had wanted to make a welcome for Victoria that was probably impossible as he watched his sister's eyes narrow. Victoria had gamely agreed to come and let him tell the family of their marriage in his own way. Why didn't he just come out with it? Why did he come back at all? Do something, even if it's wrong he told himself.

Simon set that photo on the coffee table in front of Roseanne and pulled out another. "When I saw Van Gogh's painting, *Lilac Bush* in the *Hermitage*, it reminded me so of home that I snuck this snapshot of it." He held it to his face as if it held the scent before offering it to his sister. "Remember how Mother loved them?"

"What would I want with some old picture?" She waved it away. "I get fresh lilacs every spring outside my window."

Simon studied it before returning it to his pocket. He threw another log on the fire, then leaned against the mantelpiece under the portrait of their grandfather whose stern eyes seemed to take them both in. “I guess some things never change.” He looked around to what was still his grandfather’s house with its well-worried Oriental carpets and shabby, restful chairs.

“I guess there’s a *lot* of change around here with the likes of Victoria. You’re not going to marry her, are you Simon? You know how much that worried Mother. You’d bring back her ghost.” The new log fell against the grate, crackling, catching alight, sending up a blue flame. Simon bent with the poker to rearrange it, to give the fire air. As he straightened up and was about to tell her that yes, he had happily, joyfully married Victoria, Roseanne stood up and said, “See, Simon, I have my list of what I wanted. Mother kept it for years. See?”

Simon accepted it, his lips pressed together with irritation. He was about to throw it on the fire when he started to laugh instead, reading his sister’s swirling Palmer script, ‘I want, I want.’ “Just because you *want* the pearls doesn’t mean you should have them.” He rested his back against the mantle and smiled calmly now. “I might just like them to give my wife one day.” Simon put his hands in his pockets, looking down on his sister who had reclined again with confidence.

“Who sat by Mama and Daddy when they were ill? Where were you? Gallivanting around the world?” Roseanne kicked the black leg of the coffee table before falling back further into the downy chintz sofa. “I’m just saying I know better than you what our parents would have wanted.”

As if connecting the dots, Simon's gaze moved from the sparkling hand in her lap to the other resting across the back of the sofa, to her diamond earrings, ending with the three karat solitaire at her throat. "My share of her diamonds I gave to you, remember? Mama left me these pearls in her will." He took out the white case and unzipped it. It was empty. "What kind of joke is this, Roseanne?" He leaned over her and shook the empty case in her face. "I'll have them, so get them to me by tomorrow."

"Well, I never," she said to his disappearing back, and threw her crystal glass into the fire.

The next morning as Irene Shaw and her widowed sister who lived in the next block were walking back from Mass, Irene told Stella about cleaning up Roseanne's mess from last night. "I was sweeping the grate as usual and it was full of broken glass."

"How did you know she did it? Maybe it was Simon."

"Some pieces of glass had her lipstick on it. That girl has no control."

Stella made the sign of the cross. "Did you pray for her at Mass?"

Irene nodded. "It *is* the feast of *all* souls, not just the poor souls in purgatory."

"Yes, we must make all the poor souls sufferings our own, even Roseanne's." They came through the back, not slamming the screen door and began busying themselves with food preparations for the evening party.

"I never thought purgatory would be that bad," Stella, the smaller and a little more bent of the two said, rolling the pastry.

"What do you mean?" Irene asked, her iron-gray hair sprayed in place, a half of a head taller than her sister.

"Well, at least they know they're going to heaven *sometime*." Stella worked the pastry she had refrigerated earlier for her three pies, apple, lemon meringue and chocolate cream. They were her holy trinity, the lemon meringue crowning her successes. Across town, Protestants and even atheists lined up at St. Patrick's bake sales just to buy one of her pies. Irene's fudge was also in demand but today she was chopping vegetables for her pot roast.

"Where's Roseanne? Still in hell, I mean in bed?" Stella laughed.

"You know she's having one of her headaches," Irene said. "Did I tell you that Marge Chipping canceled?"

"Roseanne's best friend?"

"Marge told Roseanne that she could make a point even if Roseanne couldn't and she was sure Simon would get it."

"I never liked her," Stella said. "Well, Roseanne, she'll be down tonight to be sure; never one to miss a party however low it sinks."

"To be sure, but I hope all her bridge partners don't call in sick with headaches. Roseanne must have inherited her headaches from her mother, Kitty. At least Roseanne doesn't pull hair like her mean mother used to do to us. Weren't those the days?" Irene wiped the perspiration from her forehead with the bottom of her apron, rubbing her eyebrows so they stood out like question marks.

"Of course, Roseanne didn't give us the earrings Kitty promised us, did she? Simon will probably have no better luck with those pearls."

"Maybe we could get them for him," Irene said.

Stella beat the board with her roller, flour flying. “Stay out of it, Irene. Where’s Mamie anyway?”

“Polishing the silver. Didn’t you hear her singing in the dining room when we came in from Mass?

“Guess you’ll be saying I need hearing aids now.”

“Ummm.” Tears from the onions slid down the cracks in Irene’s face.

“Where’d you get those onions then?” Stella and Irene both started chuckling. “They’re not those sweet Alabama ones?”

“Lordy, I won’t need any stock for my roast at this rate.”

Stella pointed her rolling pin at the kitchen window. The basement door slammed. “Look. There goes JJ with Mamie’s little girl, Tandy, chasing him with that pitchfork.” Stella raised her roller to the ceiling. “They’re going to wake up our guest.”

Mamie yelled from the living room window. “Tandy, get in here.” Tandy stopped at the end of the yard, ignoring her mother. She forced the pitchfork into the ground. It was almost as tall as she was, standing an arm’s length from her as if asking for a dance. Tandy then jumped on it, willing it deeper into the earth, all the while staring at JJ who was watching her from behind the pin oak. “If you try to kiss me again, I’ll kill you,” she spoke loud as a scream. Then Tandy stepped back, making sure the fork held its ground. Turning around to the red brick house basking in the morning sun, she said, “Comin’ Mamie.”

“Well, I declare, did you hear that, Stella?”

"That JJ needs a talking to, running around wild, trying to kiss our cute little Tandy. All we've been hearing is complaints about Simon and his Mexican from Roseanne; next it will be JJ mixing with the black help."

The kitchen ceiling was creaking with the footsteps from the guestroom above. Irene wiped her hands on her apron and put water on for coffee. "Just take those cinnamon rolls out of the sack and onto the cake plate and maybe Victoria will think we made them."

"Psshaw. Simon is going to know they're from Mallow's. Those rolls are his favorite."

"Victoria won't know. I don't want her ashamed of Simon's old aunties. Just keep those lips sealed, Stella." Irene scrubbed the carrots and washed them. A toilet flushed and the water pipes began to crackle. "Victoria must be running a bath." The tap water running over Irene's wrists caught the sunlight like diamonds.

Stella began beating egg whites, the loose skin of her right arm flapping. "Did you see those silver bracelets Victoria had on? They'd wear Mamie out polishing all of those. Simon spoils her rotten."

"He does but I think she's worth it, don't you?"

"Kitty kept saying he should stick with his own kind," Stella said.

"Well, she's gone now, God rest her soul. I hope Simon spoils us with some Cole Porter tonight." Irene began to hum *When they begin the Beguine*, punctuated by carrot chops.

"Roseanne doesn't like Victoria because of her Mexican blood. JJ's taking right after his mother the way he talks to Mamie," Stella said.

"We're all equal in God's eyes. Roseanne should remember that."

"It might be hard for a child if Simon married Victoria." Stella spread with a spoon the stiff egg whites in clumps on top of the lemon filling. "But Roseanne's only thinking about being talked about at the Country Club."

"Too late to avoid that. They are talking," Irene said. "You'd better get those pies in because I'll be needing the oven soon."

With a paring knife, Stella carved leaf designs in the leftover pastry for decoration of her apple pie. Irene held up a lemon with a leaf still on it. "You get these lemons from Strelow's greenhouse?"

"Put it back," Irene said. "Victoria had the fruit bowl all arranged to draw it."

"Roseanne said last night she wanted to use that one for a fruit compote."

Irene looked to heaven and shook her head. "But she's not even making one. I can't keep up."

"I think Roseanne would like Victoria better is she didn't make herself *too* at home."

Irene pointed to the ceiling with her finger on her lips. "I hear something; I think Simon and Victoria are coming down."

Up on the third floor this morning, Simon picked up the empty pearl case, imagining the pearls, how stunning they would look on Victoria, almost translucent against her contrasting neck. The pearls had belonged to their grandmother. Simon liked the length of their association. He thought they would go better with a different complexion than Roseanne's fair Irish one. Roseanne, he'd like to throttle her sometimes.

The case hadn't been completely empty; he had found a paper inside in his grandmother's hand: "Souls have complexions too. What suits one will not suit another."–George Eliot. He almost liked that better than the pearls, not just the thought but that his grandmother had associated the two.

He remembered the Victorian locket his grandmother used to wear with her own mother's hair in it. It had fascinated him as a child. Simon opened the musky smelling drawer to the bedside table and there were the inevitable rosary beads, worn with the imprint of desperation. The weight of all the house's prayers might rattle the boiler to bursting tonight, he thought. He closed the drawer and straightened the reproduction of the Last Supper next to the mahogany tallboy.

Hearing Victoria below adding more hot water to her now tepid bath, he grew hard as he leaned against the dresser. Simon decided to go quietly in, to steal at best her image for himself for later tonight in the dark. He tiptoed downstairs and into the bathroom. Victoria was humming to herself, not seeing him as she lay in a bed of bubbles, her black hair piled high. Her nipples and toes rose from the white water like stepping stones, a slippery path he had to take.

"Victoria."

Without turning or acknowledging him, she replied, "I'm coming." Then she sat up taller, the bath water running away from her as she began to wash herself.

"Let me." Simon knelt beside the cool green ceramic and she handed him the rose glycerin soap. She closed her eyes and he slipped off his bathrobe. Simon soon was with her under the light sheet of bubbles. It was not a large bath. Still, love displaces all.

Hearing the clatter of pots and pans, Simon sighed, not unhappily, and got out of the bath. He went to the mirror to shave while Victoria resumed her ritualistic cleansing. “I shall see if I can help your aunts with the cooking. Do they make you miss your mother, Simon?”

Simon froze in his lathering. “I have been thinking of her. Mother always wanted to travel but Father liked staying at home. So she would order dresses from New York and Paris. Wearing them was as close as she got to foreign shores. Of course, I brought home gifts for her from my travels.”

“I, being one of them.”

Simon returned to her to kiss her honeyed skin. “Yes, our one visit before she died.” He searched for the slippery soap, feeling again for her taut bottom, but Victoria pulled the plug, standing and grabbing her towel.

“They’re probably waiting for us for breakfast,” she said, giving him a playful smack and mopping the floor with another towel. “We must get flowers and food for today is the day of the dead.”

Simon returned to the mirror and nicked his neck with the razor. He had promised to take Victoria to the cemetery today to the family plot. He would honor her custom.

His father had a heart attack some years ago. Simon had hoped that his death would free his mother to travel as she had so longed for it. Instead, she confined herself to this very house, wanting to join her husband. She made herself sick as if it were her duty to self-will her own death. To Simon, it was unnatural. He had watched her in her bed lying flat and still, uprooted like a tree after a harsh winter storm. His mother had not warmed to Victoria their one trip. “You can’t marry a Mexican.” All of his arguments, she had

lobotomized. Then she brought in the parish priest. He left soon after their discussion. His mother's death cut short the conversation he had hoped to resume with her alone.

Victoria and Simon slipped downstairs the back way on the balding Oriental runner a shiny shade of port. Victoria's silver bangles announced them.

"Here they are," Irene said. She smiled so brightly, her eyes had to shut to send forth all her warmth.

"The coffee smells heavenly, oh and the pastry." Victoria was dressed in black culottes with a white sweater. Simon had his camera hanging from one shoulder but pushed it behind him to give each aunt a great hug. From the kitchen table, Irene shooed them further into the breakfast room. Stella followed with the plate of Mallow's cinnamon rolls. Irene had the coffee.

"Let me help you, please?" Victoria asked.

"You'd spoil their fun," Simon laughed, helping her slide into the breakfast nook. "Still wearing those same earrings?" Simon asked as Irene poured their coffee. "Didn't Roseanne give you some of mother's?"

Irene touched an earring with her empty hand. "I got these in high school. They're stainless steel so they'll never wear out."

"Now you eat up," Stella insisted. "We've got work to do." Like two birds in tandem, they flew back to the kitchen. "Holler if you need something."

"Didn't I tell you? The spoilers."

"How could earrings wear out?" Victoria asked. Simon shook his head, not wanting to involve Victoria any further in the family squabbles, before cramming the delicious iced

center of the roll into his mouth. Soon they were out the door in their winter coats and scarves, forgetting gloves altogether.

They bought flowers, mums the only flowers left this time of year, at the florist downtown to add to the meager greenery Victoria had picked from the garden at home under the disapproving down-turned lids from an upper window of the house. As they drove, the country lane and its ditches were sprouting big green eyes.

"What are those things that we just ran over, titanic limes?"

Simon laughed and pulled the car over. He got out and found in the ditch a hedge apple six inches in diameter. Some of its sticky white sap got onto his hand so he threw that one back and found another. "Bois d'arc" he said to Victoria in his perfect French, wiping his hand with his handkerchief and grabbing his camera from the back seat.

She had disembarked too and was marveling skyward at the magnificent tree beside the road. "It looks like Medusa with its snaking branches slung low and high and every which way."

Simon agreed. "It's like a forest unto itself, thorns and branches wild and unsymmetrical like a mess of unkept hair." He ruffled hers and started to take her picture in front of the tree.

"Let me see that." He handed her the hedge apple that she sniffed. "It smells orangey but it looks like a green brain. Bois d'arc you called it?"

"Yes, from this tree. The wild branches in front of us make the perfect bow." He pulled her back to him, arms around Victoria, warming her. "The Osage Indians used them for hunting."

She turned around in his arms, face to face. “C’mon Cupid, where’s yours?” Then they heard shots. Victoria jumped and dropped the green fruit. “What was that?”

“They must be hunting, shooting deer, I suspect.”

She shivered. “Let’s get on to the cemetery.” But first she gathered some of the strange green fruit and put them on the floor of the car.

“Stand in front of the tree for one more picture.” She stood back and made a face before pulling his camera from him and kissing his visible breath and then him.

Simon drove round and round the cemetery before he gave up, got out of the car and walked among the graves to find the family plot. “No wonder I couldn’t find it. It’s covered in ivy.” He pulled away the clinging leaves to reveal the great stone slab his grandfather had commissioned. In front of it were the gravestones, his grandparents, his mother’s, father’s, Aunt May’s and the five infants his mother had lost before him. Victoria placed a mum on each grave as well as the outer portions of cinnamon rolls she had salvaged from breakfast. “That the dead may eat.”

“The squirrels and birds are going to love that.”

“Don’t be disrespectful.” She put a cinnamon center between his lips. “That we also may not hunger.” Then she closed her eyes, her lips moving in prayer.

As Simon bowed his head over his mother’s grave, he could smell roses from Victoria’s scarf. A cardinal wove through the ivy gathered over the family monument like a needle lacing green with red, a harbinger of Christmas. “This ground remembers,” he heard Victoria say.

When he lifted his eyes, Simon noticed another family in the distance, motionless at a fresh grave. He made the sign of the cross and returned his attention to his mother’s

grave. A robin was singing on it, not disturbed by their proximity. His mother had always put food out for the robins in winter. He felt goose-bumps forming on his arms, listening to his mother's spirit rise in the robin's age-old song.

"Did you hear that?" he asked Victoria. She nodded, following the robin's short flight.

"Not that," Simon said, straining his ear closer to the ground. "Yes, I've done it, Mother."

"Who are you talking to, Simon?"

Simon simply took Victoria's arm. "Let's go." Before leaving, he placed his sprig of lilac, the picture he had carried back from Russia on his mother's grave. "I remember."

Back on the country road, returning by a different way, Simon had to swerve to miss a dead stag on the road. "It's horrible," Victoria cried. "That's what those gunshots were." Simon stopped and got out to have a look at it. Its eyes were glazed over. There was nothing they could do for it. Simon pulled it by its antlers into the ditch, sick at heart and cursing the hunters.

"Why do they kill it then leave it?" Victoria said when he got back into the car.

"He'll come get it. He probably doesn't have a hunting license and is waiting until we're well out of the way. Let's hope it's at least food besides a trophy." Simon put his arm around Victoria. "My father used to recite poetry and one of his favorites was *Lady of the Lake* by Sir Walter Scott. It starts, *The stag at eve had drunk its fill*. Then the stag dashes down a darksome glen, lost to hound and hunter's ken, foiling the hunter. So it's not the stag but rather the hunter's horse that stumbles and dies in the chase."

"So that stag escapes, good." Victoria sat up, cheered. "My uncle also likes poetry. *Ya no es possible, a veces ganar sino cayendo*. Pablo Neruda."

“By now, sometimes it is not possible to win except by falling,” Simon translated. “I like that.”

Back home they brought the rest of the mums into the kitchen where Stella and Irene were still sweating over the hot oven.

“Look at those gorgeous flowers, Irene.”

Irene straightened up, closing the oven door. “My, oh my.” She brushed her forehead with her free hand. “Ouch. Why my earrings seem to have heated up.”

“She never changes them,” Stella said.

“Yes, I remember.” Victoria walked over to the oven, catching the bouquet of Irene’s roast. “Very nice. Now where are your vases for the flowers?”

“I’ll get one.” Stella pulled a cut crystal vase from the cabinet and gave it to her.

Victoria went to the sink and began to wash the vase. The washcloth dripped from her hand, in and out, in and out until Simon was mesmerized. Victoria turned a smiling face to silence the aunts’ protests. Hand, cloth, water, glass, in and out, never hand and glass had such clarity. “Simon?”

“Let me help you, Stella.” Simon took the other heavy lead crystal vases, placing them next to the sink. Victoria rolled up her sleeves higher. “Go play us something on the piano, Simon, while we work.”

“Better not while Roseanne has her headache,” Irene said.

“We can’t tiptoe around her all the time. I’ll play softly.” Simon kissed the ear encircled by Victoria’s black curls and left for the living room.

While she was arranging the hedge apples and flowers, Victoria told the aunts about the dead deer in the road.

"Why that will have been Johnny Fasto. Next thing he'll be around town trying to sell venison. We will not buy any however fresh," Irene said. Tandy slipped into the kitchen, carrying a silver chafing dish.

"Now who's this?" Victoria asked.

"Mamie's daughter, Tandy."

"Hello, Tandy. Would you like to help me arrange the flowers?"

Tandy looked out the kitchen window, straight to her still standing pitchfork. "I've helped Simon find something and now I will help my Mamie with the silver." She ran out.

"Go on then," Irene said. "Don't mind her, Victoria. JJ's been bothering her this morning. Now where has that child got to?"

"He'll be up asking his mommy for something," Stella said.

"There," Victoria said, admiring her own work. "I'll take this one in to show Simon. Then I'm going to draw it." They could hear him humming just above the notes, *I get a kick out of you*. "You must ask him to show you his Russian photographs, so exotic."

"Yes, we will," and Irene and Stella nodded.

At six o'clock Roseanne came down the stairs in a close fitting white satin sleeveless gown. "You won't be jitterbugging in that," Simon said. "Very becoming though. Feeling better?" Their mother's diamonds glistened from her hand at her side.

"I just need a ginger ale." She walked slowly towards the kitchen, inspecting the dining room table and sideboard on the way and herself in the polished silver. Her husband, Ed, was in a living room armchair reading the evening paper, unconcerned that guests would be arriving any minute. Roseanne opened the door to the kitchen, led on by a steady hum. Stella and Irene were leaning over the oven door, aglow, their aprons now protecting their best silk dresses.

"Au gratin potatoes in," Irene said.

"You are dears to do all this even though a cocktail party would have been easier," Roseanne said, reaching for a glass.

"You're such a nibbler, no wonder you get headaches," Stella said.

Irene gave Stella a stern look. "Roseanne, you just forget about the food. We'll arrange everything with Mamie."

Roseanne raised her red manicured fingers to her forehead without touching any of her carefully constructed makeup or hair. "Well, I'll have a ginger ale and go sit down then."

"You go right ahead," Irene insisted.

The brass front door knocker reverberated against the solid oak door. "Someone's here already." Roseanne left her glass and headed for the front of the house. Simon got there before her and was already taking Barbara Perry's fox wrap. Barbara waved to JJ's face framed high up in the carved wooden staircase. The smell of burning wood from the fireplace filled the hall like incense. "The flowers are gorgeous. I love the combination of yellow mums and green hedge apples. How clever. Did you arrange them, Roseanne?"

Roseanne came forward to give Barbara a slight hug. "Oh no, it was *that* Victoria."

"I can't wait to meet her."

Roseanne went to Tom to let him kiss her cheek. She turned immediately to see where all eyes were riveted.

"There's nothing better than a staircase entrance," Simon said. "Come darling." Victoria descended in flaming red, the family pearls knotted perfectly into the jugular notch of her throat. "Barbara, Tom, this is my wife, Victoria."

Roseanne's face burned as if slapped.

"How wonderful," the Perrys said.

Ed ambled into the awkwardness, standing behind Victoria and taking her by the elbow. "Ever seen anyone so gorgeous? I think we all need a drink to celebrate."

Simon nodded. "Ed, I've got champagne cooling in a tub of ice in the basement." Ed led them towards the dining room while Roseanne pulled Simon's arm the other way, towards the nook next to the front door.

"How could you tell me like this, Simon?" Her face had gone from feverish to sickly white.

"It just came out, Rosie. I've been trying to tell you since we arrived."

"Mother would rise from the grave at this." Roseanne twisted and turned her diamonds. "And with her pearls. Where did you find them?"

"Seems like your son gave them to Tandy who hid them in the piano."

"Why, I'll slap that black bottom, messing with my boy."

"Lucky for you, Roseanne, that Tandy came to tell me of JJ's antics, and just as I about to strike the hammers that would have been muted by a strand of pearls." The front door's brass knocker struck again. Simon took his sister's arm. "C'mon. You've got a party to give."

Later, the party had been going strong when they threw open the doors to the side porch to make more room for dancing. Simon was dancing with Barbara Perry. They had grown up together.

"Why did you only tell Roseanne tonight about your marriage?" Barbara asked.

"I guess I had to build my fortitude. Just like Mother, Rosie has been against Victoria all along."

Barbara rubbed his shoulder. "Well, it's done now and she's lovely, Simon. Where did you get married?"

"We had a shoot in Acapulco. It seemed the perfect place. There's a church naturally at the zocalo, the town square. Padre Angel married us."

"Father Angel? Someone is looking out for you. What about Victoria's family? Did they approve?"

"It's only her uncle. Her parents died when she was young. I had spoken to her uncle before of my intentions. He didn't object. He said I was half Mexican with the way I speak Spanish."

"I'm not surprised. You always had a knack for languages and for dancing, not like my Tom. Look. He's in the corner getting sloshed." Their number finished and Carl Esher took to the piano keys and began pounding.

"Well, everyone finds his own kind of fun," Simon said, glancing at Tom. "Thanks for the dance, Barbara. I better rescue Victoria from Roseanne's glare. It looks like Roseanne's going the same way as Tom." Simon went up to Victoria who was trying to

have a conversation with her sister-in-law. Simon grabbed Victoria's hand and led her onto the porch. "Let's do the jitterbug."

"He's a great dancer, Simon is," Roseanne said to her husband. "I guess with all that native blood, she'll be able to keep up with him or at least do the Mexican hat dance. Look. She's unknotting Mama's pearls to let them swing and show off her moves."

"Roseanne, you've drunk enough champagne to ensure at least another headache," Ed said.

She grabbed her husband's arm, squeezing it tightly. "Lucky for you I'm so delicate tonight. You won't have to dance with me even though you didn't seem to mind dancing with the Quinn girl last party."

"Oh Roseanne." He removed her arm and slipped from her side back to the bar. He hated dancing. Ed decided to get some fresh air. He walked out the kitchen door and around to the front of the house where he saw Tom Perry sitting on the wall. Next thing he had disappeared. Ed walked over to investigate and there was Tom flat out on the sidewalk. He shook him but then decided to leave him to sober up. A little fresh air never hurt anyone.

People were beginning to leave and so Ed strode back to say goodnight. "Yes, it has been a fine evening. Thanks for coming." He walked back up the front steps to Stella and Irene framed in the door. "You girls did a wonderful job. Any of that lemon meringue left?"

"I hid you a piece," Stella said. "It's in the back of the fridge."

"Just the spot for me." Ed gave them a kiss of gratitude and poured each a tiny glass of their favorite crème de menthe.

“Congratulations to the happy couple,” Stella and Irene said. “And tomorrow Simon’s going to show us his pictures.”

“Good thing Mother’s not around to see this,” Roseanne mumbled.

“You go to bed, Rosie,” Simon said. “C’mon, Stella, I’ll walk you home.”

“Why it’s just two doors over.” Irene took both of their glasses and headed for the kitchen.

Ed intervened. He winked at Simon and took Stella by the arm. “I also have Tom Perry to pick up.”

Roseanne gave her brother a push. “You go help Ed, Simon. I’ll walk Victoria upstairs.” Simon and Ed were almost at the door with Stella between them when they heard a gasp. They turned to see Roseanne stumble at the first step of the stairway and grab Victoria’s arm.

Victoria waved the men away. “Here, you go next to the handrail.” As Victoria was helping place Roseanne between herself and the banister, Roseanne yanked the pearls dangling from Victoria’s neck. They broke and scattered across the black and white marble floor. Everyone got on their hands and knees to retrieve them except Roseanne who smiled with delight and steadily climbed the stairs.

From his pocket, Simon carefully replaced the pearls in their satin case. He and Victoria were in the guest room, officially at last. “I’ll get them restrung. They probably needed it anyway,” he said.

Victoria lay on the bed, looking out to the stars cleared by the moon above the trees. “Don’t worry, mi amor. They seemed to take me all right, no? Everyone except your

sister." Victoria turned then to Simon who had not responded. He was already in his bathrobe.

"Ssh. It's mother at the prie-dieu." Victoria stared at him crouching behind the bedroom door. His robe swung open until he clutched it back around him without moving his gaze from down the dark hall. "She's kneeling now, in her green silk dress, the worn soles of her black shoes silent against the Oriental rug."

"Didn't you put out the bread and honey like I told you?" Victoria whispered. The wind rumbled the north window overlooking the alley.

"I put bread, butter and sugar. I know she likes it. Her hair seems nut brown again, not gray at all. I can hear the click of her rosary beads moving down her side, making crystal blue waves in the green silk."

"I'm coming to see."

"No. Don't." Simon pushed his left hand against the empty air, the path Victoria might take. She merely sighed, turning back to the night sky, undressing, humming, *You go to my head*.

"Mother's praying. I can hear her." He opened the door wider and walked slowly towards the figure at the prie-dieu. He reached out to her shoulder, closing his eyes, holding his breath the whole while. When he opened his eyes, she was gone; his hand had crushed the bread, butter and sugar into a ball. He popped it into his mouth, then retraced his steps, closing the bedroom door. Simon followed the moon's illumination to his soul, his sojourner, clothed only in moonlight. "Sometimes your beauty makes me ache."

Victoria pulled him down on top of her. "Impossible to win except by falling."

"Heaven at last."

The old house began to creak and moan, the knocks of a wooden headboard against a wall until, at last, the house took her in.