A WORLD WITHOUT JUDGES

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THE DAY OF the accident was not hot, but a sullen heaviness in the air warned of the coming discomforts of summer. Jessica Kravitz knew that she would soon grow pale, her palms clammy. Even as a child her symptoms had been severe enough to force her parents to buy one of the first air conditioners in Idaho. Her father, a public defender, used it as an inducement to keep her home. He placed her in a chair with the cold beam at her throat and a pile of envelopes before her to be stuffed for one of his many campaigns against racial injustice. When she needed money to attend college, she sought summer jobs with philanthropic firms, signing on with the few that were wealthy enough to keep their offices cool. Jessica was proud of the generous nature of her work, but she knew she would never be able to go out into the world crusading like her father, or Herbie.

Herbie was a union organizer, forever raising an angry fist to an even angrier sun, inciting picketers to shout up at office windows—behind which the management conferred in civilized tones about other matters, their air conditoners humming loudly. Jessica met Herbie the summer he was organizing a nurses' union at one of the city's hospitals. She was on her way to visit an alcoholic recipient who had once been on her caseload. Walking from the bus to the entrance of the hospital, she fainted. Herbie brought her around by dashing cold beer on her face.

"Where are you taking her?" he said to a nurse who was trying to lead Jessica into the lobby. "That's enemy territory."

Feebly, Jessica said she had to go inside anyway.

"What business do you have crossing picket lines?" he said. "You look official."

She told him, and he became more pleasant. He invited her to a chili supper in support of striking migrants.

That evening, in the crowded basement of a city rec center, eating her chili one bean at a time, Jessica passed out again. Herbie helped her home in a bus. He turned down her smooth white sheets and sat beside her for hours, brushing her hair from her moist forehead and scowling.

A few days before her wedding to Herbie the following spring, Jessica mentioned that they would have to buy an air conditioner since the apartment to which they were moving was in a shabby section of the city where buildings did not come so equipped. Herbie lectured her on the evils of capitalist luxuries.

"Who wants to live in a closed-in cubicle with no contact to the outside world?" he said. "If you have the windows sealed shut, can you hear the kids shouting in the streets? The neighbors calling to one another across the alleyways?"

She wanted to tell him about the poor families she had seen standing for hours at the magazine section in the supermarkets, where it was so chilly a person almost needed a sweater, but instead she merely nodded, and so consigned herself to nine summers of affliction. As she lay awake next to Herbie, she fought down spasms of sickness, trying not to envy his cool communion with sheet and pillow.

When their son, Lemuel, was born, they put a crib for him in the stuffy living room, and later, a cot. At night Jessica would wander into the room to make sure the boy hadn't inherited her susceptibility to heat. He squirmed and frowned in his sleep, but rarely woke up, and so she assumed he must be growing up accustomed to the humidity, hardened through early exposure. Relieved, she returned to bed, there to lie sleepless, shaking silently until dawn.

Jessica endured nine helpless summers with Herbie. Then he left her for a fellow union organizer. Jessica choked and shuddered through one summer more—the hottest in half a century—trying not to hate the half of the bed next to her for being blank. She did not buy an air conditioner, afraid that Herbie would come back to her one night, see the new purchase, grow disgusted, and leave again. Not until May of the second year after Herbie's departure did Jessica give in to her weariness at the prospect of yet another struggle against the season. Lemuel provided the final motivation for buying the machine. He came out of his bedroom one morning with stains of sweat blossoming for the first time beneath the sleeves of his cotton shirt. As she put an English muffin before him, she asked her son whether he had any opinions about air conditoners.

Staring at the peaks and valleys of his muffin, Lemuel admitted that sometimes he did hang out at a certain arcade after school, dreading his return to the overheated apartment. He assured her that he never played the games there, only stood in front of the cooling vent near the popcorn machine. "And one of my friends told me," he said, dragging his finger over the rough surface of his breakfast, "this place is strictly off-limits in summertime."

After clearing the table, Jessica drove to a catalog store on the outskirts of the city. Air conditioners, the previous year's models, could still be bought at a discount. She picked out a portable unit from the showroom floor. It had a scratch, but the clerk insisted the nick would not impair its function.

Herbie would have bargained with the clerk anyway, Jessica thought, delivered a harangue about the acquiesence of the proletariat. She would have stood behind him, chewing at the skin in her lip until blood flowed into orderly canals along her gums. During her entire married life, she had always had a vertical purple welt a quarter of an inch long separating the right half of her lower lip from the left. When Herbie stood up in movie theaters and shouted humorous rejoinders to bad dialogue, Jessica told herself that poorly written popular entertainments deserved to be deflated, then bit her lip until the movie faded from the screen. At night, after parties, Herbie would demand that she let him make love to her in the living room, with the curtains open. She allowed him to do this because she, too, believed prudery to be a bourgeois sin, but when he bent his head to nibble at her breasts, she closed her eyes and bit her lip.

She considered writing down the rules by which Herbie wanted her to live, but knew he would have chided her for the compulsiveness of such an act. Besides, she already had one list of DOs and DON'Ts, etched on the inside back cover of a wretched yellow assignment book. She had composed that list on the day of her fourteenth birthday. Over cake and hot chocolate her girlfriends told her that they hated her: she embarrassed them in front of their teachers by knowing the dates of all the New Deal legislation while they barely recognized the name of Franklin Roosevelt; at parties, when the others began to twist themselves around each other in dim corners of downstairs dens, Jessica would sit for a moment, straight-backed on the sofa, look once around the room as if in disapproval, and leave.

As her friends enumerated her sins, Jessica began to recognize others she had committed. She often mocked Michael Emmerson's spasmodic movements in square dancing class. She once told Earl Kavanaugh she would not sit next to him in assemblies because he smelled. She decided she had a strong propensity to do evil and so must be watchful to avoid unleashing her true behavioral nature. She drew up a list of rules according to which she would condition her behavior thereafter. In time, she was able to convince most people that she was a caring human being, but she knew she was really just a careful one, a master of self-discipline.

Only once did that discipline fail her. During her twenty-first summer, she worked as an assistant to her father's former protégé, Myles Aronson, a married lawyer, forty-five years old. Jessica became infatuated with Aronson, and he with her. He told her she was alluring in a secretive way, and probably capable of great and spontaneous love. He was not attractive, but had a thin body and long, rough fingers. One Friday night, Jessica stayed late to help him prepare for a Monday morning hearing. He came up behind her at the Xerox machine and held her. Nothing in her DON'Ts list said she had to resist, and it was not until several weeks later that Jessica found a reason to tell Aronson she could not meet him again in their motel room.

"I looked at my father this morning," she said. "I realized that if he knew what I was doing, he would never speak to me again."

Aronson said he had reached a similar conclusion on the day before. They parted with no bitterness, but Jessica retained a terrible anxiety that her father would somehow find out about her affair with a man he considered his adoptive son. She retreated into slavish devotion to the rules outlined in the back of her assignment book.

Not until Jessica met Herbie did she tuck that book away, giving precedence to his sharp shrill commands. And when he left her, she was at a loss. She might, for instance, buy an air conditioner, but shouldn't she bargain the clerk down to a reasonable price for it? Still, if she argued with the clerk, she might ruin his day, or get him in trouble with his manager. But was that any worse than hurting the millions of poor but spineless people who would never overthrow their exploiters unless she spearheaded the attack?

Finally, Jessica allowed the clerk to ring up the price on the box. He insisted on carrying the package to her car. Like most men, he could see only her frailty. She was more than five-foot-nine, but weighed only one-fifteen.

"Will your husband be home to lift the air conditioner out of the car and take it up to your apartment?" the clerk asked.

"No," she said, smiling sadly.

"A son, perhaps?"

The same smile. Lemuel would be at Junior Congregation, sipping Sabbath grape juice. Moreover, he was only eleven and small for his age. Not that he suffered any physical disorders—he was simply short and slight. He had recently come through a divorce and now had no father, Herbie having disappeared to California with his mistress, but Jessica did not see that the lack had left him weaker than other boys. She could never understand why people tended to drop their voices when speaking of him, as the clerk did now, saying, "The cool air should make him more comfortable."

Jessica grew annoyed with herself for offering her son up like a withered arm to fend off envy and mortal blows. She recalled how afraid her son had been to tell her he could not breathe in the apartment. As she drove, the moving air stirred her thoughts. What was she doing wrong? Whom could she ask? There were no rules in her assignment book governing the raising of children. All she had to go on was Herbie's farewell note. "Try not to ruin Lemmie," he had written. "Try not to turn him into a tight-ass." She had tried. Whatever the boy did, she never rebuked him, never spanked him. She merely bit her lip. Poor Lemuel, faded and sorry. His mother would never say what he had done to upset her, no matter how much he begged to be told. She left him to guess, and he seemed to believe that everything he did upset her. He moved through his many worlds with one eye always on her, even when she was nowhere to be seen. She decided she would ask him what she could do to set him at ease.

Jessica parked her car in the lot behind her apartment building. She lifted the air conditioner from the trunk and slammed the lid with one hand. Robbie, the doorman, held the front door open for her but had no time to suggest she let him assist her before she had brushed by him and entered the elevator. He stood there, looking relieved at not having been obliged to corrupt his uniform with perspiration.

Once in her apartment on the fourteenth floor, Jessica did not even pause for a glass of iced coffee, so strong had her resolve become to clear the apartment of Herbie's lingering influence. She slit the sealing tape around the box, pushed up the window and removed the screen. A breeze ruffled the thin white cotton of her blouse, and the touch of the cloth reminded her of her loneliness. She hesitated, then removed the machine from its packing and set it on the sill of the open window. Three inches of empty space gaped on either side. How could she have mismeasured the dimensions of her window so radically, she thought. Maybe the clerk had given her the wrong model. After all, the machines on display had not been marked as to size. Perhaps her machine was missing a part—an extender frame, or a bracket. She stooped to search among the loose white pellets of foam in the box. Finding an instructon booklet, she straightened to read it and nudged the air conditioner with her hip. It fell backwards out the window.

For several seconds, Jessica could not move. Then she looked down. She saw the machine near the curb—a flat gray speck. Beside it lay a bag of scattered groceries. Beyond the bag a woman's body hugged the sidewalk.

The elevator took so long coming that Jessica used the emergency stairwell instead, running down flight after flight of raw concrete steps. The stairwell had not been remodeled with the rest of the building. Ancient odors of fried onions, chicken fat and regurgitated milk found their last refuge there, but Jesssica did not smell their ghosts until she reached the final landing and could no longer hold her breathing or thinking in abeyance.

By the time she had descended to the street, a crowd hid the air conditioner and the woman from view. Jessica did not try to force through the crowd, but she did watch as Robbie, the doorman, backed his way out. The front of his white shirt was bloody. He took no notice of the mess on his clothes, only walked to his post beside the entrance and sat dully on his wooden stool.

An ambulance came. Paramedics pierced the circle of strangers with a stretcher and brought out the woman's body. Jessica could see the swaddle of blankets on the stretcher—the body seemed the same length and width as her own.

After the paramedics had slid the stretcher into the ambulance and driven away, Jessica told a policeman that she was the one who had pushed the air conditioner out the window. She said she would be home all day in case it was inconvenient for them to take her to the station right then. She walked back to her building, opened the door herself—Robbie did not move from his stool—and went up to her apartment.

The police saw no need to take Jessica anywhere. The officers questioned her intently, but with courtesy and consideration. When a reporter and photographer knocked at the door, the policemen volunteered to send them away, but Jessica said she could not see why a woman in her position deserved the privilege of privacy. She told the reporter at length of her carelessness in having left the air conditioner on the sill. She did not wait for him to ask how she felt about the accident, but said quite frankly that she would never be able to live with the pain of her guilt. The photographer stopped maneuvering around her chair, snapped a final shot and motioned the reporter that they should leave. Then the policemen went away. Jessica walked into her bathroom and threw up. She pictured the most gruesome possibilities of metallic momentum on skin, soft tissue and internal organs; she threw up again and sobbed. She knew she would not be able to stop sobbing until she, too, was dead. She looked in her medicine cabinet; through her tears she could see bottles of pills quivering, melting. Tweezers and emery boards lost all rigidity and wavered like snakes. Only the thick handle of her shaving razor retained the straight lines of its reality.

She reached for her toothbrush, clenched her fingers around a tube of toothpaste, and cleaned her mouth. When Lemuel came home a few minutes later, his mother's breath was sweet, although her eyes were still wet and ugly. The boy had never seen his mother cry, but he did not now ask the reason for her grief. He sat quietly as she put two slices of oatmeal bread in the toaster for him, spread the toast with peanut butter and poured him a glass of skim milk. She went to return the peanut butter to the cupboard and dropped it. The jar cracked, the thick brown paste began oozing onto the tile floor. Jessica retched. Then, in a voice broken yet coherent, she told Lemuel that she had just killed a woman, that she did not think she could ever face another soul on earth, and that he should pack some pajamas and school clothes and move in with his Aunt Dottie until she could make provisions for his future.

He ate his toast in small bites. "If you send me away," he said in the flat tone of a tired psychoanalyst, "you'll never ask for me back." He finished the first slice of toast and wiped two fingers on a napkin. "I killed a cat once, on purpose," he said. "I never told you. It was too . . . *bad* to tell you. But I never killed a person." He drank his milk, dabbed at his white moustache with the napkin, got up and placed it in the trash bin. "I think I should stay."

Jessica nodded, then ran into her bedroom, locked the door and cried into her blankets until long past midnight. She did not sleep all that night, nor come out of her room the next day.

On the Monday after the accident, just before noon, Jessica called Andrew Atkins, the director of the social services agency where she worked, to ask for an indefinite leave of absence. Atkins said he would grant the request if she insisted, but really, it would be best if she came in as though nothing had happened. Work, he said, made one's troubles disappear.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I don't see how I could continue." He pleaded again for her to return, and she remembered that Paul Fields, the man with whom she shared the duties of supervising the agency's case workers, had gone on vacation the Friday before, backpacking in the Rockies. She thought that Atkins must be wondering how he could get along with both of his assistants absent.

She did not care about Atkins, whom she left listening to silence on the telephone, but she did feel an obligation to Paul not to let him return from his vacation to face a simmering volcano of confused bureaucracy. Most weeks of the year, Jessica and Paul kept the agency—and each other—calm. Jessica would peek around Paul's partition, and if she saw him staring out the window, would touch his narrow shoulders and whisper something, anything, it never mattered what because no logic could apply, it was always just the light touch of her fingers that made him swivel around again and tease them both back into a working humor.

Paul rarely touched Jessica, but often teased her. He refused to let her take the remarks of her clients too seriously—she understood Spanish and so caught the meanings of the mumbles and curses of men and women who saw her only as the arbiter of their humiliation. Paul also refused to let Jessica fulfill all her duties to authority. Whenever she held a rule up to him, he chucked bits of sarcasm at it until it shattered. She would turn her head away, as if to keep the fragments from flying in her eyes, then look at him in shy terror, waiting for him to laugh and reassure her that his missles had been aimed at the rule, that she had been only the target-bearer.

Twice a day, Jessica brought Paul his coffee—condensed milk, two sugars—and with every cup wondered why a highly competent man in his mid-thirties should be no more than a supervisor in a social services agency, unmarried, living with his parents, and seemingly unconcerned about his want of prestige, wife, or independence. She had often considered inviting him home so she could get his opinion about Lemuel. If she did not, it had nothing to do with the rumors of Paul's homosexuality. She was just afraid that people would think she was so desperate for male companionship she would become involved with a man of no ambition.

"Jessica," she finally heard her boss saying into the phone. "Jessica, are you there? Please don't take offense. I am not denying that you need some time to yourself. But Jessica, time heals all . . ."

She let Atkins go on a second longer as she fought down a fantasy in which she was zipping open the flap to Paul's tent in the Rockies, finding him half-in, half-out of his sleeping bag, beckoning . . .

"I'm afraid it wouldn't work," she said to Atkins. "I must insist."

"No one here will accuse you of anything," he said. "If the rest of the staff had known I'd be talking to you, they would have said to send their condolences."

She hung up. "Condolences," she said. "Condolences."

The phone rang. It was her mother, calling to say she was flying in from Boise that afternoon. Jessica remembered the scolding her mother had given her years before for breaking a Hummel figurine. She expected the same scolding now, its intensity increased a thousandfold, and so awaited her mother's arrival with anticipated gratitude.

Jessica's father was unable to get away from an important trial, but sent a letter via his wife in which he described his revulsion at having killed four Japanese soldiers during the war. He said he had learned afterwards, in talking to other men with soldier's consciences, that some murders deserved to be ignored. This was the only way society had found, he said, for those with subtle hearts to survive. Jessica had never heard about her father's experiences in the war. His letter did not comfort her—it upset her more.

"There's nothing I can do for you," said her mother, a nurse at a veteran's home. "I've had patients like you. They just wanted to keep pressing their bruises. I may as well leave."

Jessica nodded her assent and helped her mother pack. She called a taxi, but would not leave the apartment to see her mother to the airport.

Within five minutes after Jessica's mother had left, her friend Dottie, who had once been her sister-in-law Dottie, arrived, bearing a tall, thin cactus, just as she had after Herbie's desertion. Dottie was Herbie's sister, but could not understand what Jessica had seen in him. Nor could she understand how her brother could have been so blind to Jessica's strengths. How many people, Dottie wondered, had the unfailing will and focus of attention to forebear from doing any significant harm in the world? How many had the humility to exclude malice from their emotions?

"We don't blame you a bit," Dottie had said to Jessica the day the divorce came through. "Herbie has been a pain in the ass since the day he spit at the *mohel* who circumcised him." And, again, after the death of Isabella Borges, Dottie told Jessica, "We don't blame you a bit."

Jessica thanked Dottie and asked her to leave. Unable to offend by throwing the cactus away, she tucked it behind the wooden blinds over the sink, on the same spot where the first cactus had stood. The plant remained out of sight, but still she sensed it there, a prickly finger pointing out her guilt at having caused two families to grow up with one parent apiece.

When Lemuel came home from school that afternoon, his mother asked if the other kids were giving him a hard time over what she had done.

"Are you kidding?" he said. "They're being nicer to me than when Whimpie died," Whimpie having been a cocker spaniel. "Some kid got up on a table in the cafeteria and yelled out, 'Hey, Lemmie, your Mom flatten any more spics lately?' and sixteen other kids jumped on him." He frowned. "They shoved his face into a bowl of Boston beans."

One week after the accident, Jessica baked a cornbread, wrapped it in foil,

and began walking south. Several blocks down the street, she decided that she should have baked a loaf of rye instead. A Mexican-American family might regard a gift of cornbread as a sign of condescension. Cornbread was a specialty of Jessica's, but she doubted her recipe would be to the Borges' liking. She was tempted to leave it on a bench but was afraid the elements might ruin it before anyone could eat it.

The newspapers had gotten the Borges' address wrong, and it took Jessica forty minutes of knocking at slow-to-open doors before she found the right duplex. All three Borges children were sitting on the front stoop. They were neatly dressed, their dark eyes clear. They said nothing to her, only stared. She asked if their father was home. The eldest, a boy of thirteen, slender with fine features, showed her in.

There was a long table in the living room, laden with food in an assortment of unmatched dishes and baskets, many covered with bright cloths. It was impossible to tell whether any contained cornbread. Geraldo Borges sat in an armchair, reading a newspaper with headlines in Spanish. He was short and squarely built, his stubble-black cheeks broad and square. None of the children, Jessica thought, resembled their father.

"*Yo soy la mujer que mató su esposa,*" she said. *I am the woman who killed your wife.*

He appeared not to have understood. Then he sighed and stood. "You are welcome," he said, motioning toward the other armchair. She handed him the cornbread. He accepted it with a deep incline of his head, as if the bread were in full payment of some debt.

"*Lo siento,*" she said. *I am sorry.* Instead of sitting, she wept. He, too, wept. His children—the two younger, who were peering in through the screen door, and the eldest, who was so close to Jessica he could see the mole on her neck—began to giggle in terror. Geraldo Borges embraced Jessica.

"*Lo siento también,*" he said. *I am sorry too.* He told her, in a mixture of Spanish and English, that a lawyer from the legal aid society had been to see him earlier that week. Despite the lawyer's advice, Geraldo Borges said, he was going to sue neither the manufacturer of the fatal air conditioner nor Jessica.

She looked into his black eyes, as if imploring him to give her something. "*La culpa . . .*" she said. "*La culpa . . .*"

"*Lo siento,*" he said softly.

She fled.

Always, the silent opinions of family, friends and acquaintances had resounded in Jessica's ears like the pronouncements of incorporeal judges. In the days following the accident, these voices stopped speaking sense to her. She heard their opinions as so much soft babble. It was as if the Allied tribunal at Nuremburg had started singing Broadway showtunes into the world's waiting microphones.

Eventually, her confusion resolved itself into indifference. Even she could not govern her life by the judgments of tender idiots. Finally, on the second Sunday after the accident, she awoke to a world without judges. She lay in bed for hours, as motionless beneath the blankets on her bed as Isabella Borges had been on the stretcher.

Lemuel entered his mother's bedroom, timidly, carrying a plate of caramels. "I thought you'd be hungry," he said.

"Are you?"

"I had a few bananas. But we ran out."

She rose and pulled on a pair of blue jeans and a sweatshirt unworn since before Lemuel's birth. She was too blank to think of how to treat him. Only her instincts were left her, and these told her to lead him into the kitchen, crack two eggs into a bowl, grate some cheese, and make him an omelet. From the way he ate, she decided her instinct had not betrayed her.

"If I were to commit suicide," she thought, "Lemuel would be an orphan." Herbie, she knew, would always be too busy for him. And to keep her son in omelets and tennis shoes, she would have to keep working. She phoned Andrew Atkins at his home to say she would be coming in to the office the next day. Before either of them had hung up, Jessica heard her boss shouting the news to his wife.

On her first day back at work, Jessica was still too numb to register the stares and whispers of her co-workers. She was also too numb to deny habit. At 11 a.m., she brought Paul Fields his first cup of coffee.

"I hear you've been on vacation, too," he said. Beneath his beard and tinted glasses his face was tanned. "You look relaxed."

"Relaxed?" Did he really not know about the accident, or was he politely pretending?

"I've read that martyrs often die peacefully," he said, "and men who are reprieved after the rifles have already been pointed at their chests return to a world whose laws can't touch them." He smiled at her and she was not offended, although everything about her since the accident had warned that a smile would be taken as the bitterest of insults. "It's just a shame that martyrdom and murder can't be prescribed as therapy." He asked her out to dinner.

"No," she said, "but thank you."

"Don't you want to eat with me?"

"Yes," she said.

"Isn't your sentence of sackcloth and ashes over yet?"

She agreed to go to dinner with him. She did not, however, bring him his second cup of coffee at 3 p.m., hoping to derail her customary doubts about him by derailing her customary actions. Instead, she waited until 3:15 and phoned Lemuel, telling him to call his favorite sitter and then call her back to confirm that the sitter could come.

Dinner lasted three hours, the walk another two. It was not that Jessica and Paul had much to discuss. Neither wanted to talk about the office. Paul made no revelations about his living arrangements, although he laughed when they passed a violinist playing in the street, saying that as a teenager he had threatened his parents with practicing on EL platforms if they did not let him play blues on his saxophone in the basement after midnight. Since then, they had learned to sleep through his solitary subterranean jam sessions. Paul also told Jessica that his mother had a wonderful sense of humor—he enjoyed her company.

At no time during the evening did Paul or Jessica mention the accident. Their silences were many, but comfortable. At 11 p.m., they went back to her apartment. Lemuel was asleep in his room, the sitter asleep on the sofa. Jessica woke the sitter and sent him down to his apartment on the second floor. Then, after much the same discussion as the one about their going to dinner, Paul and Jessica made love on the couch. Her blouse and undergarments worked their way into the crevices between the cushions, yet she felt more private than at any time since her fourteenth birthday. She had never seen Paul's eyes—he kept them camoflauged behind the blue lenses of his eyeglasses—but even now, as they inspected every inch of her body, she did not feel watched. Surprised at her freedom, she said, "Oh."

Lemuel, hearing their noises, wandered into the living room. He saw his mother and went white as moonlight. She stiffened in Paul's arms.

"Haven't you ever seen your mother naked before?" Paul asked the boy.

"No," Lemuel said.

"What do you think?"

The boy moved to the window. It was open, though the curtains were drawn. There was no breeze and Jessica's skin burned. She felt as if someone were about to slash her with shards of glass, although she made no attempt to cover herself.

"I think she's perfect," Lemuel said. He turned his back on them, parted the curtains, leaned out the window and hooted once, twice, happily into the night.

His mother bit at the skin on her lip. She laughed a tight laugh and nipped at Paul's ear. She laughed again, and this time the laughter took control of her body until she had to bury her face against Paul's thin chest. His skin was cool.

Outside, the night breathed. The curtains billowed into the living room. A breeze flowed gently over Jessica's bare legs and back.