

Joan Haggerty /

UNCOUPLING TAKES OFF FLESH

"Fine, take the car and go. Now, wait a minute, wait a minute, what'll you do with Jordan?"

I change the phone to my other ear. "Jordan'll be fine. I'll start at the beginning of his nap. He'll sleep maybe four, five hours. That's how long it takes, right?"

"You don't know the way."

"I'll get a map."

"It'll be cold."

"It's only the end of September."

"It's the beginning of October. Be accurate for once, Val."

"Are you angry?"

"Val, if I were angry at you, the *paint* would be blistering on the walls. Is it?"

All is quiet. Last night had to be the night the wedding guests left not the, no it was the first time I ever, how could I have been up there trying to help when I wasn't, this is how many weeks later? A month? What've I been *doing*?"

"Val?"

"What?"

"I called back to tell you. When you get to the land, don't move Mother."

"Mother?"

"Mother with the wooden tits. Don't move her. And Val?"

"Whaaaaat?"

"Drive carefully."

Drive carefully, my ass. Two for tea. Baby makes three. I slip a card out of my tarot pack and put it in my pocket without looking at it.

Couple of hours later, the lady in question is seen pulling up outside a Madison Avenue Bookstore in her trusty green Oldsmobile. She stuffs a dummy in her baby's mouth, slings her purse on her shoulder and slopes in. "Dear Tom, I have a tarot card in my hand. It's pressed face down on the shelf below me. I'm writing on the next shelf down (with my right hand) and the tarot card is pressed (under my left palm) on the next. My right hand beckons you; my left holds you back.

I don't know where the flow is taking me now but I'm going with it, I suppose. I'm learning to allow myself to push the river. I'm willing to say our meeting had to do with the stars but I call the flow simplistic jargon when I don't like where it goes. Leave that to the poet who tells you not to look sad when you say goodbye. Make it easy for him. Me? I'd rather hang on. To branches, daddy's hand, your shoe as I slip downstream.

Did you hear the one about the man who was shipwrecked and spent the first eight hours wishing to be rescued before he decided he was going about things all wrong, that what he should have been thinking about was survival?

Yeah, well it's time to look at this here tarot card. You know what I'm wearing under this duffle coat, don't you? A chiffon dress, very pale, patterned in feathers. Nice see-through fabric.

It's the six of swords. There's a woman hunched over in a shawl with a child beside her. Six swords are piercing the bottom of the boat. Her head is down. The water is smooth on her left side, stormy on her right. She's being poled across by a tall dark man. I can't see his face but I know it's you. There's a shore in the distance.

I met you, my love, when I was afraid to enter the river, did I ever tell you that? I was standing on the edge. You came along looking like my rescuer.

I will never, ever forget what it was like when we met, Tom. No matter where I go, what I do. Do you believe me? I was the wanderer, come back. I really did believe that God would one day pull me up to him with a finger under each of my wings and then, then it would happen. And it did.

Well, how do we live with banishment, eh? Shrugs of experience, I suppose. You say it would be better if we'd never met.

I remember now what I've come here for. I was going to look up the interpretation of the card I'm carrying. The reference book says:

Journey by water. Passage away from difficulty and sorrow. Harmony will again prevail. The journey may be done in consciousness that will raise the seeker out of his (read *her*) difficulties to a more understanding frame of mind.

I see. The matter (as I see it). She is allowing herself to be taken across water. The resolution: she must do it herself. Now I would only fasten onto this message if it coincided with the one coming from inside me and it does. Yup, yup, it fits. At least that's in sync.

So what was I doing while I packed my overalls and smeared lotion on the baby's ass? I was fighting the old cliché, what am I going to do with the rest of my life? And here I thought I was relatively cliché-free this morning. Yours, etc.

I get back in the car. Jordan's spat out his dummy and is cooing. I'd be better off to stay home, get some video equipment and we could televise ourselves. *"Do I always snarl when I peel carrots? Oh, mother, do you have to wear that dress? I don't want to eat this hippy rabbit stew. I want porkchops and tinned peas like all the other kids."* Where was I? Oh yeah, trying to change lanes. I forgot to look in the mirror. Man over there leaning on his horn like a bladder. Glance, I'm being chased, another glance, he's gaining, another, he's past and another pair of yellow lidless eyes burn me. Big breath. GO. Did it, by god.

Flash on that little brown book that told me stopping distances. How far behind that fender am I supposed to be? If only I'd practiced highway driving instead of letting him do it.

Tom's been travelling up and down this highway like a corridor, no problem. Says the route gets shorter each time. If he can do it, so can I. I haven't been up here for two weeks. I stayed home to spite him. He came back with Jordan under his arm like a fish. I was sitting at the oak table drawing a bird with tears flowing out of its belly like eggs. I'd hung dolls from the doorknobs by their legs. He didn't notice. He leaned over my shoulder: "What'ya doing, kiddo? Signing my yearbook?" I thought of him driving down the highway with our son in his mouth like a rabbit. "Take dictation, o.k? We need a list of things to get for Delta. One, new jumpsuits for the horses."

I hold out my arms to him from my chair at the dining room table. "Don't you want to hold me?"

"No, I do not, Val. I don't know what you're doing to this place but it's like a morgue. It's got that left-over marriage smell, like a dirty ashtray. There's no place for me here." He runs. I go over to my cupboard, climb in, and close the door.

Instead of having a tantrum when I can't get what I want, I stay silent and look into my brain, my witch's cauldron. I stir the pot until it whips up a gothic storm like stiff black eggwhites. And *I* materialize out of this storm in a black cloak on a heath. I keep the cloud close around me as well, pull a piece of hair under my nose like a moustache, and smell it hard in and hard out. Black steam comes out my nostrils.

I am *not* driving away to make him love me more. Liar. If you're thirsty, you picture a glass of water until you get it and the image goes away. Jung says if a couple separates because of the woman's compulsion to be in the right, then the man in her brain will get very big. The him-in-me. My polarity game. Romantic, anti-romantic. Back and forth. A little boat. "What'ja mean, it won't go ahead or back, lady? You've got it in neutral." Scowling face. The air is like cupronite, that stuff Superman carries in his pocket.

Tom charges out with Jorday under his arm like a football. Then he charges back in. Jorday's laughing. He forgot he had to bring him back because he hadn't been nursed for a day and a night. I take him wearily, like an old wet nurse. I had been expressing my milk into the kitchen sink. It felt good to have his mouth back. He left like a gentleman the second time.

I can't get inside him and it's arrogant to try. "Tom came out of his office and hailed a cab." O.K. That much. In our early days, his writers sat with their legs crossed chewing their fingernails waiting for news as to whether they were going to get applause or tomatoes to eat that winter, and Tom was supposed to be reading their manuscripts and I kept trying to keep him in bed all morning.

"You hang onto me like a surfboard."

I hang on, tighter.

"Who *are* you, woman? What do you want?"

To be honest, I want his heart. And I don't mean as in valentine. I mean as in cannibalism. I'm trapped in it as he walks down 45th Street, goes into *Chock-Full-O-Nuts* for a coffee. He wears me like a badge on a blazer. I'm shaking the bars. My third eye is his left nipple. As he comes out, a blindman taps him on the shoulder: "Excuse me, Sir, but I think your woman wants out."

I slip out from behind the bus when it stops at 79th St. I'm disguised as a punk. I karate him flat on his back, get out my knife, cut deftly around the nipple, lift it neatly as a manhole cover, and lay it aside. He acts like he's been waiting for me, when I get on top of him in bed. Once he wanted me to rape him but when he had to ask it was all spoilt. None of this is gory, of course. (*And now, class? This is a little harder.*) I cannot believe I am this angry. I don't feel pretty. People don't notice us. They go on walking, their newspapers under their arms like babies. Their shins swing from their knees like metronomes. They're kicking the inside of my skull. I have swallowed some giant whole and it *ain't* Tom.

I kneel on his chest. He beseeches me silently as an innocent deer. I'm slaughtering the wrong victim and it's too late. His eyes ache up at me in dumb protest, brown as bark and glowing. They are a window to the forest where he lives. He's surrounded by debris: his briefcase, glasses, dogshit, newspapers. I can't understand why he isn't resisting me. His eyes grow larger and larger. They stream with tears, and birds fly out like kites on strings. They are *women*, for godsake, tiny black sperm-shaped women like Munch ghosts. My knife turns to paper. The fat bloody heart in my hand is a cake with too much icing. It throbs silently.

My mouth bleeds. He is one male-female creature stuck copulating while its hands claw at its own chest and its four eyes go round and round like a broken toy. The sky women are shrill; their cries drown the traffic. They want me to cut their strings loose. I can't do it. I'm trying to stand on the corpse with one foot and hold the reins of these powerful creatures with my hand, terrified to let go. Wonder woman, where are you? Home with an aspirin?

The highway is bordered by junkyards. A gantry crane rears up like a dinosaur. I hurtle my way to the intersection where ten overpasses pile on top of each other like a huge transport truck. The cars don't move. I get under it somehow (no fault of my own). This is not the river I had in mind, fellas.

I'm supposed to be equidistant from the car in front and the car behind. But what'ya do if one behind is butting yr ass? I'll catch this turn or die trying. No time to watch women change into birds. The big screen's rolled up, god's had his violent flick for today. Before breakfast? Getting a bit sleezed up out there, huh, fellas?

At least the steering wheel's hardened. Now it's black as iron. Leah's handprints were always there in the fog if you looked hard enough. I'm not jealous of her, she's kind. I glance to the side, can I pass? I slip back into my blinkers but I've caught sight of the woods. Maybe I could start a deconstruction company. What I do is buy up a shopping centre and then hire people to take it apart and distribute the goods. Scarsdale ladies come up in their stationwagons and stand around till someone hands them a sack of tomatoes. They don't know they'll soon be digging roots from under their garden furniture. First good idea I've had in months. If I can remember the names of all the trees in there, I'll manage the turn. Elm, willow, white ash, oak, northern maple, southern maple, uh . . . uh . . . shit . . . is that the sign . . . get a little closer T A C yup, yup, get it in, what . . . it's it . . . SUMAC. Great. Right on. Did it.

"How 'bout that, Jordan? Yer old lady got us on the right road."
I flash my sisterhood fist.

Jordan wakes up. First mistake, I shouldn't have shouted. He lies beside me on the seat smiling his toothless grin with a bit of snot running down his nose. He has grand brown eyes.

The Taconic is so pretty. Red, ochre, brown, yellow. I'm high suddenly, I grab a piece of Kleenex (I even had the wit to tuck a box of it behind the visor.) I take my eyes off the road to wipe his nose. Sweet baby. He coos at me and I smile daftly back, pursing my mouth out at him. But when I glance back up, I'm over the centre line and there's a car heading straight for me. Honking. I swerve back just in time. This is downright dangerous, being without a man. Point is: I'm used to taking care of the small stuff, like noses. Tom does the big stuff, like keeping the car on the road. So now I gotta do the big stuff and the small stuff. There's no room for error, and yes, I'm a little scared.

Well, well, we're in the clear now. Cruising, babe, watch me cruise. No hands. No, no, I'm driving carefully. Really. I turn Jordan around so his head is on my knee and I can hold his cheek in my hand. Dashing along just dandy for maybe one two miles. Then that shimmy in the car again. Threat, dry mouth. Not to forget. Last night. Cockroaches in the bed. Tom from a phone booth: "Babe, we have to collect our individual strengths, the more my insular part asserts itself, the more you don't want to hear it. Please understand." Don't pay any attention. Keep driving. Jordan's crying. I'm rocking him. Smaller, shrinking like Maryjane. All out of cryptonite. "So you're not coming home?"

"No, I'll stay at the *Ramada Inn*."

Late at night. More cockroaches. I phone. "There's no one here by that name" and the other day that writer phoning, tells me he's met me, don't I work for a new magazine?

"Babe, that writer you respect so much? He's losing his marbles; he remembers meeting me at lunch."

I go to the office the morning after he's not at the motel, half-zapped from downers. He's upset. He's sick. Poor bastard. We hold hands. I said about the cockroaches. He said it was the *Americana*. Is there a motel called that? May I use your phone book? Never mind. What's one more fuck in the universe? Or tantrum? Or couple? He holds the cards; the money, the land. If I'm replaced, I lose my turf. Hell, if Cinderella'd had her act together, she wouldn't have given a damn about the ball. How many strikes did you say she had against her?

I said I was going. He said yes. He said where? I said I have no luggage. He hands me a *Master Charge* and tells me to go buy luggage. I don't want luggage. I'll use boxes. I keep the *Master Charge*.

"Got to step back, got to get on my own trip."

I don't want to step back but I will to please him. I'll pace him no matter what.

"I'm scared."

"Yes." We hold hands. I go home to pack.

What is there about waiting for the stores to open so I can get some cardboard boxes that makes me so horny? You'd think masturbating all night both nights would do it. It doesn't. I want him. I want his lips down on me, I want him like the rock in Simon's song, I want to hold onto him, I want him on his knees with his arms around my waist, I want to eat him until my saliva and the tip of his cock are one, I want to put it in my ear my eyes my navel twitch it on my clitoris between my toes, I want him to come like a fountain until I'm coated from head to foot in sperm. If only I could get my thighs around his head his mouth and my cunt would be one, I want him to suck me into his head like a genie going back into a bottle, I want to go back to the office, rip out the telephone, and sit on his face. I want him to bite me, drown in his own tears and beg for my forgiveness, I want to weep like a maid down on my knees, I want the see-saw, I want to get off the see-saw, I want it, I've got to get off, I want it, I've got to get off.

What's wrong with me I can't think about anything else but sex? Or is it because I'm like an animal in a cage here with the air too hot to go out in, nobody in the shops and the phone not ringing? I've read about how when animals are taken away from their wilderness and put into zoos they do nothing but copulate until exhaustion. What are they trying to recover? They can't free their energy so it turns back on itself. I see two baboons in a cage. The female wants to do nothing but fuck all day. She salivates, her hands shake and wring each other when she can't get it, the male's rhythms are different, he doesn't want to fuck all day. He starts shaking the bars, she is shaking him for more fucking, she wants him to suck her more, he doesn't want to, when he doesn't want to it makes him feel like a machine sucking sucking when he's long past had any interest in it. He shakes the bars. She weeps. She gets a stick and scratches the ground and bites her lips. She beats her head against the bars and begs God to come and fuck her. God says he's busy.

I think of you in the Delta Woods, waiting for me to pass the baby. Your palms are upturned, testing for rain. You look down at me, dark and foxy. I hand you the baby. You sing *dem bones dem bones, dem wet bones*. It's raining. What'll it be like in the tent tonight? Will we always feel chased off until there's a shelter?

I throw my hopscotch into the next square. It'll all be okay when I reach Delta. I'm waiting for me somewhere and my poor present self has no power at all.

My cardboard boxes are open in the living room, flowers with my sweaters and toys for centres. I'll go buy some topsoil, bury them in dirt and sow grass; then I won't have to leave. Leaving the world of men and going *to what?*

The unknown. "Maybe I'm just an awkward fit, like a difficult shoe size," I said at the office. "Oh, Val, don't give yourself *airs*." Hoping they'll bloom and surprise me, I desert the boxes and find the bedroom. Goddam our paisley bedspread that looks like my security blanket. I pick it up and suck the corner. My hair comes floating down the hall. I want to shred the blanket through my teeth like dental floss. I wish I had the mask to help me do this thing.

I screw the cap off the nozzle on the waterbed and press a bowl under it into the plastic. The nozzle bends like a tap and warm water pours out. It's thick and slimy. The bowl fills and the nozzle erects again as I carry it to the kitchen sink. I pour like my period after a swollen week. This is mean; it's his bed too. I'll only take half of the water.

If I stay awhile in the tent, maybe I can get my periods to fit the moon again. Last night it was so full it had a bump on its side. I bend over for a second bowlful.

I walk back and forth to the sink for two hours. The water in a waterbed weighs over a ton. It took an hour of pouring before the bed went down two inches. If it didn't feel so good, I would rationalize that it's not necessary; he must know my spirit inhabits this bed. Finally it's gimpy enough, like a sheet twisted after fucking. I pull up my avocado plants by the roots and lay them to rest on it.

Now I can wade across. I won't need Charon. *Still trying to show Daddy you can do it yourself, are you Val? How old did you say you were?*

Tom phones about mother. I tell him I'm going to Delta and the tent will do. I choose two cardboard boxes from the six I've packed and fold in their petals. I want to pare my life down to the bone. I take my tarot card by her skinny black arm, put Jordan in the pack-a-baby, place *Hollows* (the book every goodwoman keeps by her bed) in my shopping bag, erase I COME from my slogan on the door, and call it a day.