

BLANKETS

Judy Sobeloff

He's beautiful, not my type at all, combing his long hair beneath a eucalyptus tree. I'm open and friendly to everyone, so I smile at him, and he hightails it over to the edge of my blanket in his Metallica jacket and leather pants, a refugee from MTV. He squats in his cowboy boots on the damp ground and looks into my eyes, then touches the hem of my skirt, the blue one that turns into a peacock when I'm tripping. I think, Yeah, I've been here enough times, he knows where his hand is. The air over my cheekbones heats up. He's gentle, caresses my hand, kisses me. Then he yanks me up and starts running toward the underbrush. I wave to Charlotte, who doesn't live in the park but is still my closest friend, and bump along behind him, through a sprinkler, stumbling once in the deep mud of a bicycle tire rut. He waits while I wipe off my shins with a slippery leaf, then tugs my hand and takes off again, almost knocking over a couple of strolling grandpas. When he turns onto a dark little side path and stops short beside some vine-smothered cedars, I crash into him, my head slamming into his shoulder. My breath's coming out too fast—I can tell I'm excited about him.

We crawl back behind a huge boulder, and I run my hand over the moss in its craters—if this is the north side, then something I was taught in school will turn out to be true. I can't believe I never checked out this little hidey-hole before. He hangs his jacket on a tree limb, then takes his pants off too. "What are you looking at?" he asks, puffing out his chest. He can relax, I'm thinking about the baggie of dope in his jacket pocket. When he tugs on my skirt, the elastic's so loose I step right out. I throw the rest of my clothes up on a spindly branch below his, one that looks like it won't hold but does. He pulls me in close, under some low curving branches clogged with dead leaves. I lie on him, rest my cheek against a giant fern, feel its soft tips stroking me.

It's dark and peaceful here, and more than a fern is tickling me now. My new friend rolls me over, and I look up at him while we make love. He's sweet and soft-spoken, his voice nearly drowned out by a cluster of gnats off to the side of his head. I can see splotches of bright color where light slices through the leaves, tourist families walking by. When we're done he throws sticks at his jacket until it falls down from the branch, then brings out the pot. There's always something sexy about guys with good pot. "You're an easy bitch," he growls. I know it's sick, but I get off on that sort of talk.

I throw sticks at my clothes too and get dressed and sit beside him again. He takes his time rolling us a joint, and I notice the soggianness seeping through the back of my skirt, the goose bumps on my mud-stained legs. I think of the blanket I left behind with Charlotte, one of the wool army ones I got from the free box in People's Park, perfect for sitting on and everything else. Today's People's Park must seem pathetic to anyone leftover from the '60s, but at least it's got that free box going for it.

When I go back for my blanket it's gone but that's OK, someone else is

using it now. I have a whole pile of blankets stashed near my clothes in a garbage bag in a thicket anyway. I always share with people—mostly my friend Dodie and a young kid named Bean. They don't hold onto stuff as well as I do.

I see the guy again later in the week and ask his name. It's Christopher, and he brings me to Bible Study at Oak Street House, where they make vegetarian chili and cornbread from scratch. I can't believe he's only been on the streets here a month. My first month in Golden Gate Park felt like I was back at freshman orientation, clinging and following other people around, a poor little lamb who had lost her way. Just like in that Yale Whiffenpoof song my mother made us sing with those buffoons at her business school reunion, a scene I swore I'd never be part of again. Not only does Christopher know where to get one of the best meals I've had in weeks, but when he takes me to a campsite back in the park after dinner, he seems to already know everyone there. I thought I had a lot of friends here, but maybe I need to be trying harder. It's cloudy—blanketless or not, I know I'll be warm sleeping next to him.

In the morning the ground is cold and hard against my neck though. "You on the pill or something?" he asks, shoving his feet back into his mud-caked cowboy boots.

"No, just lucky." I curl my toes around a smooth rock. No one other than my sister has asked me that before. "I'm not into the whole worrying thing."

He seems relieved to hear that, and I walk behind him, swinging my high tops by the laces, centering my bare feet in his boot treads, enjoying the sucking noise each time I pull my foot away. When he gets too far ahead of me I yell good-bye and sashay down to the beach to find Charlotte.

She's looking out high above the ocean from the same bench she's sat on every morning since she left her husband a year ago—her kids were grown and she couldn't stand him any more. "Hey, Vicki," she says, "help me out with these," and pulls a bag of grapes out of her purse. Charlotte was one of the first people to show me the instant karma that's everywhere in San Francisco. Whenever I'm hungry, somebody always gives me a plate of food or whatever I need.

We're still munching when I notice this guy Wolf who I was lovers with a couple months back but haven't seen since he got out of jail. He's leaning on the railing across from Charlotte's bench, tossing pebbles onto the beach below. When he comes over Charlotte passes him the grapes, and he ambles across the grass and washes them off in the sprinkler.

Wolf brings out his pipe but Charlotte isn't interested, so he and I go off into the trees and get stoned. "She's a real fireball," he says, rolling his eyes. "You're hanging out with old ladies now?"

"You're so twisted," I say. "She's no older than you are, and she's great." I'm glad to see Wolf, of course, but I have other friends now, I don't know how much I feel like hanging out with him any more.

Later I leave him and find Christopher, who I bring to the Fallen Oak Campsite. There's a fire going with about five of my friends around it. I'm proud to take Christopher somewhere he's never been before where he doesn't know any

of the people. Straightaway Dodie pulls me aside to check out a tree trunk she says is covered with Satanic carvings. Ever since she heard her old boyfriend OD'd a few months ago, she's been wiggling out. I tell her to cool it. There aren't any images on this tree or any other trees, just the normal grooves and furrows that form wherever the ragged outer bark is peeled away.

Dodie's new boyfriend makes room for us next to him on a log by the fire, but Christopher is raring to go, so pretty soon I lead him out of sight behind the fallen oak. Tonight there aren't any other couples back there, and we waste no time, kicking acorns out of the way, Christopher pulling himself up on top of me like a salmon that might not make it. We make love, and then he conks out. When I can't breathe any more I push him off.

Hours later he grabs me from behind. I think he wants to go another round, but he's just thrashing in his sleep. I lie there motionless, silent, staring up at the thick heavy sky. When I open my eyes next, it's morning. Long shadows flicker all around me, from the branches of the tree overhead. I shower a handful of brittle helicopter seedpods over Christopher, but he just lies there.

I kiss him good-bye and wander down to Haight Street, hang out with some folks in front of the Double Rainbow. It's Saturday, so the police won't be ticketing for loitering today. Two little girls toddle out, vanilla streaming down their faces, and one drops her whole cone. The mom brings the girls back in the store, and I watch the ice cream melting on the sidewalk, its smooth creamy sweetness, until someone walking by puts his whole foot in the puddle. I need lunch, I need it now. I could go to the Y where Charlotte's been staying, or maybe get someone to come with me to St. Vincent de Paul's. I wouldn't sleep in a shelter, with all the lice and scabies and fighting and stealing, but the food's usually pretty good. I prefer the people in the park. I like sleeping there.

I look around at the crowd again, don't really know anyone, decide I'm not up for any major crosstown food-foraging expeditions and head down the street to The Switchboard for coffee instead. Sometimes when I get extra money I bring it there—it looks like a little bare-bones storefront, but it's one of the only ways to stay in touch with people and help each other out. The sidewalk is jammed. People at card tables are hawking jewelry and tie-dye. Someone thrusts a basket of condoms at me and tries to make me take some, but I refuse. I don't need negativity coming to me in individually wrapped packets.

Stopping by The Switchboard turns out to be a good thing, because my friend Tilted is in, filling up a bucket with soap and water. "Vix, want to go in on washing windshields with me?" he asks, bonking me on the head with a squeegee. "Yesterday I made ten bucks an hour."

I'm tempted because Tilted is fun to be with, but I turn him down—money doesn't define my relationship to the world any more. I'm proving I can walk around on this earth without it, that people are loving and accepting me for who I am. I braided bracelets and drew quickie portraits when I first got to San Francisco, but these days when I need cash, which isn't often, I panhandle. If I get more than I need, I give it to a friend or leave it in a crack in the sidewalk or under a tree, knowing it'll be a good surprise for someone else. Tilted always

teases me for this, calls it "watering the desert," but I'm just doing what I believe in.

I head outside to a pay phone and call my mother back east. Collect, so I don't need a quarter. I jam one ear into the receiver and press my outside ear into my head with my thumb, lean against the glass to make the rest of the world shut up. Mostly when I call she's not home, and then weeks go by before I remember to try again. The last time I had a bunch of change I sang a medley of Madonna hits into her answering machine, which must have rattled her some. Sometimes I hear my father grumbling in the background. He never answers the phone even when he is home, and he'd have nothing to say to me if he did.

"Purinton residence," my mother murmurs breathlessly, this time after only two rings. The ball is in my court, but I let it roll back into hers—I don't want this ball. When the operator leaves I say, "Hi." Nothing else.

"Victoria? How are you doing? I'm so glad you called! You sound good. Have you seen much of Jeannie lately?"

"Not exactly. I'm still having fun, learning a lot."

"I understand you don't want me to send you money through the bank, but if I send it to you through the post office, you won't have to go anywhere near a bank."

"No, Mom."

"But Victoria, you won't have to go near a bank!"

She tries to give me money, and I refuse her, every time I call. Our conversations are so predictable I doubt she would notice if I put Tilted on instead. She offered me a shitload of money when I stopped by to get my old sleeping bag before I left to come out west. That was my first time turning her down, and I haven't accepted anything she's offered since. Before I left my parents' house that day, I went in the kitchen and plinked the pearls from my add-a-pearl necklace down the drain one by one, switched on the disposal without running the water. Real pearls. She doesn't dare criticize me any more, because she knows I might not call back. I'm waiting for her to let a question slip about how I'm surviving without a job or an income, but she never does.

In high school one afternoon, she gave me the big required talk, straight out of a pamphlet she got from her pharmacy: "Now, Victoria, if you have any questions about drugs I want you to feel free to ask me. My door is always open." Yeah, right, Mom. Your door is always open. Except for the times I pissed her off so bad she had to take something back she'd given me and lock it up, my dollhouse or CD player or Homecoming dress. My door was always open was more like it. Her door was only open that time I came home early from school with my boyfriend—whoever the guy was in there with her sure didn't sound like my dad.

After I hang up, I think, hell, it's Saturday, why not make today family day? Instead of whipping up Jell-O parfaits for Junior's Little League team, I'll hitch a ride to Jeannie's palatial abode, just past the Sunset Reservoir, right up the hill from the park. Her husband, Chad, is a conservative bullshit lawyer who works every weekend, so weekends are the only time I visit. Sometimes Jeannie

wants to hear about everything I'm doing and acts all encouraging—as if, gee, maybe I do have the right to my own life. Other times she tries deprogramming interventions she learned from an ex-Moonie, or she yells at me, the way my mother used to do before she got scared of losing me. But Jeannie and I are getting closer and talking more often since I moved out here. We're living on the same coast, at least, and the park is practically Jeannie's backyard.

The woman who picks me up tells me never to hitchhike again, my usual kind of ride. I wait on the sidewalk while Jeannie unlocks her iron gate, smiling to myself about how pissed she'd get if I started unwinding the ivy she's spent hours weaving through the latticework. She reaches down and pockets one of the neighbor kids' Hot Wheels cars, giving me her standard "It's good to see you, we've got a lot to talk about" welcome as she leads me through the foyer, up the carpeted steps into the living room. She looks like a Barbie doll in her little shorts and tank top: this is her daytime-playtime-my-husband's-never-home look. "Mom said to tell you she sent in your tuition deposit for the fall."

"As if I'd really put my head in that clamp again," I snort. "Doesn't Mom realize I've learned way more out here in three months than in my whole year and a half at UConn? They should make this a graduation requirement! She needs triple bypass brain surgery if she thinks I'm ever going back there, especially if she thinks I'll let her pay for it."

"Mmhmm. Do you want to spend the night after dinner? Chad won't be back 'til tomorrow night."

"Thanks, but I'll be fine." I grab a towel out of the linen closet and turn on the shower full blast, use Jeannie's favorite European health spa shampoo. I stay in a good long time, then turn on the heat lamps and draw squiggles in the steamed-up mirror while I'm drying off.

In the kitchen I eat fruit salad and homemade ratatouille. I'll never put down people who use Cuisinarts again—Jeannie is a good cook. She refills my plate, then stands up and pulls down a spray can from the back of a cabinet. "My girlfriend who volunteers in the women's clinic got you the Mace I was talking about."

I look out into her backyard, at the little playhouse she has already set up for when she and the prick have their first child. "Jeannie, I'm not taking that stuff. Fear is a magnet."

"Jesus, Vicki, you never learn!" she says. "So, who did you sleep with last night?"

"My new friend Christopher," I answer, as if it's any of her business. "And tonight I'll be with Tilted, love of my life!" I spill a little ratatouille on her fluffy white bathrobe.

She fills a cup with bottled water from the refrigerator, pulls her chair close to me, and soaks the stained area of the robe. "Those slimeballs are just using you," she says, handing me the can of Mace, "but you know that." I hand the can back.

"Those slimeballs are my friends, Jeannie. Besides, safety is all in the energy you project. If you don't feel fear, you won't attract bad things."

"Right."

I stand up. "As if you trust Chad and honestly believe he has to work every weekend? Who's really sleeping with a slimeball?"

A few nights later I'm down in the tunnels by Ocean Beach celebrating the beginning of my period, decked out in all my hippie finery. I say good-bye to Tilted and then happen upon Wolf, which is unfortunate, because he's all into rap now. As soon as Wolf sees me he gets his arms going and starts grunting old rap lyrics right in my face: "Yo, yo, you be illin', illin'." He keeps flapping as we walk out of the tunnels and onto the beach. The whole time we're getting stoned he leers at me, muttering, "Dumb ditty dumb ditty dumb, dumb girl."

He's acting idiotic, but that's OK, because I'm not sticking around. When I first got to San Francisco, I didn't do any drugs at all when I was on my period, but then I found that it felt even more spiritual to take mushrooms or a couple hits of acid, at least during the onset of my flow, and then to spend the night alone. After we finish off Wolf's pot we drop some acid, and he gives me a few hits to last until I see him again.

I think about searching out the spot I went with Christopher the first time, but I can't even find the moon when I leave Wolf, so I keep walking. I know it's about 3:00 a.m. from the way the trees are so quiet and no one's around. When I hit Haight Street, I love it, it feels like my living room, my own big living room where I live with my friends. I pass the apartment with the big purple and red rimmed windows, and with my whole body I shout, "Thanks!" No one answers, but that's OK, all the guys who live there are my friends. The acid I'm on now came from the lab in their basement. I've never had sex to get acid, they're just happy to share what they make.

I keep strolling, past the Pall Mall Bar and Grill, that old psychedelic warp in time, and then I hear music vibrating from a building a little way down the block, ringing out, teasing the air, teasing me. Each note is a different color in the spectrum of fall leaves, sailing down into a pond. I follow one. It's calling me, and I follow all the colors up to the second floor, open the door onto the landing, and there is the music. Also some guy in striped pants with the knees missing and no shirt. He is sitting on a mattress with his back against the wall, fingerpicking the most incredible riffs I've ever heard. Absolutely melodious. The room is dark except for a clamp lamp, and the walls are plastered with heavy metal posters and beer ads. He gets up and walks over to me, still playing, and invites me in, showing off now, getting fancier and fancier with both hands. When he puts his guitar back in its case and brings out a huge translucent bong, I'm kind of sorry, good pot or not. What I want is his music, and now he's enclosed it in that case. His head is separating from his body, it's dripping down his chest. I laugh and reach for the bong to take a hit.

I smell rust—I'm covered with blood, he's fucking the hell out of me. My legs and chest are smeared with big sticky blotches, he's covered, too, his chest hair clumped together, his fingers stained, the nails caked with reddish-brown

grime where he's grabbing my breasts. My skirt's up around my waist, my shirt's up around my neck. The light hurts my eyes, I'm watching myself lying there, watching him concentrating, his eyes closed, his chin sawing the air above me. His hipbones are grinding into me, he's piercing me.

I push him off, I try to, but he doesn't stop, he just opens his eyes, lurches, and keeps going. "Get out of me! Get off!" I shove him hard this time, but he keeps going, pumping me. He holds me down until he's done. When he rolls off, I move away from his bed, move away from him. My thighs ache, they really ache. "What were you doing?"

He throws an elbow across his face to block out the light. "Huh?"

"How could you do that?" I start to cry. "I didn't want to fuck you."

"Oh, fuck you." He shakes the hair off his forehead, laughs at me.

"But I was passed out," I say, crawling over to my underwear. It is crumpled by the door, under a red stain on the wall where my tampon must have hit before it landed on the floor. "You fucked me when I was passed out."

"Yeah, and you probably gave me some deadly disease. Now get your goddamn Tampax and get out."

By the time I get back to the park the sun is up and I'm bleeding down my legs. My clothes are stashed in a gap beneath an undercut bank where dirt hangs down from exposed roots. I stuff a fistful of moss into my underwear, throw on my dark paisley skirt so the blood won't show. A tree towers over me. I hold onto the trunk, put my arms around it, rest my cheek against its rough bark. When I open my eyes I see what Dodie means by Satanic designs—swirls and eyes someone has embedded deep in the wood. The roots in the thicket are so dense they scratch my skin. When I finally find my bag of blankets, it's shredded and there's only one left.

I'm not calling Jeannie. She'll make me go to the police, she'll make me leave the park. I can't even think about calling my mother. I grab the bag and run out of the trees without looking back.

Charlotte is on her bench, where I knew she would be. I don't start crying again until I'm sitting beside her, my feet tucked up under my skirt.

"Vicki, what happened?"

I don't say anything, just cry for a while. "It's stupid, you don't want to know."

She insists she does want to know, so I tell her how I walked into some asshole's house and passed out and he started banging me when I wasn't even conscious.

"What? That's horrible!"

"I know! Yeah, well... I went in there."

"Oh, baby," Charlotte says. She strokes my hair. She sighs, draws me toward her, rubs my shoulder. "Come with me to the Y tonight," she says, putting her hand over mine.

I picture myself indoors, enclosed and protected. I can sleep beside her,

crawl out of my covers if I need to, wash my face at a sink in the middle of the night. She starts telling me about shower privileges, how the people there know her and will look out for me, too. I'm trying to feel grateful, but an ache is spreading through my back and shoulders, coming up through my knees. She's going on about breakfast selections and lights out, about who you're allowed to get calls from and when.

He raped me! I am screwed. I am really fucked.

"I'll help you, sweetie," Charlotte is saying. But I'm the one who helps the others. I get them money, I find them food.

I can't stay in the park tonight. Charlotte is saying she'll take me over to the Haight Free Clinic and have them get a sperm sample, she's been there before, but I'm thinking, Why, so my big-shot dad can knock some heads together? Charlotte doesn't know me, she doesn't know anything about me. I hear my parents in the living room insisting, You fell off that horse, you get right back on. OK, I will. I'll go back in that park tonight and fuck every guy in sight. Charlotte's saying they'll do a tissue culture for diseases and check me for injuries. Where will they look, Charlotte? Up my twat? On my arms, on my legs, in my head? I look up the hill. I can't see Jeannie's house from here, but I know it's there. I can't stay out here tonight. I push myself up off the bench.

I make it as far as the edge of the park. I step into the traffic, and a truck comes so close I feel the pavement pulsing up through my feet. I stare back at the fenced-in houses on the other side of the street, and a door slams, dogs bark. A car stalls out in the middle of the block, its yellow turn signal flashing right in my face. I know there's nowhere for me to go, nowhere. I sit down on the curb above the sewer and stare out at the traffic. I'd have to run to make it across.