

*I am dead.* Vera applied moisturizer to her pallid skin. *Not dead as in resigned to one's fate. Not dead as in found out. Not that, thank goodness.* She reached for her powder. *Not dead as in contemplation of a fatal disease. If only.* Too white. Too corpselike. Where did she put her blush? She pawed among her cosmetic supplies.

"You'd better finish up. They'll be here any minute."

Startled out of her reverie, Vera glanced up at her husband's reflection in her vanity mirror.

Burt Solarz, twenty years and forty pounds past his prime, leaned, scowling, into their bedroom. "Christ, you look like hell," he informed her.

"Go have another beer, Burt. It'll sweeten your breath, if not your disposition."

Burt's flabby face barely registered the insult. With a self-satisfied air, he turned and sauntered down the hall to sample the guacamole and salsa that awaited their guests.

Vera pulled her bathrobe tighter and gazed at the face in the mirror. She did look like hell. She hadn't been to a hairdresser in eight weeks. A half inch of dark gray roots showed through the gold, shattering any remaining illusion of youth. She'd also lost weight, which, instead of improving her figure, merely revealed every line in her fifty-two year old face. She found her blush among the dozens of bottles and tins that sat on the glass top of her vanity. It was hard for her to care, but putting on a face had never been more important than it was this evening.

As she finished dressing, she heard the snick-hiss of a beer can: a sound she'd grown inured to over the years. She checked the line of her skirt in the full-length mirror on the closet door, and then strode resolutely down the hall.

Burt was watching baseball on TV and sipping delicately at his Budweiser.

"Started your second six-pack already? Aren't you afraid you'll lose your edge?"

Without bothering to look up from the game, he replied, "I could drink a case and still beat you at Scrabble."

She was surprised by a surge of cold fury: she hadn't thought him capable of reaching her any more. But rather than fuel an argument, she lightly said, "We'll see, Fat Boy, we'll see."

She was headed for the kitchen to check the oven when the doorbell rang. Burt didn't stir. As she moved towards the front door, she said to him, "Shut off the TV."