

Deviated Septum

Alston Goldstein rides on his yellow moped which has a basket between the handlebars where he normally keeps drugs but which today has a black mask and butterscotch candies in it. When Alston tried the mask on this morning at the Margate Swap Shop he decided he looked like Casanova. It forms a dark band around his head with oval holes for eyes. Those who saw him trying it on regarded him as a skinny blonde-redheaded Zorro too old to be purchasing a mask this time of year. It is not Halloween or near Halloween.

When Alston fishes into the basket for the butterscotch candies there is a delicate moment as he negotiates the graveled Interstate-95 median with one hand. Heavy trucks in passing could tip him. But Alston is undaunted, heading, with a slight flurry of butterflies in his stomach, toward the Wyngate retirement community. The wind and traffic have stifled the sound of his perpetual nose-whistle and Alston can concentrate on chomping his candy and having sex. Alston has not had sex, though he is eighteen and has thought about it. At the pharmacy, there are magazines that slip out of brown

covers and reveal intercourse. Alston has used these as guides. He has understood himself in his father's bathroom, at Goldstein's Pharmacy, with a magazine or two. Masturbating is wrong; Alston learned this from his father. He puts the magazines back in their brown containers convinced he is done with the whole affair each time.

Louisiana Harrison, who moved to South Florida years ago, goes by Izzy. Louisiana is too long for a name so she shortened it. She liked the way a man said Izzy; it rumbled up out of him like a growl. She draws a bath and disrobes. The cold water isn't working well this morning. Numbness in the left side of her jaw causes her mouth to dip slightly in a frown. She ignores the lack of feeling and moves to the kitchen to turn on her radio as the tub fills. Izzy likes big-band; it plays from a transistor radio next to the stove. She takes two steps backward and one step forward, spins in a slow circle, her body wrinkled and fair and worn. Shuffling into the bathroom where the bath is ready, she turns the water off, but it drips indignantly. As she bends and steps into the too-hot water she has a stroke and collapses. Water splashes onto a faded green rug. Convulsions throw an arm over the side of the tub, her head slumps with her mouth resting on her chest a few inches from the water. She breathes raggedly out of her nose. Big-band drifts faintly into the bathroom but Izzy doesn't hear this, she is in a catatonic dream state consisting of half-realized notions of her home in Louisiana. She hears blues, but it is mostly just a low bass riff moving up and down scales, like a dripping faucet, or the beating of an old heart under water. She smells bananas in heavy air. She's on a porch with

a fan and a hat and a drink and thinks, *How lovely, and, how lovely it would be to dance, even in this heat, slowly, with a man.*

At the Margate Swap Shop, Alston asked about the elephant. He asked the blond man with big jowls and sweat in the rolls of his neck behind the register.

The man said it was killed. He also said the mask was five-fifty.

Alston had the money; he'd earned it by delivering medication to the elderly every other day. The mask was worth it, he felt, he looked good, mysterious. He asked how they killed the elephant.

The man didn't know. A swarm of gnats descended upon him.

A young woman tapped Alston on the shoulder and twirled her curly hair with a finger. She had been eavesdropping at the Margate Swap Shop for five years, since she'd married too early and succumbed to a rut of profound boredom. Her husband was a cop, she didn't understand his duties, but he knew about the incident. She mentioned to Alston that she overheard their conversation about the elephant.

Alston clutched the bag tightly in his fists. The heat, the idea of having neck rolls like the blond cashier, and this woman, who was the same height as Alston and had a seductive fuzzy upper-lip, made his palms hot and his nose whistle. He said, Yes, we were chatting about the elephant tragedy. Upon saying this Alston felt he sounded inauthentic. Chatting is a word hard on the teeth.

The woman thought the boy had a sort of European charm with his reddish hair and all. She said; They shot the elephant with a big gun.