

Louise Warner
1536 South Ingalls
Lakewood, Colorado 80232
Phone/FAX (303) 922-1370

Email louiseinbloom@yahoo.com
Web site <http://louisewriting.tripod.com>

Freedom Lessons

Copyright 2011, Louise Warner All Rights Reserved

CHAPTER

1

Mrs. Spruce's window, its "Piano Lessons" sign now gone, flashed. Laura's throat convulsed; hands locked to the wheel. I should turn around, thought Laura, and pound the doorbell until she puts it back. Instead she took herself home to face today's biggest threat, Proposition Six.

Afternoon sun ignited the driveway, a glittering carpet with grubby tire tracks that the breeze would soon erase. Hate shot from the "Yes on Six" yard sign next door. She turned away; it was too horrible to contemplate.

"Mrs. Spruce took down her sign," she said, doffing a grocery

sack on the counter.

"And our neighbors put one up," said Carl. Usually greeting Laura was a treat. But it had been quite a challenge to locate the juicer and now that he had found it and got it assembled there was no way he was going to pause for a love dose.

"I noticed." Laura's hopes for a hot kiss faded fast.

"Why'd you put the juicer in the basement? I looked all over the place." Carrots cascaded to the cutting board.

"You haven't used it since 1999." She hated to exaggerate but it had been a long time.

"That's cause I couldn't find it." Vegetable stubs sliced and rolled.

Things were too tight to store the oatmeal box up here; she stuck it on the landing. "There isn't space for every kitchen appliance invented. Pasta maker, bread baker ..."

"We don't have either of those." A carrot rammed the steel throat.

"... toaster oven, popcorn popper, waffle iron, food processor, mixer, blender ..." She collapsed into a chair. "I can't even fit all the food."

"An embarrassment of abundance." More carrots took the plunge.

Sun sprayed rainbows into the living room through the stained glass. "You know, Carl, I can't believe she's giving up."

The last stalk dived down the chute. "What?" Carrot flavored

chlorophyll invigorated the air.

"Eighty-eight strings connect Eugenia Spruce to my spirit."

"Yeah, well two generations of your family did her in." At last his prize dribbled forth. "Anyway what do you expect? She can't go on forever."

"I guess." The vigor needed to fetch the rest of the groceries escaped her. "I'd better get ..." She made it out, but once inside again she yielded to gravity; a milk jug slid down her leg. "You could help."

"In a minute." He set the liquid, to Laura a sip, to him a bounty, on the dining table.

Cans of tuna and beans forced pineapple chunks to the back of the shelf. "Y'know, it really is okay to chew vegetables." Macaroni squeezed between boxes of rice.

"Yeah but fresh juice is a picker upper." He slid the wasted rind into the garbage.

"Any word on the election?" Peanut butter bumped pickles.

"I listened earlier and ..." The blip disappeared into Carl's mouth. "... I think you're losing."

"Well then, it's official. My chosen field has brought me more anguish than I dreamed possible." Apples rolled into the crisper like pool balls.

"You're a good lawyer, Laura." He upended the glass to capture the last drip. "You help a lot of people."

Oranges dropped between apples. "Yeah well I'm about to pay for the crimes of my not-so-helpful colleagues." She hoisted the milk. "I don't know what's more depressing, losing the vote or knowing old Spruce isn't teaching piano." To make space in the fridge she filled up the shelves on the door. "Baloney. I know. It's Spruce. The sign in her window should've said, 'Love Shots.'"

"How do you know she's not teaching?" A warm rinse, a wipe and the juicer was ready for storage. "Julia wasn't her only student." He cased the pantry for space.

"I don't." With a nudge, the jug displaced last night's leftovers. "But that sign has been in her window since I started lessons thirty years ago."

"Our progeny did her in. Permanently." Every shelf was full. "She won't take any more abuse."

"She loved Julia." She trapped the grapes in a bowl which found the last space in the fridge. "Julia loved her."

"Not enough to stick around, apparently." He spotted a gap behind the baking supplies. "I'm telling you, since our precious left for another teacher, Spruce has been heartsick."

The olive oil wouldn't fit standing up — she laid it over boxes of pasta. "Julia deserves a teacher who ..."

The juicer clanged cake pans on its way to the back of the cupboard.

"... can give her advanced technique and theory, who can ..."

"All the minutia in the world can't equal Spruce's magic."
Cleaning up the rest of the mess would require a sponge. He searched the countertop for it.

A brilliant observation, she thought. Still, Spruce was not the right teacher for Julia. "Yeah but Spruce was ..."

"I know, Laura." He switched the radio on.

"... getting too ..."

"Now, election news," said the announcer.

"... old." She folded a sack and slotted it behind the others.

"Shhh." He spotted the scrubber next to the stove; on the way he captured Laura in his arms.

The caress was heaven; she purred.

"... are ready to accept limitations on the rights of attorneys. Proposition Six, from early exit poll indications, will probably pass."

"Delicious," said Carl.

"Here's KUZZ's Lynette Robinson with a report."

Laura, sick about what she knew was coming, withdrew.

"I want more later," said Carl, hustling detergent into the dishwasher.

"Sid, it's early yet, but exit polls show Colorado voters are likely to approve the controversial referendum that snuffs the rights of attorneys to hold public office, serve on private boards and in general to enjoy the rights they previously had. The title of the

referendum, 'Limiting the Compensation of Attorneys to prevent Excessive Insurance Premiums' was considered misleading by some experts. But voters have the final say, and now the simply worded proposition will alter the fate of our state's legal eagles. 'No funds of the state or of its political subdivisions shall in any way promote or support the use of attorneys in public or private service except where mandated by statute,' is going to become law."

"Sounds pretty innocuous, doesn't it Lynette?" said Sid.

"Yes, but attorneys are claiming it makes them into second class citizens."

"That's an idea whose time has come, Lynette."

"Apparently many people agree with you. Proposition Six is the dawn of a new era for lawyers, and for Colorado. Lynette Robinson, KUZZ news."

"In other election projections ..."

"I can't handle this," Laura sobbed. "I just can't."

Carl turned it off. Water sloshed into the dishwasher.

"What am I going to do?" The wall did not yield to her fist; pain bounded up her arm. Good. Physical suffering left less room for mental anguish.

He took her hand. "Why don't you call Mrs. Spruce and find out what's going on? Maybe something's happened to her."

"I can't. I haven't spoken to her since Julia's last lesson." They clung to each other. "I feel so bad. I can't face her."

"Hey I've gotta call some stats in before they close," he said, breaking the spell.

The touch tone motet would be nerve-wracking; she'd heard it before. She retreated to the bedroom, a stress free zone. Music would be nice, she thought, swapping a Liszt cassette for a string quartet. But Mozart failed to soothe. Broken bonds, politics, illogic – they had followed her. She wanted to flee but there were no escapes to safely explore. That is, except for one. She stuck her head in the hall. The electronic canon was still in progress. In a pause she called, "I'm going to take a nap." The world might be going to hell in a handbasket but she could, in fetal position under a tunnel of covers, give her thirty-seven year old inner baby refuge.

The room was purple with dusk. A hand hovered at her brow. "Mom, what's for dinner? I'm hungry."

"I must've fallen asleep."

"What's for dinner?"

"Hi, honey." Julia floated, a hummingbird disguised as a preteen. "How was school?"

"Good."

She marveled at the aura that surrounded her daughter. Maybe not everyone could see it, and it might just be Laura's maternal energy, but she could swear Julia glowed. "Did you have fun at Sarah's?"

"It was okay."

"Did you do your homework?" The reality of Spruce's window came

flooding back. She shivered.

"Yes."

She put Julia's hand on her cheek. "Mrs. Spruce took down her 'Piano Lessons' sign."

"I watched Sarah's video about Condors," said Julia, anxious to avoid the subject of Spruce.

"Honey did you hear me?"

"Yes." This, thought Julia, was a perfect time to test the limits of the rocking chair. She creaked it into action.

Julia's eyes radiated beauty. "You don't miss her? We should've at least visited since you started with Mrs. Axelrad. And she'd love it if you invited her to your recital." Hair the color of glowing embers wove through Julia's fingers. "Are you glad you left Mrs. Spruce?"

"Mom, I told you." Having passed the extreme rocking test, she stopped the chair.

"You didn't like that she was going deaf." Time to get going, but the bed was so cozy.

"And she wasn't going to have any recitals."

Laura arched up, then zonked. "Right."

"Where's Daddy?"

"He went to the Grange."

"Oh yeah."

There was no chance that Julia would snuggle with her – the

adolescent rationed closeness like a long distance runner does water.

Julia abandoned the chair and backed into the hall. "I'm hungry, Mom."

The furlough had expired; in just moments she would be pronounced AWOL from mothering. She flaked from the bed. "My whole life's gonna change now," she said on her way to Mommy headquarters. A pot holder waved from its hook like a flag. She saluted. "Reporting for duty."

Julia laughed.

Dislodging a pot provoked a metal avalanche. "Honey, get me some broccoli."

"Why do we have to eat broccoli?" The freezer exhaled.

"Green vegetables are very ..."

"Mom, why's your life gonna change?" She sloughed frost from a bag of greens.

"They're gonna pass Six I think." The steamer clattered open.

"The one about lawyers?"

"Yes." Water splashed through the metal basket and into the skillet.

"Uh-oh." The election was bad, thought Julia, but Mommy would fix it.

"And I need the leftover soup." Broccoli snowballs hit the cooker.

Julia stared into the fridge. "We've sure got lots of food."

"I went shopping."

"Ooh, grapes." She plucked a few and stuffed them in.

"It's behind the milk." A saucepan claimed the back burner.

"And I need salmon patties from the freezer."

"Can you still make money?" A piece of grape rode the words.

The fragment landed on the window. Julia picked it off and Laura wiped after her. "I'll make money. It's the other parts of my life I'm worried about." Stock rushed the pot. "We'll just have to see, I guess." She preheated a pan; the burner seared a crumb; smoke twisted into the air.

"I have a spelling test tomorrow." That was a way bigger deal than anything.

It took a few stabs with a knife to pry tonight's burgers from their chums. "Want me to help you study?"

"No."

"What're the words?" Oil jumped as the fish fell onto steel; she lowered the heat.

"It's all geography. Kilimanjaro 'n Galilee 'n Edinburgh and Bronx."

"Bronx?" The splattering subsided.

"'The' Bronx, really."

"I just mean that it doesn't seem to fit the list ..."

"Mom." Her lips trembled as she tried to keep from confiding.

"Mom."

"Yes, honey."

"What if I mess up?"

"Mess up what?" The salmon added its aroma to the rest.

"You know."

"Spelling?" She dug the spatula under a patty.

"The recital." It was out; relief turned her legs to jelly.

"Then you'll do better at the next one."

"When's that?" The school books she'd stacked on a dinette chair dared her to sit on them.

"I'm sure she'll have another one in the spring, around graduation." Steaming vegetables sweetened the air.

Yes, but after that ... "Mom."

"Yes, honey." She resisted the urge to drop everything and try to get Julia into her arms.

"What if I can't do that either?" The books slid, landing her on the floor.

"You mean graduate?" Soup splashed as she set a bowl down.

"No. Middle School."

"I was pretty scared in sixth grade, too." She pulled Julia up. "Spring Valley Junior High might as well have been Harvard." The hug that she wished for did not happen.

Julia cleared away the books. "Mom, it's called middle school." Mommy was so old fashioned.

"Same thing." The first taste of minestrone surged through her. "I have complete confidence in you."

"What's Harvard?" The soup tasted better than it did yesterday, thought Julia, except for the peas, which were as yucky as they were yesterday.

"A school with very smart people and very hard classes." Mmm. There was nothing like leftovers. The best part was the peas.

"But what if I can't do algebra?" Peas were way too mushy.

"Then you'll take it again until you can."

"And what if nobody likes me?" She gulped the soup, thinking about the piano, and how she never worried about things while she was practicing.

"Spending time by yourself might be a very good thing." She spooned Julia's peas over her salmon.

"Okay ...". Help was a room away. After dinner she drifted to the piano, where she loosed her gift on the evening until the house was drenched in harmony.

CHAPTER

2

He was always surprised to come upon the Grange, stared down as it was by upscale renewal. The neighborhood had grown so chic that people would buy a bungalow for twice what it would be worth in Spring Valley, tear it down and build a cape cod, or renovate, strip off the roof, and pile another floor on. Pop tops, they called them.

A left over from when it had all been farms and cattle and ranchers, the white clapboard took him and his comrades in. Maybe it was okay with the Grangers to have DA meet there because, if you didn't get too close, addicts looked like a bunch of old cowhands.

More than likely the old boys were glad to see the place being used by folks who, like them, didn't dress up to get together.

"I'm Dick, a drug addict and alcoholic. Welcome to Drug Addicts Anonymous. We meet here every Tuesday at 5:45, and I guess this meeting's been going on here at the Grange for the past twenty-five years. I'll be chairing today. Let's start with a reading from the Fountain, the text of DA."

Beginnings and ends of meetings were always the same. What kept him coming was that the middles were as different as could be. Today's thread might be meringue, tomorrow's mackerel.

"'... everything is suggested, but if we go to meetings and don't drink, we find everything works out okay ...'"

Had the walls always been hung with photos of old farmers and their equipment next to tributes to Grangers who had passed on? Probably, but for the first year that he came, and maybe more, he hadn't noticed. His head pipes were too clogged. They cleared, finally, but not by any single blast.

"'... figured out that we had something so good in DA, we even became grateful that we had been addicts ...'"

It had been a slow fix, a gradual expanding the viewfinder until, fourteen drug free years later, he was now continuously bombarded by thought, feeling, sensation.

"'... living lives full of purpose. We've realized that meetings are better than movies and T.V.'"

As far as he was concerned, he'd been born and raised by DA. And somewhere in there he'd managed to get and keep a gorgeous woman like Laura.

"We are no longer mystified and confused ..."

Well, maybe to other people she wasn't gorgeous, but to him she was hot. Her legs, her arms, her neck were parked in his imagination. Tonight he would touch her, and maybe they would make love. Thanks to sobriety, he could feel their souls connect.

"We learn that as long as we're sober, there's hope."

Carl shook himself. Sex would have to wait – it was attitude adjustment time.

"We are asked to dream. And dream big. And we are told that, by following the suggestions of this program, we can achieve anything we set out to do."

"Definitely," Dick said, closing the cover and setting the Fountain down like a curator places a museum piece. "Are there any newcomers?"

A man and a woman, each a portrait of misery, raised their hands.

The collective heart shed tears; the room misted. It wasn't compassion as much as it was gratitude. After all, Carl and everyone else knew that the pathetic ones held the key. They were exactly where the others didn't want to be.

"Your first names?" Dick's hand circled the book like a magician.

"I'm Jerry."

"Marla."

"Well, just stick around DA and you'll see we've all been where you are. My first meeting was downtown and I was so nervous I almost fell off my chair. Then I listened awhile and ..."

Marla's hair was like Laura's, long and curly. Carl faded again. He'd hit gold with Laura, for sure. The armor was always penetrable; sweetness a little exposed.

"Someday you'll get sick of me," she had once said.

But it hadn't happened. Not in thirteen years.

Marla punctured his bubble. "I just got a D.U.I. and they told me to come here but I really don't drink very much. Sometimes I go for weeks without drinking at all. And I've never done drugs in my life. So I was hoping to get out of here pretty quick." She threw her mane behind her shoulders and twisted away from the group as if that would keep out unwelcome information.

"Thank you, Marla. Keep coming back and you may find you have more in common with us than you think." Dick hugged the book, as if for strength. "Does anyone have a topic?"

"I'm Gloria, addict and alcoholic." She squirmed out from under a coat. "I've been divorced about six months, and all I can think about is men. Every time I go home to an empty bed, I want to kill myself. I've met lots of fellas, but not the right one, and I'm so tired of waiting. Now my neighbor has a guy and they're moving to

Arizona and that makes me feel even worse. I can't take it." She fished a tissue from a pocket, daubed her nostril and stuck the hankie between her leg and the chair. "I just can't take it." Again she snapped the square into action, containing a squall that seemed too powerful to have come from her. "That's all I have."

"Well, would the topic be then, faith, or envy?" asked Dick.

"Yeah," she choked.

"Well, other than my neighbor's big screen TV, and a little problem with fear that I've been facing every day for the past fifteen years, I've never had experience with either of those. Of course it's interesting in the abstract." Dick forced away his smile. "These pangs of wishing I had a nicer car, easier life, bigger house – they ruin any contentment I manage to scrape up. And when I drive to this place, whew, some of the digs around here are something else. I'm chock full o' envy. Oh well. It's another opportunity for growth that I'd rather do without."

Others struggle the same way I do, Carl thought. Tension edged from his joints.

"Not to mention the self-pity factor. I mean I can really wallow if you give me the chance – gets me nowhere fast. Really fast." Dick shook his head. "I'll just leave it at that and we can go around the room. Oh, and Marla, a lot of us weren't sure if we'd suffered enough to earn our way in here. But we learned that the addiction elevator only goes in one direction. Down. And you can get off at any floor

you want."

There was plenty of time before he'd be called on, thought Carl, counting at least twelve people between him and Dick along the horseshoe. Good. Nothing helpful to say yet, anyway. He certainly wasn't going to admit that he was so full of motor vehicle envy that he couldn't pass a car dealership without gawking. The glossy bodies summoned him. Laura claimed there wasn't money for another car, but where there was a will ... He couldn't even look at their Honda any more without feeling embarrassed.

"I'm Corinne, a drug addict. Welcome, Marla. If you keep coming to meetings, you might decide there's something of value here." The comb that held her hair jumped into Dick's lap. "Oops," she said, returning it to the thicket. "When I first heard that slogan, 'People, Places and Things' I really thought it was dumb. I guess I always looked at other people's things, other women's husbands, you name it, and wanted them. I thought that was normal. But lately before I get all tied in knots about stuff like that, I bring all the junk I've accumulated to mind." To reassure that it was in place, her fingers played the hair comb like a keyboard. "Actually, the most unhappy period of my life was when I was living with a guy in his mansion. He had three Mercedes Benzes and a bungalow in the British Virgin Islands. But he was also violent when he got mad."

I don't want a Mercedes, Carl argued. I just want something nicer than the old Honda.

"Anyway, things aren't always what they appear to be is what I'm thinking. But I'm pretty new around here, so I better listen. This much I can say for sure: the DA program is the only thing in the world that's gonna make me rich. And I don't mean in money."

The man next to her forsook his slouch. "I'm Jim, an addict. I'm not doing too well with the faith thing lately. Not when it comes to women. I've decided I'm never gonna have the love I want so I might as well give up."

Jim and Gloria should get together, Carl thought.

"I wish I could believe in a happy ending but I don't. When it comes to accumulating stuff, though, my attitude's actually getting better. I work for a home builder, and I deal with a lot of rich people with tons of possessions. Well I don't think they're having any more fun than middle class types."

Yep, perfect for Gloria.

"In fact, some of 'em are pretty pathetic with all the pricey knickknacks and the complicated alarm systems they buy. Mostly they're paranoid that someone'll mess with their precious stuff. Whatever. I'm glad I'm here. And I guess if I keep coming back I'll figure the love thing out. Eventually."

Once Carl was primed to speak, it was harder to listen. He forced himself to relate. Craig thought a certain amount of envy could be healthy. Janine thought that if Marla wasn't completely sure if she belonged she should go out and drink as much as she wanted,

then come back. This struck terror into Marla, who suddenly turned her body, and her full attention, into the circle. Kevin talked about the materialism he was curbing in his teenagers.

When it was time to speak, Carl quivered with enthusiasm. "I am so grateful to be sober." He aimed his beam at Marla, then Jerry. "Welcome. I hope you give DA a chance." Tension floated away on a sigh. Speaking at meetings was more like prayer than anything he'd ever said in church. "I've been craving a new car. I mean I kind of need one, but the one I've got is fine, really. There are better things to spend money on than new cars. But I thought of something else about that. Sometimes my job gets to me so bad, I feel like I need to do something extra specially nice for myself, you know? I've gotta get some jollies out of life. Love isn't a problem. My wife is great. But my work is dragging me down more and more. Some days I have to fight my way out of bed. I don't know. In the first few years I was sober it was so easy. I had screwed up so bad. Almost got fired for smoking marijuana in a postal vehicle. Couldn't get through twenty-four hours without pot. So when I got into DA and discovered another way, every day was like Christmas. I had been forgiven. I got a new lease on life.

"But now I'm getting spoiled. I want more and more the longer I'm sober. A better job, prettier car. I'd be a lot better off learning to be satisfied with what I've got and appreciating the beauty of each day, each challenge, each opportunity to grow.

"I want to be happy like that all the time, but sometimes the pain is a thick curtain that won't go up. It stays down day after day and I can't seem to see the sunshine. But I have learned from coming here that one day, if I'm patient, it will lift. It will for sure. And when it does, I'll have shuffled a little farther down the path of wisdom without making the world around me a living hell by drinking and smoking pot."

Heads nodded.

"Well, I guess that's all I've got for now."

CHAPTER

3

"Are you gonna be okay till Dad gets home?"

Julia examined the book like a detective searching for clues.

"Yeah."

"How about shedding some light on the subject," Laura said, turning up the lamp. "What're you reading?"

"It's about the Condor. Sarah's Mom's got a lot of books on 'em because once she helped capture one."

"Hmm. Well I've gotta ..."

"They're going extinct because inside the dead animals they eat

are lead bullets that poison them. And the places they lay their eggs and raise their babies are changing so fast that they've been squeezed out of the places they were used to."

"I can relate to that."

"Huh?"

"Endangered lawyers."

"Only fifty condors left. Tons of lawyers though."

"That's the problem." The thousand shades of red in Julia's hair danced. "Well, honey, I'm going to the museum for my meeting."

"Okay."

"Dad'll be here by seven. You've got the pager number just in case?"

"Yeah, Mom."

"And Swan's number in case too? If she's not working, she'll help you with whatever."

"Mom."

That meant yes. "Bye." She planted a kiss. When Swan and I meet for lunch next week, thought Laura, hurrying out, the election will be over. What would Swan think? She switched the car radio off so she wouldn't have to contend with the returns. The time flashed instead. 6:15 PM. There was still hope. In the next forty-five minutes people might rush out to cast ballots in support of their favorite attorneys.

The museum bustled as usual. "Do you have the cash box for Art

on the Line?" she asked at the information desk.

"Are you Laura?" The badge said "Irina Plosky."

"Yes."

"I was told to ask for your ID."

The card she handed over didn't induce the box. "Is something the matter?"

"This is your Market Warehouse card."

"Oops." She found the right mug shot and turned it in.

"The other picture was better," Irina said.

"Tell me about it."

"I guess you're a lawyer, huh."

"How did you know?"

"It says on the Market card."

"Oh, right."

"My brother's a lawyer so I voted your way."

"Thanks."

"Is it Manfred Pack tonight?" Irina's eyes were nearly obscured — a mascara sandwich.

"Yes."

"I'm gonna be up there later. I can't miss him."

"Great."

"And here's your money."

"Thanks. See you there."

The auditorium was empty except for the big screen TV and video

player which Beverly, the Treasurer, had requisitioned. "Free Tuesdays" had been a huge hit, Laura thought with satisfaction, setting up the cash box and positioning the table so no one could get in without passing. After she hooked the Museum Board on the monthly lecture, they bit her idea about open admission. No one had anticipated the result. In six months of Free Tuesdays, it had become the most popular day. And even though there was no charge, profits from the gift shop and concession nearly made up the difference. Not to mention revenues from Art on the Line. Their last few programs had nearly sold out.

This is my most successful volunteer endeavor, she thought. Her life and purpose had finally broken the confines of suburbia. Art on the Line was the ticket she'd always wanted to get into country club parties. The board was even throwing business to her firm.

She dragged the podium dead center.

"Need help?"

"Hi Beverly. I've got it."

"How's it goin'?" Beverly said, swinging her briefcase to the top of the coat rack.

Angst battered elation. "Depends on the outcome of the election."

"Oh that's right, you're a lawyer," said Beverly. A stack of one dollar bills nearly fell from the metal box as she opened it. "But then, you reap what you sow, don't you?" The pile squared, she

stuffed it into its appointed slot.

The comment threw Laura so far she couldn't think of a rejoinder. Was that contempt? Suddenly her throat was blocked by dread. She glowered into the "Art on the Line" shelf in the storage closet, awaiting instructions. Nothing came, except the desire to scream, followed by an urge to dispose of the outdated issues of "Art Aficionado" that were only taking up space. "Can I put these on the table for people to take?"

"Sure. Beverly stared into her compact. "We were supposed to sell them last month, right?"

Laura nodded.

"We forgot," said Beverly, running her pinky over a blemish.

"Howdy." Siegfried swaggered in. "Ooh, I want this," he said, pulling a magazine and causing a slide which landed the rest on the floor. "You girls gonna get those?"

It'll split your jeans if we don't, Laura thought.

"Now Ziggy," said Beverly. "We're not girls. This is the nineties. We're women." By then he was in the alcove at the far end, surveying the snack machines.

Collecting the magazines wasn't as bad as the loose subscription cards. Beverly and Laura held council under the table.

"How did Ziggy ever get any art expertise, anyway?" Beverly asked. "He's such a dinosaur."

"Don't you know?"

"Uh-uh."

"His wife is Della Vertfield."

"The artist?"

Laura aimed for the chair, hitting the underside of the table.

"Ouch."

"The one with the landscapes in office building lobbies?"

"That's the one."

"I read she's the only artist millionaire in Colorado."

"You got it."

"So he's got bucks."

"Oui Madame."

"I thought you had to have brains or talent to get on the board."

"Let's face it. I'm only on because Art on the Line was my idea and you're only on because you're the only art restorer in Denver."

"So?"

"So everything's a special interest when you come right down to it."

The elevator bailed the first wave of people, who clustered at the door.

"Is this Art on the Line?"

"Yes."

"Manfred Pack will be speaking?"

"He will."

The woman giggled. "He's my favorite artist."

"We're glad you're here," Laura said. "Please make your check out to Colorado Museum of Modern Art."

"Or just CMMA is fine, too," said Beverly. The line stretched as far as the rest rooms.

"Good turnout," said Laura.

"We're batting a thousand." Beverly slammed a check into the box.

"Do you need help?" Joan, who sent out the newsletter, skirted the line.

"I think we're okay," said Beverly.

What little hair Joan had was sprayed upright. "Great turnout."

"It's about time for our illustrious Mr. Pack to arrive, don't you think?" said Laura.

"He's still got ten minutes."

And so do I, Laura thought. The polls closed at seven.

The crowd, predominantly female, parted for a towering bald man.

"Excuse me."

"It's him!" someone said.

"Is there a Miss Sonder here?"

"Yes. I'm Beverly. She's ..."

"You're the one who wrote me."

"Yes. Beverly Tark, the Program Chair and Treasurer. And this is Laura Sonder, our President."

The beauty of this man nearly knocked Laura over.

"Ms. Sonder?"

"Thank you for coming." It was jarring to meet a man who exuded such sexuality. Of course, that's why she had married Carl. She let her hand linger in his. "And this is Joan Marks, our newsletter editor."

"Nice to meet you," said Joan, scalp rippling.

"Can I set the video up?"

"Actually, I think it's pretty much ready," said Laura, following Pack to the stage.

"As long as everything works," he said, loading the cassette.

His pheromones pounded hers. "Let's see." Somehow her breast grazed his shirt as they backed up for a preview. She imagined him pinning her against the pop machine, her back pressing all the buttons as he had his way.

The words, "Manfred Pack, a Sculptor's Journey," came up on the video. "Perfect," he said, freezing the image.

Lately she was haunted by sex at the most inconvenient times. She figured nearing forty was why. Not that she would do anything about it. Carl kept the well primed. It's just that wanting it that much turned the most mundane transactions into trials of concentration.

"I'm so glad the Museum is finally doing this." He nodded at the crowd. "There's obviously a demand."

"Really. It's been fun for us to get to know artists one on

one."

"Are you with the Museum?"

It would be easier to converse, Laura thought, if he didn't have such a great smile. "No."

"An artist?"

"Lawyer."

He looked at her with heightened interest. "Oh, then you know about Prop Six."

"Don't remind me."

"They're predicting it's going to pass with 63% support."

"It's not over till the fat lady sings."

"One thing's for sure. People do not like you guys."

"No surprise there."

"What time do we start?"

The clock said 7. "Now."

She breezed through the introductions of Board members. "And finally, thanks to our Program Chair — please stand, Bev — Beverly Tark, once again the turnout is astounding. Thank you, Beverly." Pack adjusted himself in his chair, releasing a wave of heat she could almost see. "Now I'd like to introduce our speaker. Manfred Pack has been a sculptor for over thirty years, though I think you'll agree that he doesn't look a day over thirty-five, so unless he's including what he did with animal dioramas, or Play-Doh®, I think he's got some explaining to do right off the bat." The laughter took her mind off

their chemistry. I've created this moment, this organization, this exposure. Life is good. "And as we have been announcing ever since we learned last spring that Mr. Pack ..."

"Please call me Manny," he said from the front row.

"... Manny would be speaking to us, his work is quite controversial due to the erotic themes."

The room pulsed.

"So in keeping with the morality introduced by the new political right, which is less disgusted by the poor and homeless than it is by carnally explicit material, please be forewarned that we may be discussing sexuality. If that offends you, please feel free to leave and we will issue you a full refund."

No one moved.

"Mr. Pack attended Colorado College majoring in Art. His sculptures are known throughout the world for their depictions of love and passion, and he has been the recipient of numerous awards, including the Colorado Artist of the Year award which he received in 1990 from the Colorado Committee for Fine Arts. He also teaches a summer sculpture program for college students at the University of Colorado, Boulder, my law school alma mater. So without further ado, here is the esteemed Manfred Pack."

"Thank you. Well I should clarify one thing. I am much older than thirty-five, and when I was ten I was more interested in army men than clay."

"What a hunk," Beverly whispered to Laura.

"No kidding."

"Is there anyone here who doesn't know my work?" Pack said.

A few hands raised.

"I generally focus on lovers, though some of my pieces, mainly commissioned ones, show other poses."

Laura pictured him without clothes. Mmmm.

"This piece is in my show at the Art on First Gallery in Cherry Creek."

The audience cooed.

"It is Spoon XVI, one in a series in which I depict embraces with either lover behind the other."

Laura squirmed. Hopefully Carl won't be too tired ...

"I believe that the sex act is the ultimate creative act. Even without the desire to procreate, there's something about the motion of intercourse that renews and recharges human beings." He unfroze the tape, which traded one sculpture for another. "This one is face to face, as you can see, with the woman on top. I don't use live models for my work for obvious reasons. I use photographs. I take fifty or more pictures of a particular pose and mount them in my studio while I'm sculpting."

The video took them around museums and galleries where Pack exhibited as well as his studio works in progress. With each sculpture, the audience sank deeper into a trance.

"So as you can see, what interests me most and therefore appears often in my work is traditional coitus."

The final footage was of a sculpture garden in a museum outside Nice, France. Laura wobbled to standing. "Well, that's it for the show and tell. Please let Mr. Pack know your questions," she said, wishing Pack would ravish her from behind.

Irina Plosky stood. "Excuse me while I catch my breath," she said, gripping the back of a seat. "This has been quite an evening. I don't mean to burst your bubble or anything, but I was wondering what your feelings are on safe sex, teen pregnancy and promiscuity."

"Actually I'm about as prudish as you can be when it comes to that. I've been married for twenty years to a wonderful woman. I don't believe in premarital sex – or I should say premarital intercourse. I don't think there's anything anyone even wants to do to stop premarital sex."

Giggling was a temporary antidote to the tension.

"And this isn't prudish, but I think that sex education, contraception and abortion should be freely available to every citizen, regardless of age."

A man hustled to the aisle. "I don't think you really have any talent at all, mister," he said.

The group gasped.

It was no surprise to Laura that art could incite controversy, especially sexy art. She migrated to the edge of the stage in

preparation for battle.

The man, hair an inverted broom, continued. "You're just a cheap imitation of Jacob Reller and you know it. The latest issue of Art and Artists' Journal says right here ..." He waved the magazine, then aimed his nose at the crumpled page. "'... Jacob Reller had every single idea Pack has ever come up with twenty years before Pack was born. If Reller was alive today, Pack would have to earn his living doing something else.'"

Laura stood. "Sir, may I ask you to ..."

"You think you're so great and everything, getting the ladies all turned on and all. Well ..." The man's nose glowed like a hot coal.

"I don't know your name but I need to correct you," Laura said. "There are many people who don't agree with that article at all." It was reassuring to see Irina rise and edge toward the door, signaling Laura that she was prepared to get someone from the Museum who could manage the mutineer. "Mr. Reller's figures are very different from Mr. Pack's."

Manny was equal to the challenge. "Our nudes are similar in build, it's true. But the stances, the facial expressions, the surface textures are not of the same ..."

"You're full of shit. And you're a sex maniac, too."

Manny, still unflappable, said, "I don't think having an appreciation of sex means I'm a maniac."

"The Bible says lust is a sin."

"I don't consult the Bible, or Art and Artists' Journal, when I work, Mr. ... What is your name?"

"I don't have to tell you anything. You are a blasphemer."

"Sex is a life force. It's as much part of God's plan as anything else. It's people who misuse it. And by the way, that article in Art and Artists Journal was written in support of ending public funding for the arts. So if the rest of you are in favor of my work being included in public exhibitions, please write your ..."

"It won't do any good, Mr. Pack. You're just a good-for-nothing poseur."

Laura couldn't shut up another second. "Sir, we welcome controversy. In fact, we thrive on it. But you are making this a personal attack on a man who has come to share his skill with us this evening and who has experienced a good measure of critical acclaim as well as personal success."

"People'll buy anything. They're a bunch of sheep. I mean, look at all the shit they show on TV. Not that Pack'd get on there. This garbage is even too obscene for television."

"Listen, I'm going to have to call security if you continue to insult our speaker."

Irina nodded briskly, hugging the back wall.

"And you will need to introduce yourself if you want to speak again. But I think what you've said already is enough."

"Hey, sis. Don't threaten me," the man said.

Irina disappeared into the museum.

The magazine he carried flew across the floor. "You went to law school, so you can't even be a part of this here group any more."

The rebuttal unlocked her fear. "That has not necessarily been determined, Mr. ..."

"Oh yeah? Proposition Six is here, lady. So get ..."

The security guard rushed down the aisle.

"... used to it. You and your kind are history."

Arm around the man, the guard said something to him that appeared to do the trick, and the fellow allowed himself to be escorted out.

The exit should have been a relief, but she suspected there had been damage which she could not repair. "For what it's worth," she said, voice a leaf in the wind, "Pack's works move me in a way that Reller's never have." If there had been a post nearby, she'd have grabbed onto it. The farthest I can fall is the floor, she reassured herself. "And with that, I think we'll give Mr. Pack permission to call the presentation a success, despite the interruption, for which I apologize. Thank you all for coming and I hope you've signed in so we can send you our newsletter about December's program. Who's scheduled for December?"

"Beverly had to leave," said Natalie, founder the Platte River Arts Festival and Art on the Line board member. "She told me to tell you that we're probably going to have Luis Sanchez, the muralist." A sheet of notes unfurled. "Mr. Sanchez is quite accomplished, so I'll

just say that a documentary about his work was shown last month on PBS, he's Colorado born and raised and he's got work hanging in this museum and at the Pirate Gallery."

"Great." Laura scanned the rows. "Board members, please come up so we can chat for a minute while we're in the same place at the same time? Thanks again for coming, everyone."

Siegfried waddled up. "I should've called security the minute that guy got up," he said. "But I enjoyed Mr. Pack so much I didn't want to miss anything."

"Of course," said Laura, as Pack's lighthouse of energy reached the door. "Excuse me for a minute so I can say goodbye and then we'll have a short meeting." She caught up to him in the lobby. "Thank you very much."

"It was great."

"I'm so sorry about that guy."

"It happens. I'm controversial, and that's the way it goes. You're gonna be in the middle of a controversy yourself, looks like."

"I know. I'm not looking forward to it at all."

"How did you get so involved with art?"

"In high school I was really good at it. Mostly painting and playing piano."

"Then?"

"I got interested in law and it squeezed off my creativity. Or that's what I think looking back."

"Shame."

"Yeah. I majored in Political Science and minored in Art History. I'm a lawyer and a mommy and I've got enough time to be an art and music fan but no time to do either."

Like most people, Laura had cut herself off from life as he knew it. "Well, good luck."

"Thanks so much, and I am sorry about the unpleasantness." She left her hand in his aura so she could stockpile his charge. Then he pulled away and was gone. She detoured to the Ladies' Room. In the mirror was the same woman as before, except now Prop 6 made her society's outcast.

She braved the auditorium, where eight were gathered in the front row. "We've got a quorum," she said, disguising her terror. "Can we come to a quick decision about how to keep this from ever happening again?"

Ziggy backed his way up the aisle. "Lemme go have a little talk with the security guy 'n see what he says."

"Ask him for a suggestion. Maybe with a crowd like this, we need to have a guard in the auditorium."

"Will do." He lumbered out.

"That means a bigger budget," said Joan, sparse hair nested, having lost its altitude some time during Pack's talk. "Less money left over for speakers."

"True," Laura said. "Well, at the very least I can write the

man, assuming the guard got his name, and ask that he not return."

"That sounds good," said Natalie.

"All in favor?"

There was no disagreement.

Natalie proposed that they make a statement on the decorum expected of guests before each program. They were nearly done composing it when Ziggy returned.

"I've got the scoop," he said. "The guy's really pissed about smut being supported by the government."

"We figured that," said Laura.

"He's ticked about that gay guy who showed naked kids and homosexuality. The artist who got money from the National Endowment for the Arts."

"You're referring to Robert Mapplethorpe," said Joan.

"But more than that, he's onto Laura."

A cannon was aimed at her stomach. "Oh?"

"He says the new law — it was passed today — says Laura can't be involved with Art on the Line because it's got public funding."

The shell hit. "Should I leave so you can have this discussion?" she asked.

No one answered.

"That law isn't effective yet, is it?" Natalie said.

Ziggy continued. "Anyway he said we need to get Laura outa here if we wanna use the museum facilities."

"And the man's name?" Laura gave Ziggy a look reserved for opposing counsel.

"Mark Rouch."

"It's getting late," Laura said. "We'll have to revisit this next month."

"Sounds like we sure will," said Ziggy, pounding the stake.

The group parted and she staggered out. What would she say if she was them? "Too bad democracy works?" or "Majority rule isn't as bad as you think?"

But could any minority survive if every civil right was at the mercy of the next voter initiative? Colorado had already voted twice to stop giving poor people money to get an abortion.

Street lights warmed the air soup. Breathing the car exhaust sickened her. Prop Six was going to turn her proudest affiliation, Art on the Line, to shit. She longed to drive to the mountains; there was never as much pain up there, but fatigue pointed her home.

Pack's figures pushed into her thoughts, reminders that art and love were the parts of life worth celebrating. After all, disappointment, elections and evil were figments, mere blips on the universe's radar.