

THE DENVER OPHELIA

Ruthie buys her clothes off the backs of other women. I say, 'My mother would die if she saw me in here.'

'But she is.' Ruthie puts up her hands. 'Dead.'

'Can you be nicer about it? It's only been a year.'

We're in the death throes, the last stages of writing our dissertations, what she calls 'our dissembling'. She's been here for five years finishing.

After hours spent gleaning and writing, we meet up in the afternoon beneath a sky blue as the virgin's dress. Dry blue with never a tear. 'Heaven's hell,' Ruthie calls Denver.

She drags me to the Salvation Army store on Colfax, a wide, loud street where cowboys still roam. The store smells of sweat and disaster. I keep to the doorway while Ruthie rummages, then emerges with something muddy colored. Even her underwear comes from there.

Then we eat lemon meringue pie and try on hats at May D & F, Denver's genteel department store. The hats are my idea, big floppy things in white veil or straw. I laugh with her when we look in the mirror together, but secretly love myself in these hats rising and dipping around my face like huge flowers and me the center.

'Can you even imagine wearing this back home?' She turns from the mirror in a hat with a cascade of silk daisies. The brim seems to point to her big nose and firm chin.

She stares at me in my large white veil floppy, and her face grows sad. 'You look cute in that.'

'Cute' is not what I want to hear, so I shrug off the compliment.

'Really,' she says.

We've been lured to this shadowless city by fellowships. She's Manhattan, I'm Queens; she lords it over me because Queens is not really the city, but a suburb aching to join the clamour of downtown. Even so Ruthie has made me her best friend. I must not forget her voice breaking through the hard dry days of my first year here.

But there are secrets she will never know about me. I keep a postcard in my bedroom of a woman drowning in a riverbed of flowers, so peaceful now that she's given up the struggle. Lydia, who shares our office, gave it to me after I admired her print of Chatterton on his deathbed beneath a casement window.

'It calms me just to look at him,' she said. A week later I found Ophelia on my desk. I had to take her home because if Ruthie ever saw, she would say how decadent.

Lydia is one these graduate student prairie women who wear long dresses and boots and talk about pregnancy dreams. I have never had a pregnancy dream, but in the night my mother stands on the other side of the door pounding. I wake to silence and then I know what Lydia means about the calm. Ophelia, Chatterton. In their dying hearts is the finality I long for.

I have another secret from Ruthie which I will never share with anyone. I am in love with Professor Levine. What shames me is not that he's my advisor or that he's married, or even that he's twice my age and probably shorter than me. How could anyone but the most pathetic fall for a skinny, white-faced man with a pendulous nose and wisps of eyebrows above his Denver blues? That's what I call them for they are relentless. When he sneers at my little ideas and gives me one of his sideways grins, I feel elated, his sarcasm like an embrace. I imagine us in bed together, me caressing his bald head, his arms around me, the two of us like skeletons dancing; for I am, in my mother's words, 'a bony wonder'.

Ruthie makes do with men. She sees John, a big guy with a beard down to his waist who wanders around the department telling everyone he's becoming a Jew. She doesn't mind him using her to gain entrance to the 'land of Canaan' as he calls it, or his stink.

We're on one of our jaunts down Colfax. Ruthie's just bought a black full-length slip she pulled out of one of the boxes of underwear at the Salvation Army. She came right out of the dressing room wearing it in front of all the creepy guys. Just to show me. They took no notice, the downcast ones picking through racks of brown winter jackets. Only the young guy trying on stilettos grinned at her. I'm wondering when Ruthie will wear her slip since I've never seen her in a dress.

Still she's feeling good. When I pause in front of a store I haven't noticed before, a tiny place which catches me because in the window is my Ophelia, a full size mannequin dressed in white and covered in flowers, Ruthie agrees to go in even though she's ready for cake.

Inside the tiny dark room a young woman in a floppy straw hat sits at a high counter working on something. She puts whatever it is away and gives us a slow smile full of misshapen teeth. I sniff the air but smell only velvet and the incense the woman is burning near her busy fingers.

Ruthie does a bit of flicking. 'Will you look at the price of this?'

'Are these second hand?' she asks.

'Second or third,' the woman says.

Ruthie whispers to me that this is a resale store where women try to make a profit from fancy dresses they've only worn once. She doesn't want to stay.

I imagine myself in one of the gowns walking into Professor Levine's office, my skin as white as his against black velvet. I shake my head free of this for I have not bought a dress or skirt for years. Skirts come up short and dresses hang on me, wrinkling where they should fit, folds of material over my emptiness. Tears come to my eyes. I will look like a badly clothed scarecrow.

Ruthie sighs. She says she'll wait outside. 'Precious, so precious,' she whispers loud enough for the woman to hear. But I know why she hates it in here. She has to feel like a discoverer in the murk of other people.

I have a session with Professor Levine the next day. For once he does not criticize what I have written, but says something which confuses me. I haven't told Ruthie that I'm working on the final draft of my dissertation and can see the end. She's been stuck for two years on her final chapter. She goes to Levine only to whine.

He's sitting there in an open white shirt, sleeves half rolled up, his legs stretched out. His smile is almost friendly though I take care with what I say for he loves to make fun of me and then turn cold when I too become playful. I was almost late because I dressed for him and today I wasn't right in anything. I settled for my boy jeans and black tee shirt, hoping the sight of my pale face with hair tied at the neck will make him think Pre-Raphaelite because I'm certain this is the look he craves, a sad-eyed reed woman like the belle dame of his favorite poet. But he doesn't notice me as a woman. I'm just a mind to him and not a very good one.

Suddenly he's talking about Jane Eyre's quest for transcendence, and I'm thinking that I would have to insert whole sections, bringing the dissertation up from its dungeons of desire. 'But that means changing everything, doesn't it?'

He gives me one of his kryptonite looks, eyes fixed on me, thin mouth quivering because he's poised to make one of his sharp little comments which will hurt me, but then in retrospect have a pleasing tenderness, like a healing wound which tickles. He says nothing, only shrugs and indicates our time is over. 'I suppose I could do it,' I say, but he's looking out the window as if I'm already gone.