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The sky is burning. A vast plain of scintillation. But it is only sunset, another rehearsal for some future promised holocaust. The dying light silhouettes towers of iron in rust's glow: great stacks, ziggurats of steel cubes, shipping containers wedged and balanced on pier's edge above the crimson diamonding of the Pacific.

Karmann Ghia turns away from the copper light drowning into the ocean, each lapping wave a sputtering flame that sparkles, dies. The world is a funeral pyre without him—when will he return? She walks along this upper Matson observation deck, her fingertips caressing, tracing a rail of rebar Monk welded last year. White plastic chairs and a table shift in sunset shadows. Below, some of the old cargo containers still advertise faded logos glinting from networks of rust, salt, and desiccated barnacles: SEA-LAND, PACIFIC, MATSON, WESTCON, YANG MING, RAM-JAC, EVERGREEN, PAN-IC (INTERNATIONAL CARRIERS). A city of iron cubicles latticed along the harbor, piled like a giant's stairway in gravity-suspended steps rising toward the burnished sunset, or skewed in angles and intersecting layers; some pitched, half toppled by long-ago-extracted cranes and ship's booms. The steel hulks loom like a metallic warren on the precipice of Slip Thirteen, an abandoned cargo depot jutting out into the smoggy dusk of

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Los Angeles Harbor. The shuttered facade of the Crescent Warehouse Company along the East Channel obscures most of the old containers; beyond the protection of these warehouse buildings and the toxic, oiled patina of the channel waters is the city: only scattered buildings and glimpses of knotted freeways shift beneath the haze.

She descends the iron steps welded diagonally down the rusted side of the container, gripping the handrail of old, thin pipeline that Monk looped and welded around the crude staircase. Dim corridors snake through the labyrinth of the steel boxes, created by confluences of gaps amid the containers, or shipping doors ajar, or crawl spaces through torched holes or peeling iron sides. There are ropes, ladders, stacked crates, purloined boat ramps, illegally welded rebar rungs and handholds, ingress and egress, but these signs of human habitation have been carefully hidden from the city to the northwest.

Karmann disappears through an open cargo door, down a ladder through a blowtorched portal, into the darkened nexus of the iron chambers. Electric bulbs strung on wires hanging from freight hooks and eyelets wash her black skin in dark rainbows of blue, yellow, green; she's changed some of these lights with colored bulbs, hoping for a festive aura here, but lately it seems to her the effect is garish, carnival; maybe that's just her soul of late.

In the main rooms now, a series of chambers extended by gaping cargo doors, containers torn open and welded together at disconcerting angles. Windows torched through iron reveal views into other containers or sometimes the smoggy blue continuum of the channel waters and sky. An old sofa, tables, dusky lamps. Black-and-white shadows flicker from the Philco TV—Elizabeth Montgomery twitching her nose in *Bewitched*—hung with baling wire from a ceiling hook high in the corner, silent, volume down, its jangled antennas looped with wire snaking up corrugated iron walls for patchy reception. Some of Monk's friends mill about, drinking Brew 102 or Pabst or some of Karmann's Electric Purple

lemonade from a glass bowl on the dining table, smoking cigarettes—although Slim-Bone over by the old fish-crate shelves splayed with crumbling paperbacks has just lit up a joint—the babble of conversations echoes, reverberating inside the steel walls, everyone’s voices metamorphosing into a kind of amplified clang that has seeped into her head, one of those migraines that will take a day and a bottle and a pack of cigarettes to muffle away. Atop a converted old crab trap is the hi-fi, the turntable playing a scratchy Miles Davis riffing on “Boplicity.” Cheap portable fans waft smoke up through vent flaps sheared open in the ribbed walls or through welded windows and opened hatchways. More guests appear now, like pirates storming a besieged vessel, men and women swaying up or down from planks and ladders, twisting down knotted ropes, appearing at the bases of staircase crates, laughing, talking, bearing bottles of wine and plates of chicken and ribs and corncobs. Always a rent party somewhere in the ’hood, and tonight it’s Karmann and Monk’s turn, sharing food and drink, even stuffing a few Washingtons—if you can spare them—in a fishbowl on the table next to the pile of green-for-money rent-party invitation cards, just enough to get a soul through another month, though Monk doesn’t pay any rent, since no landlord knows about Box Town, but the money bought food and gas and wine and cigarettes and records and bail, maybe a few bills stashed in the reserve for any needy soul’s emergencies.

“Hey, Slim-Bone,” a new arrival, a young man in a purple silk shirt, calls out as he tosses another green rent card on the table’s pile:

***Don’t move to the outskirts of town
Drop around to meet a Hep Brown
A social party by Monk and Karmann
Saturday. Latest on Wax. Refreshments.***

The rent party ebbs and flows through several levels of iron lozenges: couples caress on backseat divans torn from gutted

cars, dance to Motown blaring from radios, rise toward observation containers to toast the sunset or descend into sublevels where old mattresses and piled pillows and hammocks tucked away in shadowy metal corners wait like silent confidants for the new scents, pressings, and stains their lovers will bring. The electric bulbs blink and sputter with voltage stolen from surrounding harbor grids, feeding into shipyard transformers and underground vaults and through portals and under gangplanks of dry-docked, decommissioned navy ships: a discotheque effect, strobes of rainbow lights flashing, illuminates faces beaded with sweat, clear plastic cups sloshing dark wine, glistening black Afros, silvery strata of cigarette smoke, purple eyeliner, silver and gold chains webbed in moist chest hair glinting from open silk shirts.

“Hey, Karmann.” She frowns: Felonius, one of Monk’s more disreputable friends, swaggers up to her; Lamar, already stoned, hangs on to Felonius and stares down at her, his lips—always mumbling in some kind of incomprehensible drugged soliloquy—twisting into a demented grin. The reflected lights seem to sparkle in Lamar’s black sunglasses and greasy, slicked-back hair.

“You like a widow, ol’ Monk’s never home.” Felonius’s gold tooth seems to always siphon off her eyes and then all her thoughts, unweaving, until Felonius dissolves, leaving only the glimmering nugget of gold twinkling out of existence whenever his upper lip obscures the precious metal.

“A black widow?” Karmann smiles. Behind her, President Johnson speaks in muted silence, staring down at the party from the Philco TV, then a storm of static reveals grainy footage of Huey helicopters hovering over rice paddies.

“Girl, ya all could do better’n ol’ Monk.” He pulls the ring tab from a can of Pabst, foam bubbling up as he pours beer into a plastic cup. “Ol’ Felonius, for example, I’m a community activist—”

Lamar nods, then retreats into a mumbling conversation with himself.

"Is that what they're callin' unemployed now?" Karmann laughs, sipping her wine.

"Oooh, tha's col', baby." Felonius grins, gold tooth winking. "I'd shower you with rings and treasure, baby," slipping the beer can's pull ring on her small finger.

"Shower yourself first. With water." Karmann smiles, drops the pull tab into his plastic cup, and threads her way back to the phonograph to change the record. She sets the needle to a new album one of the girls has brought, and Sam Cooke's "Little Red Rooster" reverberates through the iron rooms. Marcus and his girlfriend Dalynne materialize through cigarette smoke with a bottle of wine. "When's Monk comin', honey?" Dalynne fills Karmann's cup.

"When he gets here, I guess." Dalynne and Marcus are already stoned, their black eyes shriveled like those famous raisins in the sun.

"Chasin' graffiti, huh?" Marcus shakes his head. His woolly beard drapes to his belly, flecked with gray. "What's he studyin', he say? Signology?"

"Semiotics. The study of signs." Her Monkey, Monk and key, an initiate searching for keys to unlock each signpost, an anchorite lost in a profane world.

"Signs? You mean like stop signs and shit?" Dalynne laughs, her straightened, chopped hair bobbing on her shoulders. "Girl, how he gonna get out of the ghetto lookin' at signs?"

"It don't matter nohow, because we're in the fourth generation." Karmann sighs. Marcus is going to pontificate again. "You see, it's only been four generations since Lincoln freed the slaves, not enough time. Gonna take ten generations, according to my calculations. Our future's still a slave's future. We throw these parties 'cause we never been taught to keep money, the plantation store always kept our money, ya see? We leave our wives, girlfriends, 'n' babies, 'cause back in the old days the boss man'd

break us families up and sell us down the river. Monk's still fightin' it is all."

"You better talk sense or this girlfriend's gonna leave *you*." Dalynne scowls at Marcus.

"Tha's why a brother's got to have sisters and babies all over town. It's that ol' slave reflex of makin' lots of babies 'cause the mastah gon' take 'em from ya—"

"Bullshit!" Dalynne, spilling wine. "Black man just like any man, can't keep his dick in his pants!" She grabs the bottle from Marcus but instead of hitting him over the head stalks away into the smoky haze.

"Hey, man." Lil' Davey—six foot six—nods down to Marcus, slinking toward the radio.

"See? It's all around us." Marcus frowns, edging closer to Karmann. "Brothers call each other *man* 'cause back in the slave days whitey called us *boy* . . . now the hippies say *man* this *man* that, always ripping off the nigger, just like with our music . . . ten generations, Monk'll see, ain't no use fightin' it." Karmann's cataloged some of the debris in Marcus's beard: caked mustard, tobacco ash, wine drops, flecks of avocado dip, cracker crumbs. "You know, Karmann," Marcus says, swaying to the Four Tops, "when I'm 'round you I can't help myself neither. Onion ring?" Waving a greasy onion ring in her face. "Maybe we could, ah, dance," Marcus running a yellow fingernail down her forearm, pressing close to her, the wild beard blotting out the world.

"Excuse me." She pushes away, weaving urgently past dancers and smoke. She finally catches up to Dalynne, who's staring out through a patch of window blowtorched in the iron wall. Dalynne's arms are crossed protectively across her breasts. "Honey, don't feel bad." Karmann slips a hand on her shoulder.

Dalynne turns, eyes red with tears. "He's such a pig." Karmann nods, sips her wine. "I need to find a good man, like Monk."

"He's always gone," Karmann says. "Maybe he's thinking about not coming home."

"Don't say that! He love you more than ever, you both blessed." Dalynne wipes a tear away. "Look at you . . . you hardly even showin'."

Karmann smiles, lights a cigarette, taps one out for Dalynne.

"How you feelin'?" Dalynne lights up and Karmann blows on the match, tossing it through the window, into the harbor darkness.

"Okay, just a little sick in the morning's all."

"You smoking and drinkin' too much, girl?"

"The doctor said wine and a few cigarettes are good, keep down the stress."

"He a white doctor?" They both laugh. "You feel him kick yet?" Dalynne lightly presses her palm into the almost imperceptible swell of Karmann's stomach, then moves it away quickly, a pang of embarrassment or envy in her eyes as she sips her wine.

"Not yet. How do you know it's a him?"

Dalynne laughs. "Well, I guess I don't. You feel the kicks soon. How long are you? Three months?"

"Three weeks more than that."

"Shit, you feel him anytime now. My mama says if you eat a banana every day it'll be a boy."

They laugh and drink wine. "I'm serious." Dalynne grins. "Eat bananas for a boy, lemons for a girl." Karmann laughs, drinks wine, starts to feel better. "You know what? Later we'll go on up to your room. Now listen, I'm serious. Mama told me this too. You lay down and expose your belly. We get a pencil and tie it to a string, and I'll hold it over your stomach. Now if the pencil wobbles around, it's gonna be a girl . . . but if that pencil stays straight 'n' true, it gonna be a boy." More laughter. "I'm gonna find Marcus." She hugs Karmann and wanders through the party.

Karmann sighs and passes through a welded-open hatchway,

toward the kitchen. Down a staircase of crates into a double-wide Sea-Land container where a knot of guests crowd around a Zenith TV precariously balanced atop a six-foot crab cage leaning against a wall, talking, drinking, smoking, eating chicken from greasy paper plates. On the flickering tube, Amos 'n' Andy mug and ham it up, but their lips move in silence, the volume's turned down: Amos's face looks black and bloated beneath the white sweat-stained fedora as Andy, distracted, scoops up a pair of dice next to the bowl of mints, chomping, grimaces, chokes, eyeballs popping out of his black face like white eggs.

"I'm tellin' you, those are cracker actors," someone says behind her, "they put shoe polish on their faces."

"No way," another voice says, "them's black and that's that."

"They was white on the radio, my mama said."

"Yo' mama tol' me last night, 'Oooh, that feels nice.'" Laughter, cursing. Someone dances by, transistor radio half buried in his Afro, Little Anthony and the Imperials blaring "Take Me Back." Amos 'n' Andy fade away and it's that Walter Cronkite at the news desk, the black-and-white cyclopean eye of CBS behind him. CBS NEWS LIVE crawls over and over along the bottom of the screen, half buried in flurries of snowy static. "Hey, turn it up." . . . *bat in Vietnam. Once again, the Pentagon today at three o'clock Eastern Standard Time has acknowledged for the first time publicly that U.S. troops are engaged in active combat in Vietnam . . .* Tendrils of smoke from Cronkite's pipe curl around the network's Cyclops eye, which seems to glare down at the revelers. *Now we take you to our Washington correspondent—*

"Say, Karmann, you lookin' fine tonight." Cooky, swaying in the smoke-hazy nimbus of colored lightbulbs, tall and skinny, like a tree topped with the black manicured canopy of an Afro big as a beach ball. Cooky, for the legendary amount of cookies he consumed daily, hundreds, a superhuman addiction to sugar, a side effect of his darker addiction, heroin. "You better snap me up 'fore I go off to that Vietnam War." Chain-smoking a Lucky Strike.

“Cooky, you’re just a stick, bones made out of milk, anyway.” Karmann laughs. Is everyone stoned? Why is every fool here hitting on her? Felonius, Marcus, Cooky, just a little innocent flirting here, the wine’s getting to that headache of hers. “You’re not going to fight in any white man’s war, one look at you they going to say there’s a four-F.”

“That mean four fucks? What girl tol’ you about my man powers?” Cooky, grinning, takes a pull from a tequila bottle—that other sweet sister when he’s out of smack—he’s liberated from Monk’s liquor cabinet. “Well now, I’d fight if I was an American citizen but I ain’t because us niggers been denied our citizen rights,” exhaling smoke. “I can’t see the system because it can’t see the black man. Only draft this nigger’s gonna feel is if they open the window down at Willie’s Pool Hall.” Laughs, snorting, gulps another amber shot of tequila from the bottle, wiping his wet lips on a paisley-print sleeve. He holds the bottle up to her lips, an impenetrable light in his eye that makes her feel off-balance as he exhales a perfect blue smoke ring that hovers between them.

“No thanks.” Now they’re stealing Monk’s liquor. “Excuse me, Cooky, I have to serve up some chicken.” Karmann moves past more people, through thunderheads of marijuana smoke, which now masks the cigarette smoke in bands of thick gray strata that ring the containers. She drains her wine cup, migraine thumping, lights a Kent. The miasma of cigarette and pot smoke and sweat and booze and incense and fried chicken has for now cloaked the disconcerting international fragrances of the shipping containers, scents that she’s acclimated herself to over the months but which can be, to the unprepared olfactory nerve, challenging in their exotic spectrum: traces still linger in each container, hinting of their past international ports of call—Alaska salmon, crude oil from Yemen, alkaloid residue from transistor shipments from Peking, bananas from Brazil, pineapples from Oahu, Goodyear rubber, chocolate, plastics, cured beef, fertilizers, Detroit engines, drums of animal fats, Colombian coffee, bales of green onions,

Oregon timber, molasses . . . a mélange of essences more powerful than any pharmaceutical, a fortune's wheel of sensory assaults that alter those who pass through these chambers: states of despair, delirium, ecstasy, violence, eroticism, boredom, anxiety, metaphysical alienation, peace, and feelings she or even Monk can't describe . . . then there are the few containers welded shut, rooms they cannot bear to revisit or are too afraid to even step foot inside . . .

At the kitchen table at last, she lights another cigarette, tops off her plastic cup of wine. *Where the fuck is Monk, anyway? Out in the city somewhere, in his own world, escaping from all this, from a girlfriend and the baby.* Shit, there's Maurice—Fallouja Awahli now that he's a Muslim—approaching, shaking his shaved head disapprovingly: crisply pressed black suit and white starched shirt with black bow tie, gold lapel pin sparkling, engraved FOI, Fruit of Islam. "Dear Karmann—or should I call you Rosaline?"

"Who?" Karmann's looking for a way to escape, hoping one of the girls will saunter over and take her arm.

"Rosaline, who waits in vain for her Romeo even as he falls in love with Juliet. Why do you poison yourself with alcohol and tobacco?"

"My spirit is weak, Maur—Fallouja." Karmann sips wine, trying to exhale cigarette smoke away from his brown forehead.

"Your body is a temple, you should set an example for your black sisters. We must all set an example for our people." *A temple with an occupant*, she smiles wearily. His voice is soft, learned, soothing, always a grin on his lips to counterbalance the preacher born in him.

"I know, I know," Karmann sighs, "I'm living in sin too."

"Ah, yes. Monk should marry you. I hope one day God touches you and you are blessed with many babies, bringing glory and power to our people." Karmann bites her lower lip and smiles. "This is the only way our people will rise from the ashes."

"I didn't know we were in the ashes," desultorily flicking an ash, watching it float down toward the iron floor.

"Forgive me for speaking to you this way, but Karmann, you need a good, firm, godly man . . . a Muslim husband . . . you know I've known Monk since we were children and, well, you know, he's always going off in a thousand directions . . . Monk has no direction in life."

"He's lost, all right, lookin' for a sign." She drains her wine: whenever she starts clipping off those final consonants in her speech she knows she's getting drunk. He's right, Monk does have some crazy notions: buying a barge and floating the containers out into international waters where he could declare the sovereign rights of a separate country, issue passports, turn Boxville into an offshore tax-free bank and floating casino. Her head swims, the migraine a relentless throb of electric pain. "Excuse me, I have to go to the bathroom."

Behind her, Felonius angled, framed in a hatchway, talking on Karmann's wall phone. "Come on, baby, come meet me . . . shit." He drops the receiver and staggers away, the telephone swaying, bobbing against the metal wall like a pendulum. A tinny female voice drones from the receiver: *If you want to make a call, please hang up and dial again . . . if you want to make a call, please . . .*

She weaves down another tumble of crates and into a blue-painted Cronos container. A naked yellow bulb casts a faint gold light in the chamber. A cracked mirror on the wall reflects the navy-gray-painted toilet purloined from an old merchant ship. Nadine, a light-skinned girl in black hip-huggers, dabbles powder on her cheek before the mirror. "See you topside, honey." She smiles, blows a kiss, high heels echo and click away. A stick of incense by the old iron sink tapers smoke. The water reservoir behind the toilet is lidless, no flushing here, gravity plummeting all waste down into the Pacific below: instead the tank is filled with fresh-cut wildflowers and strips of newspaper Monk has carefully cut for toilet paper. Karmann picks up a scrap of newsprint:

*Margaret Dumont dead, romantic foil in Marx Brothers movies. Featured in several of the comedy team's movies, Dumont played aristocratic dowagers fending off the romantic orchestrations of the brothers, usually Groucho, as they played a series of bungling suitors competing for her attentions. An open portal reveals the brick facade of the Crescent Warehouse between daisy-print curtains. An oval hatchway is latched closed near the gray navy ordnance of the toilet, two deck chairs stenciled USND on either side. Karmann unscrews the lug bolts and flips the rusted rings, heaving open the iron door. Below, lapping, glinting in darkness, the Pacific. She collapses in a chair, lighting another Kent cigarette, staring down into the lens of the ocean, at the empty chair: where is he? Below, the waters lap and surge. A deep metallic groan shudders through the steel room, the currents pulling, pushing, grinding the pylons somewhere deep below the container's welded mazes. She glowers at the empty chair, a queen waiting for the king's return. Some king. Why is he always leaving her? Going off on his strange tours with his weird notebook and graffiti drawings: sometimes she feels so mad, so empty. Maybe this time he won't come back . . . the baby, it's all finally too much. *Stop it now, stop doubting him.* He'd better move his black ass. The whole world's spinning like her head: all his so-called friends stealing his liquor, feasting and partying, even trying to steal his woman, offering her impromptu rings of promise. He'd better find his way home fast. Karmann drops the cigarette down into the glistening maw, a glowing red ember, then a soft hiss as it disappears into the sea. She'll wait and Monk'll be back, a good man: if any man can read the signs and find his way home again it'll be Monk. Yes, she'll wait, not patiently knitting, she doesn't have knitting needles, but she has a phonograph needle, and she will spin all their records, weaving song by song until his return.*