



BARBARA

A NOVEL

JONI MURPHY

SAMPLE

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TO FEEL THE SUBTLE GRAIN OF A MOMENT, THAT IS THE goal, to be present.

I roll my thinking back. I return the years of sensation and numbness, the deaths and repetitions onto their reel. I start again.

Sometimes what happens to you does not make you better, it's just what happens.

I am forty years old, acting in a western in a town high up in the Rockies. Out in the world it's 1975, but in our film we're living through the ragged end of the gold rush. My scientist father died in summer. It's fall now and I'm toiling away as a movie whore. Outside yellow-brown aspen leaves tremble in the cool wind but I have spent the day inside on a stage, performing for the benefit of the camera. Inside the theater a spotlight makes a false full moon on the deep red curtain. I can't see it but I know the light is there. Velvet folds separate me from the others. Anything could be on the other side. I feel the geological layers of this time. The dark of this theater is so complete we could be miles underground. It's been years since I've felt the bright light of the sun.

A record spins on the phonograph. It is very important to Tony that the layers of sound overlap organically. There are many hidden mics to catch the chairs as they squeak and glasses as they clink. The other cast members playing miners and whores, they whisper. They move their leather heels on the wooden floor.

We've been listening to this aria again and again. The

needle kept getting replaced back at the beginning. It's a part of the picture. At the beginning the soprano produces a rickety sound, but then she builds to something else, deeper and older, and yet more modern all at once. We hear the hiss of the recording mechanism, a woman's breath, then the fluttering of leaves rustling. It is so eerie and beautiful to hear her solo voice in a large echoey room.

We are communicating something in this scene, not about the music but about space itself. The space within theater walls is one of the dark wombs where souls nestle, watching the flickering of the past. Every movie is a record of a lost reality.

What the camera sees: The spotlight moon dead center of velvet night; delicate hand at the end of a slim arm appearing from between the curtains; spinning dust particles catching in the light's beam. Though the hand and arm emerge, the body does not follow. I am not made whole. I reach out, grasp and let go. I make a come-hither pull of my index finger. My hand floats like a leaf. It is the hand of a hidden nymph in a baroque painting. It gestures with a receptive turn of the wrist.

Feelings, nothing more than feelings. I hum to myself. It's been such a long history and there's still so much more to go.

Tony calls out once more, quiet please on set.

We're ready to go. Sound, he asks. Camera? Speed.

I reach once more into the dark.

After the day's shoot I go to my room and lie on the brass bed's sagging mattress. The walls around me are covered with flocked paper. The pattern is smooth green alternating with textured fuzzy vines that run vertical like cell bars. It's worn away where the headboard has rubbed.

The room is in the back of the hotel. I have one big window that looks out at the upward slope of the mountain, on which many evergreens grow. The window goes up and down on a chain, it free-falls like a guillotine if I don't prop it open with a stick.

Most times when I'm not needed on set I nestle here. There is nowhere else to go in this ghost town. In daylight hours I read and write letters, drink tea, and watch the trees move, warm beneath my down comforter but my hands and head cold from the air that creeps in. It's getting colder and colder as the days go shorter. When night falls the window goes dark, reflecting back to me the inside of the room. I see in it myself, or at certain moments, Jake and I together.

Jake Doherty is from Odessa, Texas. He has a way of rubbing his thighs with his palms, smoothing his long legs out in front of him when he first sits down. It kills me. He learned how to saddle a horse and handle a shotgun growing up, but all he's used his knowledge for is to act like a cowboy in movies. His father is disappointed, he tells me. But everyone else can't get enough.

Sometimes when he kisses me he wraps his hand around my neck. I wish whatever he had didn't work on me, but it does. He is my co-star and he has been coming to my room almost every night. I am playing a whore after all so what we do could be called a part of our method. I watch his shoulders reflecting broad and tan in the window and the sight of him, let alone the feeling of his skin, sends me into a trance.

Look me in the eyes, he orders as he pushes in. And so, I do.

It's not just sex though, but the time after. There is a special sweetness to being with him. Often we'll lie side by side talking, or being quiet as we listen to one of my

records. We are fragile together. Jake is younger than me by years. He has his depressed wife in Laurel Canyon and I have Lev. But it doesn't matter. We are both beautiful and far from real life. We have the pleasure of disappearing into our fiction.

Jake lies on my bed blowing smoke at the ceiling. Mozart, he says, was irreverent. People think classical music is so serious but what they don't realize is Mozart loved dirty jokes. He was the perfect child of the world. When he was alive the people around him didn't know his work would come to define European culture. To them he was simply a bratty genius who couldn't hold down a job. But then, after he died, the whole of Europe somehow decided, this is how we sound, his art represents who we are. Not all the muck and mire, but the trills channeled by a playful boy.

Listening to music with another person can feel so intimate. Taking sips of brandy while a record spins in a dim room, while outside the winds blow the leaves off the trees, can make you feel like you really know a person, even if you've met only weeks before.

I tried to describe to Jake the loops my life had traced. There's no big climax, I said. My mother did die when I was thirteen years old. That's one thing I suppose.

SHE WAS THIRTY-SIX WHEN SHE DIED. I WAS NOT LIVING with her at the time. I was in junior high school, living with my aunt Marie at her home in Grand Junction, Colorado. My mother was at a clinic for mental health in sunny Pasadena.

In the mornings before school, I liked to read while drinking a cup of Postum with milk. I pretended it was coffee. It made me feel like an adult. I held my spoon like a cigarette as I skimmed headlines about pacts and invasions and polio. Marilyn Monroe was on the cover of *Life*. I remember reading all about her the morning I found out.

I was with my aunt because my mother was in the midst of a breakdown. Or as my father phrased it, she was taking some time to get her strength back.

At first my aunt told me it was an accident. Later though, I found out that my mother slit her own throat with a razor blade. That is no kind of accident. She hid it among her beauty products. I learned that somehow.

I picture even now the blade wrapped in its paper envelope tucked under the powder compact, beside the lipsticks in their glossy black tubes. She always kept her vanity case tidy. I used to admire the print of the fabric that covered the outside, a tangle of roses with thorny stems.

I remember my mother and aunt having afternoon drinks

the day she dropped me off at Marie's house. My mother had her feet pulled up beneath her big blue skirt. Her leather pumps rested beneath the coffee table, one stood while the other was toppled over. My mother held her cheek with her head askew, as if it was too heavy a burden for her neck.

It's natural to want to remember a person as they were, especially if that person is your mother. She was framed by the couch back and behind that a picture window filled with trembling gold leaves. The leaves were yellow because it was fall. The leaves shook because there was a breeze. Through the screen door came the chill of that softly moving high-altitude air. It smelled sweet, in that decomposing way, and it kept the aspens shivering. My mother looked like a painting or a woman in a movie.

I didn't know it until years later when I read some of her letters, but my mother was pregnant then. Maybe that's why she looked so pretty.

I remember my aunt nodding, my mother waving her cigarette around as she talked about my father. She thought he deserved more recognition.

My father was an engineer who worked on the atomic bomb. He wrangled dangerous material for the government. He was one of those men of science the newspapers talked about. When I was young it was all a big secret, but by the time I came to Marie's the whole world knew. He belonged to something famous.

His mentors were serious and abstract thinkers who came from big universities like Princeton and Oxford. My father had started out at Kansas State College and so had a kind of inferiority complex, my mother thought. He was in the shadow of others even though he was so handy and had brought himself up in the world through his own brilliance. My father got mad when she said such things. He

was proud to have any role in something so important as nuclear discovery.

He did what was needed with his entire capacity. Where the government hand pointed, he went. Or rather, he went and we followed. If ever my mother questioned why we had to move, my father referred to the defense of the nation. He did not merely work, he was assigned. He'd speak one of his incantations: I have no choice; I've got to do it. Even though the war was over, another was brewing and we had to be ready.

Though they argued, my mother still passed on to me my father's imperatives. Be quiet. Don't share too much. When you're a grown-up you'll understand why. Loose lips sink ships, repeated my mother, which I thought was a strange saying because the ocean was so far away from where my father had brought us to in highest New Mexico.

We moved around a lot during my childhood, but my mother never stopped striving for beauty and order. She wanted things to be nice, no matter where we were. It drove her crazy I think.

She scrubbed mold from the bathroom walls of our place at the Idaho Falls army base. She swept our desert porch with a fervor even though the whole landscape was dusty and it was going to blow back. The futility didn't matter to her. She cleaned and I helped her because I was told. After washing the floors she'd shake out the broom and bleach the mop. Pristine was how she wanted life. She used to say it was her German ancestors coming out, though later on she stopped using that turn of phrase. My father said people might get the wrong idea.

After each move my mother unwrapped the hurricane

lamp and put her paper flowers in a nice arrangement. She sheltered her special objects and didn't let them get broken no matter what. She accented our government-issue sofas with mohair throws.

Unlike some of the other women brought there because of the lab, my mother loved New Mexico right away. Even with the dust she loved it. She'd spend our drives between Los Alamos and Santa Fe pointing out red rock formations, the blueness of the sky, and the whiteness of the smoke as it rose from a heap of burning brush. Down in the old capital we'd eat lunch in an old place with thick beams for a ceiling and then she'd buy things from the women with blankets spread around the edge of the plaza. She bought silver bracelets for her wrists and baskets woven out of pine needles to hold her jewelry when she took it off at night.

My mother was beautiful in the way the magazines wanted women to be. As a girl I was proud she was mine. She had blond hair, open blue eyes, and a precise and delicate profile. In all her portraits she had a head tilt. But even caught off guard in a snapshot, she had no bad angle.

My mother rarely hit but when she did it was hard. She could become enraged over things I could not predict. Her hitting felt impersonal, something that happened rather than something she did. It passed through her like an involuntary shudder. The anger then dissolved. She'd pull me to her breast then. My red cheek would go wet with a gush of her tears. She always cried more than me, even when I was young. She sobbed as if she were breaking apart. I'd end up comforting her. I'm sorry Mama, I didn't mean to. I'd inhale. I just can't bear things like other people can, she'd say.

I could never help but love other people smoking because it reminded me of her smell: Dove soap and light sweat, Lucky Strikes and L'Air du Temps.