KATHERINE WEISSMAN

The Divorce Gang

Down where it is dry and wild, across the border where the bad guys went when the sheriff was after them, there is a hilltop. On it live a man and a woman, both expatriates, who drink, give orders to Mexicans, pretend to work. Although they have a blue swimming pool and get all their clothes washed and ironed for them, they complain that they are poor and that they miss the culture up north. They can't go back, though. They are runaways. Escapees.

Ed and Grace have a story about themselves, the way every prison inmate does: how something unfair put them there. They think they are romantic, tragic figures, exiled as on Elba. They picture themselves as enlightened barons bringing civilization, opportunity, and kindness to the brown-skinned.

It would be more accurate, however, to say that Ed and Grace are outlaws, thoroughly bad and incorrigible. Of course they don't look it; with their soft clothes and vague eyes and graying hair, they look harmless and benign, there among the flowers, hiding out. But the posse will unmask them. The posse is coming down after them from the States. It consists of Senta and her brother, Benny.

This isn't a strong alliance. They entered upon it with trepidation and considerable mistrust, for Benny and Senta haven't gotten along for years, maybe never. They avoid each other on holidays, phone rarely, are acid and careless of feelings when they speak. But the last time they saw Ed was ten years ago; he and Grace came north for tests on his liver. He bought them both a steak in the hotel dining room; then they had one lunch apiece alone with him. Now they are afraid their father will die unvisited, and in their mutual need for one last try to get him to come clean about what he and Grace did, they have agreed to call for plane tickets and send a telegram to that phoneless, guileless mountaintop to announce their coming.

SENTA

Our telegram was perhaps too sarcastic; it said: "Esteemed father, could you tolerate a brief encounter with your children; send yes or regrets, Senta and Benny." We gave the dates, too. The telegram back said: "By all means; bring serpents' teeth, switchblades, Ed and Grace." Our family adored this sort of nasty literate banter. For example: When I saw Benny at the airport, waiting by the ticket counter in a heavy tweed suit he would boil in once we arrived in Mexico City, I was tempted to attack, something Thoreau-like: Beware of new clothing. I restrained myself. But I was aware of a rising anger at the length and thinness of his neck, his tallness in general, inherited from Ed. I hugged him briefly, all rough nap and spine, and I moved away to check in.

"All ready for the big reunion?" he said, slumping against the counter. Benny has always had terrible posture.

"Not really," I said, not looking at him.

"I've been rereading *Lear*," he said. "I think Ed casts us as the Goneril and Regan of his declining years."

"In that case we'll get our revenge, he'll go mad and wander on the mesa or something," I said. "Let's go have junk food."

We sat dolefully at a sticky plastic table, not speaking much, until our flight was called. On the plane, Benny had to fold into the narrow seat and he stuck out like a wire hanger, all angles, his elbow catching people as they passed. I pretended we weren't together.

"Did you talk to Mom?" I asked after a while, checking up on him. Of course, I had been the one to break it to our mother that we were flying south. Benny has zero contact with her. But I'd insisted that he at least call her.

"Uh-huh. For a moment."

More time would have been an imposition, he meant. "So?" I said.

"She said only completely perfect things, like she understands and it's important and we're still his children after all."

In actuality, we both knew, our mother would rather see us in hell than in Mexico visiting Ed and Grace. Especially Grace.

Grace deserves a mention here, or maybe *deserves* is the wrong

word. Although she is grandmotherly age now, twenty years ago she was a youthful and seductive fiftyish woman who professed to be the best friend our family ever had. She taught Benny and me to speak Spanish, baked for birthdays, came on Christmas, lent clothes to our mother from her large and extensive wardrobe. She had a husband, but he was a lesser light. I would say that for five years or so, Grace dominated our lives. She wasn't simply Ed's sidekick. She was his evil genius.

The consequences of her badness became clear only after they absconded.

It was Benny who found Mom. The night before, she had been going on with her grieving, but was steady for us nonetheless; she had been reading in bed when I went in to kiss her. She had taken a bath and smelled of gardenia. In the morning, Benny went in with some coffee and couldn't wake her. He kept me out of the bedroom but I could see him through the door: skinny in his striped bathrobe, phoning the ambulance. I glimpsed a bit of his pajama top and noticed that at sixteen he had hair on his chest, stubble on his chin, he looked like a man.

A clinical depression was diagnosed and Mom was incarcerated in a hospital supposedly too threatening for a twelve-year-old to visit. But bars and straitjackets could not be worse, I thought, as I passed the next years in the bookless apartment of Aunt Martha, Mom's sister, who put plastic on her furniture to protect the upholstery and didn't understand irony. Benny was away at boarding school, on the verge of college. I saw him rarely and every time he seemed taller, too tall, ugly, in fact, and more emphatically a stranger.

I grew, meanwhile, into a sad, competent woman, destined to teach English to tenth graders, terrorizing them with Poe and Dickens. (Parents complain I am cruel and demanding.) Benny was, annoyingly, literary as well. After graduation he began to affect string ties and cowboy boots and made an instant success writing potboilers with a Civil War background.

Since all his many research trips, including this one, were surely tax-deductible, he could have gotten an upgrade to a seat with more room in it. Beside me now he was wedged in, hanging out in the aisle, snoring loudly. I sat neatly, disdaining him, and

soon I slept, too.

At Mexico City airport, Benny took off his suit jacket and we drank beer, the only safe thing, while we waited for our flight farther south. I don't even like beer, and here I was having two of them. Benny had three, but given his height the effect was probably the same. The effect was grand. We started inventing bad black jokes about Ed and Grace and speculating about their sex life at this stage of the game. Even the sight of the plane, not exactly a Piper Cub but small enough, didn't faze us. We laughed at it, persuaded that anything carrying us to our predestined and fateful meeting with Ed and Grace couldn't possibly crash; would the gods deprive themselves of such a rich entertainment?

The flight was what they like to call turbulent. All they served was more beer. At one point we held hands in terror, hoping, I guess, to be close at the last. I prayed. Any soothing announcements by the pilot were in such rapid Spanish and so fraught with static that we couldn't understand them. All we could see was worry on the Mexican faces around us, and an older American couple in madras and spectacles asked us if we knew what was wrong. People always ask Benny things; he looks awkward, so they assume naïvely that he will be kind.

To tell you the truth, I think it wasn't the turbulence or the beer that made us sick, but the prospect of seeing Ed and Grace again after so long. We gazed at each other greenly as we landed and staggered out down the ladder into roaring heat, looking I'm sure like a pair of orphans ripe for a cool drink and, later, adoption.

Ed, but not Grace, met us. He looked so much like Benny, is what struck me first—then I realized it should be the other way around. I hugged him; there was a whole history to the way I put my arms around his chest, his bent head. He and Benny kind of clasped and patted the way most men do, trying not to touch.

He wore a tucked and embroidered shirt over old seersucker pants from a suit I remembered. Espadrilles and a watch you had to wind, which I also remembered, and a wedding ring. "Grace is managing dinner," he said by way of explaining her absence. I imagined her commanding a battalion of Mexican maids, all chopping, and as we waited for the bags he told us what we were

going to eat: shrimps with rémoulade sauce, chicken with chocolate, poached pears. His letters were always full of such details and when he and Grace traveled, they kept excellent records of their meals.

We got into the jeep and he started driving in a reckless fashion, glancing at me on his right and over his shoulder at Benny in the back seat. The talk was inconsequential, pointing out the new road that was supposed to be built but hadn't been yet, a neighbor's lavish garden, the shantytown with corrugated iron roofs, scratching chickens, thin goats and dogs and somber people watching the car sweep by. There were no tense silences, for Ed spoke fluently and noticeably without sarcasm. I thought he was afraid to be unkind, afraid even to stop talking, for fear we would vanish.

We wound up the hilltop to this hum, like a tune you've heard over and over in the deep past. Benny and I were glad to let it be. It was fine to listen, sway, sleep. To sit in the arms of our father's voice was fine.

BENNY

Ed looked old. Upsetting. Didn't help that we were besotted by beer in airport, stormy flight. Must have dozed off driving to the house.

I knew they had staff, but this was imperial. Like a goddamned plantation, servants running around, taking our bags. Thought they'd offer to unpack for us. But no.

Ed offered more alcohol. Declined. Went for nap. Senta had a drink with him. She's no drinker. What's she up to?

Grace looked good. Youthful. She's older than Ed, chronologically. Always was a fantastic cook. I think: Why have we hated her all these years? Then I remember.

Ed drinks way too much. He and Senta were red and stupid at dinner. Grace and I exchanged looks. Because I am tall like Ed, everyone assumes we are alike. This is bullshit. Senta is the one. She's short but weak. Seizing her chances. She was flirting with him, for God's sake. Grace looked miserable.

Next day was better. Senta told me sorry: It was the beer, then screwdrivers, then wine. Breakfast on terrace. Senta cool to Ed's

questions about toast, our plans for the day. Grace stony. Nice to me, though, plied me with strong tea.

Too hot to run. Went to pool for swim. Senta and I will go to Monte Albán, a ruin, later on when sun is weaker. Valley is something. Reminded us of valley our house overlooked when we were children, before the divorce. What a memory. Senta and I rolling down the hill. Tucked into our tree house. Small, tumbling, racing, crying, going on swings, riding the dog.

"We were so free," Senta said to the valley, not looking at me.

"We were stupid," I said. "We didn't see."

"See what?"

"The bad guys," I said. "What was coming."

I was the boy. So I had this knight idea. Spy the enemy. Protect Senta, protect Laura. Senta still calls her "Mom." I haven't since that day. You find your mother half-dead, pills and vomit on the sheets, you're on a first-name basis forever.

Senta got the worst of it, though. She had to stay, visit Laura, return letters unopened to Ed. I could get the hell out back to school. I decided to pretend I had no family. Other people's parents got fond of me during holidays. I worked summers on a boat. There was no reason to go back. No home. The house was sold. Senta was only a kid and her tongue even then was by no means sweet. I had a sofa bed at Aunt Martha's.

The point is, Ed and Grace did all that. It's like a war. There's some unlucky incident. An insult, an assassination. And it goes from there. No one can remember why. It just goes.

We borrowed the car; Senta drove. The relief of not being with Ed and Grace made us giddy. We ridiculed Grace's culinary obsessions, which included large pepper mills and orange juice squeezed from scratch by maids. Stopped in Oaxaca for drink, beer, of course. Main square is huge. Heavy trees. Lacy iron chairs. Children begging. Cathedral, which I skipped. Senta went in. She's got religious lately. Reading Merton, C. S. Lewis. As I said, she takes her opportunities.

Road was hot and dusty. I hate heights. Didn't trust Senta on the curves. Held my breath till the top. Monte Albán like a mesa. Flattened mountain, ruins on top. Great stone things, steep steps. Better than cathedral. A lot of climbing. Senta got foot-

sore. Had to stop frequently. Couldn't say, "Wear sneakers next time." Couldn't say, "Stop being so nice to Ed." Conversation flagged.

On way back, got dark. Perilous descent on mountain road. Senta couldn't figure out where lights turned on. Had to use turn signal. This confused other cars. Senta tense. As on plane, thought we might die. Said, "Do you forgive Ed?"

She looked over at me, then back at road. "Of course not. Shut up. I'm concentrating."

I don't forgive him. Even if he were expiring. He seems in rude health. No sign of an early demise. Why did we come?

"That's the turn," I said to Senta. She pulled the car up into the hills.

Grace and Ed waiting by door, reproachful. "Hell, we can't call if you have no phone," I said. Senta shot me a look. Beer in Ed's hand. Moon like cheese, creamy, rising over mountain. Grace offered crackers, soup, salts for Senta's feet.

Our rooms adjoined. Through the wall I could hear the bed creak as she got into it. She sighed. Clink, the water glass, her reading glasses. I was in bed, covers up to chin. Snug as a bug in a rug. Hey, Senta, remember summer nights in the bunk beds on the porch laughing and laughing. Ed coming to admonish us. Remember.

Woke up at six. Purple dark. Smelled woodsmoke. Heard roosters. Senta was snoring and the mountaintops were covered with cloud. Got up and went out on terrace. Bare feet, cold stones. A neighbor's yellow dog trotted up, stretched, snout searching me for food. No dawn yet. Senta came out in night-gown. "What are you doing up?" she said.

"I don't know," I told her. It's true.

She yawned and put her fists in her eyes, rubbing. "We should go to town and call Mom today," she said.

"Why?" I said. I hate how she's always making the piles equal: so much for Ed, so much for Laura. God forbid one of them should get more.

Senta didn't bother to answer. She got down on her knees to embrace the dog. Dogs are dearer to her than people. She says they are truer. I think she just wants to be adored. When she

stood up, I saw that the dog's tongue had left a wet streak on her nightgown. "Okay. We'll call," I said. She went back inside. The sky turned pink. I thought about Senta's body. My shrink says all boys dream of sisters. That doesn't make it all right.

The dog yearned toward the house. It wanted Senta.

SENTA

I swore I wouldn't compete with Benny. I mean, what's the prize? Life with Ed?

But when I looked up at Ed and wanted to press my face against his shirt, something sent me back. Benny became the monster child, the enormous brother, and I was, comparatively, fair of face, full of grace—full of shit.

This got especially intense the day after Benny and I went off on our own to Monte Albán. Neither of us slept. At breakfast he looked at me reproachfully and yet wolfishly, as if I was supposed to apologize or deliver an emotion he wanted. It made me uneasy. I veered away as if from a scar or a missing limb. I couldn't look at him.

Ed, of course, noticed nothing. Grace probably did, I saw her small, bright eyes taking in the aversion and not minding. The last thing she wanted was the family reconstituting itself like long-stored orange juice, bubbling to life on her doorstep and leaving her out.

"Ed, please get some lettuce for lunch, and more beer," Grace said when our late breakfast was concluded and one of the maids, bad teeth and a crown of braids, was clearing the table.

He looked from Benny to me and back. He wanted a helper. I felt the thick and urgent desire to be first, and I said, "I'll come."

Benny shifted in his seat and growled, sort of.

"Unless, of course—" I said, glancing at Benny, knowing I was safe. Ed was beaming.

"Don't worry," Benny said, tight. "I'll read."

Ed and I went off with a clutch of bright plastic carryalls. He handed me a long, sharp knife, and I bent to slice the ripe green heads of bibb close to the root. I cut three of them, heavy with dirt and dew. Then we went to a storehouse near the garden and loaded the bags further with the brown bottles of cerveza Ed

drank from eleven in the morning until bedtime. Grace drank only wine, and two large glasses of sherry every night before dinner.

I expected Benny to be sitting there waiting for us, looking petulant. Instead he was speaking to Dolores, the maid with the braids, as she washed breakfast dishes; he knew a little Spanish from a book he once wrote, before his Civil War successes, about the Alamo. It was in diary form and represented the common soldier's point of view, Mexican and Texan.

Ed joined in. God knows what they were babbling about. Ed's own Spanish, even after all the years here, sounded like something produced by an earnest tourist: It would serve, it was diligently expressed, but the Midwestern cadence was unchanged, and so words came out flat and patient, almost unrecognizable. Grace, on the other hand, sounded as if she had been born to it. Our father was never much of a chameleon. Benny and I were regularly distressed, when we were little, by how much he stuck out, tall and slow, at brisk New England school events.

When we went into town later, I let Benny do the talking. Before, he had claimed to have forgotten all his Spanish and I had too easily believed him. It changed things, having him in charge. Then we had a fight in the Larga Distancia. This is an obscure and shabby storefront on a side street with four stand-up phone stations inside and an operator who will dial a number for you and charge the proper amount when the call is over. Benny did all the preliminary negotiations, but then he wouldn't speak to Mom. I told her he was coming on and held the receiver out and he backed off, loitering outside until it was time to pay. It cost twenty dollars.

I raised my voice and the operator stared at the sound of unintelligible shouting. Benny slumped and shrugged and didn't yell back. "I didn't want to," he kept saying as we left. "Tough!" I said, the teacher. "Too bad, that's life, doing stuff you'd rather not do. That's adult. That's reality."

I was really cooking. I was enjoying myself. If I'd had a lash, I couldn't have been happier.

Benny never fought back, he froze up and hulked along. This was a pattern of long standing. Now he was walking a little ahead

of me, head down, a bird searching for crumbs. He was signifying his hurt. This was my cue to make some conciliatory comment. I didn't. Instead, I pointed out that we hadn't bought a present for Mom. "You made me forget," I said to Benny as we went back to the car. "Because you don't think of her. You don't care."

He didn't deny it but sat in the car like a child on the way to a dreadful appointment, staring out the window.

For some reason I can't explain, I didn't make the turn for Ed and Grace's house but continued along the narrow, hot road toward more hills, unknown territory, and I saw Benny getting nervous, I saw him stiffen and sit up as he saw the unfamiliar landscape. "Stop," he said. "Where are we going?"

"What are you afraid of?" I asked. "Bandits? Cactus?"

He shook his head. "We don't know the way."

"So?" The road was getting more rutted, less cared-for, and the houses were poorer, the dogs skinnier. "It's still light. We can get back." I gunned the dusty old car and it racketed down a hill, past a burro bearing a load of corn husks five feet high.

Benny looked desperate. Then I remembered a gnarled sort of fairy tale from our childhood: He got lost in the woods near our house. They were only trees close together, nothing to be frightened of, and I always seemed to know where I was among them, even after dark. But Benny had been older when we moved to Massachusetts. What he was used to were wheatland vistas where nothing could hide. To him, the damp and tangle of the forest was a mystery he did not love, and he rarely went there alone. He had done it this time in despair because Mom had said or implied that he was a bean pole or a weakling or a milquetoast. He was ten maybe, eleven.

I rescued him, even though I was tiny. I was sturdy, Mom loved my self-reliance and my able little legs and rough, brown curly hair. When at six o'clock it became clear that Benny was missing, I went out calling for him and soon pushed my way into the woods where the deep green evergreens made everything that much darker. I had a flashlight. I heard Mom and Ed shouting and running behind me, ordering me to wait, but I plunged on with a kind of radar, my beam going straight to

where Benny was, sitting on a stump, tears dried on his face and now hungry but too stubborn to go home. I don't know if I hugged him. I was so much smaller and younger than he was; he always got gruff in front of me and wouldn't admit his misery. But he came with me. His red plaid shirt and his wary eyes got trapped in the larger beam of Ed's flash when we met our parents on the path.

Remembering, I stopped the car. Immediately the terror left Benny's face. He slumped in the seat. "Why do you let me torture you?" I said and got out and slammed the door. I looked at the harsh country. Nothing was moving. I was standing close to a cactus, I could see its spines and texture like the pores on a beloved ugly face, and I hit out at it, getting spikes in my hand and little holes where blood started up. I got back in the car and sucked my hand. "You can have Ed," I said. "Take him! You deserve to get at least one parent."

"Don't be ridiculous," he said, but he grinned.

"What a gift, huh?" I said, laughing, too, and I turned the car around like a race driver and we bounced back down the road to Ed and Grace's, released for a moment in euphoric truce.

BENNY

Damn. Damn it. Big fight with Ed. Politics, of course. He's so fucking naïve. Workers of the world uniting. What irony. Grand house, servants, he's practically a manor lord and he talks revolution.

I didn't say exactly that. I did point out that he was an expatriate Stalinist. Dangerously ignorant. Possibly senile. Ed didn't attack back. Just looked wounded.

When I was a kid, he swaddled me with Marxism. Pressed Soviet books on me. (The paper smelled sour and they were usually about child heroes of the Resistance.) Always making rabid speeches at me. He came in and sat on my bed but instead of singing me to sleep or telling a story, he would give me the business about the Bomb or the Cold War. Never did that with Senta. No compliment to her, probably. Only a girl, et cetera.

Ed and I raged on. Senta and Grace went silent. Highly uncharacteristic. Hausfrau behavior. They busied themselves with

coffee. Chatted softly about recipes. Cast reproving looks our way. It got late. The fire sank. Grace yawned and went to bed. Senta stuck there, fading. Whatever she'd said on the road, she wasn't willing to leave Ed to me.

There we were, the three of us. Seemed auspicious. Ripe for truth. No one spoke for a while. Then Ed said, "Well, you could be right."

"What?" I said. Didn't sound like the old orthodox Ed.

He shrugged and smiled. Weak. Sweet. "What do I know? I read a lot. I try to be decent. Let's go to bed."

"But, wait," I said. This was nothing to bite on. "I was mad. I'm sorry."

"Forget it."

How could I forget it? The next day was our last day. Nothing had been done. Nothing had been said. Ed and Grace and Senta were pretending that everything was swell and normal. Whitewash. Cover-up. Take down those wanted-man posters. Come home, Billy the Kid, all is forgiven. War's over. Lost your life, but hey, someone has to make sacrifices.

Also: Senta couldn't stop groaning about the present for Laura she hadn't bought. Even to Grace. Jesus. Naturally, Grace found something. An extra shawl. Senta offered to pay. The whole transaction disgusted me. Trading with the enemy.

Ed invited us to take one token apiece from the house. He kept talking about when he and Grace "go," he meant "die," and it wouldn't be long and who knew how soon we'd be here again. I felt a distaste. Grave robbing. Grace robbing. (Who, incidentally, stood by looking fierce. This was not her idea but Ed's.)

Senta bouncy about it. Went around fingering things. Asking questions. No valley of the shadow, or shadow of the valley. She took a wooden dog with yellow eyes, black spots, and a sprouting tail. Ed laughed. Wrapped it in tissue paper. They waited for me.

I took a big black pot. The famous black pottery of Oaxaca. It was funereal. Everyone frowned. "Hard to carry," Ed said. But I insisted.

Grace gave me bubble wrap and tape and a large plastic shopping bag that said AU PRINTEMPS (she and Ed liked France; the

food was crucial). Went to my room imagining airport security: —What's in there, Señor? —Oh, my father's ashes. —I beg your pardon, Señor!

In one of my books there is a Union soldier whose father dies while he is away down south fighting. Gets a letter months after. By the time he is home on leave, his mother's mourning year is almost over. She is sick of black bombazine and wants to dine out. But he feels newly bereaved. He stares at the headstone for hours as if it would force the ground to yield up his father. Back to battle he goes, wearing boots that were the dead man's. They don't protect him.

The book didn't sell well. Too sad. I guess I wrote it to exorcise Ed. Didn't work. He's alive, after all: kicking. Sick with the possibility that in carrying off the pot, I might be snatching his soul, hastening his end. When all I wanted was protection.

I wrapped it carefully. Then I packed. Knock on door. Hoped it was Senta, envious, wishing she had picked better. It was Dolores. She had a shirt she had washed and ironed for me. Smell of bleach. Smooth-pressed, warm. Told me in Spanish to have a safe journey. I asked were Ed and Grace good, and she said yes. I asked was she happy, and she said yes but her eyes said: Who's happy? Old eyes.

After she left, I laid my cheek against the shirt. I needed the touch.

SENTA

I called the dog Jack. Ed had always been an admirer of Jack London, and not only *The Call of the Wild;* besides, the animal had a raffish, awkward look: No pretentious name from history or mythology would do.

I hate not being able to have a real dog. My lease doesn't allow one. And it would die before me.

I could have murdered Benny for taking that enormous pot. First of all, it's too valuable and he'll probably break it en route, he's not well coordinated, and it will never fit in the luggage rack. He took advantage. Ed meant us to pick just some trinket to remember him by, not the biggest thing in the house.

We got into the car to go to the airport around four o'clock.

Benny sat in back with the giant pot on his lap. He winced whenever we went over a bump, and since Ed had already consumed several beers, his driving was not as smooth as in the morning. I hoped he knew the road blind by this time. Grace sitting there calmly reassured me. She was a practical woman with a strong instinct for survival. If she doubted Ed's sobriety, she could ask me to take over. She didn't drive anymore herself. Cataracts.

At the airport, once we had checked in, Ed said they'd be going now, they wouldn't wait. Grace arranged herself beside him, short by his tall, tucking her arm into his, and they stood together like a portrait waiting to be kissed and painted. I did what I should, then Benny. But I wanted Ed to wave us into the sky. I wanted him to cry and think of us up to the last moment.

When they had passed through the glass doors to the parking lot and disappeared perhaps forever, I said to Benny, "They could have waited."

"Well," he said, "when have they?" At the gate where we were lined up, he was the center of attention, so tall and with the pot clasped in his arms like a holy child.

This was what we did best together, Benny and I: suffered deprivation. We agreed to expect nothing in the way of love, and showed each other our scarred and hardened hearts. Now that there was no one to vie for, it was easy.

We talked a lot on the trip back. We analyzed every stitch and wink and morsel of the four days, except for the conflicts between us, which we pretended were petty, an inheritance from the playground. I permitted myself to hope for a happy ending.

Too bad it didn't come true.

The true ending isn't an ending. It's a perpetual present with a few cards and letters and phone calls traveling between me and Benny and Grace and Ed, each one launched with a little glow of enterprise, like a venturing ship, then fading as it receives no proper response. Benny and I, for example, don't have any momentum at all. The only time we get fired up is when we jeer at Ed and Grace. The rest is demand, defense, embarrassment, silence; we can't even make a plan to have dinner. As for Ed and Grace, I write less and don't care to go again. I wonder if I'll

mind when they die.

I put Jack on my desk. His wise and crazy yellow eyes urge me not to forget... something, I don't know what. Mexico. The conquest. Heat and cactus. Danger. Pain. The part that goes into exile.

I asked Benny once, on the phone, interrupting a difficult silence, "What did you do with the pot?"

He seemed surprised. Then he said, "Ashes to ashes." I was startled. For a second I thought Ed was dead and Benny knew and I didn't. Then he said, "The fireplace. I put it by the fireplace."

That was the best conversation we've had.

. . .

When bad guys get old, people forget that they ever were bad. Age grants clemency. They become retired desperadoes with soft chins and swollen knuckles, robbed of their flash and devilry. No one wants to hang them by the neck anymore.

Well, maybe some do. But they're not going to go out of their way to accomplish it.

Specifically, Senta and Benny are not going to go back to Mexico to continue their Western movie. They are not planning to pursue Ed and Grace across the mountains; to duel them by moonlight, cruel as the Aztecs, high up at Monte Albán. This is because they are tired. They can't decide to love Grace and Ed, and they can't decide not to.

On the hilltop, Dolores sweeps the smooth floor. She stops sometimes and looks at the valley. She has five children, and chickens. She is thirty. This is the best it will get.

Grace and Ed, meanwhile, hide from the heat in their bedroom. They lie on ironed sheets, waiting for sundown—beer and brandy and kinder light. Grace is afraid Ed will die first, and he is afraid that she will. They watch each other sleep.

He has an M.A. in Romance languages from Princeton University and has nearly completed his Ph.D. dissertation on Rimbaud. His poems have appeared in *The Paris Review, The Yale Review,* and *Raritan.* **ANDREW TOWLE** was born in 1967 and grew up in River Forest, Ill., outside Chicago. Inspired by a modern verse class at Vassar College, he began writing poetry, and after receiving encouragement from professors, he submitted his work to small magazines. His first publication was in *Poetry.* Upon graduation, he received a W. K. Rose Fellowship from Vassar, as well as a Wallace Stegner Fellowship from Stanford. As a fellow at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, he started working on *Nights of the Hunted,* a novel-in-progress about a group of friends living in post-AIDS San Francisco. He has published in *The Yale Review, Shankpainter,* and *Christopher Street,* and has finished a manuscript of poems, *The Dead Sea at Dinner.* He lives in New York City. **MARK TURPIN**, 39, has been a carpenter in the Oakland-Berkeley hills for fifteen years. He has two children from his first marriage, which lasted seventeen years; in 1991, he was remarried to Suzanne Qualls, a poet and performance artist. In terms of his development as a poet, he feels the most debt to Robert Pinsky, who invited him to audit a graduate writing workshop at UC Berkeley in 1986 and 1987. He has been published in *The Paris Review* and *The Threepenny Review,* and has nearly completed a book-length manuscript entitled *Nailer.* **KATHERINE WEISSMAN**, 47, received her B.A. from Washington University in St. Louis, and now makes her home in New York City. In her twenties, she held a variety of jobs, including proofreading for an anarchist press and assisting a veterinarian. During the '70s, she was an editor for *Liberation,* a collectively run radical magazine, then went on to edit for *The Ladies' Home Journal, Cosmopolitan,* and *Mademoiselle,* where she is Associate Editor. Four years ago, she started taking fiction workshops at the Writer's Voice at the West Side Y and also at the Poetry Center at the 92nd Street Y. "The Divorce Gang" is her second published story. She is at work on a novel called *The House of Delight.* **NANCY WHITE** began teaching English at Saint Ann's School in Brooklyn immediately after graduating from Oberlin College in 1982. While teaching, she earned an M.F.A. from Sarah Lawrence College, by which time her first poems were published in *Ploughshares.* She took a sabbatical in 1991–92 to concentrate on her writing, with residencies at the MacDowell Colony and the Fine Arts Work Center, and finished her first book. The book, *Sun, Moon, Salt,* won the Washington Prize and is due out from WordWorks in early 1993. **SANDRA YANNONE**, born in 1964, lived her entire childhood in Connecticut. She received her B.A. in English from Wheaton College in 1986, and completed half of her course work toward a law degree at Boston University before deciding to enroll in Emerson College's M.F.A. program. Currently she is a Ph.D. candidate in creative writing at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. She spent one year working full time as the first editor of *The Long-term View,* a public-policy journal at the Massachusetts School of Law. She has published poems in *Quarterly West, Phoebe,* and other magazines, and has finished a full-length manuscript entitled *Other Woman.*