

SCULPTING ROSE AND LILY

by Julia Rubin

A sharp wind cut through the jacket of the thin dark haired man walking down Ninth Avenue but he didn't notice. He was following a woman.

Her round hips swung freely beneath a silky skirt. Her pace was unhurried, as though she had the luxury of time. She walked close beside another woman, one arm draped over her shoulder. They were the same height and had the same wavy black hair, but beneath cotton pleats the second woman's walk was not as enticing.

As the women turned a corner the man quickened his pace to slip ahead, then stopped and turned. The women looked identical, high cheekbones, hazel eyes, and young, eighteen, maybe twenty. At thirty-one he felt old, too old. And the look the second one gave him said *walk on*. He was about to when the first woman smiled. At his expense, he was sure, but it lit up her face.

He reached into his inside pocket and pulled out a lace handkerchief. "Excuse me. I think you dropped this."

"I think we didn't. No one carries handkerchiefs these days."

"Maybe this will bring them back into fashion."

"Let's go," the second said, but stayed beside the first.

He held out the handkerchief so that either could reach it. "Please. For brightening my day."

The first woman smiled again and took it. He smiled back then glanced at the second woman and began checking his other pockets until he pulled out another handkerchief and held it out to her. The first woman burst into laughter.

"How many of these do you give away in a day?"

"Come on," the second hissed.

He put his hand over his heart. "It's rare I even try. Really. As rare as seeing such a smile, Miss ..."

"Rose. And my sister is Lily."

He tipped an imaginary hat. "Jason."

A raw gust whipped across 47th Street and the sun vanished behind a swath of clouds. Both women shivered.

"It's almost a lovely morning for a walk," Jason said, then pointed to a coffee shop across the street. "May I buy you a cup of coffee?" He looked from Rose to Lily. "Both of you, if you'd like."

"It's both of us or neither," said Rose. Then she and Lily began to argue. They turned their heads, but remained side by side. Looking straight at them, it still took Jason a moment to understand. They were joined, below the shoulder, above the waist. As he was trying to wrap his mind around that the arguing stopped and Rose said, "A quick cup."

As Jason slid into the booth opposite them it occurred to him that his presence made their sitting together seem normal. The waitress barely looked up as she set down three cups.

Lily lowered her head and closed her eyes.

To Jason's questioning look Rose said, "She's gone away. It's how we give each other time alone," but her face was drawn.

"I invited you both," he said.

Her smile returned. She touched her sister's shoulder.

Jason slid cups towards Lily and Rose, then sipped his own. "The coffee is pretty good."

Silence.

"You never know. I haven't been here before."

More silence.

"I live downtown, but I was out walking. I often go out in the early morning, especially on Sundays. The city feels peaceful then, don't you think?"

Lily whispered something to Rose. Rose nodded.

"Do you always carry women's handkerchiefs?"

"I never know what I'm carrying." He began to pull things from his jacket pockets; a small notebook, a box of matches, a pen, a list, several business cards with a drawing of a hand holding a business card, a piece of charcoal wrapped in cloth, an envelope with a stamp. "Damn!" he said, immediately apologized, then picked up the pen and wrote on the list *mail bill*.

Rose laughed. Jason shrugged. "I have to admit I did remember I had a handkerchief." The pen was still in his hand. "But it really is rare I try to give one away." He opened the notebook and started to draw.

"Then why..."

"You smiled. People on the street rarely smile, and never so brightly." He dropped his eyes to the notebook. "So why did you agree to coffee?"

"I don't know. I guess because you were funny. And because you didn't realize. About us. It was nice. There are so many..."

"Creeps." Lily.

"It's still better than home," Rose said to her. To Jason, "In the city we can sort of hide."

"The city can be lonely." Jason turned to a blank page.

"I don't know. What we really miss are trees, grass, the sky."

"But New York has those. In Central Park, Prospect Park, lots of places. I could show..."

"A *quick* cup," Lily whispered to Rose.

Jason tore two pages from his notebook, on each a sketch. Rose alone. Lily alone.

"It's really good," Rose said of hers, but she looked at it as if he'd drawn her without an arm.

He walked them to the corner. "It really is rare that I pull out a handkerchief. And an invitation to coffee..." He shook his head. "Thank you."

Rose blushed. "We never even talk..."

Lily tugged at Rose.

"Anyway, thank you."

“Before you go...” He pulled one of the cards from his pocket and held it out just like the hand on the card did. “I’d love to take you to dinner.” He glanced at the coffee shop. “Someplace nice. I won’t ask for your number, but can I give you mine?” He handed the card to Rose, then leaned forward and kissed her hand. He reached for Lily's but she tucked it in her pocket.

“Please call,” he said, “even if it’s to say no.” Then he tipped his imaginary hat and walked away.

Jason found drawing two months after he found his father slumped over his desk with a gun in his hand. He was sixteen.

His father had been a poet with wildly swinging moods, but his love for his family was so great that they forgave him his outbursts and looked past his despair.

With his death Jason’s mother crumbled, so all the arrangements fell to him, and when the condolence calls stopped and her mourning continued it was he who cleaned the house and cooked the meals and held her when she cried. He pushed away the last image he had of his father, and when it would not leave, he would, roaming the city in search of something to smother it.

One day, on the advice of a friend of his father’s, Jason picked up a pencil and began a picture of his father as he’d found him. When it was done he tore it to shreds and began a different one, of his father as he’d once been, happy, well. As he drew an ache gripped his throat. He finished the picture through a blur of tears.

Jason filled a sketchbook with pictures of his father. He bought another to carry when he roamed the streets, drawing junkies and drunks, old men and tired whores, anyone with nowhere to go and no need to move.

He drew them as they were, and as they might have been. When drawing was no longer enough, he started to sculpt.

Sunday morning, the sun barely risen, Jason was walking up Sixth Avenue. It was a week since he'd met Rose and Lily.

When traffic stopped him he turned east to keep moving and found himself in Washington Square. Beside the fountain a hippie in a tie-dyed robe was playing a flute while three girls in blue jeans danced around him. It was a circular tune, the beginning leading back to itself so that as long as Jason listened the end never came. With each circle the tension of waiting grew until at last he had to leave.

At the edge of the park he saw a rose lying at the base of a tree, a pale pink bud. He picked it up and made a wish. A few hours after he got home his telephone rang.

Jason invited the twins to a cafe in the Village. He greeted them with flowers, but Lily's focus was on the closely spaced tables. "I thought we might eat in the garden," Jason said, and ushered them through a side door.

Vine-covered walls enclosed a courtyard. In one corner a reclining mermaid kept an eye on three overgrown goldfish lazing in a pool. Jason led Rose and Lily to a table near the pool. A waiter followed with menus and a bottle of wine.

"I took the liberty," Jason said. Rose's mouth tensed. "But if you don't drink..."

"Oh, no. I mean, we do." Rose glanced at Lily. "A little."

The waiter poured and Jason raised his glass.

"Thank you for coming. You've made a poor artist very happy."

He took a sip and Rose did the same. Her eyes roamed the courtyard. "It's lovely."

“So are you. Both.” He twirled the stem of his glass. "Lovely and brave. Coming to New York all alone."

“We’re never alone,” Lily said.

The waiter’s return saved Jason from responding. As he recited the day’s specials Rose glanced uncertainly from him to the menu and back.

“I could make some suggestions,” Jason offered. He ended up ordering for them all.

“We don’t eat out much,” Rose said when the waiter had gone.

“Then this is even more special.”

Jason took a sip of wine. Rose sat with her hands in her lap, Lily with her eyes lowered.

“Bread?”

“What?”

“Would you like some bread?”

“Oh. Yes.”

Jason held out the basket.

“It’s warm!” Rose exclaimed. Immediately her cheeks reddened. “You must think we’re...”

“Charming. And lovely. And unique. Even your clothes. Have you always dressed differently?”

“Since we started sewing for ourselves. We learned when we were little. Sort of self defense.”

Lily shot a look at Rose who quickly added, “If we wanted to look nice.”

“You look very nice.” What else could he say? He gestured towards the pool. “Would you believe those fish used to be tiny, like you keep as pets? A friend of mine won them out at Coney Island. On the way home we stopped here for a beer and he decided they’d be happier in the pool than a bowl. I didn’t think it was a good idea but he dumped them in anyway. It’s been five years and they’re still alive. I think they are happier. My friend always reminds me he was right.”

The waiter brought their salads and wished them a bon appétit. The lull as they ate grew to silence.

Jason looked around the courtyard as Rose had. “I grew up in New York and I’m still amazed there are places like this right in the city.”

“Do you come here often?” Rose asked. Lily gave her a look that made her add, “I guess so.”

Jason answered with stories about the café, how, late at night, poets and composers would gather downstairs to share new works and cheap wine while the cook fed them the evening’s leftovers.

All through dinner Jason told stories, interrupting himself with enough questions to learn that Rose and Lily played piano, that Lily liked classical music, that they supported themselves by sewing, that Rose liked to read romance novels and Lily, poetry. He didn’t ask which poets.

For dessert Jason insisted they have the chocolate mousse, declaring it “Pure heaven.”

As he ate his he sculpted it, each spoonful a bit of clay torn away. On his plate a woman’s torso took shape. Rose’s eyes widened.

“I do better in stone,” he said, pointing to the mermaid.

“You made that?” Rose

Jason nodded. “You should see what I do with marble.”

“Marble? Like in a church?” Lily. Wary. Curious.

“Yes. I mean, none of my sculptures are in a church, but like that.” He took a breath. “I have some at my studio. If you’d like to see them.”

Rose looked at Lily. Lily looked at the mermaid. Jason crossed his fingers.

He walked the twins to the bus stop then headed downtown to his studio. His thoughts were not on Rose, but Lily. Should he have let her ‘go away’ at the coffee shop? It would have made things easier. Except it wouldn’t. She couldn’t ‘go away’ forever.

Jason's studio took up half of the top floor of an old factory in Tribeca. It was cold in the winter and hot in the summer, but the rent was cheap and it was filled with light. Windows lined the south wall and a skylight took up most of the ceiling. His workbench, pushed against the north wall, was covered with tools, wire skeletons, clay figures. Underneath were spools of wire, tubs of clay, and broken blocks of granite he’d pulled from dumpsters.

Wooden crates, also rescued, were scattered around the studio, each holding a sculpture of stone or clay. His favorite was a face tilted back, eyes closed, tongue peeking between parted lips.

He saved the center of the room for the marble, three pieces set on velvet-draped pedestals; a woman’s torso, arms reaching towards an embrace, exquisite but for a savage scar where her right breast would have been; a thin man curled into a ball, his face a mixture of yearning and pain; a shapely calf and ankle, ending in a club foot.

Jason spent half the night before the twins' visit cleaning up the studio. He rearranged the sculptures a dozen times, trying to picture the twins moving among them, then looked through every record in his collection before choosing Chopin.

At the first knock he hurried to open the door. As Rose led them in Lily seemed to hang back until she heard the music. Jason silently thanked Chopin.

He steered them to his worktable where a wire form stood half covered with clay. Drawings of an old woman were taped to the wall. Dozens of drawings. Jason tried to explain how he *saw* them into a model. Sometimes two models. Sometimes more. However many it took to see every detail of the sculpture. Only then did he go near the marble. Marble. The twins looked towards the center of the studio.

"Please," he said. "Take your time. I'll make some coffee." He disappeared through an alcove in the back of the studio. When he returned they were staring at the sculpture of the club foot.

I'm an idiot, he thought. What he said was, "Let me tell you the story."

He ushered them towards the alcove where a loveseat draped in peach brocade sat in front of a table set with mismatched china. Beside the pot of coffee was a basket of warm croissants. Jason filled their cups then settled himself on a red velvet ottoman.

"It was an old girlfriend's foot," he began.

"Did you give her a handkerchief?" Rose asked, not smiling.

"That was before the handkerchiefs. But I was out walking. The door of a bar opened and I heard this joyful laughter. I followed it in and spent the next hour talking to the happiest person I'd ever met. I didn't find out about her foot until I offered to walk her home. By then it didn't matter."

"What happened?"

“She'd always accepted herself, her foot. But it hurt. I'd read that in ancient Mesopotamia they'd make a statue to lure the pain from flesh to stone. When I told her about it, her face lit up. That was the greatest feeling.

“After I finished that sculpture I made another of her foot as it might have been, healthy, straight.” He sighed. “When she saw it, she, who'd always been content, began to want. She started fixating on feet, on shoes. One day she bought a pair of spike-heeled pumps. The next, she started calling doctors.

“In the hospital she kept the sculpture of the healthy foot by her bed. The surgery was a success. She said it was because of the sculpture. But she married her surgeon.”

He started pouring more coffee though none of their cups was empty.

“Was she happier?” Jason was startled to hear Lily. “After the operation?”

“She was always happy. But afterwards she didn't hurt. Her surgeon was like her, happy.”

“You were happy before she left you,” Rose said, as if in his defense.

“I was in love. I thought I had a chance to be happy.”

“And the other sculptures?” Lily again.

“People think art should show beauty. But sometimes beauty is hidden. That's what Rodin did, saw beauty where others didn't.”

The twins had never heard of Rodin. Jason tried to describe one of his sculptures but gave up. “There are some Rodins at the Met. It's a wonderful museum,” he added, answering the question in their eyes. “You could see them for yourselves. I could take you.”

“Could we go there on our own?” Lily.

“Of course, though a guide can be good, someone who knows his way around art, and around the museum. Around art, anyway. It’s been a while since I went to the Met and it’s a big museum.”

Rose laughed. It wasn’t that funny but she laughed anyway.

Jason smiled “Is that a yes?”

Rose laughed again, looked at Lily, and nodded. Jason wanted to hug her.

At the door of the studio he started to do just that, but as he reached towards her with his right hand his left hovered near Lily’s shoulder. He let both drop.

After they’d gone he stood by the door, trying to imagine a less awkward good bye, but his mind was blank.

Still, the following Wednesday, Jason was at the museum ushering Rose and Lily inside. As they took in main hall, with its domed ceiling and mosaic floor, they seemed to forget their concern about being stared at themselves.

He led them through the dim labyrinth of the Byzantine rooms to the airy brightness of the Sculpture Court, its walls rising two stories to meet the vaulted glass ceiling. At the far end a sun-streaked glass wall set Rodin’s “The Burghers of Calais” in silhouette. Jason led the twins close so they could see the details. The men’s robes, hands, even faces, were unnaturally rough, yet they seemed more life-like than any of the others in the court.

From there Jason led the twins up to a hall filled with Rodins. He showed them “Clenched Left Hand”, then stopped in front of “The Old Courtesan.” Despite her wrinkled skin and sagging breasts, Rodin had graced the old woman with shadows of her former beauty. Rose and Lily struggled to see what Jason saw, looking closely as he pointed to the high cheekbones and wide brow.

He saved “Fallen Caryatid With Stone” for last, a beautiful young woman crouching beneath the weight of a stone block balanced on her shoulder.

“I love her the most,” he said. “Despite the weight of her burden she looks more sad than pained, and more beautiful for that sadness.” As Rose and Lily looked at her Jason stood protectively behind them.

“How can a statue seem so sad?” Rose asked.

“I don’t know. That’s the genius of Rodin.”

Jason took one detour after another as he guided them back to the main doors, even managing to find the exhibit of musical instruments, which he thought pleased Lily.

Outside the museum the twins took their time descending the broad steps, looking back as though loath to leave.

As Jason walked them to the corner he saw their bus a block away. Throwing caution to the wind he moved to kiss Rose’s cheek, but she turned her head and his lips brushed hers. Her cheeks went red. Lily turned her face away but Jason caught a look of sadness that echoed the Fallen Caryatid. He reached for her hand. The light turned green and the bus started towards them. He let his hand drop.

“There’s a concert next week,” he blurted out. “Classical. I think you’d like it, Lily.” He’d find a concert. This was New York. The bus pulled up, he said he’d call, and then they were gone.

Jason headed across Central Park towards the subway, but before he reached it he turned south. He had a meeting at an art gallery in the flower district. It was almost sixty blocks away, but he needed to think, and to think he had to walk.

He’d always moved cautiously with women, but with Rose he’d taken it to the extreme. How could he get close to her with Lily right there? If he did try anything,

they'd think he was a creep. And wouldn't he be? He reminded himself that he'd been attracted to Rose before he'd understood about Lily. But now wasn't he courting both of them, in a way? He let out a groan which shook him out of his thoughts. He realized he'd passed the gallery five blocks back.

Instead of the usual wine and cheese opening, the gallery owner was holding a tea dance to introduce an exhibit by a romantic British painter, and he'd hired Jason to design the event. It was one of the ways Jason paid the rent.

He tried to focus on the meeting, but while discussing the shape of the dance floor he was struck by an image of himself waltzing across the room with Rose and Lily in his arms.

Rose's voice brightened. "A tea dance?" Then Lily's, too quiet for him to catch her words, but she sounded upset.

Jason had worried she might be. "I thought a friend of mine might join us." If he could find someone for her... "He's a poet. Not tall, but dark and handsome. And he's a really nice guy."

"A poet!" Rose.

"No." Lily.

With that Jason felt Rose's excitement fade. He asked to speak to Lily, trying to figure out what to say as he listened to the rustle of Rose passing the phone.

"Lily, when I heard about this tea dance, I thought of how you love music. A string quartet will be playing. We don't have to dance, but sitting in an indoor garden listening to Viennese waltzes, and they'll serve English tea and the loveliest pastries..."

Silence.

“And enough famous people will be there that no one will be paying attention to us.” He couldn’t say “you.”

Jason heard whispering, then Rose came back on. “She doesn’t want your friend to come.”

Now what? “He doesn’t have to. I just thought... but, Rose, and Lily, if I might have the pleasure of your company at the tea dance, it would make me very happy.”

Jason’s first glimpse of the twins left him speechless. Rose wore a dress of peach silk, it’s V-neck echoed in a Basque waist. Her hair was done in a French braid that hung over her outside shoulder. Lily’s dress was pearl grey. The bateau neck was demure, but the fitted skirt revealed a figure as shapely as her sister’s. Her hair, coiled in a chignon, accentuated the grace of her neck.

He led them into the gallery where small tables draped with pink cloths alternated with flowering trees to form an oval around a parquet floor. Waiters carrying silver trays with pots of tea and bottles of champagne skirted the edges of the room. Jason led the twins to a table near the entrance. Rose exclaimed with delight over everything from the delicate cups to the pink-iced petit fours. Lily kept looking around uncertainly, yet beneath her nervousness Jason sensed excitement.

The quartet raised their bows and The Blue Danube Waltz filled the room. As couples moved to the dance floor Rose and Lily followed them with their eyes.

“Would you like to dance?” Jason guessed that they never had, but as they watched they’d begun to sway.

“You’ve played a waltz on the piano, haven’t you? All you have to do is think your hands into your feet. Come. I’ll show of you.”

As the quartet began a slow waltz Jason took Lily's hand and led them onto the dance floor, then reached around to cup Rose's back. Stares followed them.

"Don't worry," he said. "I'll take care of you."

As they began to move he murmured beneath the music "*left right left/ right left right/ simple your/feet know the/rhythm and/flow of the/waltz with me/ waltz with me/waltz.*"

Following his lead came easily. They'd been following one another's their whole lives.

The next waltz was faster, and Jason swept them around the floor. Rose radiated joy, and Jason basked in it. Lily closed her eyes and the tension in her face softened as though she was having a lovely dream. They danced every waltz to the last.

As soon as the quartet stood for their bow Jason ushered the twins from the floor and out of the gallery, the stares that followed them cut off by the closing doors. Despite their hasty exit, the twins seemed to float on the air of the waltz. Floating along with them Jason asked, for the first time, if he might walk them home.

The sky to the west was streaked with pink. A hint of the day's warmth still hung in the air. Rose relived the afternoon in bursts of chatter while Jason, walking beside her, leaned forward every few phrases to include Lily. Though she said nothing she seemed to glow with a quiet joy.

"This is it," said Rose. They stopped in front of a red brick building on 31st Street east of 9th Avenue. The sun hung low in the sky. Its light warmed Rose's face, throwing her shadow over Lily. Jason fell silent, entranced by the image.

"We should probably go in," Rose said.

Jason blinked. “I’m sorry. I was just... the light, and the way you... I was thinking what an incredible sculpture...”

Lily and Rose looked at each other. A whole conversation passed in that look, as though they’d feared from the start that he meant to use them, and their fear had just come true.

“Please. I didn’t...” Jason took a breath. “If you could see what I see, how beautiful you look, you’d understand. I’ve been asking you out because I like spending time with you, showing you new things. It makes me happy.” Another breath. “But just now, seeing you in this light, so lovely, so different. If I was a poet you’d have inspired a sonnet, if I was a composer, a concerto. But I’m a sculptor.”

He thought their expressions softened, but they said nothing.

“I should let you go, but I’ll see you soon, OK? I haven’t shown you half the things I promised.” Without moving to kiss Rose, or to take Lily’s hand, he added, “Thank you for this afternoon. It was one of the nicest I’ve ever spent.”

He watched them disappear into their building, then walked back along 31st Street.

“Stupid,” he muttered aloud. Why did he mention the sculpture? Just when things were seeming easier, more comfortable. Of course he’d thought about sculpting them. He’d thought about a lot of things. But in that moment on the corner he saw the sculpture as clearly as if he’d finished it, their expressions, their pose.

Jason turned down Broadway. His pace quickened to keep up with his thoughts. He should have kept quiet. He should have waited. He still barely knew them. They’d told him so little about themselves.

Jason was running now, dodging people, dodging cars, flying around corners, racing lights, trying to outrun his fears. Then, up ahead, an arch emerged from the growing dusk. Washington Square.

The park was quiet and he let the quiet slow him. On the far side he finally stopped. He leaned against a tree and closed his eyes. His breath eased. His mind cleared. Nothing had actually happened. Rose and Lily had looked at him with suspicion, but they didn't run, didn't tell him to go away. They didn't even say no. Until they said no, there was hope. He could still see the sculpture. Now was a time for waiting, not mourning. He took a deep breath. Then, taking his weight back from the tree, he headed home.

Four days later Jason's phone rang. They'd talked about it, Rose told him. She didn't say how they'd decided, only gave him their 'yes'.

He should have been happy. Instead he grew anxious. Once they started posing for him things would change. He knew this. He just didn't know how.

Dressed in gauze shifts, Rose and Lily were seated on a bench in Jason's studio. Their heads were turned to the left, Rose's tilted up, Lily's down. Lily's arms were crossed at the wrist, her hands in her lap. Rose's right hand rested on her thigh. Her left, supported by her knee, reached towards Lily.

Jason put Brahms' waltzes on the stereo, then opened his sketch book. His pencil hovered over the page. Despite the calm he tried to project, his heart was pounding. Rose and Lily looked as tense as he felt. He began to draw, but the lines came out cramped and stiff. The connection he'd felt with the twins at the tea dance was gone. The harder he

tried to regain it, the more distant they seemed. He started to hum along with the music, something he only did when he was alone, but it steadied him.

Rose and Lily barely blinked, barely breathed, both of them closed up tight. Still he kept sketching, trying to recall how they felt when they'd waltzed, trying and failing.

The sun dipped behind a building, and the change in light broke his concentration. An hour had passed.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Please tell me when you need to take a break."

"It's OK," said Rose. She didn't sound OK. "When we were little we had to sit for even longer. It was one of our punishments when we were bad."

"I don't want this to feel like punishment. Anything I can do to make you more comfortable, please tell me."

A shrug from Rose, but Lily spoke. "I like when you hum."

While the twins changed back into their clothes Jason set out bread and cheese and a bottle of wine. He asked if they would sit three more times. It sounded like a lot, he knew. For him it was so little.

He'd hoped that the second sitting would be more comfortable than the first. It wasn't. The twins sat like stone. The lines he drew were lifeless. He found himself clutching his pencil so tightly that his hand ached. If he was that tense, what could he expect from them? He took a breath, lifted his eyes from his pad, and knelt beside Rose.

"Are you comfortable?" She seemed startled to hear him speak. "You can move a little if you need to." She smiled, assured him she was fine.

He moved over to Lily. "Are you OK?" She nodded. "Are you chilly? Let me turn up the heat." The offer alone seemed to warm her.

For the rest of the sitting Jason worked to be more attentive. He tried to match his breath to the twins' and felt Rose relax. Lily, too, a little. He found his hand moving more freely across the page, yet as much as he coaxed from them, he wanted more, wanted what only his fingers could tell him.

As the daylight faded he found the courage to ask. Just for a moment. Only their backs. Even as he spoke he saw them tense. "Like at the tea dance." He started to hum the tune from their first waltz. Rose looked at Lily. Jason kept humming. Lily closed her eyes, then nodded.

By the third sitting they were all less nervous. Still, the few times Jason touched them, Lily drew inward. Rose, though, opened like a blossom. Her skin reached towards his fingers, shredding his concentration. He found himself leaning close to her, whispering small endearments. Each one brought a blushing smile.

Jason ended the sitting as he'd begun, tracing their backs with his fingers, first Lily's, then Rose's. At the base of Rose's spine he paused, then slid his hand over her hip, along her thigh. Her breath caught. He reached out his other hand but the flesh it found was Lily. He froze, felt her shrink.

As soon as they'd changed Lily dragged Rose to the door. Her head was twisted so far away from Rose that her chin rested on her shoulder. Rose said she'd call, but she looked more upset than he'd ever seen her.

Jason paced his studio for an hour, then phoned the twins. He got no answer, not then, nor an hour later, nor two hours after that, nor five. He tried the next morning, afternoon, evening. Worry turned to fear. At nine-thirty he grabbed a sweater, pulling it over his undershirt as he left the studio.

The lock on the outer door of the twins' building was broken. Jason buzzed anyway, then climbed to the third floor. He knocked on their door, knocked again. The second time he thought he heard Rose's voice. He turned the knob. The door opened.

"Jason?" Rose called out, fearful, hopeful.

"Are you OK?" He stood just inside the doorway. The vestibule was as dark as the street.

"We're back here."

Jason followed her voice. On his left the hall opened onto the front room. The only light came from a floor lamp in the corner.

Rose and Lily were sitting on a high-backed love seat, both wearing pale blue dressing gowns. It was the first time he'd seen them dressed alike. Except for the gauze shifts. Rose looked at him with pleading eyes. Lily's head hung low. Her hair hid her face.

Jason knelt beside Rose. "Are you alright?"

She shook her head. "She was so upset when we left your studio. She wouldn't talk to me, wouldn't even look at me. As we walked she kept hanging back until I was almost dragging her. On the bus she kept her head turned away. With our worst fights she's never been like that. At home I thought maybe if I did something nice for her she'd at least look at me. I asked her if she'd like me to make some hot chocolate. She loves chocolate. But she wouldn't answer. I said I'd make it anyway, that I wanted some. She started screaming 'I know what you want. I know.' And then... and then she started clawing at our chest like she wanted to tear us apart. Scratching and clawing and screaming 'I know. I know'."

Tears strangled her voice. Jason pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and held it out to her. At the sight she began to sob. He took her hand, holding it until her tears slowed enough for her to go on.

“I finally managed to grab her hands and... and she went limp. She’s right beside me and it’s like she’s not even here.” Rose closed her eyes. Her tears kept flowing.

Jason stroked her hair, her cheek. “Shhh. Shhh. It’ll be OK.”

Gingerly he rose and crossed to the other side of the loveseat, easing himself to his knees. “Lily,” he whispered. “Sweet Lily. I’m sorry.”

Her chest shuddered as she took a breath.

“Lily, will you talk to me? Please.”

With her next breath Lily started to hum. It was the first waltz they’d danced to. She hummed it just as Jason had in the studio.

“Won’t you talk to me?”

She kept humming. He reached towards her, letting his hand come to rest on hers. They sat like that for long, long minutes as he listened to her hum. Slowly, very slowly, he raised his other hand towards her hair and brushed it from her face. “Shhhh,” he murmured. He kept stroking her hair. Lily lifted her head just enough for him to see her eyes. Such sadness. Such longing.

“Sweet Lily. What?”

Her eyes swam. A tear ran down her cheek, and another, then a torrent. Jason wiped the tears from her cheeks, her chin, her lips.

Slowly, very slowly, Lily lifted her hand. He watched it rise, dip, rise again, like a feather caught on a breeze, drifting towards his face, coming to rest on his lips.

He’d known. He had known.

Jason took her hand in his. He kissed her fingers, one by one, then drew his lips down her fingers to her palm, down her palm to her wrist. There he let them rest, feeling the race of her pulse.

Slowly he lowered her hand to her lap. Slowly he brought his lips to hers. A whisper of a kiss. “Sweet Lily.”

“I want...” she whispered. Sobs shook her body. She turned her face away.

Jason eased Lily’s head to his shoulder, stroking her hair until her breath slowed to the quiet of sleep. Ever so gently he shifted her head from his shoulder to the loveseat.

Then, moving like a thief, he slipped around the loveseat to return to Rose’s side. She sat with her head lowered. ‘Gone away’. He touched her shoulder. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. She raised her face to meet his.

It was after two a.m. when Jason got back to his studio. Throwing off his sweater he went to his workbench and pulled out a spool of wire. He twisted lengths together, cut pieces out, added new ones, bending, shaping. Beneath his hands a skeleton of the twins emerged.

The first hint of dawn was creeping into the sky when he put aside the wire and pulled out the clay. He closed his eyes as he spread it over the skeleton, letting the memory in his hands guide them.

By the time Jason stepped back from the sculpture, sunlight filled the studio. He reached out to stroke Rose’s hair and his shadow fell across Lily.

Outside he heard a woman laugh. It reminded him of Rose’s laugh the first time he’d heard it, the laugh that gave him the courage to invite her to coffee. Then he remembered the words that followed: ‘It’s both of us or neither.’

Jason reached for the sculpture, each hand closing around one of the figures. His fingers pressed inward, hit wire and kept going, digging out the joints of the skeleton, bending, twisting, searching for the ends of the wires to pull them apart. A red stain spread across Rose's chest. Jason pulled his right hand free. Blood poured from his thumb.

He freed his left hand and grabbed the thumb. It throbbed with the rhythm of his pulse, and though it kept bleeding, the rhythm steadied him.

The sculpture lay on his workbench. Sharp pieces of wire jutted out of the clay like broken bones. Taking his hand from his thumb, Jason pressed Rose's shoulder into place. He left it streaked with red. The throbbing sharpened to pain. Blood filled his palm. He wrapped a rag around his thumb but the blood kept flowing.

Jason looked at the sculpture and his throat tightened. In his mind he started to fix it. He could. He had to. But first he had to stop the bleeding. He couldn't do anything until the bleeding stopped.

(end)