

CAROL COLLINS

## COMING OF AGE

“Pygmies!” Dennis says in disgust. “A repeat!” He throws the Public T.V. guide into the air.

I look up from my reading. “It wasn’t that good the first time around,” I say in sympathy.

He holds the remote control in his hand, ready to fire, as though he could destroy KCET programming and all of anthropology with a press of his trigger finger. We’re propped amidst a plethora of pillows on our queen-sized bed. Magazines and books are stacked about us. Rain is drumming hard on the black skylight.

I’m halfway into a *New Yorker* story concerning two young lovers about to break up because they no longer smoke pot with breakfast. Instead, he sits singing the USDA lists on the cereal boxes to country music. This might be the last straw to the anti-heroine who is beautiful and bored and has another, slightly less feckless, young man on the string; the second guy raises carnivorous plants in the daytime and studies taxidermy in night school. The power of the story seems to be not in the relationships but in the images—the starkest one isn’t the Venus’s flytrap working over the beetle, but a drawer in the taxidermy lab that opens to reveal a treasure chest of gleaming false eyeballs with shiny stares, rolling about like marbles.

I think of Byron McFee. This is a natural jump to make: pygmies are *National Geographic*, and Byron, my first boyfriend (or even just friend) had a pile of them stacked in his bedroom closet next to his Lincoln logs. We’d leaf through them, pretending to be searching out pictures to accompany school reports, but like everyone else of the pre-*Playboy* generation, we were looking for naked natives. As for glassy eyes: one day, wandering about in the soft hills of my uncle’s pasture, Byron and I came upon the unforgettable sight of a dead cow. She lay on her fat side. All of her black and white markings were swollen to twice their size, so she resembled an enormous half-charred marshmallow. One unseeing eye was wide open.

Byron and I dared one another to touch the cow’s eye with a stick,