

# The Affair

*by* Jerry Ratch

Mine lasted 90 days. But don't they all?

After we made love the first time, it was early November, I remember, some internal part of me shot upward with a laughter that would not stop. Something inside gushed upward like Old Faithful. Of course, that's a little ironic now, isn't it? But it was as if something was suddenly unplugged.

I remember going directly upstairs to the bar at Chez Panisse and ordering a flute of champagne. But it wasn't enough, and I had to have another, and then another. Still that inner smile and the laughter came bubbling out of me as though it had been uncorked. I just couldn't keep the exhilaration inside. Bursts of laughter kept escaping, and I was shaking my head and smiling, apparently.

The woman at the bar would gaze at me, smiling too, because my smile was so contagious. She looked like the bar girl in the painting by Manet, *The Bar at the Folies Bergere*, with her curls of hair hanging beside her cream-white face. Her enormous dark eyes, inquiring.

“What is it with you? What?”

But all I could do was shake my head and look downward, and inward. When I left the bar, the sun had already gone down and it got quite cold out. The sky turned from the deepest shade of blue to a midnight blue and the stars turned up their power and seemed to come down a little lower to the earth, as if they were about to spill out my secret. The kind of cold that tightens up inside your nostrils and your hands seek out the body warmth inside your pockets.

And then you are forced to go home, where you would be more alone than you ever thought possible.

Then the rains come. And by late November, after numerous days feeling the invasive damp chilling my bones and

gnawing away at the soul, and seeing the stark yellow leaves against black rain-dampened tree trunks, one day my lover finally agrees to take me with her to go shopping in the City for a green leather couch she's had her heart set on. She's driving her Saab, and I'm going along as if I'm her husband now, and we are speeding across the Bay Bridge when I put my hand on her thigh. I can't help but give her thigh a squeeze.

I leave my hand there. She doesn't remove it, and I think to myself, "Now, this is something. This is good."

And I leave it there all the way across the bridge, feeling myself growing hard, and my heart starts pounding as she drives fast, real fast and dangerous. Then it occurs to me: "Not even her husband could do this — not without telling her to slow it the hell down."

