

BY THEMSELVES

She lives at the time in a misery flat with a utility kitchen. Coffee table plants rest on opposing smoked glass insets. All around, chubby bear novelties, macramé, style magazines and a conventionally silver-framed Mardi Gras poster. Having had other changes in circumstances, she keeps boxes in storage.

The drapes are pulled. Out of doors, rain falls. That morning, a clock radio blares music. The man singing has long been accustomed to failure in matters of love, and has had the bad fortune to see history repeat itself. He may give up. If someone does not talk him out of it, that is exactly what he will do.

She touches a switch, returning the room to sepulchral quiet. Sits up on the side of the bed in her nightgown - an aureole of white cotton floating near his face where his head lies on the pillow.

Then he must have dozed: when he opens his eyes again, he is facing the other way. The dresser light illuminates a small midway teddy in a red vest propped against the mirror, china pin cups, a brush.

On the edge of his vision, her small foot points delicately out, toes poised to enter a slender dark pump. Sheathed in nylon, the leg crossed over and extended, her familiar small-boned ankle and foot. Their articulation rounded to fit inside the soft aromatic leather.

Privately appraising, the small pads of her lithe fingertips smooth.

Starting above the ankle in the silken under-calf, moving down, appreciative. As he might do for her. Touching herself.

Then up, massage. Glide and probe.

The exploration lasts only seconds. Using three fingers now, trace the curve of calf with deliberation, back up... down again.

Finally, the foot returns to the carpet. With a reflective sigh - another day of work - she begins dressing. Touching the vanity to balance and her hair, long flows over the shoulder, slips from its tuck.

Closing his eyes when he feels her sense him.

What her eyes contemplate in his sleeping face, what thoughts must swim through her, will be concealed from him.

As he had in a game as a child, holds his breath. Makes for her a face of innocent unconscious.

Opens his eyes again.

She is gone.