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## Tales of a Salamander

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Tales of a Salamander

"Not drinking has added an element of uncertainty to my life," says Vinnie. "I used to know for sure how I'd die."

She wraps her elegant fingers around an iced-tea glass and shakes it twice, her old bourbon-and-soda gesture.

Vinnie lived with Joe over his used furniture store in Savannah for most of her drinking years. She would come awake every morning to the sound of bureaus and sofas and chairs being scraped out to the sidewalk for display. That sound of wood scraping on cement was her personal signal that the world was still out there in some orderly condition, that Vinnie could send down the curtain on her dreams of scandal and pursuit and start the slow journey up, up to the surface.

The day she decided to quit booze her eyelids were swollen as plums and just as blue. She opened first one, then the other at the bathroom mirror.

"Help me," she said. "I'm turning into Totie Fields."

Joe had been a seafaring man, no dreamguy by any means, but smooth as a mahogany hope chest. Inside, like a hope chest, he was full of the promise of incorruptible coziness.

Joe drank hardest of all on Saturday nights, drank until his voice was a whisper and his leanness became liquid. After the bars closed, back home up the two flights of stairs, he would curl into a wing chair and sing.

"A-waay, Nova Scotia, my seabound home/Tho your mountains dark and dreary be/When I'm far far away on the briny ocean deep/Will you ever heave a sigh and a-wish for me?"

He would catch Vinnie in his arms, then drop her because his strength was used up.

On hot, Savannah summer nights they slept with the sheets twisted around them like a pale, blue river, the overhead fan slowly turning, dreaming the separate story lines they would always dream no matter how much whiskey Joe poured down Vinnie's lovely, brown throat.

Joe loved olive-skinned women. They never turned bluish like redheads. But they weren't so dark that you couldn't see changes in their color during lovemaking. He loved to watch Vinnie's color change as her excitement

grew. He loved the way her nipples and lips passed through all the variations in pigment from pink to carmine.

Sometimes, when the air was too hot upstairs, Joe would go below and wander through the store, sitting on every chair in the place so none would feel left out.

"I saw a movie once," he told Vinnie, "where this couple was so rich they had a house full of everything you could name. Baby, they had Queen Anne and Louis Quatorze and Lalique goblets out the wazoo. Then they sat at this huge table," said Joe, patting the scarred formica table between him and Vinnie, "with this Baccarat crystal chandelier overhead."

"Ha. They were just like us. He couldn't get any closer to her than I can get to you, even with all that money."

Vinnie stopped drinking without Joe.

She went to A.A. every afternoon and took the first four steps before Joe even realized something was different. She bought a small notebook and hid it in her douche kit. This is the first story to herself that she wrote:

"Three women visit a greenhouse. The first one points to the orchids and says, 'Isn't that just like a woman's sex?' The second one says, 'Mine looks like a camelia. It's all soft and pink. I know what you mean.'

But the third one knows hers is nothing like a flower. 'Mine is like a salamander. It's alive and doesn't stay still like flowers do.' The others don't get it, but she knows that a woman can't wait for someone else to move her the way flowers wait for wind or a gardener to set them in motion."

Joe was helping a customer load an armoire onto a flatbed truck the day that Vinnie came downstairs with her bags packed.

She stood at the curbside waiting for a taxi, her grip tight on the Samsonite handles.

In one instant Joe saw the silent woman, her slender ankles, and a wide expanse of future without her.

He started to tell her no, don't, how could you, we can make it—but all the unsung songs in his head competed for release until they burst out of him in a howl.

Then the taxi came and went, bearing his Vinnie away like a flower on someone else's lapel.

—Gita Smith