

"Where were you in '62?"
by Sandra de Helen

Another Friday night in South St. Louis. It's 1962. May or September or April – one of those months before or after the unbearable humidity soaks the days until they bleed through the night. Ronnie and I are three years into our enforced teenage marriage, and our two year old son is asleep in his room. It's 10 or 11 at night; Ronnie is five or six hours late for dinner. He will be drunk. He will probably be in a rage. With any luck, he'll be too drunk to beat on me, and will fall down on the stairs on his way in like he did last week. I'll drag him those last few feet, cover him with a quilt and let him lie in the floor like a dog.

His supper of spaghetti with meatballs sits in a pan on the stove, long since cooled and congealed. I sit on the beige vinyl couch in my white cotton nightgown, not daring to doze, too restless to read. Every passing car sound increases the beat of my heart.

Soon enough I hear the familiar Thunderbird engine, followed by a slamming car door, then his heavy steps on the stairs. He doesn't stumble, but comes steadily to the door and pushes it open so hard it bangs the wall.

"Sandra!" he yells.

"I'm right here Ronnie."

"Yeah, well, where's my goddamned supper? Why isn't supper on the table?"

And so on. The usual. I say it's in the kitchen, I'll warm it up... I was waiting for him, could he please keep his voice down...he'll wake the baby ... Then he grabs the pot of spaghetti from the range, throws it against the kitchen wall, and when I hurry to clean it up, he pulls me up from the floor, tears my gown from my body, and shoves me naked out the back door. The lock clicks.

I'm shut out of my own apartment near midnight in the city. No clothes, no shoes, no service. I climb down the back staircase all the way to the basement where we share laundry facilities with seven other apartments, I find a pair of slacks and a shirt hanging on the line, steal them and cover myself. Then I walk barefoot the three or four miles across town to my mother-in-law's. I wake the household and claim the couch for what's left of the night. It's 1962 in Missouri. No one thinks to call the police.
