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**Short Stories**

**Big in the Bars**

One by one, the shoppers are attracted by the flashing blue light above the table. I slice the potatoes into thin wafers, fanning them like a deck of cards. “The magic little machine that slices, dices, and shreds.”

I slip on the round gadget, put in a small head of cabbage, and push the button. “Instant coleslaw.” My thumbs point toward my chest. “Proof positive. Even a man can whip up a dish.” Women laugh.

To a young man wearing a shiny gold wedding band: “Want more of the bride’s time? Get her out of the kitchen with this.” Crowd snickers and presses forward, trying to get a look at the man. Hold up the shiny machine. Make my pitch and sell four.

At five o’clock the crowd fills the aisle, spills over into hardware. I talk faster as brown paper bags rustle and “Jingle Bells” plays over the loudspeaker. I pass sliced apples in a clear plastic bowl.

When I see Johnnie in the crowd, chewing on an apple slice, my fingers move, my words grow. I play to him. He asks questions, pretends doubt. He plays my shill, buys one. I sell eight more Veg-O-Matics and turn off the blue light.

“You never lose the touch,” Johnnie says, helping me pack away the equipment.

“This crowd’s easy,” I say, remembering the times I’d called Johnnie to help me with the tough ones. The cynics, lunatics, born-agains who tried to wrench the crowd from my fingers.

“Remember that county fair in Billows? They’d leave that revival meeting full of hellfire.”

Johnnie laughs. “Once we had the good Reverend hooked, they followed like black sheep.” He looks past me, past the shelves of cookie tins, cake pans, and Pyrex cookware. “Twenty-six years. What did we do with all the time?”

“A lot, Johnnie. We did a lot.”

What can I say to him? That we ate two pounds of feta cheese when we heard it would make us men at thirteen? That we beat up Ronald Smalderhort for laughing at his mother’s accent? That I still have the Greek cross he gave me when we were ten? That I hate him for having had it all and lost it?

Johnnie lays a sheaf of papers on top of the carrots I’ll use tomorrow. “The papers from the bank. Even a second mortgage and borrowing to my limit isn’t enough to buy that bar in Westhill.”

I hand him back the papers without reading them. “So? There are other ways.”

“Name one,” Johnnie says as he straightens the tilting Christmas tree by the coffee pots.

“Ask Santa. Rob a liquor store. Get a rich mistress. That’s three for you to think about. Let’s eat.” I hand him his grease-stained parka. “Doesn’t your wife ever wash this thing?”

We walk past the animated elves past the men’s underwear, out into the mall. Johnnie whistles “Silent Night” along with the Salvation Army singers. I drop a dollar into their black kettle.

“Remember Sary Mae that Christmas in Arkansas? The one whose daddy owned those weight loss clinics,” says Johnnie.

“Not the one who put the cold towels on our heads the morning after? Or was she the one who turned out to be a guy? You always were big in the bars.”

At the Coney Island, Johnnie orders his hot dog without chili and grunts when I get the works on two, French fries, and a Coke.

“That stuff will rot your guts,” Johnnie says. He stands up and tightens his stomach muscles. “Go on, punch me.” I give him a light tap. “Harder.” I hit him harder and the waitress rushes over. “It’s okay,” he says without looking at her and sits down.

He takes a bite of his hot dog, chews it seventy times (his mother used to count), and says, “You should start working out with me.” After he finishes eating, he washes down his all-purpose multi­ple vitamin and tablets of B, C, and E. He offers the bottles to me, but I tell him Greeks put too much faith in food and vitamins.

Johnnie says his mother isn’t dying after all. It’s only the gall bladder that has to come out; then she’s coming to live with him. Stella and kids aren’t happy about it, but he knows how to handle her, how to handle all of them.

I tell him to borrow some money for the bar from his mother, make her a partner. Says that’s not the Greek way. When I ask him what the Greek way is, he shrugs his shoulders. I suspect he doesn’t know. Once he said he couldn’t remember anything about Greece and must have been adopted. He plans to go back someday, but I know he’s just talking.

Wants to know if I’ll help him fix Little Lite Mike’s car tomorrow after he bails J.B. out of jail.

“Christ, Johnnie. No wonder you never sleep or have any money. Do these bums ever pay you back?” I can tell by his droopy eyelids that he’s not listening. I poke his shoulder and he looks at me.

Johnnie says, “Well? Can I count on you tomorrow?”

“See you tonight,” and I pay our bill, leaving him to drink his black coffee alone.

When I walk in the Pour Devil, Johnnie’s on stage finishing my favorite, “…and gave birth to the blues.” The sound holds, dark and thick like a blackberry brandy. He sees me and gives the thumbs-up sign.

I wave to the old lady in orange chiffon, wondering if her puckered chest ever gets cold as she sits listening on the same bar stool night after night. All the regulars are here: Gracie wonders who’ll buy her breakfast; Roy looks for his ex-wife; LuAnne dances to forget she’s no one’s ex.

Tonight they make me tired. All of them. Even Johnnie. I lean against the carpeted back wall and watch him check the mike, move a loudspeaker. Like a depressed housewife, he adjusts, readjusts the furniture.

During Johnnie’s second set, the man next to me says, “I used to watch that guy twenty years ago at The Cat’s Eye.”

“Oh yeah?” I stare at a broken light fixture.

“Yeah, that’s a fact. Knew him before he ever made it on ‘Saturday Dance Party,’ before he had a hit record, before he fell off the charts.”

I imagine the man is a fly and drown him in my beer.

“Say, whatever happened to him?”

“Nothing,” I say as I revive the fly and swat it against the Merry Xmas sign.

“Bet it was either dames or whiskey. What do you think?” The man says.

“I think it was flies. They done him in,” I whisper.

The man takes his Scotch and soda and moves to the bar. I push open the Gents door, push it right into Nelson’s back.

“Can’t a guy even comb his hair in this joint without being knocked around?” Nelson stoops so he can see his hair in the lower half of the cracked mirror. He sees me behind him. “Hey, the man I’ve been wanting to talk to. Do you think Johnnie’d lend me a hundred? Big poker game tomorrow. I could take all they’ve got. Watch it,” Nelson says as I start to step into the stall. “Toilet’s leaking again.”

The jesters are present with their pom-pom hats for Johnnie. I feel them tugging at my scalp.

“Sure, he’ll give you the money. Didn’t you see the sign outside? Drive-in banking, twenty-four hours a day.” Everyone has a pitch these days.

“He gets most of my paycheck every week. Least he can do is give some back. Wish I owned this place.” Nelson shakes his wet hands. “You’d think he’d at least spring for some paper towels. What a cheap bastard.”

“Yeah,” I say thinking of Johnnie’s overweight wife who works at Ford, his rusted-out Mustang parked in back. One hundred and fifteen thousand miles on it, a piece of cardboard stuck over the side window, a broken defroster.

Yet, Johnnie has to play the big shot. Some of our biggest arguments have been over that. I say he’s afraid to tell people the truth. What truth, he says. That you don’t own this place, I say. What place, he asks. Forget it, I say.

Johnnie is with the Scotch-and-soda man at the end of the bar. I try to warn him but he’s already talking, tucking his black shirt tight under the black leather belt, hand-tooled in Greece, special ordered by his mother who went back for a visit.

“I’m all right,” Johnnie says automatically as he grabs my elbow and pulls me into the kitchen. He doesn’t remember that I stopped asking that question years ago. “You know any rich mistresses?” He says.

“You’ve got to get a class place of your own. You’re not getting any younger, you know.” I cut myself a piece of the spinach pie Johnnie’s wife made. “That woman sure can cook.”

“I’ll show you who’s old,” and we spar until he gets me in a headlock. The spinach pie sits uneaten on the counter.

“Give, give. A drink for my life.”

Johnnie lets go and we fall to the floor. “Thelma,” Johnnie bellows, “A beer and a shot.”

“You two are crazy,” she says, setting the drinks on the floor beside us. “Must be a full moon out tonight,” and she bares her teeth, bites at Johnnie’s neck. “You better get out there and keep those animals dancing.”

I sit on his stomach to hold him. “Thought you were on the wagon.”

Nelson comes through the swinging doors, sees me, and turns to go.

“Wait,” Johnnie says pushing me off. “You start tomorrow,” and he hands Nelson a crumpled sheet of paper. “The pay’s good.” He takes money from his pocket and straightens it between two fin­gers before handing it to Nelson. “To hold you ’til payday. Don’t mess up this time,” he tells him.

Nelson thanks him, says he owes him a lot, says he’ll pay him back. Says he can’t pay him back for all he’s done. He leaves by the back door.

“Christ, Johnnie. You dangle your feet in the water and the bloodsuckers feed.  
 Bells jangle, peaked caps bend. Lions move on padded feet. As Johnnie sings, the dancers’ pounding moves along the edges of the oak dance floor, under the carpet, through coated wires.

I watch Johnnie control the group; move them closer together, pull them apart, urge them into twirls and dips.

It’s not my Veg-O-Matic crowd, but I can sell them a dream they can slice and dice. This morning was my dress rehearsal. Johnnie never did know how to peddle himself.

When Johnnie steps off the stage, I step on. I turn on the Christmas lights rising the backdrop, pick up the mike. People look at me and point. Most of them know me but only off stage. No one uses Johnnie’s stage but Johnnie. Nelson leaves to get him.

The bells are quiet, jesters sit in chairs, the lion’s cage   
is open.

I pick up the tambourine and shake it above my head, against my hip. “Tonight’s the night,” I say quietly, forcing them to lean forward in their chairs. Louder. “The night to pay old debts. The night of truths.”

I shake the tambourine and point to Johnnie who’s motioning me off stage. “Who doesn’t laugh, dance, and sing with Johnnie. Who doesn’t tell him problems?” I set the beat. “Problems, we all got problems.” The crowd’s clapping with me. “I got problems. You got problems. Even Johnnie’s got problems. Yeah, yeah,” I chant.

I can feel the crowd with me, hear their echo. I make my pitch, “Johnnie don’t own this bar.” The silence after revelation. Then louder than ever. “But we can buy stock in Johnnie’s dream. Help Johnnie buy his bar. Buy a dream.”

I pull silver and bills from my pocket and drop them into the tambourine, shaking it. “Dig deep for Johnnie,” I say, passing it to the silky girl beneath me. “For Johnnie’s bar. For Johnnie’s dream,” I continue as the tambourine is passed from hand to hand, Thelma empties it twice into her tip jar.

“For Johnnie,” one final time as someone turns on the juke box and everyone dances.

I find Johnnie in the back room stretched out on the mattress he sleeps on when he’s too tired to go home.

“I’m not a charity case,” Johnnie says.

“No one says you are, you blue-eyed Greek. But you’re big in the bars.”

**The Bottom Drawer**

A voice over the kitchen phone. His voice. I’ve been expecting it. “Tonight,” he whispers as if he’s talking through a handkerchief. “Just the two of us.”

“You shouldn’t call me here,” I pour milk in my coffee, slam the refrigerator door shut with my foot.

“Why not?” he says. “No one’s there.”

“True,” I answer, looking around the empty kitchen, clean for a change with the kids gone for the weekend on a Boy Scout campout, my husband with them. But I have the feeling they could walk in any minute.

“How’s you car?” I ask, remembering he took the bus to work this morning.

“Nothing $300 won’t fix,” he laughs.

“I’ll loan it to you,” I offer.

“I don’t want your money,” he says.

Doesn’t want his own either, gave it all to his ex-wife last month in the divorce settlement.

“What do you want?”

“You,” he says. “Wrote you another poem, ‘Laughing Laura at Her Desk.’”

No one ever wrote me poems before. I keep them locked in my bottom desk drawer at work.

“You there?” he asks.

“Yes, I’m here,” I lie.

“You’re not angry I called are you?” he asks. When I don’t answer, he says quickly, “Let’s meet at the coffee shop down by the park. I need your advice on something.”

Like a couple of high school kids meeting at the local hangout. Never did that, though. Not in high school. Never with him.

“Advice on what?” I ask, remembering his oldest son hadn’t invited him to his high school graduation last week.

“On us,” he says.

“We’re friends,” I say, seeing him again in last night’s dream, leaning over me, stroking my forehead until the lines in my flesh disappear and I’m sixteen again. Only this time I go to the dance.

“More than just friends,” he says.

I wonder if he’s dating the redhead who lives down the hall from him.

“Ever since that infamous lunch,” I say, pulling the phone into the living room. “All because you forgot yours and ate half of my bologna sandwich. Should have held out for the traditional apple.”

The pictures of my husband and children stare at me, smiling from their frames on the piano.

“Aha,” he laughs. You brought me an apple the next day.”

And so I had. But his laughter doesn’t belong in this room. My husband’s eyes watch me, prac­tical as always. Serious. His mouth closed against need, against silliness.

“Are you still there?” he asks.

“No,” I tell him, expecting to look up and see my appointment calendar opened to the right place.

“I’ll see you at lunch Monday,” I tell him, picturing the tiny storeroom where we eat and he reads his poems.

I hang up without saying goodbye. I know people at work are beginning to talk. But that’s at work. That’s not here.

**The Butterfly Dress**

Instead of my Saturday morning paper, I find Aunt Hattie’s shoe, like a warning right outside my door. A pointed-toe purple shoe with rhinestones in the heel, the kind that women wore in the 1960s. It’s so like her to show up at my doorstep, actually on my apartment landing, just when I’ve got my life on the right track, just when I’m about to become the engine blowing steam instead of a caboose or box car carrying someone else’s load.

“Harry,” I shout, spotting her at the end of the hall sitting on the radiator reading the Saturday morning comics and chuckling to herself. I call her Harry when I’m irritated, ever since five years ago when she cashed my paycheck, boarded the wrong bus, ended up at the race track and lost it all on some horse called Serendipity. If I didn’t believe in Serendipity, she said, I had a lot to learn.

I call again and remind myself to have maintenance fix the burned-out light bulbs in the brass sconce across the hall. I roll the sounds around on my tongue, “Harry,” knowing she doesn’t like to be called by a man’s name, especially the same name as her fourth husband, the astrologer. She told me once that she married him on the strength of his astrological chart and left him a year later for the same reason. Still, she said, there’s something to love in a man who can read the stars.

She hobbles toward me on one shoe, dropping newspaper pages like mulch, her Hawaiian print dress bursting into red and pink hibiscus as she gets closer.

“This slush almost ruined my best shoes. Stepped out of the cab right into a puddle,” she says and bends down to pick up her abandoned shoe. “But look at that, dried good as new. Can’t say I miss these Detroit winters.”

Aunt Hattie winks at me as I yank her into the apartment. “Got any bacon and eggs? That study they serve on the plane isn’t good for your digestive system.” She peeks into the vestibule mirror, fluffs her pink-tinted hair, all the time peering myopically at my reflection over her shoulder.

When Aunt Hattie starts poking around in things, she stirs up a lot of dust. “You didn’t say you were coming. Where’s your luggage? Where’s your coat?” I ask, figuring attack is better than standing by doing nothing. If it gets really bad, I can put her back on a plane. They leave for Florida day and night. “Now I suppose we’ve got to go back to the airport to collect your things.”

“Nope. I came unencumbered,” she says, already in the kitchen cracking eggs into a bowl. “Got to thinking about that red and purple sequined dress I bought years ago at downtown Hudson’s. Your mother said it was scandalous. Cut to here.” She sucks in her stomach. “Big butterfly across here,” and she draws her fingers across her bosom, leaving traces of egg shell. “Need something like that for the Misty Mellow Seniors Ball.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” Sometimes she rambles, while I like to get to the point. “Besides, downtown Hudson’s is gone. Don’t tell me you don’t have stores in Miami.”

“Not the kind that sells butterfly dresses. At least not around my place,” she says as she flips the bacon, splashing grease that spurts into brief flame on the burner.

I tap my fingers against the oak table, a habit I’ve been trying to break since my boss men­tioned it during my performance review last year. Instead, I scrape off some raspberry jam that has dried into a small jewel atop the wood. All the time, I try to think of where we can find a butterfly dress. I haven’t been shopping for clothes since I found the black business suit on sale at Lord & Taylor’s at Fairlane Center Mall a few months back. Who knows if they carry butterfly dresses.

“Nice place you have here.” Aunt Hattie keeps her back turned. “Your mother told me you got a promotion a while back to supervisor of something or other and moved into this new place downtown.”

For now, I refuse to close the space between us. I stare at her back, straight as always, and her shoulders that curve toward the pan, and the top of her head that dips toward the bacon as if she’s listening to its sizzle and pop.

Never one to give up, Aunt Hattie adds, “Your mother says you work too hard, very long hours. But she says the money’s good and you’re moving up.” She glances over her shoulder at me. “You know, all work and no play makes for a dull day.”

“Easy for you to say.” I grin. “Times have changed.” I glance at the kitchen clock and wonder how I’m going to get the work done that I planned on doing this weekend.

“Times always change,” Aunt Hattie shoots back. “That’s no excuse.” She pops two slices of bread into the toaster. “Ah, well, this white bread will have to do but the preservatives will clog up your system. You really should take better care of yourself.” She moves the toaster setting from dark to light. “Your mother said you can see the Detroit River from your bedroom window. Can you really?”

“Not when it’s dark and foggy like today.” I know Aunt Hattie has something up her sleeve. “Come on, Aunt Hattie, pull out your handkerchief,” I tease her with the old joke between us that lets her know that I’m on to her. “Bet you have some good-looking man tucked under there and you’re waiting for the right time to whisk him out. Right?”

“Could be,” Aunt Hattie says. “But forget the looks. They don’t count in the end. I would find you a man who could tickle your funny bone.”

“I laugh enough,” I assure her. I search my mind and actually can’t remember the last time I was with anyone besides Aunt Hattie who had me gasping for breath between laughs and wiping tears from my cheek, the way Aunt Hattie and I used to laugh at *The Three Stooges* reruns.

“This man might even live in the neighborhood.” She pauses as if searching some map in her mind. “But he sure wouldn’t laugh at what’s happening to this city. It’s a crying shame so many of the buildings are crumbling and vacant around here. Didn’t used to be like that,” Aunt Hattie says. “Somehow you expect brick and mortar to last longer.”

She turns to look at me, as she pats the bacon dry between two paper towels. Then she divides it equally onto our plates, four slices each. “Still, I’m glad to see someone’s building places like yours, someone’s trying to breathe new life into this city.”

Over breakfast she wants to know how my night classes are going, why I need to get a master’s degree, do I ever stay after to talk to my professors, if they’re all married. I tell her it’s none of her business, but she won’t let up. Aunt Hattie complains that I think too much. “Comes from reading all those books,” she says. “Sometimes you just have to feel something and do it.”

Right now I feel like going back to bed. After studying half the night for my computer program­ming class, I’m not very alert. It dawns on me that I better call my mother before she arrives on my doorstep in search of Aunt Hattie.

Sure enough, my mother answers the phone with, “Hattie, where are you?” When she hears my voice, she starts right in telling me how Hattie is missing and how she and Charles have searched everywhere. “Even went to that martial arts center where she’s been taking tae kwon do. Did I tell you she’s doing that? Says she wants to cultivate her chi. Can you believe it? Says it’s something to do with her internal energy.” My mother sighs and I picture her rolling her eyes like she always does when she talks about Aunt Hattie. “That woman will be the death of me.”

When I explain that Aunt Hattie is sitting at my kitchen table eating breakfast, my mother sighs again. “I didn’t want to tell you but the doctor says her mind may be slipping.” I hear her air condi­tioner humming in the background. “I’m sorry, Dear. Just put her on the plane and I’ll meet her at this end.”

I promise to keep an eye on my aunt and send her back Monday morning. My mother warns me to make sure she gets on the plane. “Can’t trust her to do what she says. Not if something better comes along. “Never could,” Mother says.

I don’t notice any difference inAunt Hattie. She always seems the same to me. Still, I feel sad, the same as when the wrecking crew tore down the old hotel behind me. Dust was heavy in the air for days afterward.

Even after my mother hangs up, I hold the phone pressed against my ear, not quite ready to break the connection. I remember how when I was a little kid, maybe ten or eleven, and stayed with Aunt Hattie, she treated me like a grown-up. She took me to midnight movies and dealt me in when she played canasta with her neighbors. She even gave me a roll of nickels to bet with and sometimes I carried my winnings in my coat pocket for a week, just to hear them clinking against each other.

Now Aunt Hattie sits at a kitchen table like she did back then, piling a forkful of scrambled eggs on her toast before taking a bite. I ask her about the ball she’s going to, wondering if she’s making it up. With her, it’s often hard to tell what’s real and what she just wants to happen.

“Your mother’s going with Charles Bronsbottom,” she says, watching to see if I recognize the name. “You really ought to talk to her. She won’t listen to me. First thing every morning he grabs the newspaper to check his stocks. Tells everyone how he invested in IBM back before computers.”

“Do I detect some jealousy here?” I tease.

“Of course not,” she says, buttering another piece of toast. “But he’s not right for her. You can tell a lot about someone by how he reads the newspaper.”

I suppose she’s right since I usually turn to the advice columns, reconfirming that men are more trouble than they’re worth.

“You know he insists on being called Charles. Not Charlie or Chuck. Charles,” she says, draw­ing out the syllables. “Nothing like your father, rest his soul. At least your father knew how to have a bit of fun.”

Aunt Hattie licks her fork, taps it on the table. “Reminds me of that James you were engaged to a few years back.” She taps louder, blinking her eyes as if she’s changing channels by remote con­trol. “Humph, James. Sounds like somebody’s butler. Now, Brad, Rick, Mike—those are names you can sink your teeth into and hold on. Even Johnny, a name that wraps ‘round you like a quilt. Know any guys with those names?”

“No,” I say, scrubbing harder to get the scorch marks off the frying pan. “Harry,” I warn her, “life’s too short to mess it up with men. Of all people, you ought to know that.” Aunt Hattie’s been divorced five times, engaged more times than the rings on a red cedar, and always on the lookout for what she calls good marriage material.

“You remind me of your mother sometimes,” Aunt Hattie says, shaking her head. “Never mind. Did I tell you my new beau’s name? It’s Les. I tell him Les is more.” She chuckles and cups her face in her hands. “So we’re working on a new name for him. We’ve tried out Major, Grant and Rock but they don’t fit right. A name should mark a man, tell you what he is,” she muses, almost as if she’s forgotten I’m here.

I stare at the wall behind thesink, wishing now that it didn’t remind me of mashed potatoes. From tiny chips of paint samples arranged on a card, I remember struggling for hours to finally pick that shade, desert sand, the same color as my office. Neutral and clean. Makes it easy to concentrate on the computer programs I usually spread across my desk at work or my kitchen table in my apart­ment. I wonder if I ought to hang some posters or baskets or maybe even wallpaper to make it look more homey. Maybe I should repaint it in a color like cranberry or grape or even lettuce green, some­thing nourishing.

“Yes, maybe that’s it. We can call him Mark. He’s my sign, the difference in my days, some­one important. Mark my word,” she says laughing, “when you meet him, he will sweep you off your feet. He knows every kind of dance and even makes up his own. I always did like a man who knows how to dance.”

“Aunt Hattie, you *are* crazy.” I laugh, a deep freeing laugh that bounces off my abandoned plans to work on my computer program all weekend. “You make me forget things,” I scold her. “How will I ever get ahead at work if I spend my time hunting down butterfly dresses with you?”

“You’re too young to forget things,” she says. “Before you can forget them, you have to do them.”

“So this Mark of yours is someone new,” I say. “What happened to the one I met last Christ­mas? The one who was going to take you to Paris?”

“Oh, that one fell and broke his hip. Even after it healed, he was afraid he would fall and break it again. Sad,” she says, “the way some people just give up.” She clucks her tongue against the roof of her mouth, a talent I tried to copy when I was a kid and never could master.

When I try to make Aunt Hattie’s sound again after all these years, she sticks out her tongue and waggles it at me before tucking it back behind her front teeth. “Like this,” she says, slurring the words. She keeps up the clucking as if she could go on this way forever.

Again I try and again I sound like I’ve got something stuck in my throat that I’m choking on. I gasp for breath.

“Can you whistle yet?” Aunt Hattie asks, sticking two fingers in her mouth and letting out a high-pitched screech that probably can heard all the way to the fifteenth floor.

“No,” I admit. “I can’t whistle blowing out, just sucking in.” I show her the puny, cracking, shrillness I can make if I purse my lips and inhale.

“You just need more practice,” Aunt Hattie reassures me, brushing my uncombed hair off my forehead with my fingertips. She reaches down in her black leather purse, worn along the edges, and pulls out a brush. She moves behind me and starts to brush my hair, like she used to do when I was a little girl.

“Beautiful color,” she says, “like the cherry wood your grandfather used to turn into bureaus and chairs with carved backs.” She brushes for a while longer, then smooths her hand over my short cap of hair. “Too short to braid now,” she sighs.

Sometimes I envy Aunt Hattie, the way she does what she wants no matter what, the way she wanders through life like a tourist bent on seeing all the sights. I wonder if I got cheated out of some chromosome that would have made me more like her, sort of like a computer program with reversed code numbers.

“Remember how, when you were a little girl, we went to Eastern Market every Saturday?” Aunt Hattie asks. “You used to press so close to the fish market window, your breath fogged up the glass. You kept wiping it with tissues. Everything got so smeary you couldn’t see.”

“That was a long time ago,” I say, trying to remember myself as a child.

“Not so long,” she whispers, carrying her dirty dishes to the sink and dropping them in the water. Grease beads on the surface. “You wanted to take those fish in the window and put them back in the lake. Never had the heart to tell you they were dead.” She dumps the dishwater, turns on the tap, squirts in so much liquid that soap bubbles erupt from over the side of the dishpan and cling to her arms.

“Very little in life that’s as final as death,” Aunt Hattie adds, turning to me and flicking soap bubbles off her arm, aiming them toward me. “Some people just sit and wait around for it.”

“Harry,” I warn, “Don’t talk like that.” She clicks her tongue and flicks more soap bubbles my way.

“Knowing you,” I say, “you’ll be the one to decide when your times up. You’ll probably climb some ladder until you reach the top and then step off, wearing nothing but your purple shoes with rhinestones.” I picture this and start to giggle. “Well,” I add, “you might wear your butterfly dress.”

“Only if Gentleman Death comes courting in the proper manner,” she says primly. “And he needs to know the dance of the butterfly dress. A very special dance, indeed.”

Aunt Hattie measures me with her eyes, from my toes to the top of my head and winks. “You are very special. Even back then at the Eastern Market, you drew people to you. No other little girls got to help the baker wrap the bread. While you two jabbered away, I slipped next door and bought the trout you loved so much,” she says. “Once they were coated in batter and cooked, you never knew they came from behind that window. Sometimes I wonder if I should have told you.”

I hug her, feeling my body fit itself to her curves, kissing her cheek that tastes like peppermint soap. She grabs my hand, dripping suds down the sleeve of my white chenille robe. “Don’t ever forget who taught you to waltz,” she says, placing her other hand in the small of my back and counting off the steps.

“How could I forget? And now, it’s time,” I announce. “Let’s go find the monarch of butterfly dresses.”

While I’m getting dressed, I hear Aunt Hattie moving around my living room. I find her study­ing the stack of computer printouts I was working on last night.

“What do you do with this stuff? Looks like hieroglyphics.” She lifts up the top page. The pile unfolds like an accordion.

“I debug programs.” She laughs, a staccato sound crisp as high heels against tile. “I fix the errors so the program can run.”

“Seems, then, like you could debug your life,” she says, smoothing her nylons, lamplight glinting off her rhinestone heels. “No offense, but even when you were a little girl, you were afraid of lightning bugs. Always wanted me to catch them and put them in Mason jars. Never could explain how you just can’t put a lid on some things.”

I link arms with her and shut the door behind us. There’s a boutique I know that may carry what she’s looking for.

When we arrive, Aunt Hattie refuses to try on the black dresses the saleswoman brings. “I’m not going to a funeral,” she snaps as she owls sequined dresses from the rack and holds them up to her. When she finds the one with the red rose, its stem rising from the waist, she smooths it over her bulges.

In the dressing room, she holds her hands at her sides as I zip up the back. “Goes with my shoes,” she says, fingering the purple satin skirt. “Look how the butterfly on the petal glitters gold in the light,” she says. “Gives me wings. Yes, it does.”  
 She steps out of the dress and whisks it in front of me. “You try it on,” she says, shivering slightly in her purple slip. She pats her arms, hands fluttering against her skin to warm herself. “Go ahead. Get the feel of it. Won’t kill you.”  
 As I lift my arms to slip it over my head, I lose my balance and tip sideways into the mirror. “These dressing rooms are too small,” I grumble. “No room for moving around.”

“Not over your clothes, silly,” she prods. “You need to feel it rub against your skin.” She flashes my grimace back at me.

Aunt Hattie picks up my blouse from the floor and drapes it over her arm. “Think of this as a costume.” She stands behind me, hands on my shoulders, and sighs. “Feel the way that dress lifts you up?” She raises the silky material of the skirt and lets it drop again in folds against my legs.

I twirl for Aunt Hattie, hands on my waist. “We always were about the same size,” I say, still amazed that what fits her fits me.

“I owe you,” Aunt Hattie says. “You found me the dress. Now I need to return the favor.”

“No favors,” I tell her. “I’ve had your kind of favors before. There was that time you offered to cash my check and I never saw any of the money. Or what about when you called in sick for me during fourth grade and told the school secretary I had eloped with Rudolph Valentino, as if she knew who that was. No,” I repeat, “I definitely do not want any favors.”

“I’ll think of something,” Aunt Hattie says, as the saleswoman packages the dress in tissue and folds it into a green cardboard box with a carrying handle.

Aunt Hattie points the box toward a man dressed in a double-breasted, charcoal gray suit. “Now that’s a nice looking man,” she says as we step behind him onto the escalator. “But did you notice how his step has no bounce? And those worry lines on his forehead are not a good sign.”

“Shh,” I warn her, hoping the man won’t turn around. “He’s probably got some problem he’s figuring out. James always looked like that when something at work bothered him.”

“See,” she says. “I rest my case. Definitely not your type of man,” she says. “And don’t roll your eyes like your mother.”

As I unlock my silver Mustang, a present I bought myself when I was promoted, Aunt Hattie pats the black convertible top. “Wish we could put the top down. Nothing like the wind in your hair,” she says as she runs her fingers through her pink curls. “I still drive my old Thunderbird. Gets me where I want to go and that’s what counts.”

I don’t confess to Aunt Hattie that I bought the Mustang on impulse this past May and haven’t had the urge to put the top down since. She would insist that we roll the top down today, no matter what the temperature.

She settles against the chilled leather and pulls the seatbelt tight. I wait for the defroster to start working before I zip out from the curb, merging with the other traffic. We sing along with some of the songs on the radio, her voice deeper, richer than mine.

Aunt Hattie says it’s her treat when we stop by Carl’s Chop House for a late lunch. We’re seated before I remember I left my purse locked in the trunk. I’m irritated I have to go back into the cold to retrieve it. When I return, I spot Aunt Harriet sitting at a different table, laughing with a man about my age and holding up her new dress. She doesn’t see me moving in her direction.

She jumps as I put my hand on her shoulder. “Oh, there you are. Johnny’s going to join us for lunch.” She looks back and forth between us, her eyes darting about like lightning bugs. “Really, John is his middle name but I like it so much better than Matthew.” She folds her dress carefully before tucking it back in the box and setting it on the floor by her chair.

“Harry,” I warn, glaring at her and refusing to look at the man, who must think we’re both crazy. “It’s time for us to go. That plane leaves early tomorrow for Florida.”  
 “Sit down and rest awhile. Plenty of time. Go on, sit,” she says, motioning me toward the empty chair the man has pulled out for me.

“I’m sorry,” I say to the man across from Aunt Hattie. “It’s just that she’s…”

“A total delight,” he finishes for me. “Please do sit down,” he says, sweeping his arm toward himself as if he’s scooping up air. “Just call me Johnny.”

As I run my tongue over my lips, I feel the rough skin, chapped from the cold, and wish I had stopped to put on lipstick. My chest feels tight, as if I might be coming down with something.

There’s only one other couple sitting at a table against the wall, leaning toward each other, their blonde heads merging over steaks that may grow cold on their plates. The tablecloth glistens white as egg shells or new-fallen snow.

“You two have a lot in common,” Aunt Hattie says. “You young people today work too hard. You’re so busy watching your feet move that you step all over yourselves,” and she clicks her tongue.

“How do you do that?” Johnny asks, trying to imitate Aunt Hattie’s tongue clicking. “My uncle used to make the same sound whenever he told me to mind my manners.”

“And did you?” Aunt Hattie asks.

“Never. No fun in doing what’s expected,” Johnny says, looking right at me. “Can’t learn any­thing that way.” He studies the wine list, running his finger down the names, reading some aloud. “Let’s try this Zinfandel from California,” he tells the waiter who agrees it’s a fine choice for brighten­ing up a drab winter day in Detroit.

“So tell me why you work so hard,” Johnny says, his eyes dark as the convertible top on my Mustang. “What is it you do?”

For some reason, I can’t remember what I do. It’s as if my mind’s hard drive has crashed and I lost all my files. “I don’t work hard,” I deny as he reaches across the table and turns my hand palm up trace the lines with his fingertips.

“Cold from being outside. But no callouses yet,” he tells Aunt Hattie. “It’s not too late. In her future, I see hope, a long lifeline, much happiness, an aunt who gives good advice.”

As I start to withdraw my hand, he tightens his grip. Blood rushes to my cheeks, a sudden warmth. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Aunt Hattie, the stillest I’ve ever seen her and she looks tired, her face tanned, lined and weathered, older than she looked this morning, I know I can’t let her down.

“How much happiness do you see?” I joke. “Enough to fill a wine glass?” I click my tongue against the roof of my mouth and Aunt Hattie’s sound emerges from my mouth. Both of them stare at me as if I’ve conjured up ghosts. I do it again. “Easy to do. Just takes some practice,” I gloat feeling his hand cup mine. “Maybe I’ll teach you how.”

Aunt Hattie pats Johnny’s arm and says, “I know someone who has a terrific dress she can bor­row if you like   
to dance.”

“A man who can’t dance sits on the sidelines,” Johnny says sipping the fragrant wine. He winks at me, the same kind of wink Aunt Hattie gives when she’s up to no good, the kind of wink that reminds me of a railroad crossing.

I wink back, hearing in the distance the sound of train whistles and the clickety-clack of big steel wheels against   
the tracks.

**Case Closed**

Turn out the light, mother hollers. Windows slam, doors lock on the first floor, shut tight against hitchhikers, rabid bats who fly by radar. At 12, the midnight age, I open shades she pulls, call forth witches and the Seven Sisters from winter skies.

Heads bent low, we read mysteries. Under sheets bleached white with dreams, we spot clues sprinkled like cherries over mother’s buttercream frosting. We dig for chocolate cake buried, layer upon layer. It crumbles in our mouths. We guess it is the short bearded stranger or even the vicar, never the girl in red polka dots. Motive is all, we say. Where is her intent? We, like her recognize innocence. On the last page, her sentence is life.

Mysteries crop up everywhere at school. Like what dress to wear or not wear for luck. I solve algebraic equations, where x equals y squared and unknowns become known. Answers are right, teachers say, or wrong, depending on the answer key. I hope for multiple choice, a chance. When I check Patrick’s papers, I give him a couple of points for trying. Trying to kiss me with mother flicking the porchlight off and on like some lightning bug. Still, his fingers touch bare breast and rest, a period on the page.

So much blood flows every chapter. Hard-boiled PIs, names of metal and luck like Mike Hammer and Sam Spade, go it alone. Tough guys, quick with their fists, they pound flesh and pavement. I fall in love with these characters. They’ve seen it all. And, they have done it all. At least that’s what I tell Thomas, years later, when he wants to know why I quit my job and how we expect to pay our bills, much less make it and get ahead. Ordinary questions, I guess, from someone who prefers reading biog­raphies of dead men, models to live by.

Locked room mysteries confuse me since what can’t be is. The key usually is in the victim’s pocket. When Thomas hires a security firm to install electronic sensors, I can never remember the code. Mother says I’m lucky he’s such a good provider. He puts deadbolt locks on her front door and back, showing her how to work them fast in case of fire. At my house, I set off alarms, punching in wrong numbers. Finally, I’m fed up with all the noise. No one understands why I want a divorce. Of course, he says, you’ll change your mind.

Miss Marple clicks her knitting needles, knowing all the time. Liars and murderers are no more than microbes in a glass of water set on the kitchen sink. I drink gallons of well water, live dangerously.

**Computer Cupid**

Some things are tough to figure. If it were all happening to Cami, I could understand. She’s a cheerleader and real popular. But I’m just average, nothing special

It all started yesterday. There I was in my computer class, minding my own business. I called up last week’s file and got a weird message: *I’m waiting for you, as always.*

I didn’t let it worry me too much, just erased it, figuring someone got my file mixed up with someone else’s. But today when I log in, another message pops up on my screen: *Quit biting your nails. You’re too cute to have habits like that.*

I blush and look around. That creepy guy in the back row is watching me. He’s probably the one doing this. Just my luck. Too bad it’s not someone like Tom Ryan, smart and cute. But Cami is Tom’s type. I’m only his next door neighbor, a good buddy since kindergarten.

By the third message, I’m getting angry. It says: *My eyes are on you.* I glare at “the creep” all through class, but he doesn’t look up from his computer.

Telling Tom about it after school makes me feel better. He says he’ll help me catch the guy. Tom asks for my code, tells me he’ll check out my files, pats my shoulder and says, “Don’t worry. It’ll all work out OK.”

The next day Tom’s waiting for me after his fourth hour computer class. “It must be one of the guys in my class,” he says. “There’s already another message in you file and you told me “the creep” left class before you did yesterday.”

“Maybe he snuck back later and did it,” I say.

“I don’t think so,” Tom says, shaking his head. His hair falls slightly onto his forehead, making him look like that guy on *Miami Vice. “*But I’ll follow him today to make sure.”

Turns out Tom is right. It’s probably not “the creep.” He doesn’t go near the computer room except for class, and after school he rushes off to the chess club tournament.

The messages keep coming some more taunting than before: *Just look around. I’m closer than you think.* Others reassure me: *Don’t worry. You’re not your parents. You are you.* Others make me shiver. *The light in your room went off late last night. Were you trying to finish your English project?*

A couple of weeks later I get to compute class early and catch “the creep” bending over my computer. “What do you think you’re doing?” I holler as I rush up behind him.

“Just need to borrow your manual,” he says. “No big deal.”

“Sure,” I tell him noticing that his computer is still turned off. Maybe I caught him before he could do anything.

Tom and I take turns following “the creep.” Nothing happens.

By the twentieth message, we’re still not getting any closer to finding the guy. Even Tom is stumped.

It makes me feel funny. It’s as if someone is looking inside my head and knows what I’m feeling and thinking, knows things I don’t even tell my best girlfriend.

This guy knows I worry about guys thinking I’m too smart, knows I bite my fingernails when I’m nervous, knows I hate for my parents to argue. Still it’s kind of nice to have someone know the worst and like you anyway.

I’m nervous as I slip into my seat in my fifth hour computer class. I’ve changed my code before, but he’s always been able to break it. I punch some keys to display my file. Sure enough, there at the bottom of the screen is another message: *You’ll do fine on the history test. I’m with you all the way.*

I type in: *How do you know I’ll do fine? Who are you?* I haven’t admitted to Tom that I answer these messages. He might misunderstand.

I’m almost late to my history class. As I slide into my seat, I glance over at “the creep” who sits two rows from me. I lean over and whisper to Tom, “I’ve got an idea. Maybe ‘the creep’ has a friend do it.”

“Don’t be on it,” Tom laughs.

“It’s not funny,” I tell him as the teacher tells both of us to be quiet and passes out the tests.

Tom walks out of class with me. “How did you do on the test?” he asks.

“Fine,” I say.

“Knew you would.” At the drinking fountain he puts his hand on my arm. “Want to go to the Valentine Dance with me?”

“You don’t have to do that,” I answer, thinking he’d rather ask Cami. “Maybe ‘the creep’ will ask me,” I joke.

“Your choice,” he says, turning toward the second floor stairway and taking the steps two at a time.

As I walk out the door, Tom honks.

“Want a ride?” he shouts.

“You didn’t have to wait for me,” I tell him.

“I’m waiting for you, as always,” he says quietly.

I gasp, cover my mouth with my hands. All my books drop to the sidewalk. “It’s been you all along!” I scream. “You tricked me.”

Tom jumps out of the car, helps me pick up my books. “Had to do something to get your attention.” he says and winks. “After all, you still think of me as the kid you used to beat up in your sandbox.”

“Wrong. You don’t know everything,” I say, wondering what to wear to the Valentine Dance.

**Daily Entries**

I’m reading Sylvia Plath’s *Ariel* when Cornelius pushes my shoulder, knocking my chest against the edge of the desk. And I feel like I’m sliced in two but a lot he cares.

When I catch my breath, I turn around in my seat to hit him with the book. All hour he keeps poking me in the middle of my back and whispering things. (Why don’t you see him and make him shut up?

He tells me Sylvia Plath was a sickie and says you look like the picture of her on the back cover. Says I look like her too. Says it’s something in the eyes that gives sickies away. Says her poems are death poems by the dead. Only dead people read dead poems he whispers.

I’d like to make him dead. I can do it for my demonstrations speech. “How to Kill a Person Without Hardly Trying.” Maybe I can hang him from that fluorescent tube light that never works. The one that makes the pitiful beeping noises, flickers, and goes off. Or what about pinning hm to the bul­letin board with gold thumbtacks?

This room is a perfect tomb. Everything stays the same. Those ancient books locked in the glass cupboards. And these old desks bolted to the floor. Only the seats move and creak. Even the stale smell of chewed-up Double Bubble and Juicy Fruit stuck under my desk reminds me of gladiolas and chrysanthemums.

I run my fingers over the carved names on my desk, my eyes on the clock that hasn’t changed its time since the first day of class. If the bell doesn’t ring soon, I may just turn around and stab him with my pencil. The headlines will read, “High School Student Dies From Lead Brain.”

After class, Cornelius holds me in my seat. He says he’s got the car tonight and wants to take me for a drive and talk.

I tell him I’m busy.

He says I’m not busy and he’ll pick me up at 8:00.

I try to spit in his face but nothing comes out. My mouth is dry as the chalk on the board.

He doesn’t give Sylvia Plath back but leaves with her tucked under his arm.

Can you believe that he actually has the nerve to show up at my house? I hear him talking to my mother in the living room. They both make me sick talking about school and kids whose names she memorizes from the yearbook, hoping one day she’ll meet them all. But she hasn’t learned Cornelius’ name and she’s trying to find out about him.

Cornelius doesn’t push my mother’s shoulder and he’s very serious as he talks about his advanced placement math course and his plan to win a scholarship to the University of Michigan.

My mother is impressed with him, with me for finding him. I know this because she seats him in the overstuffed tweed chair. It’s the chair she usually reserves for the minister, my father, and the Avon lady. She even gets a plate of cookies and a coke to keep him longer.

I get myself a coke out of the refrigerator and my mother, when she sees it in my hand, says it’ll make my pimples worse. So I quickly guzzle the twelve ounces while she tells me how I’ll get pimples and a stomach ache.

Most guys would rather walk than take a girl out in a station wagon with a bumper sticker that reads “Vote for Nixon.” And one underneath saying “God is Alive.” The back side windows are cov­ered with decals from national parks and state attractions.

Cornelius drives with both hands on the wheel. I turn the radio on full volume and sing along. He turns it down and talks while I count the seventy-five decals.

He talks a lot about you. Says you’re too inhibited. Says you shouldn’t wear pants all the time even if you are ashamed of your legs. Says you might be decent looking you’d get contact lenses and smile so your teeth show. Says the way you cover your mouth with your hand is a sure sign of insecurity.

The only reason I’m telling you this is because Cornelius says he’s going to make his entire journal an analysis of your   
behavior. He takes on what you do in class. When he shows me the notes (six loose leaf pages already) I tear them up. But he laughs and says he makes carbon copies of every­thing.

When he pulls into lovers’ lane, I scrunch down in the seat and hope no one recognizes me. I’ve got a pack of cigarettes in my purse and two packs of gum. If he tries to kiss me, I’ll just light up a cigarette.

Cornelius turns on the overhead light and I have to lean over to shut it off. I want to puke when my arm touches his. Instead, I start screaming at him, telling him how dumb he is.

He just sits there smiling, saying I’ve got too much pent-up hostility. He says Mary Ellen could give me some lessons on how to relate to people. She’s the one who sits in the third row, talking to some jock and fluttering her eyelashes. She even talks to Jerry the whole time you read Emily Dickin­son. (You know as well as I do that anyone who talks during Emily Dickinson can’t really feel anything.)

I tell him Mary Ellen’s too dumb to know anything and through the stickers on the windows, I can see other cars, couples with their arms around each other, kissing. Well, I can’t really see them but I know that’s what they are doing. And here I am cooped up with crazy Cornelius.

The stuffing is coming out of the seat on my side. I pull out tiny pieces, roll them into balls, and flick them off the rear view mirror. All the time, I think about Mary Ellen and those parties she has.

Finally, Cornelius pulls Sylvia Plath’s book from the glove compartment. As he opens the book and shows me a page, I see he’s underlined parts with black magic marker. I’m so mad, I hit him in the arm with my fist. He has no right to mark up my book and I tell him so (Would you like some­one marking up your copy of Emily Dickinson?)

I tell him to take me home and he does. He doesn’t even try to kiss me good night. I’m glad of that. His braces would have shredded my lips.

But I do pause under the porch light to tell him about last night’s dream. He’s roped between two desks, spread-eagled, and you’re ripping his journal into small, white slivers that turn into pins and pierce his body. He’s a voodoo doll tied to desks bolted to the floor.

Shaking his head Cornelius says he needs time to   
figure that one out. Tomorrow night same time he’ll pick me up he says. I tell him I won’t be here and slam the front door for emphasis.

In class, Mary Ellen teases me about Cornelius and invites me to her pajama party. I don’t really want to go so I pretend I don’t hear her.

Somehow, my mother hears about Mary Ellen’s party and I go just to make her shut up. (I get really sick of hearing my mother talk about Mary Ellen.) But I don’t tell Mary Ellen I’m coming. I just show up.

Mary Ellen looks surprised to see me but she acts okay and takes me down to the basement where the other girls have already spread out their sleeping bags. Theirs look like they’ve just rushed out to Hudson’s and bought them. I really don’t want to spread mine out next to theirs and I wouldn’t have until much later except Mary Ellen tells me too.

Mine belongs to my older brother and it still smells like stale smoke from his Boy Scout campouts and has ketchup stains on it and a hole in the bottom where he zipped it up and hopped around the campfire.

When I unroll it, the girls hold their noses and get   
the Airwick to set next to my bag. I laugh with them. It is kind of funny.

We listen to records, especially *Saturday Night Fever.* Mary Ellen says that John Travolta takes Cheryl Ladd to disco at Studio 54. Says Suzanne Somers is dying to go out with him. A skinny girl with red hair says she saw Travolta’s movie seven times and could spend the rest of her life watch­ing him. Mary Ellen puts her hair up like Olivia Newton-John’s and twirls her way into the bathroom.

The girls put on their pajamas—those shorty, see through kind. Those nighties reveal everything and I’m glad they can’t see my small breasts through my flannel covering. My mother says not to worry about it, that after I have children they’ll get bigger. But by then, it won’t matter anymore. I’ve thought of stuffing Kleenex in my bra but I’ve heard that a guy can tell when he dances with you. And the points on padded bras always get pushed in and everyone knows. (Can’t you tell that Jennifer in the fourth row wears one?)

The girls teach each other the New York Hustle but I sit and watch. After all, we’re at that age and funny stuff can happen. Something like that can mess you up for life. But even Mary Ellen dances, so maybe the stories aren’t true. No one doubts Mary Ellen. All the boys in school are after her. (Even crazy Cornelius would give up a scholarship to go out with her.)

One of the girls (I don’t know her name but she’s in my history class) shuts off the record player and says, “Surprise.” From behind her back, she holds out a small jar. Mary Ellen, who is yell­ing at her because she scratched the record, stops in the middle of a curse word and tries to grab the small white jar.

The girl drops down on her sleeping bag, still holding the jar.

Everyone is quiet.

She takes a movie magazine from her suitcase, flips to the back and shows us a full-page ad. After the other girls get done looking, I pick up the magazine and study the ad.

If I looked like the girl in the ad, all my problems would solve themselves. She looks like me in the “before” picture-flat chest, slumped shoulders, brown hair. She’s even biting the inside of her lip: at least it looks that way to me. The “after” picture reminds me of Mary Ellen—tight sweater (wonder if it’s cashmere), rounded in the right places, blonde hair (maybe it’s the lighting), and an easy smile.

All this from a jar of cream. Bust increaser that need only be applied nightly. Smooths. Softens. Builds while you sleep.

The jar is passed around and hands rub under see-through nighties. Even Mary Ellen scoops some out and applies it. When I get the jar, I look to see if anyone is watching me. They’re not and I take the whole jar into the bathroom with me.

Behind the closed door, I massage in the cream. I can already feel it beginning to work.

I’m going to buy a jar of cream for myself. If I knew Mary Ellen better, I’d ask her to let me use her address. (Wonder how the school would feel about receiving a small white jar in a brown wrapper.) Guess I’ll just use my own address and beat my mother to the mailbox. (Maybe I can wrap my mother in a brown paper and mail her to Mary Ellen.)

Through the bathroom door, I can hear Mary Ellen. She’s telling everyone how Jerry (the one she talks to when you read Emily) calls her every day and makes out with her every night in lovers’ lane. She says she now uses the pill. I can hear the other girls listening to her.

I look for the proof, the packet of pills behind the mirror of the medicine cabinet. But there are only the usual aspirin, toothbrushes, toothpaste, electric razor, and after-shave. I find a rusted safety pin but no pills. They’re not in the closet either. Not behind the shampoo or the hair brushes. But on the second shelf, way in the back, behind the new towels, under a pile of frayed yellow hand towels, I find a diary. Mary Ellen’s diary.

Since the key is attached by a red satin ribbon, I open the diary and read. Pages filled with Mary Ellen’s small backward slanting words. Pages about her and Jerry. Three pages about their first kiss. Pages of her parents’ quarrels, of her desire to get her nose fixed, of going to sleep and waking up, of boring days, of friends’ insults, of daily chores.

My hands sweat as I lock the diary and replace it.

I’ve been in the bathroom a long time but I don’t want to come out until I can think of some­thing to say. I start laughing to myself, hoping it will help me remember a punch line to some joke, any joke. When I hiccup between the laughs, when the laughs become sobs, when I can’t stop no matter how hard I try, Mary Ellen starts screaming at me.

Mary Ellen says, “You’re weird.” She pounds on the bathroom door, still screaming. “I told my mother you were weird but she made me invite you anyway. Your dumb mother made her pro­mise Your own mother knows you’re weird.”

I don’t care if she screams. Who listens to anything she says?

I just unlock the door and walk out. They’re standing there. Quiet now. But I turn my back on them and walk up the stairs and out the back door.

I walk all the way to lovers’ lane, sit behind a large oak where no one can see me and listen to the cars come and go. There are no station wagons tonight. Only cars with shadows inside that merge, then break apart.

All night I sit breaking branches into small bits and thinking how I’ll write this up in my journal.

You’re busy when I try to hand my journal to you after class, but I can wait.

When he leans over and kisses you on the mouth, I think he’s taken you by surprise. But you don’t move away.

I’m disappointed. I thought you’d understand.

**A Dangerous Life**

On February 2, Eliza decides to give up men the same way she decides to shed her winter weight: quick and clean, like snapping lima beans.

Maybe it’s the sharpness of her mother’s voice over the phone wires, heavy as the ice that encases and drags down the lines, making them touch in spots that are not supposed to come together. The static.

“Can you hear me, Eliza?” In the background, the mixer whirs, its motor whining, filling the empty space where she used to live with her mother back when she was a young girl, just starting to notice the boys in the neighborhood who stayed out late. “I’m making your favorite carrot cake. From scratch.”

The noise distracts Eliza, expands and feeds her hunger for quiet. “Yes, Mother, I hear you.” Another voice, deeper, in the background. “Who’s there with you?”

“Just your favorite uncle. That’s what I’m trying to tell you. Charlie just blew in from California.”

Her mother mutters something under her breath to Uncle Charlie, then talks into the phone again. “Brought lots of oranges filled with California sun. Dinner’s at 7:00. We’re celebrating the end of winter. You’re invited.” That tinkling laugh her mother uses when men are around. It flies into Eliza’s ear like a gnat and buzzes briefly.

“Sorry. You know I’ve got that new ad campaign for Branker Trucks I’m working on.” Eliza opens the refrigerator door. Empty except for a head of wilted lettuce and a half-empty bottle of domestic red wine left over from the New Year’s toast she drank at 3:00 in the afternoon with a man in her office she dated, a man who can’t decide if he really wants his divorce to go through, a man she’s wasted two years on. She stoops down and grabs a can of Trim Line from the cupboard.

“What do you know about trucks?” Her mother laughs again. “Remember how you Uncle Charlie used to drive those tandem trucks through towns we never heard of? Say, maybe he can give you some ideas.”

Sure he can. Ideas like how to pick up hitchhikers who hijack your load or how to find the roadside park where a crap game is as good of an excuse as a blown water pump for being late. Only took a week before he lost that job. Yet, her mother always defends her baby brother, gives him money from her waitressing job, even works double shifts when Charlie needs money to pay off gam­bling debts.

Eliza can still hear her mother from back then chanting again and again like some kind of mantra, “He lives such a dangerous life.” Then her mother shivered with excitement, “Don’t ever say I said this, but those men may kill him if he doesn’t pay up.” She always emphasized “those men,” as if they were men she would like to meet, men from foreign lands.

“Can’t make it tonight, Mother. Besides, the trucks are toy trucks. For kids.” Eliza chugs down the can of Trim Line, a sweet-tasting concoction that promises instant results. “Got to go. Miles to go before I sleep.”

Her mother talks without listening, talks until she wears Eliza down, a sliver of herself. “So what do you know about kids? You never had any. You were never even a little kid yourself. Born a wrinkled-up adult, all red and squalling.”

After 39 years of this reminder, Eliza knows it’s senseless to refute anything. On this day, she feels like the groundhog. She will emerge from her hole and, despite the sun and shadows, scurry across the frozen field, daring anyone to force her back into her burrow beneath the earth’s crust.

Once started, her mother can’t stop. “Always worrying and fretting about things. Your father used to call you ‘little mother.’ We both sort of figured you’d have lots of kids, bless his soul wherever he is.” Pause and rewind. “Are you anorexic again? I make your favorite cake and you can’t bother to come over?”

Although she’s often heard the story about her father, Eliza suspects her mother made it up, something to justify her leaving Eliza alone when she took off for the different restaurants she worked in, none of them for very long. So many names: the Lighthouse, the Alamo, the Alpines—all high places for making a stand. Her mother used to say she would never work for a restaurant that had a common name or family name: as if people can own the food they serve. For her mother, food is love. To deny food is to turn down love.

Eliza can’t remember her father, even when her mother shows her snapshots, loose and slip­ping out of the corners in the photo album. Instead, Eliza remembers the men her mother found eat­ing alone and brought home. When Eliza woke, the new man was there, eating at the breakfast table, trying to make jokes with her.

Only Uncle Charlie ever came to stay for more than a week. Then he would take off, too, usu­ally on some rainy morning when the sun didn’t hurt his eyes. Eliza would wake up and he wouldn’t be there. Her mother made a game of it, looking around for him and asking her where he went, as if Eliza could pull her Uncle Charlie from a hat, if she could only find the hat.

In a while, her mother would shake her head, laugh a deep laugh that rumbled around in her belly until it rose up and burst from the back of her throat, an explosion. She always said the same thing, “That Charlie. Off for more of his adventures.” She would cook up a big batch of potato pan­cakes, smother them in her favorite apple sauce and wonder aloud about where Charlie would go this time.

Her mother would even thumb through an old Atlas and they took turns guessing where he might end up. Eliza always chose Alaska, a wild territory, only recently named a state. She liked the names of the towns, almost promises. Names like Anchorage, Fairbanks, Ruby, Point Hope — wide open spaces with only the wind to carry the prayers of men who stood with water up to their knees, scooping up rocks from the riverbed, hoping for the flash of gold.

“It’s not good not to eat, dear. I never knew you to turn down carrot cake, at least not the way I make it. Maybe you’re working too hard. There’s more to life than working.” Dishes clink in the back­ground.

Eliza imagines her mother, arms sunk up to her elbows in dishwater, bubbles rising. One shoulder raised and head bent, cradling the phone. Cord stretched taut across the kitchen, ready to let loose from its anchor on the wall.

“Eliza, talk to me. I can tell something’s wrong. I hope you’re not on one of those crazy diets again. Charlie and I are coming right over.”

“All right, I’ll come,” Eliza says, slamming down the phone. But she doesn’t want to go, doesn’t want to watch her mother cutting pieces of cake for her and Uncle Charlie. Doesn’t want to watch her mother put on more pounds.

But her mother doesn’t care about things like weight, never did. Just pats her wide hips and says men like a little flesh on the bones, whenever Eliza chides her about her health. Never even cares when her ankles swell most nights from carrying around all that weight. Claims she still gets the biggest tips.

Just last week, she spent an hour telling Eliza how she enjoys watching men eat, even puts extra scoops of mashed potatoes on the plates of her regulars. Then she laughed, a sure sign that she found another man to bring home and feed. Their coming and going never bother her mother. Always says all a woman has anyway is herself to count on.

Eliza knows she is different from her mother. If she becomes weightless, she will be able to float free from the pull of gravity, free from the fleshy legs that hold her upright. She believes in more than food, more than men. She believes in magic and she blames Uncle Charlie for that, for pulling quarters from behind her ear when she was a kid, for taking off for Alaska without her.

Eliza has a deadline to meet on the Branker Truck Account and she’s never missed a deadline in her life. She still has a couple of hours before she has to be at her mother’s house. Time enough. Opening her briefcase, she takes out the sketches, mock-ups showing the series of ad proposals. All she needs to come up with is the copy, words round as cherries, shiny enough to seduce ten-year-olds.

But she crosses out each word she writes, obliterates it with lead, moves the pencil point back and forth until the paper rips. Before, words have never failed her. They blossom into fruit beneath her fingers. Maybe it’s the sketches, miniaturized, small versions of real trucks instead of the thing itself. She wants her words to make the trucks zoom, capture tire treads hot against concrete, the speed of an empty tanker cresting the hill, coming home, large enough to fit into a child’s cupped palm. Eliza can almost feel the power of it all, the engines throbbing.

Not good in snow, her own Camaro, new and bought for speed, for handling when roads are dry. The sun has already set when Eliza slides into her car, the cold leather warming with her body heat. It’s still too early to celebrate the end of winter with her mother and uncle. But she will surprise them and show up before the appointed time. The days are beginning to get longer.

Eliza will drive by her lover’s house first, a confirmation of her morning vow. Sometimes his wife does not draw the drapes against the dark and she can look into their lives, see them watching television or one time they were repainting the living room walls. She no longer wants to sit there on his couch, performing daily rituals.

The Camaro’s rear wheels slip as she turns right, onto her lover’s street. The rear end skids, but Eliza goes with it, doesn’t fight it. She brings the Camaro under control, keeping it from smashing into the van parked in front of the colonial two-story that was just built last spring.

During the opening of the colonial model, she traipsed through as if she were a prospective buyer. Even asked lots of questions and took a brochure about the new subdivision, wondering what it would be like to live there. The real estate agent gave her a card, urging Eliza to call as soon as she made up her mind. She never told her lover about doing this. Even though he lived three blocks down in an older house, he wouldn’t have liked what she did. But, then, there were lots of things she never told him.

As she pulls up in front of her lover’s house, she turns out her headlights and wonders why so many lights are on at his house. Wasteful, she mutters to herself. As if energy were cheap these days. She sees that he did not shovel the walkway and the Christmas lights are still up. Thank goodness, she thinks, he has the sense at least to keep them turned off. Why has he left the bike outside, leaning against the garage, letting it rust as if it has no value to anyone? She wonders if they are both inside, shut in by the deadbolt locks he said he installed last month on both the front and back doors after their neighbor’s house was burglarized.

Eliza presses steady on her horn as she takes off, hoping her lover hears the noise, unexpected as a shooting star. Her headlights streak the night, catch another car unaware as she crests the hill and turns on her brights. The roads are salted, dry, safe as she pushes the Camero past 60, rejoices in the way it hugs the road and translates every curve into a foreign language.

Eliza passes a bush: round, squat as her mother who is rooted, self-contained within her skin. Not like me, Eliza thinks. Her mother is a woman who has withstood droughts, tornadoes, and other natural disasters, even her daughter. Even Uncle Charlie, who Eliza believes is really her father. Maybe she just wants him to be her father. Out loud, Eliza says, “Father.”

Mother and father. The two of them together: earth and air. She will see them tonight. She will eat her mother’s cake, peel California oranges and suck the sweet juices. Her words will flow, fluid and nourishing as orange juice. She will show Uncle Charlie that she can pull silver dollars from behind his earlobe, from behind both earlobes. She has been practicing.

She who never speeds pushes up past 80 along these back roads. Now the silence, the quiet darkness whipping past her. The night wide open.

Eliza breaks the sound barrier, slim, sleek in her new shape. Her hands, magician hands, nimble enough to turn the wheel, rehearsed enough to levitate the car in space, held to earth by the invisible strands of her beliefs, by her desire to live a more dangerous life.

**Double Date**

John sits across from me, dips French fries in ketchup as he thinks. I drink my coke, trying not to break his concentration.

“Just ask them straight out,” John finally says.

“And if that doesn’t work?” I ask, stirring the ice in my Coke.

“It’ll work.”

I guess that kind of confidence comes with being the most popular guy in school. Captain of the swim team and everything else.

“They might not go for it,” I tell him.

“Not at first maybe, but they’ll come around if you just sit and look sad.”

“I remember how much my parents like John. “A real level-headed boy,” my dad usually says to my mother.

“You might not like camping,” I say. “Your clothes are always wrinkled, the showers cold. Sand in everything. Ick!” I slurp the end of my Coke.

“With me along, maybe you won’t mind cold showers,” John laughs.

I pick up John’s biggest French fry and feed it to him. Suddenly he chokes, looks past my shoulder. I turn to follow his glance and see Mary Beth leaning against the table behind me, watching John.

As usual, Mary Beth looks like she stepped out of a Clearasil ad, the smooth-skinned cheer­leader who leads the crowd to victory.

Mary Beth steps to John’s side of the table, her back to me. She tells John about her California vacation, her voice soft as her hair. “Miss me?” she says.

I excuse myself and walk to the restroom, my shoulders straight. I slam the door, lock it.

Resting my forehead against the mirror, I remember John’s and my first date after he broke up with Mary Beth. When he first asked me out, I turned him down. Figured he’d lost a bet, even though I can’t picture him losing anything.

But he kept asking and finally I said okay. Thought once he went out with me that would be the end of that. He was used to the Mary Beths, not klutzes like me.

Mary Beth probably stayed at some luxurious California hotel. Camping’s not her style. I worry that it’s not John’s either. What if he ends up hating it, hating me?

I open the door quietly, smile when I see that Mary Beth is gone.

Before I’m even in my chair, John says he just knows my parents will let him come along. Says he’s so sure, he’s already got his suitcase packed. “Just remember to let them do all the talking,” he cautions.

“Too bad it isn’t California,” I say, watching his eyes.

“And what’s wrong with Traverse City?” He touches my arm. “You really shouldn’t let people like Mary Beth get to you.”

Sometimes his sureness gets to me. Things always work out for him; he knows just what to do. For a moment, I hope my parents will say no.

John drops me off at my house, tells me to call after I talk to my parents.

Before dinner, I stand in front of the mirror and practice what I’m going to say. Nothing sounds right. If I mess it up, it’s seven days without John, plenty of time for Mary Beth to work on him.

During dinner, the words tumble around in my head. Dad teases me about being in love. Dur­ing the apple pie, Mom asks if I’ve got everything packed. She hands Dad the newspaper and starts to clear the table.

When I finally talk, my voice sounds hoarse. All the words leave me and I say right out, “Can John come camping with us?”

Mom sets down the plate she just picked up. Dad looks up from the front page. Dad says it wouldn’t look right; when he was young, boys didn’t go on vacations with girls.

Mom agrees but reminds him times have changed. “Besides,” she says, “John’s a nice boy.” She stacks silverware on the plate. “It might give her something to do besides mope around the tent all day writing in her diary.”

Dad remembers last year. I can tell by the way he combs his mustache with his fingers. “Couldn’t even get her to go fishing with me last year,” he says.

Mom nods her head.

“Does John like to fish?” Dad asks, pulling the sports’ section from the newspaper. That’s his way of saying okay.

I pull the phone into my room and punch out John’s number. When he answers, I tell him the good news and ask him if he knows how to fish.

John says, everybody knows how to fish. I feel guilty for doubting him.

“Traverse City, here we come,” I say.

As we talk, I polish my toenails pale pink. Reminds me of the inside of a shell, the kind you hold to your ear and hear the sea.

I dance around the room, John’s voice strong in my ear.

John teases me about being too happy, warns me I’ll grow up one day. He asks what makes me unhappy.

“Purple nail polish, the second day of school, and guys who can’t fish,” I tell him as I stub my toe on the dresser.

I’m on my best behavior all week, do the ironing without being asked. Even I begin to think I’m going to collapse from so much goodness.

But finally, after we wedge John’s suitcase between the tent poles and canned goods, we’re all in the car—Mom and Dad in front, John and I in back; sort of a double date.

I look out my window and try to remember last night’s dream. John catching minnows with his cupped hands, dropping them back, swimming off for the white water lily by shore, leaping from the water like some shining trout and putting the flower behind my ear.

But the fisherman of my dreams is talking to my dad about last night’s Tigers game. When I point out the deserted farmhouse, neither hears me.

We stop at a small diner and instead of sitting down at the table, I continue walking to the rest room in the back.

When I come out, two guys about my age are sitting at the counter. One punches the other. The punched one turns and whistles.

When I reach the table, John’s looking at the menu, pretending he’s gone deaf. My dad’s figur­ing the gas mileage on his napkin. My mother’s cleaning the spoon with her napkin before she stirs the coffee.

I stare at the blowfish hanging from a string over the cash register. Probably gets fatter every time a sale is rung up.

John asks me what I’m staring at and my parents turn to look.

“Looks like you when you get mad and puff out your cheeks,” Dad says to me, laughing. “Ever notice that, John? Get too close to a fish like that and the spines puncture the skin. But it doesn’t kill you, only makes you more careful.”

“Yes, sir,” John says. “I’m careful when she gets mad.” They both laugh and I feel betrayed.

I tell John he’s never really seen me mad and he reminds me of the time the carnival guy conned us into playing the shell game. John says that telling everyone within shouting distance that the man’s a shyster was a pretty good sign I was mad. I tell him that doesn’t count; he says it does.

Mom tells us we sound like an old married couple and I shut up.

In the car, I burn my thighs on the leather seat as I scoot closer to John and mouth the word, “I love you.” He blushes.

We pass a metallic blue camper on the road, decals from all over the United States plastered on the back window.

“Look at that,” John says. “Must have a television set and everything.”

“Yeah,” my dad mutters. “Those things are taking over the campgrounds. Last summer a long silver job came roaring in at night. Levelled our tent just like that,” and Dad snaps his fingers.

“It was the best part of the vacation,” I say. “We talked about it for days. I mean, what if we’d been in there sleeping?”

“And I thought the best part was the Thompson boy,” Dad says adjusting the rear-view mirror so he can see into the back seat. “You sure had your eye on him.”

“I did not. Besides, he was only fifteen.”

John winks at me.

My mom says the Thompson boy was nice, even stopped by every afternoon to show her the fish he caught.

“Sounds like a weirdo,” John whispers to me.

“Anyone who panics at a couple of bloodsuckers on his arm has to be a little off,” I say.

“Bloodsuckers,” John says, cracking his knuckles.

Rolling down the window, I shoo a trapped fly toward it. I get the fly out safely, roll up the win­dow and lean my head against it. Soon I’m asleep. A sudden jerk bounces me against the glass and I hear my dad saying he can’t help it if the boulder was hidden by tall grass. My mother says she warned him to check before he drove in. John says it’s a nice place to camp and I open my eyes.

We all unload the trunk. Mom sets up the cooking area. I hand Dad stakes for the tent and pull out the sleeping bags. John gets in the way until Dad sends him to look for firewood.

When it starts to get dark, we cook hot dogs on an open fire.

“I thought you had a camper,” John whispers as he swats mosquitos landing on his legs.

In sleep, my mom and dad separate John from me. His snore, quiet at first, then louder, surprises me. The breath leaves his mouth in spurts.

In the morning, I tell him he snores. He says he doesn’t. When I ask him if he ever hears himself sleeping, he says I twist everything around.

“Only old men snore,” he says as I toss him his bathing suit from the line.

“Let’s go swimming, old man,” I say.

He thumbs his nose and goes into the tent to change. When he comes out, he looks glorious, his team suit trim at the hips.

My turn. In the hot tent, I pull at the bikini. Maybe Mom’s right. Maybe it is too skimpy, but like I told her, I’m not a little girl anymore.

When I open the tent flap, John looks up from my dad’s fishing tackle and grins. He asks if it will hold together in the water. I wonder the same thing.

The lake is just over the hill. John picks a bouquet of daisies and hands them to me, bowing. They wilt quickly in my warm hands and when we reach the lake, I swish them around in the water and weight the stems with a small rock.

John wants to race me to the raft. I tell him I’m game and start my dog paddle, splashing water into my mouth. I stand up choking, spitting dirty water.

Warning me not to swallow any of the water, John shows me how to breathe, holds my arms so I can practice kicking. I kiss his arm.

“You’ll never learn if you keep fooling around,” he says.

I jerk my arm away and stand, the lake bottom solid against my feet.

“And if I don’t want to learn?” I say. “If I don’t want to swim like Mary Beth, what then?”

“You’re not Mary Beth.”

“And don’t you forget it,” I tell him, wishing I were Mary Beth, wishing I knew how to swim and had a camper instead of a tent.

I swim alone toward the raft. He waits until I’m halfway there and goes whizzing past me. He pulls himself onto the raft, lies on his belly, his head over the edge.

“Here comes the mongrel pup. Sink or swim,” he shouts.

He helps me onto the raft. I lean my head back toward the sun, waiting for it to bake out the anger.

I tickle him and he laughs so hard he falls into the water. I jump in next to him and dunk him. He comes up spitting. He tells me to grow up and I tell him growing up doesn’t mean you have to stop having fun. He asks if I can imagine my parents tickling each other. I must admit the picture just won’t focus.

“Well, maybe they should try it,” I say.

He ignores answers he doesn’t like. “This lake is kid’s stuff,” he says. “Muck and junk floating around. Indoor pools, that’s the way to go,” He leans back on the raft, shading his eyes to look at me.

“I don’t like chlorine in my eyes,” I say sadly. I’m not sure I can like anyone who doesn’t like lakes.

“Like I’ve said a million times. You’re just a romantic and they don’t get places.” He rubs my shoulders, loosening the muscles.

“Here is someplace,” I tell him, knowing Mary Beth would say it was no place.

He laughs and dives into the water. “Try to catch me.”

Even if I could, I wouldn’t want to catch him, at least not now, not in the water.

He’s back on shore before I even leave the raft.

When I finally drop down beside him on the shore, I’m tired. I trace a scar on his leg with my index finger.

“Bloodsuckers,” I say, pointing to three on his leg.

He tries to brush them off with his hand. “Don’t just stand there. Do something,” he says.

“Like what? Amputate?” I’m beginning to really enjoy myself. “Spiders,” I say, “That’s it. Spiders eat bloodsuckers. I’ll go find some.”

He grabs my arm. Tells me he doesn’t like spiders, to find another way. He keeps shaking his leg, trying to loosen the bloodsuckers.

“Don’t move around so much, makes the blood flow faster,” I warn.

He sits in the sand, his bloodsucker leg straight in front of him.

I feel sorry. He looks so helpless. But sorry or not, I need to know. “Can you really fish?” I ask.

“Looks easy,” he says. “Read some books about it once.”

With a stick, I gently scrape off the bloodsuckers. I tell him salt works too.

John sits staring at me, pokes a finger in my cheek. “Like your dad said about the blowfish.” He pushes a strand of hair from my eyes. “Maybe your dad will teach me to fish.”

I hug him. “What if you don’t catch anything?”

“Nope I don’t,” he says. “Don’t like worms any better than bloodsuckers.”

I tell him my dad doesn’t either. That’s why I always put the worms on the hook. Bet that would make Mary Beth sick.

“And he calls himself a fisherman?” We both laugh.

“Race you back to camp,” John says taking a head start. “I really never did like Mary Beth,” he shouts back over his shoulder.

I stand up and race after him.

**Everything Was Different**

The room was a misty grey, but it seemed useless to turn on a light in mid-afternoon. Valencia had tried to read the book, but that, too was useless. She thought of how a college professor had once praised the book for a whole hour. But she had found only words on a printed page. Black on white. Nonexistent people created by a restless man. So she’d let it fall open against her sagging breasts.

Her legs were propped on an orange-flowered ottoman to relieve the pressure of her bulging stomach. She massaged her thighs gently, stopping to trace where a blue vein had broken and spread its spider branches under her skin.

A record was rejecting for the third time and she walked over and turned it off. Outside the window, it was still raining, ugly, foggy drops beating on the glass, making the green grass blend with the brown patches. And a car passing, the wheels thinning the puddles.

She couldn’t stand being boxed in her thoughts a minute more. She kicked the book under the chair when she passed. As she slipped her arms into the raincoat, she noticed a rip in the lining and didn’t even care. She walked across the street to Sandy’s house.

“You little idiot,” Sandy said as she opened the door and pulled Valencia inside. “Why, just look at your hair. It’s soaked.”

And Valencia shook some of the dampness from her long, auburn hair as if in obedience. Sandy took her coat and returned with a towel.

“Am I ever glad you came over. It’s been one big storm in this house all day. The boys can’t get out with all this rain. They’ve both had those summer colds, you know. And they’re giving me a pain. Its’ great to see a civilized human being who can sit in a chair without pulling at the buttons or slipping crackers under the cushion to see them get smashed.”

“I’m not feeling any too civilized today. Just feel like I’ve got to be away from myself and with someone. Let’s go out to lunch and talk for a while.”

“Sounds marvelous. But I can’t get a babysitter in the afternoon and Jack will be…”

“Forget it.” The words are clumsier than she meant them to be, like opening a tin can with pliers. It frightened her that her mind was growing clumsy along with her body.

Valencia looked at Sandy’s short hair which was tousled as if she’d just been awakened from a nap. She watched her quick-puff her cigarette and turn it in her fingers as if she was trying to hold on to something.

Valencia folded the towel and pulled pieces of hair through it. She wished she didn’t have to pretend not to know that Sandy was concerned. That was the pain of people.

“What do you think I’d look like with one of those new short haircuts?” she said to Sandy. “I’ve been thinking about getting it all chopped off.”

Valencia remembered how she’d had it piled on top of her head the day she was married and the day at the beach when Ed had pushed it back behind her ears. She listened to it squeak as she pulled it taut between her fingers.

Looking at the kitchen clock, Sandy answered, “You’d love it short. Just whisk a brush through it in the morning.”

There were screams from the bedroom and the sound of metal hitting something. Then crying and a door slamming. Always a lot of sounds. Billy, the four-year-old, was laughing. “That’ll show him. He threw his truck at me. But it hit the wall and the wheels fell off.”

He looked at Valencia and his face wrinkled. “Gee, are you getting fat.”

He held his gun up to his eye and pretended to shoot her.

“Hey, you gotta fall dead. You don’t play right.”

“That’s enough, Billy Get back in your room. Walk,” she said as he skipped back and left the lamp rocking. But it didn’t fall.

The bedroom screams resumed and Valencia ran her hand lightly across her ballooning stomach.

Her mind rocked back and forth as her hand reached out to straighten the lamp. If only Ed would stop smiling. If only Sandy could…

“Hey, Sandy, hasn’t he ever asked that question before?”

“What question?”

“About being fat.”

“Sure, but he only asks it. Doesn’t really want an answer.”

They looked at each other a long time, both wondering what to say. Sandy lit another cigarette. She exhaled the smoke and split the humidity with her question. “You getting excited yet? Just a couple more months.”

Valencia started to tell her but instead bit the corner of her nail and shook her head up and down.

“Getting the jitters?”

“No.” And she wasn’t . That was the ache. She wasn’t getting anything. “I think I will get my hair cut.”

“That’s because you planned it all so carefully. That’s smart. Both of you working for a couple of years. Wish jack and I had done that. No worries of any kind.”

Sandy drew her feet under her and yelled at the boys to keep quiet. Then when they were quiet for a minute, she yelled again to ask them what trouble they were building now.

“That’s right, no worries. It’s best to be practical.” And she found herself looking at the clock every few seconds as Sandy did. The cheap gold hands slowly marking off another day, drawing closer.

When Sandy asked her into the kitchen while she fixed dinner, Valencia said she had to get home and do the same thing. Sandy looked relieved.

As Valencia rose from the chair, the towel fell from her shoulders to the floor. Quickly she bent over to pick it up and found her stomach caught between her shoulders and knees.

“Damn,” she muttered as she leaned over sideways and almost lost her balance.

Sandy helped her into her coat, handed her a black umbrella, and said, “Jack’s bigger than mine. Don’t worry about returning it right away. The only time he remembers he’s even got an umbrella is when he goes to the back of the closet for his golf shoes.”

She laughed and Valencia smiled politely, almost embarrassed to be let in on a man’s quirk, the thing that made him human, the thing that should be guarded.

The rain fell about Valencia, not touching her. If only it would touch her, she thought, like when she was a child and put on her bathing suit and built dams out of small twigs and the dams broke and the water rushed over the brown lines and flowed down the sewers.

But she wasn’t a child anymore. She couldn’t just do things; there had to be a reason. And she couldn’t find the reason and Sandy couldn’t tell her; it wasn’t fair to ask.

She folded the umbrella and stood by the car, looking at her house. She didn’t want to go in; it was too small for both her and Ed to be themselves and now with the baby coming. Everything seemed to be smothering her.

It was awkward climbing into the car, but then there was always awkwardness involved in things like this.

In the city, people were driving. Looking ahead. Stopping for stop signs. Making turns. And she performed the same routine functions.

Clicking on the radio, she listened to the music and commercials without hearing. She was trying to think of a place to go where she could be alone, could embrace herself and murmur lovers’ secrets, lies that explained so many things. Bust she couldn’t think of any place.

“I’ve got to get back,” she said aloud as a disc jockey announced, “It’s time for the 4:30 news.”

When she was home again, she stuck yesterday’s roast in the oven, knowing that Ed wouldn’t say anything now. Then she plopped back in the chair and tried to read the book again. But soon she was counting the number of cars that passed the house; she could tell by the faraway humming and clicking that grew nearer, and the splash that sent rain sounds into her lap as the car passed. She waited for Ed.

Finally she heard his car. The door slamming and the footsteps slapping the concrete. Ed was ugly as he stood in the doorway, large shoulders blocking out the rain behind him, a tired puff about his eyes and the black stubble on his chin that he shaved away twice a day. He reminded her of a bull as he wiped his feet on the worn rug and she smiled with her eyes for the first time that day.

“Here, let me take your coat.” Her heaviness seemed almost gone as she started to jump up and then remembered.

“That’s all right, Val. Stay where you are.”

But Valencia took his coat and stood there, waiting. Ed walked into the bathroom and shut the door; the water was running.

When he came out, she was standing by the door. They looked at each other and she said, “Kiss me,” and he did and she wished he hadn’t.

She listened to it rain the rest of the night and she could hear Ed snoring gently, muttering something, and watched him as he turned away, his face soft against the pillow. And she cried, enjoy­ing the salt-sting on her face. Eventually she slept.

Dusty rays of sun hit her back the next afternoon as she ran a white rag against the damp head­light. She was glad that Ed had been able to come home early and thought about suggesting a picnic. She knew he’d go if she asked, but he wouldn’t like it, not in the middle of the week. Maybe they’d go on Saturday.

She could feel him watching her and when she looked over at him, his eyes were not laughing, but smiling carefully, as if they might break her if the glance was too rough.

She caught a handful of water and tossed it at him; a few drops hit him on the forehead. His green eyes pulsated with the old look. He pointed the hose at her but then quickly turned it aside so that the jet of water hit the tree to her left. She frowned, dipped into the bucket and wiped the fender.

“Something wrong?” Ed had stopped rinsing the car and was watching her. “Maybe it’s too hot for youth be out here like this.”

Smiling, she shook her head. She knew he was trying, really trying, for her sake. But she wanted things to be like they used to be, and she knew they could never be that way again. And she knew no one could help her, would want to help her. After all, they’d planned on the baby for a long time; they’d both wanted it. But she felt cheated now; she was changing her mind and she knew it was too late for that.

“Want to go shopping tonight for the crib?” Ed was rinsing the front tire off, no longer watch­ing her, offering his support.

“But you have to shop.”

“Not for the baby’s stuff. That’s different.” He was watching her again as she rubbed the hood dry.

And that was just it. Everything was different now. She emptied the dirty sudsy water and rolled the bucket.

“It’s like old times having you home early. Remember how we use to go for long drives, out to dinner, and then to a drive-in?” She laughed, set the bucket next to him, and ticked him in the side as she continued talking. “You always spilled the popcorn.”

He turned to grab and tickle her, but instead kissed her forehead. “Yeah, it was fun. But it wouldn’t be comfortable for you at the drive-in now. Besides, you always spilled the Coke.”

He bent to steel-wool the tires and she walked back around the car, trying to remember if she’d really ever spilled Coke at the drive-in.

She waved to Sandy who yelled from across the street, “Have you seen the boys?”

Valencia shrugged her shoulders and nodded. Sandy never seemed to be able to find the boys when she wanted them.

Valencia climbed up to clean the top of the car. The sweat was running in small beads down her temples and inside her blouse collar. Using the rag, she wiped off her face. It felt cool now.

“Hey, Val what the hell you doing? I’ll get that. You just get the lower parts.”

He put his arms around her waist and helped her down, smiling as if he knew something.

“Damn it. Stop smiling like that. It makes me sick.” She threw the dirty rag into the bucket and rain into the house, slamming the door.

But she could hear Ed whistling and shut the kitchen window to stop the sound.

If only he would be mad at her, she thought as she took some lettuce from the refrigerator. She licked her finger and rubbed it against a dirt mark on the door.

All the time she was washing and shaking the lettuce, she remembered times he’d really been mad. That time she kept calling him a son-of-a-bitch, he’d hit her, and once when she’d locked the bathroom door, he’d smashed it in and had fixed the lock the next day. But now it was that stupid smile all the time. He tried so hard and she felt sorry for him.

Vinegar. Top shelf over the refrigerator. She moved a kitchen chair over and remembered he didn’t like her to climb. Only a couple of months, he’d remind her. Well, let him count the time.

She glanced toward the window as she lifted her foot onto the chair and kneed herself in the stomach… balance lost. She was lying on the floor. And all was quiet.

She hurt somewhere. She couldn’t hear Ed whistling and it was impossible to talk. She didn’t know what she’d say anyway.

Nothing. The silence terrified her; the dead sparrow flies. Maybe she’d heard it in a poem. Only her thoughts moving, all that there was of life. Hushed velvet slippers crossing snow.

Then she heard the grinding of the electric clock. The baby kicked against its confines. Time was passing and the baby kicked again and then was quiet, the sleeping death of life, waiting.

Valencia felt better now. She’d just lost her breath for a moment. She stood, pushed the chair back under the table, and opened the kitchen window.

“Hey Ed. Can you reach the vinegar for me?”

She waited, smiling patiently.

**A Fine Day**

The nurse rubs Vaseline on Juanita’s swollen finger, twists the wedding band over the knuckle. Juanita moans. She isn’t ready for the next contraction, can’t remember any of the Lamaze class lessons, doesn’t want to remember.

Pinching her arm, Richard tells her to breathe. “Why do you make everything so hard?” He sticks out his tongue, pants. “Like this.”

She wants to yank out his tongue with forceps.

“Goddammit, breathe right."  
 She scratches at the starched sheets, holds her breath against the pain.

“You can do it,” her husband says as she begs for the needle. “Bite on this.” He slips a sponge between her teeth.

Her teeth close on his finger.

“Goddammit.” He squeezes his sore finger, rocks it between his knees and back to his chest. “That hurt, goddammit.”

When the nurse comes with the needle, she holds out her arm.

“If you only tried,” Richard says from the flowered chair by the window. Newspaper pages crackle as he turns them; his voice floats above her, reading the baseball scores.

After the doctor drops the baby on her abdomen, after he stitches the wound and washes his hands, she is alone in a room. Curtains are pulled around her and she sleeps.

Her breasts that leaked for nine months go dry. Her daughter cries against her and the nurses bring her less often. Juanita is glad. Her daughter reminds her of the chicken in her freezer—feathers plucked, skin puckered.

In the middle of the night, the new mother in the next bed bites into apples and sucks the juices from oranges. She whispers through the curtains; Juanita feigns sleep. In the morning, the woman buys pictures of her infant. Juanita orders none.

When Richard visits, the woman is nursing her new son. Her face, like her exposed breast, is smooth, full. She laughs at Richard’s jokes. Her son’s feet straddle her breast as she burps him against her shoulder.

Richard turns away, hands Juanita a potted geranium he is holding. “Spot of color for the front porch.”

“I’ll keep it in the bathroom.”

“Not enough light there.” He kisses Juanita on the forehead and takes the apple the woman in the next bed offers.

“Want a bite?” he asks Juanita.

Juanita shines the apple on her nightgown and takes a bite. She gags and spits the half-chewed pieces into a Kleenex. “Wormy,” she tells Richard.

Richard holds the apple close to the light on her headboard, examines it. “Just your imagina­tion.” He bites and the juices glaze his lips.

“What are we going to name her?” Juanita asks.

“Who?” Richard closes the curtains and turns on   
the television.

“Your daughter.” She pushes the off button and moves the control box to the other side of the bed.

“I don’t care. The mother is supposed to choose the daughter’s name.” Richard pats his pock­ets for a pack of cigarettes. “Can I smoke in here?”

Juanita’s mother parts the curtains. Her fleshy arms jiggle as she moves forward, holds out two packages. “For the new mother from her mother.” She hugs Richard until his body is lost in hers.

In the first package are nursing bras, the front flaps folded down so the back tag shows.

“Thirty-six D,” her mother says, winking at Richard. “Didn’t I tell you pregnancy would make a woman out of her?”

“Mother please, Juanita says. “I can’t breast feed. There’s no milk.”

“Nonsense. The women in our family always have enough to feed triplets.” Her mother unties the second box and removes the cellophane wrapping. She eats the caramel in the center and picks out a chocolate-covered cherry for Juanita.

“Let Mother pick the name,” Richard suggests.

Juanita shakes her head.

“You got something against your name? Juanita is a nice name. Don’t you think so, Richard?” Mother picks caramel from her back molar.

Richard does not answer. He’s pushing in the tops of the candy to find a soft center.

“All a girl needs is a pretty name. I read your name in a book.”

“What book?” Juanita asks.

“One of those detective magazines. Your name was right on the cover.”

Richard’s laugh is too loud for this room of mothers. A nurse pokes her head through the cur­tain to remind them that visiting hours are almost over.

Juanita closes her eyes and rests her head against the pillow. She does not want to walk her visitors past the nursery where they will stop and try to pick their flesh and blood from the other pink bundles.

During the eleven o’clock news, Juanita uses her cuticle scissors to cut the nursing bras into strips. She cuts each thread holding the hooks and eyes. Some seams she rips apart with her hands. The weatherman predicts sun and a high of eighty as she puts the cotton strips into their box and dumps it in the wastebasket by her bed.

She dreams names of childhood playmates—Lori, Judy, Cindy, Katherine—but none seem right. Through breakfast, she says names aloud: Esther, Ruth, Mary, Sarah, Hannah. In the book of names the hospital provides, she finds Amanda, worthy of love. This is the name she writes on the birth cer­tificate. The meaning of the name, she repeats to herself—over and over, a litany.

Amanda develops jaundice and is kept from Juanita. Through glass, she watches her baby. Although Amanda sleeps and does not open her eyes, the nurses assure Juanita that she is doing fine. Juanita points her out to other parents and grandparents. Tells them Amanda is starting to gain weight, is losing the yellowish color that made her look like a chicken. Juanita studies the nurse’s movements as they bathe and feed other infants. She watches how they pin diapers and is sure she can do just as well.

Back in her room, she waters the geranium. Water leaks through the clay pot, onto the congratulatory cards. The card from the office is on top; the signatures smear as Juanita blots them with tissue. Their card is the kind with a chubby baby smiling, pinks and whites blending in the pastel borders. At the bottom, they tell her to hurry back.

Juanita reaches for the ringing telephone, knocking over a carnation arrangement. The white mild glass breaks on the carpeted floor. Storks with pipe cleaner legs and babies in yellow blankets are lost under carnations and glass.

Yes, her boss says, they miss her. The new girl puts figures in the wrong column and flirts with the married men. Not to rush Juanita, but if she finds she can come back in a month instead of six weeks…No need to decide now.

The baby is fine, she is fine, everyone is fine, and maybe in a month…

A nurse bustles in. She takes a white cup from her tray and rattles the pills against the paper sides. “Hang up, dear,” she says. “Time for our medicine.”

The nurse gives Juanita pills and water, and turns, almost tripping over the aide who is sweep­ing the glass and carnations into a dustpan. The nurse swivels on her foot and says to Juanita, “We really must learn to be more careful with a baby in the house.”

The nurse closes the door quietly. The aide leaves without looking at Juanita.

The same nurse brings Amanda for her evening feeding, checks the mother’s and baby’s bracelets. She tucks in the neckline lace on Juanita’s nightgown and says, “We don’t want to irritate the baby’s skin, do we?”

In her sleep, Amanda wrinkles her forehead. Juanita watches. Without warning, Amanda opens her eyes and cries. Juanita sticks the bottle in her mouth, rocks her back and forth. But the baby hits at the bottle with her fists, drinks, instead, her own tears.

“Hush now,” Juanita says. “Pretty baby sleep, sleep.”

Holding the baby against her shoulder she sings, “Mama’s going to buy you…” The baby’s tears run down her neck, between her breasts. The wails are trapped in her ear canal, bounce against the bones.

“Stop it.” Juanita shakes her and tries to force the rubber nipple into Amanda’s mouth.

The toothless gums set against her. She cannot pry them apart with her fingers.

Juanita rings for the nurse, again and again, until the nurse comes running, her crepe soles silent against the carpet.

In the nurse’s arms, Amanda burps and is silent. The nurse says nothing as she walks out.

Juanita bites through the cotton pillowcase, sucks the plastic covering until pine Lysol stings her tongue. The roof of her mouth is clean. She sleeps with her hands tucked under her chin and dreams of spruce forests, of pine cones nestled in branches.

At home, Juanita is alone with her daughter. No nurses with sterile hands stand waiting behind glass. Richard at work all day, into the evening. Later every night. Friends at their desk or at home cooking for their own families. Her mother at the hardware store, counting out nails for men. Only herself in the mirror every morning, her skin parched, peeling around the lips.

She vacuums to drown Amanda’s cries, watches soap operas on television. Sometimes she rocks Amanda in the darkened bedroom and cries. She tries to sleep with Amanda next to her in the double bed, but the baby kicks against her, keeps her awake.

Richard says Juanita is too tense; the baby feels it. “Girls cry more than boys anyway,” he says one night at the differ table. He takes Amanda for walks in the buggy while Juanita sleeps.

Her mother calls and says it’s colic; Juanita was the same way as a baby. “Is her stool runny?” Mother asks Richard over the phone.

Richard relays the question to Juanita.

“I don’t know,” Juanita shouts over the television voices.

“Yes, it’s runny,” Richard says into the phone.

Richard goes to the drug store and buys a case of Enamel. “Mother says this is better for colicky babies,” he tells Juanita when he gets home.

The doctor tells Juanita that most formulas are the same, says Amanda is a normal, healthy baby. “You just spoil her,” he says. “Let her cry. She’ll stop eventually.”

That night, Juanita calls the doctor’s home number.

“Dr. Feldon speaking.” A calm voice, warmer than his office voice.

Juanita lays the receiver in the crib net to Amanda’s mouth. The cries grow louder. She waits one minute exactly and picks up the receiver. It is dead.

When Amanda cries again that night, Juanita dials the doctor’s number and listens for his voice before putting the receiver near Amanda’s mouth. On the third call, a distant voice identifies itself as Dr. Feldon, tells the caller to leave a message when the beep sounds. Amanda cries through the entire tape.

Exhausted, Amanda finally sleeps. Juanita falls asleep on the couch watching the late movie. Sunlight wakens her and she puts her hand over her eyes, pulls up the blanket that Richard put over her before he left for work. The television is off and everything is quiet.

Juanita jumps up and stumbles on the edge of the blanket. She tiptoes to Amanda’s room, stares at her daughter whose face is already filling out. She stands there until Amanda whimpers in her sleep.

By the time Juanita warms the bottle, Amanda is crying. Juanita changes her diaper and wraps her in a blanket. She rocks Amanda and tests the milk against her forearm before putting the nipple against the baby’s lips. Amanda sucks. Suddenly, she chokes on the steady stream. Juanita lays her across her knees and pats her back gently.

Again she holds the bottle to Amanda’s lips. Amanda will not drink more.

“An ounce isn’t enough. Come on. Just a little more. “ She squeezes the nipple so milk beads on the baby’s lips.

Amanda turns her head. Milk drips onto Juanita’s arm, sticky against her sweating skin. Juanita wipes her forehead with the back of her hand, all the time making clucking sounds with her tongue, coaxing Amanda to drink.

Amanda’s cries grow louder. Juanita hurls the bottle against the wall. The plastic sac breaks and the milk drips down the blue walls, behind the framed print of the little drummer boy.

“Stupid baby!” she screams. “Why can’t you act right?”

The muscles in Juanita’s arm twitch as she lowers Amanda into her crib. She runs from the room, slams the door. The wood is cool against her forehead.

“Dumb, ugly, little baby.” She pounds the door with her fists. Pounds until her fists hurt. “Why don’t you leave me alone?”

Juanita runs cold water over her bruised flesh. “I’m leaving until you stop crying.”

Juanita pours a glass of orange juice and picks up the morning paper from the breakfast table where Richard always leaves it for her to read. She shuts the heavy front door behind her and sits on the top porch step, the concrete warm through her shorts. It’s the first time she’s read the paper since she’s been home. By the time she reads the comics, she is laughing.

As much as she hates to admit it, her mother and Richard are right. She needs to get out for a while, talk to other people.

She opens the front door and is surprised at the quiet. A good sign, she decides as she puts on her makeup. She takes her time and blends the rouge, wipes away the mascara smudges.

Even when she opens the bedroom door, Amanda does not wake up. She stays asleep when Juanita puts her in the buggy, stays asleep as the buggy bounces down the curbs and up.

Two mothers are sitting on the park bench rocking buggies. The first mother wears a peasant blouse with intricate embroidery on the front and on the sleeves. The second mother wears a halter top and moves her position occasionally to catch the rays of the sun on her shoulders. They are talking about a rash on the second mother’s baby.

Juanita aligns her buggy with theirs and sits down.

“Look like diaper rash,” the first mother says.

“Can’t be. I’ve tried all the ointments on it.”

“What do you think?” The first mother asks Juanita. She reaches into the other buggy and points to a rash on the inside of the baby’s thighs.

Juanita leans over and looks into the buggy where the baby makes soft noises sucking at the nylon blanket binding.

“Diaper rash,” she agrees.

“Try baking soda,” the first mother says. Then she looks over her shoulder at a small towhead on the monkey bars. “Be careful!” she shouts.

Amanda wakes up and begins to cry. Juanita rocks the buggy harder. She picks up Amanda and rocks her against her shoulder, offers her the bottle.

“Let Ruthie try,” the second mother says. “She has a way with babies.”

Juanita hands over her baby, watches her baby snuggle into Ruthie’s shoulder.

“Your first?” Ruthie asks. “My fifth. A boy,” she says, pointing to the baby asleep in the buggy. His light hair stands on end and his fair skin is flushed. The blue stretch pajamas pull tight across his fat belly. “Girls are tougher,” she reassures Juanita.

An ice cream truck rings its bell on the other side of the playground. Three children jump from the sandbox where they’ve been digging underground roads and run to the park bench.

“You promised,” the towhead says to Ruthie. “You promised.” All three children nod their heads.

Ruthie puts Amanda back in the buggy and winks at the second mother. “We promised.” To Juanita, she says, “Do you mind watching the babies while we get the kids ice cream?”

“Course not,” Juanita says.

“Bring you anything?” Ruthie asks, trying the red ribbon at her neckline.

Juanita shakes her head and Ruthie laughs. “Good thing. Probably melt before we got back here.”

Juanita watches the mothers and children walk under the slide. She brushes a fly from Ruthie’s baby. While she’s up, she wheels Amanda’s buggy next to the boy’s.

Juanita does not think about it, just wheels the boy’s buggy along the path. She pushes faster until the path curves in to the center of the park. She pushes over bicycle ruts and sings, “Mama’s going to buy you a mockingbird.”

Concrete dolphins rise out of the fountain ahead of her. Water streams from their mouths.

“And if that mockingbird don’t sing,” she hits the right notes, holds them.

Juanita leans over the concrete edge and washes her hands in the water. She rubs a moist finger along her lips.

She pulls the buggy back from the fountain, sits on the cement bench next to an old man.

“Fine day,” he says.

“Yes, a fine day.”

Your baby is sure enjoying it.” The old man looks into the buggy.

“He’s a good baby. Sleeps all night ad eats good.” Juanita takes a handful of popcorn form the box the old man offers.

“Reminds me of my son when he was a baby.” The old man reaches into his pocket and pulls out a wallet. Behind the scratched, plastic frame, a blonde, middle-aged man smiles.

Juanita has no pictures to show. In the distance, she hears the ice cream bell.

**In Winter**

All day the words drift in Jeannie’s ears, melt now as she lies in her single bed, her grand­mother’s crazy quilt holding down her body. The words, like her legs, cramp in the winter heat.

Up through the vents come her mother’s sounds: quiet, brittle. “You keep her,” she says to Jeannie’s father. “She always loved you best.”

The furnace clicks on. Hot air dry against her eyes, the back of her throat.

“A girl needs her mother. What can I say to a sixteen-year-old?” Her father’s voice hovers near the ceiling, then curls around the lipstick tubes and rouge she’s worn since her thirteenth birthday.

He gave her the tube of strawberry kisses two years ago, after she’d blown out the candles. From his coat pocket, not even wrapped.

Jeannie opens her window. Snow, cold under her fingernails, piled in her hands. Still more clinging to the outside ledge.

Her mother’s voice rises as she tells him the whole neighborhood knows how well he handles the young ones. He tries to shush her.

Small snowballs, the size of pearls, lined across the window sill. One by one, Jeannie flicks them off, packs the remaining snow into a ball.

In the box of photographs in the basement, her father puts his arm around her mother: at the beach last summer, at the New Year’s Eve party after he set the crepe-paper tiara on her head. Before that even. Jeannie, at two, held between them.

Silence. Her father may be holding her mother now, kissing her lips to stop the words.

Kneeling at the vent, Jeannie pushes pieces of her snowball through the metal slats. Snow water over her parents’ heads, refreezing at their feet. They cannot move.

Her father says he won’t be home much when he finds an apartment. “That’s no life for a young girl.”

Her mother again, on cue, says it’s no life for an old girl either being suddenly split up like this.

The snow hand touches Jeannie’s forehead, slips to her mouth. Muffled shouts in her cupped hand. “Never” ricochets off her palm, onto her tongue: a morning taste.

“What will I tell Jeannie?”

“Think about it.” Her father closes the front door.

The car starts in the driveway. Grinding gears from park to drive. A thump as metal hits the snowbank. Forgetting, he honks his standard good-bye from the bottom of the driveway.

Has he already found a new place? Or will he come back later to sleep on the tweed sofa that pulls into a bed? If her father chooses the sofa, she can’t have Cindy sleep over next week.

House sounds: television dialogue, canned laughter, the ironing board click, the steam iron hiss. Her mother is probably ironing her father’s handkerchiefs, even his underwear, just as she’s done for years. Take the pale blue shirts and iron permanent wrinkles into the collar. Rip off the buttons.

Turning her face toward the window, Jeannie sleeps, dreams the words are ironed flat on stone tablets. Theme music: the clock clicking off each minute, whining toward the next. Later, her mother’s flesh against her forehead; the dampness of lips and lotion hands, her mother leaning over her, dim in the night light, mixing with the dream shadows.

In the morning, Jeannie’s jaw is sore; she’s a teeth grinder. Her dentist suggests braces. Her mother claims it’s nervous tension and urges her drink warm milk before bed. Last night, her mother forgot to heat the milk; this morning her mother sleeps late.

Jeannie sits alone at the kitchen table, watches out the window for Gary’s car. He’s late and her feet are getting warm in the fur-lined boots.

A horn honks. She runs, clutching her books to her chest. Halfway down the walk, she turns and goes back to close the storm door. No one to yell after her that she should wear her hat.

Like her father, Gary’s at the wheel, tapping his fingers on the dashboard. His head bobs to a tune Jeannie can’t hear. His mouth opens and closes, forms a circle to draw out the end of the song.

“If I’m late for that gym class one more time, I’ve had it,” Gary says as he throws the car into drive before Jeannie even has a chance to close the door.

Jeannie rubs her jaw and straightens the books in her lap. At a stoplight, Gary leans over and kisses her. She tells him she doesn’t like to be kissed at 7:30 a.m. She scratches a snowman into the frosted window as Gary calls her a grouch, asks her what he did to deserve this. Teasing, he sticks out his lower lip, waits for her to laugh. She does as she gets out and locks her side.

Jeannie feels the cold between her legs, wishes she’d worn slacks. Her boots are really no pro­tection against the snow drifts that lap over the fur tops, melt against the soles of her feet.

In chemistry, she wonders which chemicals are responsible for sexual attraction, vows to exper­iment with love potion formulas. In gym, the volleyball reminds her of the back of her father’s head. She vows to serve with her fist when it’s her turn. At lunch, she dumps her peanut butter sandwich into a garbage can and starts a diet. By study hall, she’s light-headed and anxious to talk to Cindy.

They’ve been friends since grade school. Cindy has an older sister who told her things which she told Jeannie; things about boys and how to kiss with her mouth open. It was Cindy who went with her to buy her first bra, talked her into a padded one trimmed with lace. Together they watched the Girl Scout movie, “You’re a Woman Now” and giggled. Cindy already knew all about the blood, knew how to use it to get out of playing softball. All she had to do was whisper to Mr. Whitlock, the gym teacher, that it was “that time” and he’d let her sit under the tree and watch the rest of the class play. It was Cindy she told when a boy hit her in the chest and she was afraid she’d get cancer.

Cindy confided in her, the secrets girls can’t tell their mothers, the secrets mothers give away to fathers late at night.

In study hall, Mrs. Abbess sits behind the desk, watching, pushing the sharpened pencil in and out of her tight braids. Sometimes she scratches her scalp and examines the pencil point. Now she waves the pencil in Jeannie’s direction, motioning for her to get back to studying.

Jeannie drops her eyes and rereads the note she’s written to Cindy; really a letter—started in chemistry, added to in English, and just finished. Nothing melodramatic. Her parents are getting a divorce. Does Cindy think her dad is really seeing someone younger? How much younger? Will she have to talk in court? Her mother threw the whole roast down the garbage disposal last night, even the mashed potatoes. She ate Ritz crackers and peanut butter. Did they turn off the heat in the study hall?

When Mrs. Abbess starts sneezing and rummaging in her purse for tissue. Jeannie gives the note to the girl in the next desk and nods towards Cindy in the back. The note is passed.

Jeannie glances back and sees Gary reading the note over Cindy’s shoulder. He thinks it’s about him.

“Cindy,” a hissing through her teeth. Her jaw is still sore, the bone hurts way back into her ear.

“Cindy,” Louder this time.

Mrs. Abbess looks at her, looks at Cindy, at Gary, his chin almost resting on Cindy’s shoulder using the palms of both hands. She pushes the chair from the desk, rises slowly.

“Cindy,” Jeannie whispers.

Cindy watches Mrs. Abbess moving toward her. Slips Jeannie’s note into her English book. Pulls out her math assignment. Gary leans back in his seat. Jeannie grips her pen like a child learning to write, digs her fingernails into her palm.

“The note, please,” Mrs. Abbess says, extending her arm.

Cindy explains she was doing math problems. Gary was helping her. She puts the math paper into the outstretched hand. It slides off the fingers, onto the floor. No one picks it up.

“The note, please,” she says again, taking the pencil from her English book, lays it on the desk.

“In my hand, please,” says Mrs. Abbess. She takes the note Cindy hands her and holds it between two fingers, waves it above Cindy’s head, both sides visible, filled with writing.

“As you students know, to reach such notes.”

Jeannie stands.

“Sit down. Perhaps you’ll think twice about writing notes next time.”

Mrs. Abbess strokes the black velvet ribbon that holds her glasses around her neck. Slowly, she lifts the glasses from her chest, places the wire ends around each ear. She fingers the nose piece into place, drops her eyes to read.

Jeannie cuts across the room, slipping through the spaces, pushing desks aside when she must.

“Sit down, Jeannie.” Mrs. Abbess doesn’t move.

Sounds: The wind pushes snowflakes through the cracks. Mrs. Abbess’ cold rattling in her chest. Gary’s crepe-soled boots against the wood. The paper rattle as Jeannie grabs the note.

Pictures: Jeannie’s hand raised, still holding the pen. Mrs. Abbess, tripping, falling backward into Gary’s arms. Cindy standing. The whole study hall moving: red plaid shirts tucked into blue, pink sweaters and yellow, even orange.

Someone calls her mother who meets her in the counselor’s office, embraces her. Now she sits stroking Jeannie’s hand as the counselor talks. Neither can understand. No previous blots on Jeannie’s records.

The counselor talks of a note which Jeannie ripped up on the way to his office, threw into the air like confetti. “Mrs. Abbess was still picking pieces of it out of her hair when she got here.”

The counselor looks at Jeannie’s mother and offers her a cup of tea. She shakes her head, starts crying. The counselor offers her a tissue, pushes the box to the edge of the desk where she can reach them easily.

Her mother wipes her eyes, examines the tissue for traces of mascara.

After lining up the pencils on his desk, the counselor continues, “Poor Mrs. Abbess was so upset I sent her home for the rest of the day.”

Jeannie bites off a broken nail, wonders if Mr. Jenson will let her make up the history test she’s missing.

“Actually had her pen up, ready to strike,” the counselor says. “Vicious attack.”

Her mother is crying again and the tissues pile up in her lap. “Everything at once,” her mother says. “Too much for her, for me.” She tells the counselor about the divorce, about the girl. “She’s probably not much older than Jeannie.” Her mother’s cheeks are flushed.

Using her foot, Jeannie moves the wastebasket by the counselor’s desk, pushes it toward her mother so she can get rid of the white mound in her lap.

The counselor rolls the pencils across his yellow pad. Jeannie knows he’s dying to write it all down, stick it in her record. She asks the counselor if the time she locked the teacher in cloakroom is in her record.

“That was an accident,” her mother says. “You were only in first grade.”

Her mother promises to look after Jeannie, to make it all up to her. She agrees to take her for a physical exam, even to consider some outside counseling. Yes, she’ll keep her out of school the rest of the week and yes, things do usually work out for the best. She smiles at the counselor as she helps Jeannie into her coat and buttons it.

On the way home, the car stalls. Her mother tries to start it by holding the accelerator to the floor even though Jeannie warns her she’ll flood the motor. Her mother folds her arms over the steering wheel, drops her head, and cries.

Jeannie gets out her side, walks around the car, stopping to knock the icicle of the bumper. She opens her mother’s door and nudges her over. Sitting in the driver’s seat, she waits a few minutes, then turns the key. The engine catches.

The rest of the way home, her mother talks quietly, explains that it’s her father’s fault, deserting them both like this when they need him most.

“When you were a baby,” she says, “I was the one who warmed your bottles and changed your diapers.” her mother takes one of the counselor’s tissues from her pocket and blows her nose.

Her mother’s eyes grow brighter as she tells about his nights out with the boys while she kept things going at home. The cooking, the ironing—she did it all. And now what has she got? Nothing. That’s for sure. Not even her looks.

“Don’t trust men.” her mother says, brushing a strand of Jeannie’s hair behind her ear.

It’s the first time her mother has spoken to her about men. Jeannie turns the windshield wipers against the snow melting on the warm windshield.

Who will do her father’s cooking and ironing? Perhaps on weekends, she will clean up his place, cook meals. The first weekend, she will probably cook chicken. That’s his favorite. She can even ask her mother to teach her to make chicken gravy.

When they get home, her mother pulls the shades and makes her go to bed. She pulls the blankets to Jeannie’s chin and tucks them in at the sides.

The time Jeannie had pneumonia, her mother sat up all night sponging her head with water, tucking in the blankets. When Jeannie started feeling better, her mother made her a nurse’s cap out of starched white cotton.

The vacuum cleaner runs in and out of her dreams; pots and pans bang against the burners. Later, voices talk about her in tones and pitches she recognizes. Her mother’s voice. Her father’s voice. Both droning on and on.

There are words and more words by the two people Jeannie has brought back together. She wishes they would both suffocate in all those snowflakes so she could push in raisin mouths and carrot noses.

**A Job**

Up until now, I’ve had it made. Things were easy. Don’t get me wrong. I didn’t go around admitting it to just anyone.

But it’s like I told Mary Jane when we decorated the basement for my sixteenth birthday party a couple of months ago—I’m a lucky kind of person.

My parents aren’t divorced like Mary Jane’s and they don’t yell all the time like Sara’s. They buy me pretty much what I want except for crazy stuff like the trip to Hawaii I asked for last year. They even like Bill, my boyfriend. The only thing they really get on me for is not cleaning my room and sleeping late on weekends.

But that’s all changed. Now they’re on me all the time. Every time I turn around they’re after me to get a job. It’s getting downright embarrassing.

At lunch today, I slide in next to Mary Jane. The other girls we hang around with dash in just before the bell rings. We’re all talking about the good-looking guy in our English class who just moved here from California.

I split my lunch bag down the middle like I always do and keep on talking. Suddenly they’re all looking.

“Taken to eating paper?” Mary Jane jokes, pointing at my lunch bag. “Guess that’ll help you keep your diet.”

Folded between my apple and granola bar is a sheet of newspaper. I groan, “Probably an Ann Landers column.”

Mom’s a big fan of Ann Landers. Since I was in junior high, she’s been cutting out columns and sticking them on the refrigerator door so I’d read them. Stuff about dating, drugs and treating your parents right. But this is going too far.

Sara snatches the paper and unfolds it. “Aha. It’s even better than Ann Landers,” Sara says. “Here you go. Part time cashier at Sherman Drugs. Wait, here’s one that’s even better. Responsible student to assist in after-school playground supervision on Mondays and Wednesdays at Emerson Elementary.”

She turns the paper around for everyone to see the ads circled in red. “Plenty here for all of us,” she giggles.

“Oh, no,” Mary Jane says. “We edit the Clarion on Mondays. You can’t just quit on us.” She knows my mom has stepped up the effort to get me working.

“I’m not getting a job,” I assure her. “No way. I mean it’s not like I have to work.”

“Bet you could get a nerd job like Cynthia’s at McDonald’s,” Kim says. “Then we could all drop in to see you Friday and Saturday nights.”

“That’s not fair,” I say. “You know Cynthia has to work. Her dad’s still laid off.”

“She’s a nerd, anyway,” Kim says. “No fun at all. She doesn’t even know anything that’s going on.”

I look at Jill who’s just leaning back in her chair the way she usually does. She has that cool, sophisticated look that’s beginning to get on my nerves.

Jill leans forward and wipes the table before resting her silk-covered arms. “Do you think,” she says, “that Bill’s going to just wait around for you to get off work on weekends?”

I’d like to wipe that superior smile right off her face. Instead, I just sit there seething at my mother, taking big bites out of my apple. The sound of my teeth crunching through the red skin fills my head.

When I get home from school, I’m glad my mom’s upstairs vacuuming. I flop on the floor in front of the television to watch my favorite soap. I turn it up to block out the vacuum overhead.

I’m caught up in the story when Mom just walks right up and turns the television off.

“Hey,” I holler, “it’s not over yet.”

Mom just stands in front of the screen, a dust cloth in her hand.

“Well?” she asks.

“Well, what?” I say. I know what she means and she knows that I know.

“Looks like some good job openings for you. Which ones are you going to apply for?”

“None,” I tell her. “None of my friends work. Besides, I don’t have time for a job.”

Mom just looks at the television and shakes her head. “You’ve got time,” she says in her matter-of-fact voice that warns there’s no room for argument.

I just pick up my school books and go upstairs to study until dinner.

At dinner, it’s Dad’s turn.

“I was telling a guy at work today how you’re looking for a job,” he says. “The guy’s wife has this business where they call people on the phone and try to sell magazine subscriptions.”

He asks my mother to pass him another roll. As he butters the roll, he watches me, waits.

“I told him you’re great on the phone, that you were born with one glued to your ear,” he laughs. “Anyway, here’s the number. His wife’s hiring some new people next week.”

“Sounds good,” Mom says as Dad takes a slip of paper from his pocket and hands it to me.

“I wouldn’t be any good at selling people stuff,” I say, wishing they’d both just change the subject.

But my dad rattles on, tells me there’s no need to be nervous. Adds that he guesses everyone gets a bit scared about their first job.

But I can’t stand it any longer. I ask them both to just stop talking about it. I tell them I’m not afraid of getting a job, not afraid of working. It’s just that I need to work extra hard at school. The competition to get into a good college is getting tougher all the time.

“There’s more to learning than going to school,” my dad says. I know I’m in for one of his when-I-was-your-age stories.

Sure enough. I hear again about how he helped out on the farm when he was big enough to walk. How he made extra money sweeping out the hardware store when he was only ten. As if every kid should have to do that.

“Times have changed,” I tell him. “And none of my friends have to work.”

“That’s just it,” he says. “They don’t know anything about real life, about what really matters. I want you to be different.”

“I don’t want to be different,” I scream and run up to my room, turning up the radio full blast when I get there. I don’t want to hear them whispering about me.

They both come up later and tap at my door. Both stand in the middle of my room. Mom hands me a piece of my favorite dessert, apple pie still warm from the oven. I set it on my dresser.

“We know it’s a change for you,” Dad says. “And we know you don’t want to do it. But it’s time. We’ve decided to give you a month to find something.”

My mother nods, straightens the hair brushes on my dresser. “You’ll find something you like. And we’ll be glad to help.”

“I don’t need your help,” I shout as they both leave, quietly shutting the door behind them.

It’s like I tell Mary Jane. It’s tough to figure what makes your own parents turn on you. But they all do it sometime or another. They get that smug look on their faces and tell you it’s for your own good.

At times like this, I wish I were Jill in her silk blouses and cashmere sweaters. Her parents never make her do anything. Not even clean her room. They have a maid who does all that stuff.

When I call Mary Jane, she’s in the shower. But she calls me back in five minutes.

I pour it all out to her and she listens. But then she laughs, “It’s not all that bad. You’ll have extra money and you might even meet some cute guys.”

“What do you know about it?” I hiss through clenched teeth. If even your best friend betrays you, what’s left?

Mary Jane is quiet for a minute, then says, “Since my dad moved out, there’s only one thing my parents agree on. And that’s that I’m too young to get a job.”

Mary Jane never told me she wanted to work. I mean if you don’t tell your best friend some­thing, how important can it be?

“You’re just saying that to make me feel better,” I say.

“No,” Mary Jane says, “I really want a job.”

“You’re crazy,” I tell her. “You don’t know when you’ve got it made.”

In bed that night, I plot it out. I know just the place to go. I’ll show them all. I’ll get a job I hate. They’ll see what happens.

The next day after school, I walk over to the Summerdale Convalescent Home. It always depresses me. Every Saturday when I used to practice for cross-country I had to watch all those old people being pushed around in their wheelchairs. Sometimes, someone would even push them over to the fence to watch us practice. I don’t ever want to get that old.

The woman behind the desk is bright and cheerful, even though some of the old people are sitting right there in the lobby playing cards.

I know they’re watching me as I talk to the woman at the desk. She calls the manager who takes me into an office to talk to me.

She says the job involves taking care of a group of senior citizens. Says it’s a tough job and not always pleasant. Says I’d even have to empty bed pans.

It’s just what I’m looking for. The perfect way to make my parents sorry. So I respond to the manager’s questions on cue. After all, I’ve been in a couple of school plays and know how to act.

My parents are thrilled when I get the job, even tell me how proud they are. When my mom hugs me, I do feel a little guilty but not much.

I start on a Monday, after school. As soon as I walk into the lobby, my stomach turns over. Maybe I am a little nervous. Mostly, it’s the smell. Medicine and alcohol and maybe even death. It’s the same smell hospitals have.

The nurse on duty takes me around and introduces me to everyone, shows me what I’m sup­posed to do.

Most of the old people are pretty nice but some are real cranky. Mrs. Williamson, for exam­ple, yells at me all the time. Tells me I remind her of her daughter who sends money but never comes to visit. Complains that Mr. Bellingham cheats at cards. Whispers that Mr. Bellingham and that new woman down at the end of the hall have something going. Says she’s seen them kissing and holding hands. I’m shocked.

“Now, dear,” Mrs. Williamson says, holding my arm tightly, “what makes you think we’re any different than you.”

I try to avoid Mrs. Williamson as much as I can. It’s not easy, though.

Mrs. Williamson holds court in her room. The men and women from down the hall and from other floors congregate there. She used to be a high school English teacher and lectures them about the symbolism of Moby Dick and the dark side of Nathaniel Hawthorne. The old people seem to like it. Guess it reminds them of when they were young.

I joke about Mrs. Williamson and some of the others with my parents. They listen and their eyes kind of mist over. I can’t ever imagine my parents getting that old.

One Saturday, Mrs. Williamson asks me to take her over to watch the guys practice football. Everyone thinks it’s strange because she hates to be seen in a wheelchair.

As she once explained to me, “I’ve got my pride, dear. Wheelchairs are too much like baby strollers.”

But this Saturday, she’s all dressed and even put rouge on her cheeks.

I wheel her around by the bleachers and sit on the third bleacher up, my head level with hers.

One of the guys recognizes me and waves. I’m humiliated.

During the break, he runs over to talk to us. “Two cheerleaders,” he says. “Great. We need all the encouragement we get.”

Mrs. Williamson leans over to me when play resumes and says, “Let’s not just sit here like two bumps on a log.”

She cups her hands around her mouth and shouts, “Hip, hip, hurray. Put ‘em away.”

The team salutes us and I wish I could just melt into the ground.

“Boom, boom, bah. Hit ‘em in the craw,” she shouts louder, nudging me.

Pretty soon she has me shouting with her and we’re giggling like a couple of kids.

On Monday, the football player asks me who the old woman is.

I tell him she’s not an old woman, she’s Mrs. Williamson. And she thinks he’s kind of cute.

He blushes and says he’ll see us both next Saturday.

**Library Card in My Back Pocket**

When I was a little kid, my mom used to walk a mile with me every week to the Jessie Chase Branch Library in Northwest Detroit. I sat at the children’s table thumbing through the picture books, deciding which I would check out. At age ten my blue two-wheeler bike was my transportation. Pulling out my library card made me feel like “big stuff” since a mere flash of it led me into adventures with Heidi, the Bobbsey Twins and Nancy Drew mysteries. I carried home whole new worlds in the wicker basket that hung from my handlebars.

I promised myself that someday I would read every book, even those in the adult section. I learned how to look up answers on my own, how to use words, how to tell stories, how to expand my neighborhood by crossing oceans and climbing mountains in my mind. The librarians discussed books with me as if I were a grownup. They introduced me to Black Beauty and, in my imagination, I jumped onto that horse and raced the wind. I read everywhere: under the shade of the locust tree in our backyard, at recess in school, under the covers at night, waiting for my parents to get ready for church. I was that girl with skinned knees, a ponytail, and a library card in her back pocket. On my twelfth birthday, a cold day in November, my parents took me to the Main Branch of the Detroit Public Library. It reminded me of castles I read about with its big pillars and massive size. My neck hurt from looking up at the ceiling. My shoes slid across the marble as I headed for the ornate steps. I found room after room of books and people of all ages and types reading at tables. We found the young adult section and I had never seen so many books in one place. I stacked books all around me at the table and flipped through them. I didn’t know which to read first.

I collected as many books as I could carry and went to the checkout desk.

My parents smiled at me as I pulled out my crumpled library card and presented it with a flourish to the librarian. “Ah,” she said as she stamped return dates in each book, “I see your magic passport is well used.”

“I work at the library at my school,” I proudly told the librarian as I cradled the books and tried to keep the top one from slipping.

Long before college, my first library card had worn thin. It finally shredded in the jeans pocket during a wash cycle. Luckily a library does not discriminate against anyone, even those who are care­less like me. I received another card and I never left home without it.

The Main Library became my second home when I attended Wayne State University. Many days after class, I curled up in an upholstered chair in one of quiet nooks. There, I soaked up *Leaves of Grass, Moby Dick, Hamlet, Native Son, The Great Gatsby.* By then, I knew I could not read fast enough to devour all the books in the library. Still, I could not stop turning pages. From time to time, I looked down over the railing to the main floor. I learned I couldn’t identify serious readers based on appearance. Reading seems to be one of those equal opportunity activities that lure all ages, all ethnic groups, all religions, everyone in the community. I watched so many people stream in and out of the library and wondered what they had chosen to read, wondered if maybe I had read the same book or should read it.

When I became an English teacher at a Detroit high school, I gave my students extra credit for visiting the Main Library. I believed no one could pass through those doors without succumbing to the lure of books. Such a magnificent library breathes the history, the humanity, the individuality of each person who dares enter.

**A Lot She Knows**

The family said Irma should be the one. They argued back and forth on the phone late at night and on the weekends when long distance calls were cheapest. They talked about it when they got together for Sunday dinner. They whispered about it in bed with their husbands.

After all, it was only fair, they said, that Irma should be the one. She had no husband to care for (having been divorced ten years ago), no children at home (Elaina, her youngest, was at Upper State College), no job worth worrying about (being only a clerk in K Mart’s wig department), and in short, they said, she had always been Mama’s favorite.

Irma protested. She went to Sunday dinner, although she wasn’t invited, and told them she was willing to chip in for a nurse. She reminded them rather loudly, that Mama took them to the Waldmere County Fair and left her home to fix dinner. (“Mama always thought you could cook best,” Ruthie and Antoinette said.) Mama called the doctor when they got measles, and when Irma got them, Mama gave her what was left of their medicine. (“Mama always thought you were the strongest,” Ruthie and Antoinette said.) Mama made her sleep in the attic while they had a room together. (“She always said you were the smart one and needed time to yourself,” Ruthie and Antoinette said.)

But in the end, it was Irma who took the Greyhound bus to Hazen, Ohio and promised to write every day to let Ruthie and Antoinette know how Mom was getting along.

Once there, Irma straightened her long-haired wig and picked up her suitcase, still not quite ready to walk up the hill to Mama’s house. Instead, she turned and walked across the street to the Soda Stop. The red sign was freshly painted and clay pots of marigolds were on each side of the door. It had always been like this, never changing. Old man Warner insisted the sign be painted every spring before the first heat bubble showed. When Irma pushed open the heavy glass door, she heard the familiar sleigh bells announce her arrival.

Old man Warner laid down the *Hazen Record* and pushed his bifocals to the top of his head. “My far sight’s still as good as when I used to go crow shooting. And I do believe it’s Irma who’s finally come back.”

He went behind the counter and scooped vanilla ice cream into a frosted metal container. Next, blueberries followed by milk, mixed on the machine and, “The Blue Bomber Special for you. Don’t nobody ask for it much anymore.”

Irma had named the football captain the “Blue Bomber” when he made the winning tackle against County West. Then she’d gone to work and concocted the Blue Bomber Special which she served him and a cheerleader. After that, she toasted him silently with the drink and picked bits of blueberry skin from between her teeth.

Old man Warner leaned over the counter and watched her drink. “How’s your Ma doing?”

“Okay, I guess.”

“If your sisters was home, they’d be down here to fetch you.”

Irma wondered how many times she’d read her school books at the corner table after she was off work or sat whispering to one friend or another about the Blue Bomber. It was at that table that old man Warner convinced her to take the scholarship to Michigan State, where she dropped out the first semester to get married. Mama had never forgiven him for that.

“When you get settled in, come back on down and I’ll show you our new bank. Even has those new cameras in it. A subdivision is going in behind Lankford’s farm and we got us a new schoolhouse. Lots has changed,” he said, straightening the boxes of licorice whips and jawbreakers. “Maybe enough that you’ll stay this time.”

“Nothing changes that much,” Irma said, wiping her mouth with a paper napkin.

Irma walked the path in the woods where she and her sisters had buried their pet duck after it died. She looked for the crooked tree she used to sit in to read or write in her diary. She looked for the crooked tree she used to sit in to read or write in her diary. She couldn’t find it. The path was grown over with wild ivy and Queen Anne’s Lace. The dandelions had turned to white puffs, and , every so often, she stopped to make a wish and blow the white seeds. Irma guessed that no one walked the path much to Mama’s house anymore.

The county nurse opened the door and led Irma past the bookcase containing *Reader’s Digest* condensed books, into Mama’s bedroom.

Mama was sitting up in bed, wearing the quilted pink bedjacket edged with lace that the three daughters sent when they first heard of her illness.

“This lace itches my neck. Too still,” Mama complained, pulling the lace until it tore in one corner.

“You can tell they’re getting better when they start getting cranky,” the nurse said to Irma, as if Mama weren’t in the room.

“Hi, Mama,” Irma said, kissing her papery lips, fearing they would come off on her like the tattoos in cereal boxes.

“What took you so long?” She asked.

“The bus was late, Mama.”

“Don’t lie to me Irma Jean. You been talking to old man Warner. Always listening to him, never caring what I said. Isn’t natural.”

“Ruthie and Antoinette send their love. How are you feeling, Mama?” Irma sat down in the nurse’s chair by the foot of the bed.

The nurse answered, “She’s doing fine. It was only a mild stroke. A couple of months and she’ll be good as new.” She handed Irma a list of instructions and a phone number, and then left.

Not knowing what else to say to Mama, Irma stared at the faded brown photographs of her great grandparents framed in golden oak. At the bottom of the frame, marching in order, are school pictures of Mama’s grandchildren. Small metal Kresge frames for the three daughters. Daddy serious on the tractor, the same look in a studio portrait, a hand resting on Mama’s shoulder. Mama with Irma and Ruthie, holding Antoinette in her arms. All jammed on the low chest of drawers by Mama’s bed, edges of frames overlapping bodies blocking each other.

“Good as new,” Mama snarled. “A lot she knows about weeding the garden, with arthritis in my hands.”

“She is a nurse, Mama.”

Irma smoothed the patchwork quilt covering Mama. She’d helped make it. Bits of matching Christmas dresses with holly sprigs. The old lemon print apron Mama wore to make wine. Papa’s favorite plaid flannel hunting shirt. Sunday school dresses of pink, yellow, and red calico. Irma’s gradu­ation dress. Squares of years quilted together with white background fabric. Irma traced the lines, the small, even stitches.

Irma remembered her uneven stitches, Mama yelling at her, showing her time and again how to gauge the length. She couldn’t see the patches she’d done. Perhaps they were on the other side of the bed, against the wall.

“What did you do to your hair?” Mama wanted to know after she’d asked about her daughters and grandchildren.

“Nothing, I haven’t done anything to it.” Irma wished she hadn’t worn the black wig. Maybe the short blonde one or even the braid, but not the long, straight black one.

“You always had such pretty hair. So curly and thick. Like mine used to be.” Mama stuck another bobby pin into the thin gray hair twisted onto the top of her head. “My daddy used to make me braid it so tight my eyes hurt. Said curls was the devil’s tool.”

Mama’s childlike voice told of her father, who’d wanted a boy, who’d been pleased, though, when his only child was big-boned and strong, strong enough to slaughter chickens, drive the horses, clear the field of rocks, pitch hay.

“I milked the cows so Mama wouldn’t have to. Some said she was a Jefferson and married beneath her; I always believed that.”

Irma picked up the portrait of her great grandmother and studied her waist-length, straight hair, moonstone eyes, fragile hands, the dabs of pink high on the cheekbones, delicately painted in later by the photographer.

“Mama, are you glad I came?” But her mother was gently snoring, like a clock’s quiet murmur at midnight.

To help the days pass, Irma cleaned house: polished the nurse’s handprints and coffee stains from the dark walnut table; straightened drawers where she found her sisters’ and her own old report cards tied in blue yarn, locks of their hair pressed between brown paper, and Valentine cards they made for Mama in first grade. Irma found years of her life jammed in cardboard boxes and wooden chests. In a storage cupboard in the attic, she discovered letters in which her father had written words she hadn’t known he knew, words to Mama at sixteen, at nineteen. It surprised Irma that her parents had been lovers.

That evening, she took golden brown chicken and biscuits to mama on a sterling sliver tray that had been a wedding present. She had never seen mama use it. She put both the Irish linen napkins with their original folds, which she’d found in the cedar chest.

“You’ve become a better cook since you left home,” Mama said. The color was returning to her cheeks, and she’d gone outside to check her tomatoes that afternoon.

“I’ve been cooking a lot since I left home,” Irma said.

After she scoured the pans, Irma usually read to Mama. She’d read through all the *True Confessions* the nurse had left, surprised that Mama hadn’t wanted her to throw them out.

Irma removed the pins from Mama’s hair and brushed it. Then, she sat at the low dresser, removed her wig, and brushed her own hair one hundred strokes, as she’d done every night since she was a child, hoping somehow the nylon bristles would pull it straight, tame it.

“It’s a wig,” Mama laughed, pushing the quilt from her shoulders, standing behind Irma in the mirror. “Let me try it.” Mama slipped the wig onto her own head and stood, hand on hip, examining herself. “Don’t I look like Maybell Stinger?” Mama asked, as Irma tried to recall who Maybell was.

It was the way Mama stood with her head thrown back that made Irma remember Maybell, the woman at Carlton’s Hardware. She was the pretty woman who measured out the nails, who rung up purchases on the cash register. The one who always gave Irma a red sucker when she went with Papa to buy chicken feed. She remembered Mama and the other ladies whispering about Maybell at the church’s Saturday Potluck Suppers. Mama was right. She did look a bit like Maybell with the wig on.

Irma got the other wigs from her suitcase and rejoined Mama at the mirror. The two gray heads bent close together as they tried on wigs, struck poses, and tried to guess who they were now.

**The Mapmaker**

When Rayna Travis Gullavor gets a notion into her head, it sticks like a grain of sand caught in an oyster shell, a gritty irritant calcifying, growing, and transforming itself into a hard, round pearl. It nestles there, her third eye, the eye she can’t close.

Rayna sees things. Lately, she feels her watchful eye moving back and forth, up and down, pupil dilated, open wide, vigilant, waiting for something big to happen. It scares her, yet excites her, churns up her stomach as if she’s riding the Tilt-a-Whirl at the county fair and can’t get off. She can’t tell Eddie, she must not tell Eddie, no matter what.

The little things she sees are piling up. It’s okay to tell Eddie about these. Things like Uncle Henry driving all the way to Cranston, the next town west, to buy new Jockey bikini shorts, a whole dozen that he kept in a toolbox in the trunk of his ten-year-old Chevrolet Impala and washed twice a month at the Easy Ways Laundromat over in Brownstown, just south of Raintree. Things like the little boy down the street writing math formulas on the inside of his forearm before the semester exam, or Jennifer at the Cranberry Café fudging the amount of her tips at tax time, or even Eddie, her husband, whose leg will end up in a cast when he slips off the roof next year.

“What did you see today?” Eddie asks jokingly every night before he falls asleep.

And Rayna tells him, only him, like she’s done since seventh grade. Funny things, silly things. She sees them before they happen. Things about people they know, about people who move behind her eyes, who come and go when they want and refuse to take any direction from her. Sometimes, for weeks at a time, she sees nothing to tell. Still, Eddie remembers to ask and his response is always the same, “Rayna, you’re a woman to be reckoned with.”

“I am, indeed,” she always replies. And when she gets right down to it, she thinks of herself as a woman of action, a woman who gets things done. Lately, she’s trying to see her way clear to what she must do.

Like she tells Eddie, she can’t help it if she sees things. Is it her fault that sometimes she doesn’t see the whole thing? Besides, how’s she supposed to know when something is just a brick instead of the whole house? Okay, so Uncle Henry’s Jockey bikini shorts were part of his strategy for getting Jennifer’s attention. It worked didn’t it? They used the tip money she didn’t give the IRS so both of them could run off to Miami and fry their flesh in the Florida sun while the rest of us froze back here in Raintree. It’s not as if Aunt Mable cared much about Uncle Henry’s bikini shorts or Jennifer for that matter; she just hated to miss out on going to Miami.

Rayna wouldn’t mind going to Miami herself, with Eddie, of course. She’s spent all 55 years of her life in Raintree, Michigan, right near the tip of the rabbit’s ear. Or, more accurately, within a 33 mile radius of Raintree since she likes to grocery shop at the Farmer Jack over in Brownstown (but she always made sure not to go grocery shopping when Uncle Henry was at the laundromat).

“Don’t like my eggs runny,” Eddie reminds her, the same way he does every morning. “And don’t skimp on the salt.”

“Bad for your blood pressure.” Without even looking, Rayna reaches into the right-hand corner of the cupboard, pulls out the salt shaker and measures out a teaspoonful, tossing it into the skillet with the eggs. “If you’re going to eat with so much salt, you ought to at least get more exercise.” But no way Eddie’s going to listen to her. Seems to crave the stuff. Won’t even read the newspaper articles she clips and posts on the refrigerator.

“It’s your life. Guess if you’re determined to do yourself in, isn’t any way I can stop you.” Rayna glances out her kitchen window, checks the thermometer she got free at Grady’s hardware and tacked to the birdfeeder, close enough for reading, for seeing what kind of day she can expect. Hotter than normal today, near 70 degrees already and humid. Miami is probably cooler with the ocean breeze.

“Can’t be,” Rayna mutters, shivering, rubbing her arms to get the blood circulating. “Just can’t be.” She grabs the Windex from under the sink, sprays the window, wipes it with a paper towel. Must be her own image reflected in the glass.

“What? You know I can’t hear you when you mumble.”

“Nothing, I didn’t say anything.” Maybe something is wrong with the glass. Hadn’t she been telling Eddie she wants new windows, the kind she can clean from the inside? She doesn’t move, doesn’t blink; her eyes sting, dry from the air, from lack of moisture.

“Adele,” she whispers, “can’t be.” But it is Adele. Adele kneeling, reaching, yanking, turning, and uprooting the crab grass, dandelions, chickweed and even the violets breaking ground in the flower­beds behind her house. Adele whose arthritis bothered her so toward the end that she couldn’t walk down the back steps without her cane.

Rayna raps on the window, calls out to Adele, then quickly puts her hand over her mouth, hoping Eddie isn’t listening. She bites at a torn cuticle as Adele rises with the weeds cradled in her arms, then fades like the watercolor of Lake Superior Rayna painted from memory so many years ago in her high school art class.

Rayna rushes to the back door, opens it, shouting, “Get away from there. Go on.” She claps her hands, hard, angry that the Simpkins’ coon dog is loose again. “Darn dog,” she mumbles. “Always digging up other people’s yards. Adele never could stand that dog.”

“So? Doesn’t bother me none. Doesn’t bother Adele none anymore either.” Eddie scoots his chair back, a screech against the linoleum. “You never tinkered with this weird stuff before. I don’t like it. You think you can pretend I didn’t hear you call Adele? Why can’t you let the woman rest in peace?”

“Now don’t you go getting up and getting in my way.” She pops the toast onto a plate and reaches over his shoulder, setting it in front of him, kissing the back of his neck as she draws back.

“You’re up to something. You think I can’t tell when something’s not right with you?” Eddie cuts off the crusts, darker than the rest. His jaw clicks as he chews, the sound of a socket slipping out of the joint. “Next it’ll be flying saucers and little green men you’re seeing in Adele’s flowerbeds.”

Rayna stares out the window again, concentrates until Adele begins to take shape, her hair long, grey, coarse, too heavy now to stay pinned in a bun, loose and tumbling down her back, legs bent against the grass, her hands buried in the fertile soil, digging there.

Rayna dares not look away. Hope rises in her like the sour dough bread she made early this morning, covered with a damp dish towel and left to ferment while Eddie slept, sheet wrapped between his legs.

“You hearing what I’m saying? Gets spooky when you start seeing people who aren’t there any­more. Even you have to admit it’s a lot different than Uncle Henry’s bikini shorts. Not natural.”

“No need for you to be shouting when I’m just two steps from you.” Rayna scoops eggs onto his plate, wishing he would listen to Dr. Metpath about his cholesterol and glad he hasn’t discovered she’s been using Eggbeaters to make those coconut cream yellow cakes he loves. “Ever thought about going to Miami, Eddie?”

“Nah, might run into Uncle Henry and Jennifer.” Eddie pours ketchup on his eggs, stirring them around until they’re covered with red. Next the salt, specks of white like stars. “Reminds me, is my uniform pressed for the parade tomorrow?”

“In 37 years, have I ever forgotten?” She can’t wait to see him march by in the Memorial Day parade, handsome as ever, just a bit more of him than when he came back from San Antonio, wearing that very same uniform, stepping off the Greyhound bus, full of places he saw and she didn’t.

“Darn fly,” he waves it away from his eggs. “Hope they’re not out full force for the picnic. You know, Aunt Edna refuses to eat potato salad anymore.” He points his egg-loaded fork at the fly. “Not a bite since last Memorial Day.”

“Remember how she had a big chunk of potato half way to her mouth before she spotted the fly stuck to the potato with mayonnaise? Rayna laughs, smoothing her green dress over her belly, a well-fed woman. “Who knows how many she already swallowed.”

“That’s one you should of seen coming,” Eddie chides Rayna. “Sure you didn’t even call those flies? You never did like Aunt Edna.”

“Eddie Gullavor, you know darn well I can’t conjure up whatever I want.” She fears Adele may be just a fluke, the same kind of luck as her two winning cards at Bingo last week. Rayna stares across the table at him, her thumb scratching at the green Formica tabletop as if she can get below its shiny plastic surface, right down to the thing itself. “If I could do that, I’d see us in Miami. Yep, Miami. Probably on a yacht.”

She runs her tongue over her teeth, licking away the salty taste, lifts her hair from the nape of her neck as she starts humming then singing full voice, buoyantly, “O spacious skies…from sea to shin­ing sea.”

Eddie takes up the chorus, an echo: “From sea to shining sea.” His voice breaks reaching for the high note. “So what’s the difference between a sea and an ocean? ‘From ocean to shining ocean.’ Doesn’t sound right.”

He sets down his fork, watches Rayna’s hand turned palm up, fingers moving as if she is sifting a fistful of sand. “Rayna, stop it.” He leans across the table and catches her hand in his, her fingers scuttling across his palm like a ghost crab without its shell.

“Let’s do it, Eddie. If not Miami, then San Francisco or Seattle or anyplace near the ocean. I need to see an ocean. Salt instead of fresh water. Bigger than Lake Superior. Fish the colors of crazy quilts.” She pauses, then adds, “You know, some people think life started in the ocean.”

One at a time, his words like hard steel balls in a pinball game, “You’re not yourself. This has got to stop right now.”

Rayna waits for his words to bounce off corners, hit the target and settle into her pockets, weigh her down. She can’t explain. It’s as if she can hold Miami in the corner of her eye, a speck of dust at first, then a house and lately even whole city blocks, and she walks those streets. The hot sun at mid-day makes her perspire. Her pale face has a soft shine like satin, smooth as the pearls clasped round her throat. She is there.

Maybe it’s just all the books on Miami she’s been checking out from the Bookmobile. Or maybe it’s the *AAA Tour Guide* she sent away for, especially the photos of pink, aqua, yellow, beige office buildings, hotels and houses, with greyhounds and flamingos and even peacocks and nymphs carved into limestone, etched on glass. She knows she must go there. She must leave soon.

She wonders if it’s the same feeling Eddie got years ago when he worked the mines, back when he rode the elevator down the shaft, stepped out into the darkness, with the light on his hardhat to keep him from blindness. Sometimes he used to bring her chunks of iron ore, chipped from rocks, from miles of tunnels blasted deep beneath the earth’s crust. But that was before 23 men were killed when one of the tunnels collapsed, before the strikes, before the mine closed for good.

“We’ve never seen the ocean. Just think, we can go right to the edge. We can walk along and feel the land drop away.” She shows him the book on Miami she got yesterday from the Bookmobile. It comes once a month, 39 miles from Calendar and back again. The book opens to her favorite photo, the sun filling space between two palm trees, slivers of blue at the edges, ocean or sky. The map at the back opens into her hands. She points out Haulover Beach, just a short ways down Collins Avenue. Right on the Atlantic Ocean.

“Ever feel the ocean between your toes?” She wiggles her toes inside her shoes, against the curved leather that binds her feet.

“Drug dealers, sand, palm trees and retirees. That’s all Miami is.” Eddie slips on his work jacket, his name embroidered across the back under the Mobil logo, a walking advertisement. “Some­thing wrong with Raintree all of a sudden?”

“Wait,” but she can’t stop the accident. His jacket swings loose and catches on the orange juice carton, knocking it to the floor. “You’re late. Go ahead. I’ll get this.”

Rayna squirts Joy liquid detergent into the dishcloth and kneels down on the linoleum. The orange juice puddles, the shape of the Grand Canyon, a canyon too wide to jump across, just like she saw on the Channel 9 documentary last night. But you can get down inside with a helicopter or go right to the very bottom by riding a mile or walking. Close enough to touch slate ledges streaked the color of marigolds.

She can see straight down, all the way to the canyon floor and feels dizzy. She stands up, sways and keels over, forehead smack in the middle of the orange juice. Hard enough to knock her out. The fly feeds off the orange sweetness, a slight buzzing beside her ear when she opens her eyes, orange pulp stuck on her eyelashes, fluttering there like flypaper.

She comes to slowly, not sure where she is. Then she remembers. She dabs at her dress with the dishcloth, wipes her face, then the beige linoleum. A faint outline remains, two streaks for the canyons’ edges.

The rest of the morning she works in the garden, clearing away dead leaves, turning soil. Earth worms rise to the surface. Too light for slugs who leave their trails of slime after dark. She fertilizes the lawn, a holiday ritual: Memorial Day, Fourth of July and Labor Day. Days of fireworks and sparklers.

On Memorial Day, Rayna and Naomi stand shoulder to shoulder, as they’ve done year after year, watching the parade on North Central Avenue. “Here comes, Eddie,” Rayna says, waving her flag at him and the small group of veterans who left Raintree and returned to stay after World War II, after Korea, after Vietnam, after the Persian Gulf.

“Still, the world’s not safe,” Naomi sighs, tugging her bra strap back up on her shoulder and tightening it, fingers moving deftly under her flowered dress. “Man knifed his own wife last night over at Carson Ridge.”

“I know,” Rayna says, hugging Naomi and pulling her back from the curb just before Charlie Dawson got so busy waving and looking back at Miss Raintree that he forgot to watch where he was headed. He lost control of the red convertible on loan from Courtesy Chevrolet, ran right over the curb where Naomi had been standing a second before, tires crushing the cooler and the picnic lunch Naomi packed that morning.

“Nothing’s safe anymore,” Naomi says, aimlessly lifting the flattened cooler with her foot and letting it drop again onto the concrete sidewalk. “Not even in Raintree. Can’t do a darn thing about it either. Just got to take it.”

“Maybe we can. Do something about it, I mean.” After all, hasn’t she just saved Naomi’s life? Well, maybe not her life but at least kept her from the bruises and broken arm that she would have had. It’s the sign she’s been waiting for, maybe nothing worth putting up in neon lights, but her sign nonetheless, round as a pearl plucked from an oyster, black as her dilated pupils full of light.

That night, Rayna tips her head back against Eddie’s shoulder as they and the rest of Raintree watch the fireworks burst silver, gold, red, yellow, white against the starless sky like unset gems displayed on the jewelers’ black velvet cloth.

After the fireworks, Raintree neighbors tell each other good night, walk slowly back into their homes, not wanting the day to end. Rayna climbs into her bed beside Eddie, lies with eyes wide open, knowing what she must do, waiting for Eddie’s ragged snores to tell her when she can dress again with­out waking him.

On her way out, she picks up the books on Miami, the maps where she traced different routes. So many ways to get there. On the familiar Michigan back roads, she drives slowly, watching for deer and raccoons as she rounds crests the hills, flicking the headlights to bright. Rayna passes through Brownstown, past the Farmer Jack, past the laundromat, past the drive-in movie theater where she and Eddie went every Saturday night when they dated, past roads she recognizes.

Rayna pulls into the first Rest Area and parks under one of the lights turned on for late-night travelers like her. She studies the pull-out map in the library book she showed Eddie, tracing with her finger the wiggly lines that lead to Miami. She has folded and re-folded the map so many times, the creases are starting to tear. But she locates the interstate, a junction where U.S. 23 connects in Briarwood.

Although she’s never been to Briarwood, she knows it’s about thirteen times the size of Raintree, a very large city she hears about on the news. Like other big cities, it has its share of crime. But she’s not frightened, not at all. And, as she leaves the Rest Area, she pushes hard on the accelerator, knowing that she’s over the speed limit, but she likes the sound of the road beneath her tires, the sheet metal encasing her, protecting her, cutting through the night.

She stops again in Mettalwood to check where she is. Hard to see Briarwood, right on the fold. In Ironsville, she checks again and sets her odometer to make sure she doesn’t roar right through Briarwood. Only twenty more miles, then the interstate. She watches the miles pass. The odometer shows twenty miles but no Briarwood. Too big to miss and she’s on the right road.

No traffic this time of night, actually this early in the morning. So Rayna just stops smack in the middle of the road, doesn’t even pull off to the side. Darkness all around her. No gas station, no stores, no houses. Nothing but dark. She flicks on the dome light and pulls out the map. Can’t even find Briarwood now. Looks like Briarwood has worn off in the crease, too much folding and refolding the map, or maybe it was never there.

Nonsense, Rayna tells herself. Briarwood was there. So where did it go? She knows she’s not lost. Briarwood is lost. Maybe getting lost will scare the town enough to clean itself up. Like Naomi says, “Nothing’s safe anymore.”

Rayna rests her eyes. Behind her eyelids, she pictures Briarwood. As it was before she came. Now the void, the empty space where it should be. Rapid blinks. Her third eye, focusing, capturing the image, turning it upside down, holding it there against the retina.

No different than one of those souvenir plastic towns inside a snow globe: Briarwood. Turn it over, shake it, set it up on a table and fake snow floats down, covering the town in white flakes suspended in fluid. An embryonic sac. Shake out the guns, the knives, the anger, the greed. Break the water, let it rain torrents until the streets are clean. She looks again, her vision clear.

Briarwood, the sign says, population is 15,434. Rayna rolls down her window to watch the chil­dren walking to school, listens to them as they pass, giggling and telling their stories. Their faces are clean and moist as if they’ve just stepped from their morning showers. They carry books clutched in their arms. She knows that they will also learn someday about their birth, how the waters broke before they were born.

She wonders if Eddie will think she’s los when he wakes up in the morning. Probably take him awhile to realize she hasn’t run to the store for more eggs or walked over to Naomi’s for an early morning cup of coffee. Should have left him a note. How can she leave a note, though, when she doesn’t know what to say, how to explain it? She trusts him to figure it out by himself. When he starts looking, he will see the books are missing the books on Miami.

Rayna checks her map. She finds Briarwood, back on the crease, bold letters as if the name is freshly typeset. She licks off the smudge of ink on her finger and passes through Briarwood. She picks up the interstate with no problems.

Traffic is heavy. So many cars returning home after Memorial Day. Cars from Georgia, Ohio, Kentucky, Tennessee and even Florida pass by with carriers on top packed full of tents, lanterns, camping gear. Vans towing boats, still dripping water as if their owners snuck in one more ride across the water before heading home. Pickup trucks loaded with fishing gear, tanker trucks carrying more fuel, and the eighteen wheelers carrying goods of all kinds across the country.

She stops at a Mobil station and pumps her own gas. Eddie will never stop anyplace but Mobil, even when they get really low on fuel. Spreading out the map on the counter, she asks the man who gives her change the name of a town she has accidentally put a hole through with her ballpoint pen. He doesn’t know. In fact, he thinks there’s no town there, at least it doesn’t show on the map pinned to the wall right above the cash register. But Rayna knows differently.

When she arrives at the hole in the map, she stops the car and pulls off to the side of the road. Nothing there but cattails, furry brown spikes reaching up, rooted in the marshland beside the road and a red-winged blackbird rising from the shallow creek that cuts through the field, over by the weep­ing willow. Reminds her of Raintree, the spot down at the bottom of the hill, right where Everet Mason’s property ends, a spot no one owns. She and Eddie often go there to picnic and pick wild strawberries in season.

Rayna opens her car door and steps out onto the road. She has come to trust that eye that no one sees, that eye that moves within her head. She pictures the town, the café where she will eat lunch, the houses, the people. The town begins to evolve, gradually, just as she envisions, emerging like an oil painting, layer upon layer until it is complete, until she can stand back and admire its depth, its detail and as she squints and moves closer, she sees the brushstrokes that bring it to life: Flagsville, Ohio.

She opens her map. The hole is gone, covered with a black dot and the name, Flagsville. She climbs back into her car, turns the ignition key and drives up and down streets. When she spots the café, she pulls right into the parking lot, leaves her car unlocked and goes on in, seating herself in the first booth, liking the way the tufted black vinyl feels solid against her back.

“Ever notice how everybody’s in a better mood during a holiday?” the waitress asks. “You know, I didn’t even mind coming to work today. That’s sure not like me. No way. I was thinking of leaving this place. But, you know, somehow it looks different today.”

Rayna says, “Yes, I know,” and orders a hamburger with everything on it and fries, just like she used to do before she began worrying about Eddie’s cholesterol.

The waitress sets the hamburger and a bottle of ketchup in front of Rayna, and asks, “Have everything you need?”

Rayna nods and pulls out her map, worn thin and torn in spots, some names of towns and cit­ies illegible. She knows she must pass through them all before she gets to Miami. A drop of ketchup oozes from her hamburger and drops on her map, covers the name of another spot she will go.

When the waitress returns to refill her coffee cup, she asks Rayna where she’s headed. When Rayna tells her Miami, the waitress sighs, “I always wanted to go to Miami. Are you going on vacation?”

“No.” Rayna puts a spoonful of sugar in her coffee and stirs. “I’m going on business.”

Rayna looks around the café. Everything glistens, captures and reflects back her own image. The chrome chair legs, the window hung with brown gingham valances, even her coffee spoon that she wipes with a napkin. She sees herself: a middle-aged woman, hair still brown, the color of mud she often thinks, skin reddish from veins too close to the surface, her faced lined and slightly weathered, lips parted, ready to smile. No jewelry, except, of course, her wedding ring that she never removes. All in all, a practical woman, solid, the kind of woman strangers ask for directions.

“On business,” Rayna repeats. “I make maps. You know, trace in the new routes and bypasses. All the changes.”

“You must travel a lot.” The waitress sits down on the other side of the booth and sets the cof­fee pot on the table, taps her long pink fingernails against the table, the sound of rain against a tin roof. “Sometimes I think about leaving. Just never seem to get around to it, though.”

“Why not? You look like a woman with vision.” Rayna opens up the map and holds it out. “All these places. So much to see. So much to do.”

The waitress reaches for Rayna’s map, knocking over the salt shaker, spilling the salt granules. “Oh, no.” She brushes the salt off the table into her right palm, then tosses it over her left shoulder. “Better safe than sorry,” she says. “Who needs bad luck? Not me, that’s for sure. Had enough bad luck already to last me a lifetime.” She sighs, “The stories I could tell you.”

“Someday,” Rayna says, looking at the waitress’ red plastic name tag, pinned to the brown ruf­fled apron, worn over a brown gingham dress with puffed sleeves. “Yes, Barbara, someday the notion will hit real hard. Then, just like that,” Rayna snaps her fingers, “you’ll do it.”

After paying the bill, Rayna asks for directions to the nearest jewelry store. She buys pearls, the real kind, not freshwater pearls or cultivated pearls, but pearls pried from oysters by a fisherman, pearls round and perfect, lustrous white pearls to clasp in a single strand round her neck.

Rayna Travis Gullavor wears these pearls, warm against her skin. Sometimes she fingers them as she drives. She sees Eddie pumping gas and cooking eggs, sees him spread out across the whole bed at night. For Eddie, Naomi bakes sourdough bread, cans the strawberries he picks and goes on televi­sion asking Rayna to come home. But Rayna cannot go home.

Not until Rayna drives through all the towns, until she sees the way to real Miami is safe for any traveler, until she walks out into the ocean and waves crest, wash over her body, pick her up and float her out past lifeguards, out to where salt water buoys her up and the pearls burst from their string and dissolve to sand—until then, she must travel alone.

**Minor Adjustments**

Our desperation drove Brittany and me full speed in our hunter green van right out to the army surplus store, the one down there on Telegraph, next to the construction company. Heck, we’re both pacifists. But enough was enough.

For once Brittany, my fifteen-year-old daughter, and I agreed on something: men turn your life up­side down and shake it as if you’re only plastic figures in a snow globe. Well, we would see where the snow settled.

Brittany pounded on the door of the surplus store as I coughed and spit bits of sawdust into Bradford’s oversized, monogrammed handkerchief. The kid with sinking ship tattoos on both arms waved us away.

“This is an emergency,” Brittany explained, tilting her head and staring right into the kid’s green-metal eyes as he backed up to let us in, locking the door behind us.

“Just call me Rocko,” he said after Brittany told him we needed whatever it took to survive environmental warfare. Didn’t take him long to get into the spirit of things as he yanked out battle fatigues, helmets and gas masks left over from some military maneuver.

“Cool,” Brittany said twirling in front of the three-way mirror, sleeves hanging down past her knees and the tube on the gas mask dangling. Rocko nodded his shaved scalp that had green-and brown-tinted stubble poking through on top. Brittany rubbed her sleeves over his head. “Great camouflage.”

Took two Visa cards to pay for all that gear including the canisters of Mace Rocko convinced us to buy for self-defense. “Be on guard,” he shouted as we climbed into our van. “It’s a war out there.” As if we needed to be told.

On the way home, all Brittany could talk about was Rocko, Rocko, first and last name the same. When I cautioned her that Rocko was a guy, no more and no less, she made the error made by young women everywhere. “He’s different,” she said. “But Bradford wouldn’t approve of Rocko would he?”

“Don’t call your father Bradford. He doesn’t like it,” I responded automatically as the garage door closed behind us. “Never know. Maybe Rocko carries one of those military handi-mechanic tools on a keychain.”

Our house was still under siege. Bradford was squatting with his head inside the bottom kitchen cupboard, door open, sanding away at something and clogging the air with sawdust. My pots and pans were heaped in a pile in the middle of the floor, filling up with sawdust.

I yanked at Bradford’s ankles. “Get out of my cupboard now. You promised. No more pro­jects.” I forced myself to breathe in and out simply and slowly and visualized Bradford roped to a straight-back chair while every single Craftsman tool he owned paraded back to Sears.

“Wasn’t closing right,” he muttered, shutting off the sander. “Just trying to help.” He climbed back into the cupboard. The whirring, whining sound bounced up and down my backbone.

“Closed fine for me. Just fine.” As if he asked. As if he cared. He could never say I hadn’t warned him.

He poked his head out, looked right at Brittany dressed in her fatigues and gas mask and didn’t say anything except, “Get the Dust Buster will you, Sweetheart? Not the shop vac, but the small one. I need you to hold it here and catch the sawdust.”

I saluted Brittany before putting on my gas mask. Felt good to know she was covering my flank as I marched into the family room, turned the volume high on that new comedy everyone was raising about and we tilted our helmet-heads against the beige velour cushions, ready to laugh. Like a geyser, water spurted out of the bathroom faucet as Mr. TV Fix-It Man stroked his chin.

“Hey, Bradford must have crawled out of his cupboard right onto the big screen.”

I took my gas mask off to get a better look. When Mr. Man rummaged through his box of high-tech tools and each gadget was bigger and had more dials than the one before it, I had to admit something in his eyes looked like Bradford. When he kicked the vanity and shouted and cursed, I knew the language. When the blonde in her bikini swam in to rescue him by turning the faucet off, I would have sworn it was Bradford except I could still see Bradford’s legs hanging out the cupboard door in our kitchen.

“Just leave everything where it is,” Bradford said the next morning before he left for work, dressed in his pin-striped navy blue suit with white shirt and sedate red-and-blue striped tie that fooled everyone at work into thinking he really was a chief engineer like his business card said, a man in con­trol. “I just have a minor adjustment to make.”

Sure, sure. How many times had I heard those very same words? Minor adjustment translated into “done this year some time unless I get interested in something else first.” That’s why last summer Bradford never finished putting the eaves on the lop-sided gazebo that had an overhanging roof on only one side of the octagon. Of course, no sense in painting it until the eaves were up. Not that it was Bradford’s fault since Glenda next door you-hooed him right on over to fix her garbage disposal just as he was getting ready to go to Home Depot to get the eaves he should have gotten when he bought the wood to build that stupid gazebo that none of us wanted anyway except him.

I stumbled over the turkey broiler. “I hate to cook anyway,” I screamed, heaving the broiler against the cupboard door and raising both arms in victory as it left a big round dent in the center.

“Bullseye, Mom. Way to go.” Brittany stubbed her toe on the cast iron skillet and threw it to­ward the turkey broiler, leaving her own dent. “That ought to keep Bradford busy for a while. You know what they say about idle hands.” She rolled up about twelve inches of pant leg on her fatigues.

“You can’t wear that to school. It’ll give your principal conniption fits.”

“Yeah,” she sighed through the gas mask. “Guess it will,” I heard her say as she leaped over the pile of pans, her pant leg catching on the lid of my crockpot and dragging it outside behind her, wiping out her own footprints in the late March snow.

I can’t say I was one bit surprised when Mr. Leary, the school principal, called me at work and told me she was suspended until she apologized for stirring up trouble. He sputtered and said that in his day girls knew how to dress appropriately. “Sure,” I muttered, “in mini-skirts and platform shoes that ruined their arches.”

Silence at his end for a moment, then the lecture. Made me feel like I was back in school my­self when he said, “I can see where Brittany gets it from. You need to pick her up. Now.”

“Oops, gotta run. Late for a meeting. You do have her father’s number, don’t you?” And I hung up.

Bradford enlisted you-hoo Glenda in his battle to convince Brittany and me to discard our gear which I must admit was a bit smelly by April. She did her best. Even lured us into her kitchen by baking our favorite chocolate-frosted brownies. Raving about Bradford’s talent, she demonstrated how he fixed her garbage disposal so it chewed up a whole carrot in two seconds and said, “A man like Bradford is a treasure.” Brittany and I just tightened our gas masks and let her back door slam when we left.

Fact is that Brittany and I had become comfortable in our fatigues. Each colorful battle patch Rocko helped us pick out signified a rear flank action. We awarded ourselves a star above the right pocket on the day we disabled the garage door opener so that even after two days of tinkering, Brad­ford couldn’t figure out what was wrong with it.

By the time May rolled around, Brittany knew all the words to the Army marching song, talked me into going back to the surplus store for mess kits and combat boots, and developed a Rocko-induced craving for dehydrated potatoes and beef jerky and for Rocko himself. Even Bradford couldn’t complain about my not cooking since my pans took up most of the kitchen floor and he was still waiting for a back-ordered hinge for the kitchen cupboard.

In the meantime, he was in the process of painting the bathroom in an oil-based, enamel white when he discovered he was a gallon short (and left drop cloths and open paint cans on the sink because as soon as the store could mix it without putting too much starlight white in with the ermine and egg­shell, he would finish the back wall). “Don’t care if they do it a hundred times, they’re going to get it right,” he said. “I won’t settle for less.”

So, each night, he dabbed some paint on from a new can and the commercial exhaust fan he installed in the kitchen last week sucked the paint fumes throughout the house. That fan sure did work, even sucked up all the purple blooms from the African violet I had setting on the window ledge above the sink. “Now that’s what I call a real exhaust fan,” Bradford said. Most days I wished it would suck him right up, paintbrush and all.

At exactly six o’clock on a Wednesday, May 13 (no way I’ll forget that day ever) Brittany, Brad­ford and I sat in the unmowed grass with our backs against the lopsided gazebo eating our rations which Rocko kept in stock for us.

It was then that Rocko came roaring up the driveway on his Harley-Davidson. When he spot­ted Bradford, Rocko braked too quickly and catapulted over the handlebars.

“Hey, guy, what did you bring us?” Brittany said at the same time Bradford started yelling, “Get out or I’ll call the police,” and I ran over, telling Rocko, “Don’t move. You might have a con­cussion.”

Bradford stood over Rocko, holding a hammer. “Don’t try anything. I’ll use this if I have to.” Bradford raised the hammer and gripped it with both hands. Who knows where he came up with a hammer on such short notice. Then again, Bradford doesn’t look fully dressed unless he’s got a tool in his hand. “I mean it,” Bradford said, lowering the hammer as Rocko wiggled his legs. “Don’t make me hurt you.”

“This is ridiculous. Give me that.” When Bradford wouldn’t let go, I unclipped my canister of Mace from my belt and aimed at his left ear. I’d been wanting to do that for some time. When the wind blew some into his eyes, he let out a yowl that set the neighbor’s black Lab barking and Bradford dropped the hammer like it had teeth. “It’ll make it worse,” I warned as he rubbed his eyes with his knuckles. Then, I introduced Rocko.

Maybe it was the ship tattoos sinking more on Rocko’s rippling biceps as he clenched his fists or the two-inch, skinny orange braid that fell over his forehead or the black rubber marks his motorcy­cle left on the concrete driveway that provoked Bradford. “Leave. Now,” Bradford hissed, still rubbing his eyes.

“Or what? I know all about you,” Rocko said, sitting up on the grass. He handed Brittany two canteens. “In case the old man breaks the water pipes.”

“What old man? What water pipes? And who are you to give my daughter anything? Get out.” Bradford and Rocko ran for the motorcycle at the same time and each took hold of the seat and a handlebar and pulled opposite ways. The motorcycle rose slightly and fell one way and then the other, again and again, as the two men pulled in opposite directions, each screaming at the other, “Let go.”

Don’t know how long this would have continued if I hadn’t pointed out the twisted seat and bent fender. “Oh, man,” Rocko and Bradford moaned at the same time as they let go of the motorcy­cle which landed, again, with a solid smack on the concrete and laid there.

“Always wanted one of these hogs,” Bradford said. Looks wounded laying there. Not to worry, though, I’ve got the tools to fix it.” He slung his arm over Rocko’s shoulder as they walked in step toward the garage.

Brittany stamped her foot, “Get back here, Rocko.” Rocko just kept moving, nodding his head at whatever Bradford was saying. “You’re a deserter; that’s what you are: a deserter. And a traitor, too.” Her gold-flecked brown eyes, shaped like mine, challenged me. “I thought Rocko was different.”

I hugged Brittany to me and patted her back. “I know,” I murmured. “Oh, how I know.”

A slight breeze from the north brushed petals from the cherry tree that drifted onto Brittany’s shoulder and mine. For a moment, we mistook them for snow. Then, we smelled the fragrance.

Didn’t take us long to decide what to do. And no way were we going to leave a note for Bradford or Rocko since they could be holed up in that garage for days.

Brittany and I booked the most expensive room available at the Ritz-Carlton for a week. We stripped off our fatigues and gas masks, changed into flowered spring dresses, packed our suitcases, drove the few miles to Dearborn, signed in, and immediately found the whirlpools where we laid back in the churning water and breathed clean, moist air.

**Not Fast Enough**

I may have been only ten years old but I could run faster than any boy or girl on our street, faster even than the twelve-year-old boy across the street who was always running out of his house, up the street, away from his drunken father who sprinted after him shaking his belt. Faster than my friend Joyce who never even walked fast because her hair might get messed up. Faster than Bobby who preferred riding his bike everywhere.

When I saw the notice posted on a tree at our school playground, I knew someone nailed it there just for me to see. See it I did. I stared at it so long it must have tattooed itself on the back of my eyeballs.

Picnic, Games & Prizes  
Everyone Welcome  
August 23, 1953. Noon.  
Baseball, horseshoes, checkers, dominoes, more  
Running contest. Ages 10 to 12.

There was more but I stopped reading. Running contest was what caught my attention. I ran around that maple tree at least twenty times for good luck. When I ran, my mother always told me to slow down, told me that ladies walked. I knew right then I wasn’t a lady and never would be. I was a runner and that was that. I went into strict training. Only two weeks to prepare. Short but time enough. I ran everywhere: to the store to get milk, up the stairs when I wanted to beat my sister to the bathroom and down the stairs when I was done and right out onto the concrete sidewalk and across the neighbor’s grass, even though he shook his fist and threatened to tell my parents if I didn’t stop. I didn’t even slow down. I couldn’t. I wouldn’t, no matter what. Even during sleep, my legs churned, kicking the stuffing right out of my mattress.

Neighbors shook their heads as I whizzed by. All the dogs in the neighborhood broke free and followed behind me yapping and ripping at my heels. The birds flew lower in the sky as they tracked me.

Often Dad stood on the sidewalk, yelling, “Lift those knees higher. Higher.” He shouted until he was hoarse but I still heard him croaking when I passed. “Left, right. Higher.” And I did. I lifted them so high I figured I was going to knock my own mouth shut.

Mom’s mantra was: “Stop that right now. You’re going to get a heat stroke. Then, what will the neighbors think?”

On August 23rd, at high noon, I stood tall at the start line. I knew I could beat each and every kid there. My flat chest puffed out and I shuffled my toe along the line, trying to appear modest, some­thing all girls should be according to my mother. Just before the start signal, a big guy showed up and toed the line. I’d seen him around, playing baseball, football, hockey, soccer and being cheered on by a bunch of high school girls. If you had been watching from the sidelines, you would have seen me cross the winner’s line on the heels of the big guy. Despite what you might have thought, it was sweat I wiped from my eyes with the palm of my hand. But when the big guy went up to get his prize, a Siamese Fighting Fish, I saw the disappointment in his eyes even though the girls marveled at the pur­ple fan tail, giggled when the fish bumped up against the small round fishbowl meant for guppies, not for the magnificent Siamese Fighting Fish.

I wanted that fish in the worst way. I would name it Johnny, just like the guy who sat next to me in math, the guy I had a crush on. I pictured all the room Johnny would have to spread his tail in my ten-gallon tank. I offered the big guy a dollar for the fish. He just sneered at me.

To this day, I’m convinced that the big guy was really thirteen. He cheated. I know that in my heart. Just like I know he dumped that glorious Siamese Fighting Fish down the sewer after the girls left.

**The Party**

Karen stared at her husband across the room. She watched his lips move and leaned forward in her chair trying to hear what he said to the other men. But his words were lost in Ruth’s laugh.

“The Pailmans aren’t coming tonight. Their little boy has a cold,” Ruth said, touching Karen’s arm.

“That’s too bad.” She lit another cigarette and blew the smoke forcefully between her rigid, slit lips, all the time trying to remember who the Pailmans were, trying to make the connection.

But tonight her mind wouldn’t twist in the right directions. She reminded herself that she’d known the Pailmans for years and she could visualize their faces and things they’d done together, but she still couldn’t bring them close tonight, any more than she could draw closer to Ruth, who’d shared her secrets since high school days. Even Ruth’s son, whom she loved but did not yearn for, was only a mass of recalled sensations at this moment. And her own unconceived children were buried some­where inside her, consciously denied but waiting still. In this dim room, her mind was beyond manipulation.

She was being spoken to. She knew it. The laugh, the words, and the warm fleshy hand touch­ing her arm reminded her. Karen forced herself to say the expected words. “I hope it’s a boy. You’d like another boy, wouldn’t you?”

“Come on, Karen. What are you thinking about tonight? You know we want a girl this time.” She shook her head at the other women and turned back. “You’ll find out someday what hellions little boys are.” Ruth smiled, confident of her womanliness, yet not even showing a slight stomach bulge.

The women talked for a while about their children, about their children’s accidents, about their children’s babysitters, and about their pregnancies.

Karen heard clearly a woman’s voice laughing in the dimness at some story another woman told. She knew the voice; she knew all the voices; she’d heard them for years at high school parties, at college parties, at summer swimming parties, at New Year’s Eve parties. It was as if they all belonged to one family, a sort of group marriage.

She turned to look at Ed, the man they called her husband, the man who looked at Ruth’s whiteness. Then she spoke, surprising herself. “Well, Ruth, I hope it’s a beautiful girl. A beautiful girl who will live forever in her tomboy treehouse.” She blew a screen of cigarette smoke.

“Please, Karen, blow the smoke the other way.” She parted her lips exposing small teeth clenched tightly together. The words fought their way from behind the hard whiteness. “I just don’t understand you tonight. Are you drunk?”

“Yes, that’s it. Tonight I am drunk. No one can understand a drunk. No one is expected to. I don’t expect you to.”

She heard Ruth say something to her, something that was meant to be reassuring. She watched her twist on the arm of the chair, moving her legs more to the right and smoothing the skirt over her thighs, carefully so the life inside would not be disturbed, the life that hadn’t even made itself felt yet except in morning sickness.

The women were still telling funny stories about their children, each trying to outdo the other. She listened to Ruth speak of her son, watched her methodically stroke the tufted wool of the thick chair arm. If the party had been quieter, she would have heard a soft, slurred sound, the sound of Ruth.

“But I did read it somewhere,” Ruth protested.

She must have nodded her head “no,” but it hadn’t really been to what Ruth was saying.

“It’s true, Karen. Children are upset with the blood and cruelty of fairy tales. Like the mean old witch who eats children in ‘Hansel and Gretel.’ It would upset him if I read that sort of thing to him.” Ruth looked toward the other women for support.

The damp blackness of Karen’s eyes suggested a smile. “You’re right. Children shouldn’t know they get eaten.”

Ruth hadn’t heard. Her legs were swinging in beat with the record that was piped into the base­ment, speaking words of fleeting truth to the congregation below. Her heel caught on the fabric, bend­ing her forward and revealing more of the small white roundness that struggled to free itself from the flowered dress. Ruth’s temples were damp and her hair curled carefully around the water droplets.

Karen smiled at her, the just-right smile of departure. She would play the game, the game of hide-and-seek that they all played, the game that even children knew.

“Excuse me, Ruth. I need another drink.” She stood, pushing her slip strap back under the summer’s sleeveless dress.

“Don’t you think you’ve had enough?” Ruth’s face wrinkled in disapproval. “Well, there’s nothing worse than being sick the next morning. It makes you weak to get sick. After all, I should know.”

“Sure, I’ve had enough. But what else can a person do when she’s had enough except to take another drink?”

She could feel Ruth’s eyes trace her ascent, watching for a visible sign of sickness. The tape­worm eyes measured the body flesh from top to bottom, checking the dimensions of femininity.

As Karen passed the screen door, the coolness of the summer night reached in and clutched the back of her neck, strangling her with its freshness, its dark clarity. And in the kitchen, she wiped the wetness from her forehead with the palm of her hand, a man’s gesture. She set the empty glass on the sticky Formica counter and read the labels of the liquor bottles. There were ten different brands but the same ones that were lined up at every party.

She sat down on one of the bar stools that was used in the kitchen nook and, crossing her legs, snagged her nylons on the underside roughness of the counter. So easily her earlier tedious grooming had been marred. The washing, the filling, the brushing, the ironing, and the final touch of perfume, the warm smothering final cloaking and she had been ready. Now it had been made imperfect by the bare skin under the torn nylon fibers.

Her husband, if he saw her now, would say she was drunk. She filled her glass with Scotch and water and took two ice cubes from the ice bucket. Then she sat alone with her imperfection.’

She removed a bobby pin from her hair, feeling the strands stiffened by hair spray. She used to wear it in a ponytail in high school and had loved the feel of it as it bounced off her shoulders when she walked. She was reminded of the graduation party that most of tonight’s people had been at. But Barbara wasn’t here tonight. She had gone away to school after the graduation party. No one had really liked Barbara. She was too fat, her hair was always dirty, and dirt was under her fingernails in the summer because she liked to garden, really liked to. Her fingernails were even dirty at the graduation party. No one had seen her since but she probably wasn’t at a party tonight and her fingernails were probably dirty.

Looking down at the counter, she saw what she had done. She had scratched her and her husband’s names into the counter’s wax with the bobby pin. She tried to erase them but knew it didn’t really matter. No one would ever notice. The light had to be hitting the counter just right before the scratches were even visible.

Suddenly she cupped her hands around the sweating glass as she heard someone coming up the steps. As she waited, she pressed the side of the glass against her lips, licking the moisture from the smooth roundness. She could smell Ruth’s lily-of-the-valley perfume. She took the last cigarette from the pack, sliding her fingers along the whiteness. She forced her eyes to look at the scratched-in names, fearing some hand would suddenly fill them with wax if she turned to look at Ruth.

Ruth spoke her name for she was a woman comfortable only with noise.

She liked the sound of Ruth, a woman of God. “Are the walls sky blue, Ruth?”

“Yes. Yes, Karen, they are.” Ruth was moving the dirty glasses from the counter and rinsing them in the sink.

“You’re wrong. They’re robin’s egg blue.”

“All right. What’s the difference? You really are drunk.”

She could feel Ruth stiffen and even Ruth’s name became a growling sound deep in her throat as she tried to call to her. Instead of calling, she dropped her head on her arms, admitting defeat; Ruth was much stronger in her unyielding certainty.

Ruth wiped her hands on a paper towel and moved above her to stroke her forehead, all the time murmuring sounds. Ruth encouraged her to cry, the woman’s remedy. But she wasn’t able to cry; she hadn’t cried for a long time. And Ruth had once called her cold or maybe she had chosen the word “restrained.” It was when they were at a movie when they were freshmen together. Ruth, at that time, had licked popcorn salt from her lips and wiped tears from her eyes with a green Kleenex. And all the time she kept saying that Karen should cry. Somehow, Karen felt she’d let her down, then and now.

Ruth handed her a Kleenex, commanding her in a quiet voice, to wipe the sweat-smeared makeup from her face. In her defeat, she obeyed.

Ruth was grasping at words and reasons, anything to fill the silence. “It’s okay, Karen. It’s not a party unless someone gets drunk. Eddie’s not mad. He asked me to come and see if you were all right.”

There was no answer from Karen and Ruth continued hurriedly, probing softly. “Eddie’s worried about you. Says you’ve been depressed a lot lately. Is something wrong, Karen? You know I’d like to help.”

Karen lifted her head, looked at her best friend, and wished Ruth could help.

“Is it the talk about kids, Karen? Is that it?”

When Karen just continued to look at her, she relaxed with the reasons that she could accept. “We forget about you sometimes, Karen. I’m sorry. We’re all sorry. Your day will come.” She chuckled to herself and added, “Besides, you’ll have the benefit of our experience. We can tell you what works with kids and what doesn’t.”

Karen smiled, realizing that Ruth needed her agreement. She finished the Scotch and water and wiped her lips with the side of her finger, allowing it to feel the smooth pinkness, drawing every part of herself inward to the redness, slowly.

“I’m okay, Ruth,” she said quietly. “I’m really okay.”

Ruth put her hand on Karen’s elbow and although Karen couldn’t feel the touch, she saw the hand and heard Ruth’s voice droning on. She thought how soothing Ruth’s voice was and wondered if the words really mattered. Sometimes they seemed powerful, but tonight they’d lost their force; she was too tired. Ed’s eyes had been drawn to Ruth’s assured whiteness and Karen found herself hating her own seasonally tanned skin, her firm body. And yet she couldn’t cry. And Ruth was waiting.

“We’re alike. Good God, but we are.” Karen wasn’t sure if she’d spoken the words aloud until Ruth responded.

“Of course; we’ve been friends a long time. Come on now. Let’s join the party.”

Karen excused herself to repair her make-up but waited in the kitchen listening until Ruth’s sound on the steps was gone. She ran her finger over the scratches on the counter, drank another glass of Scotch and water, and started downstairs.

The screen door was still open. It had started to rain and for a brief moment she thought about her open windows and the drapes that would get water-spotted.

Then she opened the door and walked into the garden where the flowers all looked black at night. And she stood among the flowers, feeling the mascara streak her cheek with darkness, feeling the black rain soak into her skin, knowing that someone would come to get her soon.

**The Picnic**

She sits at the window watching for him. Still, she isn’t looking when he swerves up the drive­way, going too fast, always too fast.

Her eyes stay fastened on the little kid next door, wondering if he’s the one tearing up her flowerbeds. She’s never caught him at it. Never seen him pull up the marigolds, the asters, the bache­lor buttons, the zinnias, leaving the roots exposed to the summer sun.

She wipes sweat from her forehead, feels it escaping beneath her fingers, trickling down her temples, her neck, and pooling between her breasts. Not a breeze anywhere. Even the fan malfunc­tions during this heat wave.

“Why didn’t you keep the shades down?” Jim shouts from somewhere near the back of the house, his voice rushing ahead of him. When he reaches her, he leans down and tilts her chin up, kiss­ing her lips damp with sweat.

She pushes away from him. “Too hot,” she says. Last year at about this time, she remembers how her mother fanned her as she slipped on the wedding dress, fixed the veil on her head before they left for the church. It was hot, then, too.

“That’s the kid digging up my flowers,” she says, pointing to the little boy playing in the sprin­kler. “It’s not right digging up my flowers like that.”

“No, it’s not right,” he says. He straightens the picture on the wall, picks up the glass filled with melted ice, wipes dust from the table, a flurry of motion as if he’s trying to create a breeze that will cool her.

“Ever notice how when it gets this hot, it’s like you’re looking at everything through a telescope? Things move closer and lose their shape,” she says and looks past him as he stands at the window.

He leans his hands on the window sill, notices the paint peeling around the outside frame. If he has time this summer, he plans to strip the paint to the bare wood and start over.

“When I was a kid, my old man always painted the house white,” Jim says. “Every year he touched it up. Said we had the whitest house on the block. Made him proud just to look at it.”

“Not white, she says. “I don’t want a white house.”

“What do you want?” he asks.

“Stop shouting. I hate it when you shout,” she says. “It’s this heat. Makes everyone edgy.”

“It’s not the heat. It’s you. It’s me.”

“Stop it,” she says as he pulls her from the chair, toward him. “I can’t breathe.”

“Let’s go on a picnic,” Jim says, still holding onto her. “Out to Proud Lake. Like we used to do all the time before anything happened.”

“Before what happened?” she shouts. “Go ahead, say it.”

“Just before,” he says, already moving toward the kitchen.

She hears the familiar kitchen sounds. He’s opening and closing cupboards, rummaging in the freezer.

On the drive out, he tries to talk to her but she turns up the radio and rests her head against the window. He pulls down the visor against the sun. Pools of water on the road form and disappear as he speeds toward them.

He pulls into a side road. It’s hard to see anything with the dust they’re stirring up. The pines lining the road are covered with dust. Even the sparrows seem gray, weighted down. But around a curve, she sees a shack and past that a canal leading to the lake.

The woman at the shack tells them they only have an hour before dark and that the dark comes suddenly. Warns them how easy it is to get lost so the y need to watch for the signs that will guide them back. Loans them a flashlight to read the signs, just in case. She tells about a couple that got lost one foggy night years ago. Says no one ever found them or the canoe. But some people say they see them during Harvest Moon.

“No,” the woman says as she swats at a mosquito that settles on her arm. “I never seen them.” She asks them to sign the canoe rental form. “But sometimes maybe I hear them. Maybe. But no way to be sure. Just hear canoe paddles and something like singing.” She pauses, tilts her head, listening. “But maybe it’s nothing but the water against the shore and the wind in the trees. Hard to tell.”

The woman leads them to the canoe, waits for them to get settled before handing them the flashlight and the paddles. “Remember,” the woman says, “the canals aren’t deep, only about three feet. It’s the lake you got to watch. Over your head. About fifteen feet, no one knows how deep in the middle,” she warns as she shoves the canoe off the slanted landing ramp.

Paddling hard to move through the canal, Jim says, “It’s okay, Sweetheart.” His breath seems measured by the paddle strokes. “You don’t need to paddle.”

She faces forward, her back to him, and holds the paddle tightly across her knees. She watches for submerged logs. “Jim,” she shouts, “Watch out. There’s a log on the right. A big one.”

“What?” he shouts back, too loud, almost like a gunshot. “Can’t hear you.”

“Jim,” she shouts louder. But he still can’t hear her and the canoe bumps against the log, rocking and turning the canoe slightly. She sits rigid, certain it will tip over. Surprised when it straightens out.

They move out onto the lake and watch the fishermen standing on the shore, casting their lines and reeling them in when they hook a trout. Near a small island, they spot geese honking and arching their necks when the canoe moves too close to shore.

“Protecting their nests,” Jim says. “But they don’t seem afraid of people. Amazing isn’t it how they get used to people taking over their lake in the summer.”

“Getting hungry?” Jim asks. But she’s not hungry. Maybe the picnic can wait until another day.

As the sun starts setting, she urges Jim to go back. But he wants to watch the sun set, feel the cooler breezes wafting over the lake. The fishermen are fading on the shore. She’s not sure if they’ve gone home or she just can’t see them in the dusk.

“Peaceful, isn’t it?” Jim says, letting the canoe drift. “It’s like we’re the only people here. And you don’t feel the heat on the lake.”

She starts paddling. “Let’s at least get back to the canal. The lake’s too deep. What if we can’t find the signs?”

“We’ll find them.”

“You’re always so sure of everything,” she says, paddling harder, rocking the canoe form side to side.

They make it to the canal but she’s not sure it’s the right one. Her arm muscles hurt, not used to the paddling. But she doesn’t stop. A bird swoops low across the canal, skimming her hair and she screams, letting go of the paddle.

“It’s okay,” he assures her, grabbing for her paddle and missing it as it moves past him. He starts paddling again. He breathes hard as he fights the wind pushing them backward.

“It’s not okay,” she says. They don’t seem to be moving. The water slaps against the canoe, a hollow sound like a ripe melon.

Picking up the flashlight beside her, she directs the beam over the side, squinting hard to see. But the water, like wrinkled skin, shows only its surface.

Over there, on the outer circle of the light, she sees her own face, breaking in the waves. Another face forms behind hers. She watches, quiet waiting, a fisherman letting out the line. Suddenly her mother’s eyes, shiny as minnows, rise to the surface.

Even now her mother’s eyes spawn secrets, swimming there just out of reach. Her mother’s eyes have looked like that before—at birthday parties before presents were unwrapped, at her wedding before Jim put the ring on her finger.

Jim reaches out for her as she stands, but she’s too far away. “Sit down,” he says as he grasps each side of the canoe and moves forward, stepping over the metal seats in the middle. She pulls back. The balance is off. The canoe tips, flipping them both into the canal.

Jim reaches her side, puts his arm around her shoulders and pulls her upright. “It’s okay. Just put your feet down. It’s shallow here.”

“Don’t move,” she whispers. “She’s here. Do you see her over there?” she asks, staring hard trying to find the place again.

“It’s just the moon reflecting off the water,” he says.

“No, it’s her. I know it’s her,” she says. “Find the flashlight and I’ll prove it.”

“It’s gone,” he tells her. “The flashlight is gone. Your mother is gone.”

She remembers how she and her mother had shared many secrets—a new dress she couldn’t tell her dad about, an extra $50 tucked in her jacket pocket when she went off to college, the first yellow crocus under the melting snow. But there were some secrets her mother wouldn’t share.

“Some things you just have to find out for yourself, like a first kiss.” She leans back, moving her arms through water, making angel wings. “That’s what my mother used to say.”

“Do you think they’re really here on the lake?” she asks, spitting the canal water from her mouth.

“Who?”

“That couple who drowned out here when their canoe tipped over.” She caresses the side of the canoe as she speaks, cutting her finger on the rough aluminum edge. She looks at the cut. “Do you think maybe they canoe every night and only let themselves be seen at Harvest Moon?”

“Let me see that, “Jim says, reaching for her hand. “Just a small cut. I’ll put something on it when we get to the car.” He turns the canoe right side up. “It’s just a story. A story that woman likes to tell people like us.”

“Oh, Jim, it shouldn’t have happened.”

“What?” he whispers. “What shouldn’t have happened?”

“She shouldn’t have died. Not while I was gone,” she says so quietly that he’s not sure he hears it. “She wasn’t even sick.”

They listen to the water lapping against the canoe, against the shore. The night sounds.

“I mean she could have waited until we got back from the honeymoon. Maybe I could have done something. Maybe we should have waited to get married.” She tilts her head back to look at him, her hair floating like seaweed atop the water. “Maybe she knew and just didn’t tell me.”

“She would have told you,” he says.

The water is cool, cold. Too cold now that the sun has gone down.

“It was hot that day, really hot,” she says. “Didn’t it break a record of some kind?”

They move toward the shore, pulling the canoe beside them. They can see lights on the land­ing ramp ahead. Not much further.

“I miss her,” she says, remembering how everyone tells her she has her mother’s eyes, dark as garden soil.

“I know,” Jim says.

When they pull the canoe up to the landing, the woman runs out of the shack, waving at them. “I was so worried about you two,” she says, “What happened?”

They’re both too tired to explain. They just motion toward the canoe. When they try to pay her for the lost paddles, she refuses, saying, “Wouldn’t do to have two young couples lost on the lake. You would have had to wait for the Hunter’s Moon,” she jokes. “And Hunter’s Moon isn’t the time to be out on the lake.”

**The Puppet Show**

My life is filled with scenes. The puppeteer improvises, sticks her hand inside a memory and wiggles it until it’s center stage.

**Act 1, Scene 1**

*As a Daughter*

My mother and I stand in line at Hudson’s. I am nine years old, too old for the thermal under­shirts she holds in her hand.

“The ones from last year don’t fit,” my mother says to the woman behind her in line. She holds the shirt to my chest and turns me toward the woman.

“Do you think if I take a tuck in the shoulders, they’ll be okay?” Mother asks the woman.

The woman nods. The little girl holding her hand giggles. I turn to the front of the line, my braids heavy against my back.

“She’s the tallest in her class. If I didn’t take tucks in things, we’d go broke.”

“Mother.” A growl in the back of my throat. She doesn’t hear.

“Not sick all the time either like others in her class.”

The line moves forward.

“Smart, too,” Mother says over her shoulder. “Show them, Sweetheart.”

The saleslady rings up the prices.

“Don’t total it,” Mother says. She turns to me. “Okay, what’s the total?” Everybody looks at me, waits.

I stand, my shoulders slumped.

“Well?”

“I don’t know,” I whisper.

“Don’t be shy, Sweetheart.” She looks at the woman behind her, then at the saleslady. “She always gets A’s in arithmetic.”

Blood in my mouth. My tongue hot, thick between my molars.

Mother’s fingertips nudge my shoulder. “Give us the answer.” The balls of her fingers press to the bone.

“$7.29,” I say.

The saleslady totals.

“See,” Mother says, moving her fingers inside her coin purse. “Right, including tax. She never misses.”

The next day at school I go into the girls’ lavatory and pull off the sweater my mother knitted, pull off the undershirt. After wadding it into a ball, I put it into my lunch box, under the peanut butter sandwich my mother packed, under the apple and celery sticks.

**Act 1, Scene 2**

*As a Daughter*

Twelfth grade graduation. My mother in the audience. Her green cotton dress tight across her breasts, her hair frizzy from last week’s permanent. She waves as I walk to the lectern to give my valedictorian speech.

“Good afternoon,” I say.

“Good,” my mother mouths, one word behind me.

At home, fanning herself with my graduation cap. She sits on the front porch swing and talks to Julie’s mother, Mrs. Brandon. I pour lemonade into their glasses.

“She’s got a scholarship to Antioch,” Mother says as she unbuttons her top two buttons.

“Some name for a college. Sounds like a vegetable.” Mrs. Brandon holds the cool glass to her temple. Looking at me, she says, “Thought you’d be getting ready for the prom. Julie’s home taking her beauty nap.”

I shut the screen door quietly behind me and pick up my yearbook from the hall table.

Their voices come through the holes in the screen.

“That Julie. Broke her date with Jim Parker so she could go with Ronald Thompson.”

The swing cracks. “This heat gets to me. Seems to make my blood pressure worse.”

“That’s because you eat too much salt. It bloats you up.”

I stare at Julie’s picture in the yearbook, trace her oval face with my finger.

“When my daughter’s a doctor, she can take care of me. Won’t have to go to that quack anymore.”

“If she wants to go to the prom, bet Julie could get Jim Parker to take her.”

I don’t listen to my mother’s answer. I concentrate on drawing a handlebar mustache under Julie’s nose. Ink freckles splatter against the white face. The curl goes in her hair, solid blue beneath the ears.

**Act 2, Scene 1**

*As a Mother*

I spend hours making my daughter’s ballet costume. It is perfect: each pink layer of net stitched carefully; the sequins sewed one by one to the bodice. No last-minute cuts or tucks.

Dress rehearsal. My daughter sits beside me in the darkened auditorium. Two rows up with the rest of the class.

“Why don’t you go sit next to Christine?” I know all the girl’s names.

“Don’t want to,” she says, rummaging in her school bag.

“What are you looking for?”

“Nothing.”

Finally she pulls out a flashlight and book. A permission slip marks the book at the halfway point. She opens the book and begins to read.

“What’s this for?” I take the permission slip. “A hayride. I used to really like those,” I lie.

She doesn’t say anything.

“You look silly holding that flashlight. What if your teacher looks back here?”

“I don’t care.” She turns the page.

“You should.”

I reach for the flashlight; she holds it tight. I pull. It falls to the carpeted floor, shatters. The light goes out.

Her teacher turns and waves her forward to join the class. As they mount the stage, their legs are tinged with green until the stage lights shift color. Now, white and pink porcelain figures, stiff in their tutus, arms arched above their heads. Twirl like jewelry box ballerinas.

My daughter, at the end, looks into the spotlight, freezes there while the rest turn right and exit.

Locked in her seatbelt in the car, my daughter finishes a chapter in the book.

At the first light, I straighten her tiara, say, “Everyone goofs in rehearsal. You’ll do fine tomorrow night.”

“I know.”

“There’s nothing to be nervous about. You were the prettiest one up there.”

“I’m not nervous.”

“You don’t care do you?”

She starts another chapter.

“You don’t care that Christina and the others laugh.”

She doesn’t look up from the page. “It’s only a dumb ballet recital.”

“But the others care.”

“Yeah,” she says.

**Act 2, Scene 2**

*As a Mother*

A puppet show at a birthday party. A makeshift stage: two chairs and a cardboard box draped with black velvet. The puppeteer is concealed.

On stage: a butterfly: a boy chases it with a net. Sequined wings snag on the black velvet. One of the mothers sets her coffee cup on the Formica end table and moves forward. By then, the butterfly is free.

I watch my daughter. She looks straight ahead, unmoving, trying not to respond to the baby who has its hand tangled in her long hair. Maybe she doesn’t feel the groping hand. Again and again, she breathes deeply, her chest straining against dotted Swiss ruffles. Does she smell the musty silk? Does she dissect the butterfly, pulling the sequins off one by one?

Whatever she is doing, I will never know. She doesn’t even flinch when the baby wraps fine, blonde strands around its finger, when he sticks them in his mouth and sucks.

Other children scoot closer to the stage, try to touch the puppets.

My daughter sits alone in the group, untouched by them, untouched by me. The space around her is clean like her room at home. She changes the sheets, makes the bed, vacuums the floor, and locks her diary with the key she wears on a gold chain around her neck.

The butterfly gives way to a wicked witch, a flying fish, and a dancing girl in feathers. Still, she watches. I wonder what I have done to her or not done. I get tired of trying to explain her to myself, to others.

“You’re not listening,” Peggy says as she jabs me in the ribs.

I apologize and readjust my face.

“This is some party. And to think they almost cancelled it.” Peggy wipes caked lipstick from the corners of her mouth.

Peggy knows what is going on. I wonder if she has one of those electronic gadgets that picks up conversations ten miles away.

“Ricky stuck a tape recorder in Katherine and Don’s room.” She giggles and covers her mouth when her daughter turns around and glares.

“Ricky played it for all the neighbor kids. Didn’t Sarah tell you about it?”

I shake my head.

Peggy nibbles at a corn chip. “Wish I could have heard it.” She hands me the bowl.

I wish she would go in the kitchen to refill her coffee. My head aches from the noise and smoke.

“If only my kids could keep their mouths shut like Sarah.”

Peggy’s two girls are poking each other, each jab harder than the one before. For a brief moment, I wish they were mine. Then I look at my daughter. She could be a color photograph of herself taken a few minutes earlier. She hasn’t moved and her expression hasn’t changed. I want to shake her.

“I’m ready for them to go back to school and they’ve only been out three weeks.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean.”

I look at my daughter and feel sad. My agreement is based on my two older sons’ behavior, not hers.

Suddenly I want Peggy to keep talking.

But the show is over. Older children push the younger ones from in front of the stage, grab at the puppets. The black velvet is pulled from the chairs. The stage is gone. The puppeteer sits two of the smaller children in her lap and slips the cowboy over one girl’s hand, the cow over the other’s.

The birthday boy steps on my toe in his rush toward the kitchen. A group of children follow, each wanting to be the first in line for ice cream and cake.

My daughter stands slowly, unaware of the movement around her. I call to her and she turns, startled to hear her name.

As I put my arm around her shoulders, I ask her how she liked the show.

“Fine. Just fine.”

I know she’s thinking of something else; I’ve asked a stupid question.

“Which character did you like best?” Again, it’s not what I want to ask, but at least I try.

“The princess,” she answers too quickly, saying what a nine-year-old might say.

I’ve forgotten the princess; I suspect she doesn’t even exist, but I smile, play along with her. She reaches for my hand.

When the crowd around the stage thins out, I ask her if she wants to play with one of the puppets.

“I don’t need to,” she answers.

I wonder what she does need. At her age, I needed Richie Beard to stop taping “kick me” signs on my back every time he went to the pencil sharpener. I needed my mother to stop asking Ellen Farber in every time she knocked on the door. I wanted my mother to quit straightening my under­wear drawer and throwing out my pencils without erasers.

I look around for Peggy and her children. My daughter plays with them sometimes and I’d like to see them playing together now. But I can’t find Peggy and I must avoid looking into my daughter’s face.

My hand squeezes hers tightly. There are only two children playing with the puppets now; one is behind the stage talking for the butterfly. High pitch, too shrill.

“Try the puppets. Maybe the princess will be fun,” I mock her, ashamed for both of us.”

She tries to withdraw her hand but I’m ready for her. No escape. She begins to cry, silently, but it’s too late for tears.

We are by the stage now, alone; the two boys lose interest in make-believe. They turn to more substantial things like ice cream and the swing set outside. Over the mothers’ chatter, the noise of chil­dren playing.

Grabbing the butterfly, I force her hand into its gauzy innards. The sequins sparkle as she struggles against me. Her wrist no more than a butterfly wing in my hand, fluttering against the net. Tighter. The fluttering stops. Her bones knobby, hard against my skin. She slumps against my hip and I am ashamed. When I release her wrist, she stands quietly, looking at me.

She is not able to understand that I fight myself and I do not try to explain. She is not aware of the lies I tell for her and for me.

“Would you like some cake?” I ask her, smoothing her hair.

She avoids responding directly but moves nearer to me. “Let’s go home.”

I find myself perspiring, getting angry again at this girl who won’t try, who has inherited my weakness.

**Queen Anne’s Lace and Dandelions**

If my mother finds out what I’m doing, she’ll have conniptions. (I can just hear her. “I don’t work all day so you can ride the bus and go alone to places like that.” The sad look.) She doesn’t approve of my going to the shopping malls either, but says since I’m with friends, nothing really bad can happen. But after a winter of bumming around shopping malls, I need something to get me out of my rut.

I first notice it in the “Where to Go, What to Do” column of the newspaper. Maybe it’s the strange-sounding food— baklava, spinach pie, grape leaves. Or the picture of the belly dancer with all her spangles. Whatever it is, I know I have to go to Greektown.

Sometimes things hit me like that. No matter what, I have to do them. Nothing else matters. Not even my mother’s voice or her finger as she points to a newspaper article about a mugging on our old street. We moved out to Westland when I was in the first grade. But I do remember my mother saying she’d never go back to Detroit, not even if her life depended on it. And she never has, not even to visit old friends.

But Detroit doesn’t worry me. The only thing I worry about is catching the express bus. I keep checking the paper where I’ve written the directions. The lady at the bus company kept muttering something about Grand Circus. I kept telling her I wanted to go to Greektown, not a circus. When I asked her to repeat the directions for the third time, she hung up. Luckily, I got a nicer lady the sec­ond time I called. She even spelled out all the street names. (Mother voice: Don’t talk to strangers.”)

The bus is crowded and the man next to me keeps hitting my shoulder with his newspaper every time he turns a page. I clear my throat and my voice sounds squeaky when I ask him if we’re almost downtown. He looks over his glasses and shakes his head. I ask him if he’s ever been to Greek­town. He ignores me.

To make sure the bus driver knows, I pull the cord twice and get off in front of Hudson’s. I remember coming here with my mother to see Santa Claus and getting lost behind some racks of winter coats. It’s tough when you’re small and can’t see over things.

I make my two transfers okay and walk over three blocks like the woman at the bus company told me. And there it is: Greektown. Not that I expected a whole lot, but I thought there’d be some­thing besides a bunch of buildings. Maybe the dancers only come out at night. Maybe they’re all inside someplace drinking wine, waiting.

At least I can eat some of the food. I sit at a table in a hot bakery and eat baklava, the honey dripping through my fingers. The clerk, who’s about my age, asks me if I’m from out-of-town, says they get a lot of tourists in the summer. I tell her I am, that I’m from Texas, that my parents are next door looking at vases. (Mother voice: “Is the truth so bad?”)

The clerk says her name is Maria, says I don’t sound like I’m from Texas. I tell her I just moved there, and I try to slow down my speech, draw out my vowels. I usually pretend I’m in a class play at times like this. I sit straighter in the chair, dab at the corner of my mouth with my napkin—a real southern belle. She says she used to have a Greek accent because her parents still speak Greek at home. Says she went to speech therapy to get rid of it. I tell her that if I had a Greek accent, I’d never want to lose it. She laughs.

I’m so busy looking at the Greek crosses and trying on blouses, I forget the time. By the time I remember, it’s almost too late. Even though I hate rushing things, I run to catch the buses, to make my connections.

I’m all out of breath by the time my mother walks in the door. Maybe she’s too tired to ask me much or to notice the Texas drawl I’ve been practicing on people all day.

I tell her the gang and I went shopping. She says I should do something more constructive with my time. She rattles off a list of chores for me to do tomorrow and I write them down. I can do most of them tonight while she takes a nap. That’ll leave the day free for Greektown. There’s something about the place that’s gotten into my blood.

After a week of hanging around Trapper’s Alley, I’m now one of the regular crazies. We’re all here today. Prometheus with his magic torch that joins glass and metal. Appollo drawing her circles and filling them in with yellows and oranges. Mr. Antilopolis selling popcorn from his red and white cart. The old woman playing the piano, drinking beer from a paper cup. And all the rest who open their suitcases and sell coin bracelets to the tourists who come to look and sometimes buy.

I’m sitting on the concrete watching the old woman play when I first notice him. His eyes move from my bare toes, to my red halter, my lips, and back again. He’s not like other guys I know, not with the eagle tattoo on his right arm, the wavy hair, the dark eyes that pin me against the brick wall. I tug at my white shorts and smile, wondering if I remembered to put on lipstick. When he flips over the wooden Coke crate and sits next to me, I can’t think of anything to say. (Mother whispers in my ear: “Ignore him.”)

Doesn’t matter, though, because he’s full of wisecracks about the old woman. Says she danced so long in her white satin dress it turned yellow. Says those dangling rhinestone earrings gave her a tin ear. Says lots of things that make me laugh.

Suddenly, the old woman stops playing and pulls on elbow-length, white gloves. She walks over to us and screams in Greek at the boy beside me. He screams back in Greek. She pokes a gloved finger against his chest and says more words before spitting on the ground beside him. He gets up and kicks the Coke crate. He goes, still shouting.

I can’t understand any of it. She must really be crazy. We weren’t doing anything. But she stands above me, muttering. She crosses herself and pulls me up. She’s taller than I thought and big­ger. My stomach feels funny. Probably because I didn’t eat breakfast. (Mother: “Don’t I beg you to eat right?”) After all, no old woman can scare me. Not even when she reminds me of one of the witches in *Macbeth*. I picture her stirring her brew, chanting the magic words.

With my free hand, I try to pry her fingers from my arm. I shout at her to let me go. I shout to Mr. Antilopolis for help but he shakes his head. Prometheus doesn’t even lift his goggles. (Mother rings her hands.)

The old woman pushes me down on the piano bench and sits beside me. I stand up. She pulls me down again. My legs are warm against her satin dress.

She asks me if I play and, when I shake my head, she says, “I will teach you.”

Up close, she looks at least ninety. As she slowly peels down the gloves and pulls at the fingers one by one, I tell her I don’t want to learn. I only want to talk to the guy she chased away.

In English, the old woman says the boy is no good. Says she knows him like she’d know her own son if she had one. Says Greek girls won’t be seen with him. That one is dangerous. Knew it when he had that eagle put on, she says more to herself than to me. Says not to ever trust boys with tattoos. Bad sign, she says. (Mother nods her head in agreement.)

It’s easy to peg the old woman. Probably a stripper who read palms and played the piano dur­ing intermissions years ago. Sometimes I think I have E.S.P. the way I can just guess people’s jobs and problems. I do it to pass the time on the buss or in my fourth-hour Geometry class.

“Like this,” the old woman says, arching her hands and stretching her fingers. “Get the feel of it. Let it grab you here,” and she taps her chest. “You try it.”

I shake my hands, stand up and bow to Mr. Antilopolis. Then, with my fists, I pound at the keys. The sound is too loud, even for me. (Mother shouts: “You want to go deaf?”)

“So much anger,” the old woman says, taking a drink from her paper cup, rolling it around in her mouth. “In the old country, there was a story about a girl like you. She breathed in everyone else’s anger; it was the gods’ way of testing her. But she did not know how to get it all out again. She tried coughing, hanging upside down from the rafters in the barn. She tried kissing and drinking buckets of water to drown the anger. She tried to cry it out until there were no more tears. But she couldn’t stop the anger from growing. Finally, she grew so big with all her anger that she floated into the sky and became a thundercloud.”

Old people telling stories always makes me laugh. My grandma, before she died last year, used to talk about the witch woman who made cures and love potions. Grandma said she drank something once, made special for her by the witch woman and that’s how she met my grandpa. Even my mother would laugh when she told that one.

I picture myself getting fatter and fatter. My clothes split at the seams. A fat thundercloud with blonde hair. I rain on a watermelon-eating contest. I laugh so hard I can’t catch my breath.

The old woman passes me her paper cup and I take a drink. I gag and spit the warm beer on the concrete.

“Try again,” the old woman says, lifting my hands to the keys. “Easy,” she urges as I press the ivory. “That’s it.”

I sway with the old woman as her shoulder leans into mine and she begins to sing. I play all the wrong notes. It sounds lousy. But I’ve got the beat and sing “Ninety-Nine Barrels of Beer on the Wall.” I’m surprised to hear her join in. Then Mr. Antilopolis, with a deep voice that loses count of the barrels.

Tourists stop to watch, to sing. I get to laughing and hugging the old woman. The tourists drop coins in the paper cup. Beer splashes against the sides. Watchers move on, still humming the tune.

Taking the coins from the cup, the old woman wipes each one on a Kleenex, drops it into her satin shoe, and finishes the beer in the cup.

She plays songs I’ve never heard. Most of them are about lost lovers, but the one I like best is “Angels of the Wind.” It’s about two young lovers who run away together and, when they die, they ride the wind across the canyons and sing to each other.

“I know,” the old woman says. “Watch.” She alternates her feet on the pedals and plays two black keys, four white keys. Over and over. Faster and faster. “You try it,” she says.

I scoot over so my feet can reach the pedals and hold my hands like she showed me earlier. The pattern is easy but sometimes I get confused and hit three black keys. (Mother, proudly: “Give it your best.”)

The old woman bobs her head until I’ve got the rhythm. Stands. Takes a lace-edged hand­kerchief from her low-cut dress. Waves the handkerchief in circles above her head. Twirls.

I keep playing. The old woman takes Mr. Antilopolis’ hand, making him drop a bag of pop­corn he’s handing to a tourist.

“Don’t worry. The pigeons will eat it,” the old woman says.

Appollo wipes her hands on her smock and takes Mr. Antilopolis’ other hand. The growing line grabs a man from the crowd. Then Prometheus, who pushes up his goggles and turns off the torch. I play faster. The line swerves in between the tourists, picks up more people. The old woman waves the handkerchief and sings. Directs them all to sing. Leads up one side of the alley, down the other. Someone knocks over a garbage can.

The old woman collapses next to me on the piano bench, wipes her forehead with the hand­kerchief, tucks it back inside her dress.

“Good. Very good,” the old woman says. Her rhinestone earrings shine. Maybe they’re really diamonds that some dark-haired man gave her when she was a stripper.

She takes my hand like a little kid’s and leads me through an alley door, into a bar, up to the counter where an old man is washing glasses. She sits on a tall stool and motions toward the one next to her. I sit down.

“What’ll it be, diamond girl?” the old man asks.

Taking money from her shoe, she orders a beer for herself and a Coke for me. She’s blushing.

The old man sets our drinks on the counter, picks up her hand, raises it to his lips. To me he says, “This one’s a beauty, eh?”

They talk in Greek and I look around at the old men sitting at the tables, playing checkers, talking. Reminds me of the time I visited my great aunt in an old folks’ home. Kind of depressing to think of all the old people in the world just sitting around, waiting to die. (Mother: “Have you no respect?”)

“Where are all the kids?” I ask the old woman.

“Gone,” says the old woman. Says the young have to leave sometime. In the end, they come back, she says.

I tell the old woman I have to go. My mother will ask me tons of questions if I’m not there when she gets home.

The old men do not look up from their checkers and the old woman is talking to the man behind the bar. No one says goodbye.

On the bus ride home, I watch the street names, trying to remember where I used to live. Three times, I play the game where I have to find all the letters in the alphabet on street signs. Each time, it takes me longer, so I start counting out-of-town license plates. I look down into cars and try to guess where people are going. Sometimes, if there are kids in the back seat, I wave and they wave back.

At a light, I see a guy lean down and kiss the girl beside him. I pretend I’m the girl Jim used to kiss me like that this spring. But we broke up just as school ended and it was too late to find a boyfriend for the summer.

When I walk down our street, I always look toward the open screen doors and picture windows. If I see someone moving around in the house, I feel good.

I unlock our front door and start the potatoes and pork chops my mother has left out for dinner. I’m in the shower by the time my mother gets home. She tells me to hurry up; the food’s on the table.

Buttering her bread, she tells me about the woman who bought tiger-striped cotton to make her husband pajamas. “Can you imagine,” mother says, “what her husband will look like in four yards of tiger stripes?”

Today is one of her good days. By now, I can tell the difference. On bad days, she talks about how her legs hurt, how her boss schedules her for weekends because he has something against her, how the new girl messed up a whole bolt of velvet, how she’s about to quit and find another job.

But tonight, she says she might be able to get me a part-time job there this winter. That way I can have some extra money for school clothes. Says she knows how important that is to a girl.

We’re eating the chocolate chip cookies we made Sunday night when I remember all those fancy things my mother used to make for dinner before my father went away. I remember how I used to hate the stuff but she’d smile and say, “Try it. You’ll never know unless you try it.”

Sometimes I worry about my mother because she doesn’t smile like that much anymore. She doesn’t clip food recipes from the paper and doesn’t even take cookbooks out of the library.

I get her old cookbook from the shelf in the kitchen and we look through it for Greek recipes.

“How about kidney pie?” Mother asks.

I make dying sounds. “Eat kidneys? That’s disgusting,” I say.

While we’re doing dishes, I tell my mother she should go out more, have some fun. She says I sound like a mother. She lifts her hand out of the dishpan and blows soap bubbles my way. I put my hand in the water and flick my fingers at her. She dips in both her hands and gets me back.

While we’re watching television, the detective tries to trap the killer in a disco bar. My mother says the dancers are more disgusting than kidney pie. I get up and do a few steps, tell her I’ll show her how. She says she’s too old. Her body won’t move that way anymore. I tell her she really should get out more. She says it’s my bedtime.

It’s really a hot day and all the way to Greektown, I worry about my mother, wonder if she’s happy. Sometimes I pretend my father comes back and we’re all at the dinner table, laughing.

I sit on the piano bench next to the old woman who keeps wiping the sweat from her eyes. Finally, she takes me to her apartment where she has a fan. She clicks it on and stands in front of it, lifting her satin dress to cool her legs.

The old woman tells me to get a Coke from the fridge and to bring her a beer. In the fridge, I find three cans of beer, a hunk of cheese, a box of cereal, wilted lettuce. No Coke.

She hollers from the other room for me to watch out for the dish on the floor. Says she likes to put something in it for the stray cats now and then. Says she owned a parakeet once but it flew out a window she’d forgotten to close. That’s why there’s a bird cage in the living room with no bird, she says. Says to help myself to something to eat if I’m hungry. I tell her I’m not hungry and pour her beer into a glass. (Mother: “Make sure it’s clean.”) I fill a jelly glass with water.

The old woman takes the beer and looks at my water. “Watching your figure, I see.” Rubbing her hands over her wide hips, “Used to be more careful myself, especially when I was on the stage.” Warns me never to develop a taste for beer. Says it was an Irishman who got her drinking beer. Warns me against Irishmen.

She wants me to see everything in her apartment and lifts the curtains that block the bedroom from the living room. “Made them myself,” she says, but I see a worn tag down at the bottom. She shows me the satin dresses in the closet, old and musty like the furniture. Says she feels guilty having so many clothes. Then she holds up a rhinestone necklace from the cluttered bedside table, places it against her satin chest. She says she saves it for special occasions. Then she shows me a bouquet of Queen Anne’s Lace and dandelions she picked behind the Grecian Urn. (Mother, remembering: “Reminds me of the bouquets you used to bring me.”)

Leading the way back into the living room, she tells me to sit down and cool off. I flop down on the couch, my head against the armrest. The old woman just keeps talking and showing me things. Takes a photograph from a three-legged table and says it’s her with her father in Greece. Lived there until she was ten. She shows me another picture of a girl in an organdy dress, a bow in her hair. Says it was taken shortly after they moved here. I looked at the picture, then at the old woman. I can’t imagine ever being that old.

The old woman tells me about her mother. Says all the men in town wanted to marry her mother. Even after they came here, men turned to watch her mother, helped her carry groceries up to the apartment. That is, until her father put his foot down. The old woman tucks a thin strand of yellow hair behind her ear and pinches her cheeks to give them color. “Even my father said I got my mother’s looks,” she says. I remember my father telling me the same thing the night of the Spring Fling.

Now I’d be the first to admit that the old woman isn’t what anyone would call pretty, but in her own way she looks nice. And, now that I’ve had time to think about it, she must be younger than ninety.

I find myself telling her about my mother. About how she works so hard, how she’s tired all the time. How sometimes I get so mad at her, I decide to never tell her anything. Then, afterwards, I feel bad. I tell her how last night my mother came home in a bad mood and got mad at me for playing the radio so loud. Then she screamed about how I have a bad attitude and threw my socks under the bed instead of in the hamper. (Mother winces: “And what if I tell my friends everything you say?”)

“In the old country, we had a story about the ugly duckling who grew into a beautiful swan.” The old woman props her feet on the couch and tells the story I’ve heard a hundred times before. When my mother told it, she made up different voices for all the ducks.

When the old woman gets to rambling like this with her stories, I know she’s tired. Usually I listen to two or three and tell her I have to get home. Then she tells the story about a girl who’s always in a hurry. It’s a funny one where the girl turns into a clock or ends up running on quicksand. We both laugh and I leave.

I stop in at the bakery to talk to Maria. We’ve gotten to be good friends and usually check out all the boys who walk by. Some come in and talk for a while. But she doesn’t know the guy with the tattoo and I’ve never seen him again.

Maria has me cutting slices of baklava as she kneads dough. Once she let me make baklava, kept shouting directions and handing me things to put in. But I must have forgotten something because it turned out a runny mess and we had to throw it away.

The bell rings. Maria wipes her hands on her apron and goes out front. When she comes back, she asks me if I still hang out in Trapper’s Alley, if I still see the old woman.

There’s something in the way she says it I don’t like. I pretend not to hear.

“That old woman is crazy, you know,” Maria says. She’s a liar, too. Bet she told you how she was born in Greece,” Maria laughs like she’s been saving it up for a long time. She tells me that every­one knows the old woman was really born on the east side of Detroit, knows she worked for years at that old hotel on Third Street. “Everyone knows it. She’s no more Greek than you are.”

I tell Maria to shut up and leave before I’ve even finished cutting the second pan of baklava.

My mother comes home in a rotten mood and when I mention her birthday, she tells me to forget it. Says she’s getting to old to have birthdays. But ever since I was a little kid, I liked birthdays. Anyone’s birthday.

When I tell my mother not to plan anything for Saturday, she gets that funny look mothers get when their kids do something nice. She tries to guess, threatens to tickle me until I tell.

Saturday comes. I shake my mother awake, hand her the tray with toast and coffee. She starts crying. I tell her she looks sixteen and she laughs.

My mother says all she wants to do is sleep all day, but I tell her I’m taking her on a bus some­where for her birthday surprise. “I’ve got big plans for you,” I say.

My mother says it’s been ages since she was on a bus. I get a little nervous when we enter Detroit. But my mother doesn’t say anything about it. She’s just looking out the window and telling me how everything’s changed.

When we get to Greektown, she says it’s like another world. I buy her a piece of baklava.

The old woman is in on the surprise. She’s watching for us and winks when she sees us in the crowd. She stands up, pulls on her white gloves, smoothing them to the elbow.

“That old woman could have a stroke,” mother says. “All those heavy clothes in this heat.” She shakes her head.

The old woman takes my hand, leads me to the piano. I play. The old woman dances, alone at first. Then, she starts the line, pulls my mother from the tourists. Mr. Antilopolis takes my mother’s hand. I hear my mother protest, her words louder than the music. Finally, her laughter. In the end, my mother and the old woman sit next to me on the piano bench.

To the old woman, my mother says, “I don’t know how you do it. Teach me your secret.” My mother gasps for breath, takes the old woman’s hand. To me, she says, “And when did you learn to play the piano?”

“I will teach you to play,” the old woman says to my mother.

My mother laughs, argues, but the old woman soon has her playing. Nothing fancy, of course, but playing all the same.

When my mother gets tired of playing, the old woman kisses her on both cheeks. I can tell my mother’s embarrassed by the way she picks at her nails; she does that when she doesn’t know what to say or do.

“My mother’s thirty-five today,” I tell the old woman.

“So young,” the old woman says, taking my mother’s face between her hands. “But you should get out in the sun more. You’re so pale. In Greece, young women like you danced every day under the sun.”

My mother moves closer to the old woman, puts her feet on the pedals, begins to play notes on the high keys.

“So young to have such a grown-up daughter,” the old woman says after drinking beer from her paper cup. She smooths the satin material over her thighs. “If I had a daughter, I’d want her to be like yours.”

My mother tells the old woman how I throw my clothes on the floor, how I ran down the street naked when I was three.

The old woman laughs and tells my mother about the Greek boy with the tattoo. They’re still talking about me when I slide off the piano bench and leave.

I come back with two paper cups of beer and a bouquet of Queen Anne’s Lace and dandeli­ons. I hand each of them part of the bouquet.

“Beer is good for living things,” the old woman says, putting the bouquet in the cup. Mother does the same.

I link arms with theirs and lead them through the back door of the Grecian Urn. As we sit at the table, my mother looks at me like she does when I forget to tell her where I’m going. The she looks at the old woman and says, “It’s embarrassing, but I didn’t get your name.” She looks at me again, and I realize I don’t know the old woman’s name either.

“Call me Yaya,” she says, flicking a small spider off the Queen Anne’s Lace. That’s Greek for grandma.” She sets her cup in the middle of the table, places my mother’s beside it. “There. Reminds me of the time I was singing with Frankie on tour. He picked a rose from the Queen’s garden and put it behind my ear. Completely forgot about the thorns until I started yelling.” She tucks her slip strap back under the white satin.

“Who’s Frankie?” I ask.

The woman tells me the young forget too fast. My mother agrees.

The old woman snaps off a Queen Anne’s Lace and pins it in my mother’s hair. “For the birthday girl.”

My mother says she hasn’t had flowers in her hair since her wedding day when she wore a wreath of baby’s breath.

I think of how she looks in her wedding pictures, standing next to my father in his tuxedo. “Remember how you always told me to wash my hands when I looked at those pictures?” I ask my mother. “I used to think you were a fairy princess and someday we’d all go back to your castle. Remember?”

My mother laughs like she did in the old days. “How could I forget? You know I saved my wedding dress for you to wear someday, if you want to.”

I’m surprised. She’d never told me she saved it; I never thought of her as sentimental. After all, she’s always teasing me about saving ticket stubs and shells from long-ago vacations, tells me to clean up all the clutter.

“Enjoy,” the waiter says as he sets the spinach pie and salad on the table.

The old woman waves a piece of cheese on her fork and says, “Feta cheese. It makes you sexy, or so my father always said. Enjoy.” She winks at my mother and leans over and takes the cheese from my salad. “You’re too young to worry about that.”

The old woman invites us to her apartment to see her new parakeet that likes beer. Says she bought a female because they sing prettier. “This one got loose in the store and took a whole day to catch. Knew right then it was the one for me,” the old woman says, picking up her bouquet from the table.

After we tell her we’d like to but we have to go, she kisses us and I feel her heart beat under my cheek as she hugs me first, then my mother.

“Come back next week to see Aphrodite. That’s what I named her.” My mother and I looked at her. “The parakeet I was telling you about. I’ll make sure she doesn’t get loose before then,” the old woman says.

We promise we’ll come, and I tell her I’ll even bring some beer.

The old woman waves at us until we turn the corner.

**Raspberry Surprise**

It isn’t that I’m not appreciated. It’s just that like the early morning newspaper, I’m missed more when I’m feeling unappreciated. I play games with myself: I wonder what would happen if I were to go back to school, or stay in bed all day, or get a job, or run away. The running away is the best game because I predict what I’ll pack. Sometimes I leave with only the clothes I’m wearing. Some­times I buy a whole new wardrobe. Always I take the car. Always the family is frantic. Tom is pictured telling the police that I am a good wife, too dependable to run away. And always Tom looks puzzled when the police tell him thousands of wives run away each year.

But today I’m tired of these games and I need something more solid. I need to sit at the kitchen table with my cup of coffee and actually read the newspaper. It’s a small rebellion, perhaps, but I’m not silently planning the day’s schedule, or worrying about the dirty dishes crusting over with oatmeal, or rushing through to the grocery ads so I can plan my shopping. I just sit here sipping my coffee, pulling my stained robe closer, and reading.

I don’t feel angry at the slender models who wear the latest hair styles. I don’t promise myself I’ll go on a diet, or get my hair cut, or try a new shade of lipstick. I don’t even cut out any recipes although some, especially the raspberry surprise cookies, look good. Maybe it’s that my first babysitter is getting married. Maybe it’s that Julie next door told me yesterday she is getting a divorce. Or maybe it’s the phone call this morning when I promised the efficient voice that I’d be a room mother again next year. Or it could be my husband’s talk about the efficient new secretary. All I know is that I’ve been feeling out of place recently, as if I didn’t belong anywhere. The reason or reasons really don’t matter.

What does matter is the inconspicuous announcement about a women’s consciousness raising group that is meeting tonight at the local community college. I’m not sure what it is about, but I do know my consciousness needs raising, at least beyond the level of dirty dishes.

I lift the phone receiver from its hook on the wall and feel the oatmeal stickiness from when I answered it quickly this morning. I punch out the number, listen to the busy tone for a while, and then quickly push all the correct buttons again before I can change my mind. This time it rings and on the second ring is answered by a young, confused-sounding voice. Somehow, this gives me comfort.

“Woman’s Center. May I help you?”

“I’m calling about the meeting tonight of the consciousness raising group.” I hope I don’t sound nervous or incompetent. I am glad she can’t see me as we talk.

“Yes?”

She sounds rushed, and I comment on it. She sighs and complains briefly about all the calls. She says the female caller before me, who just told her off for giving women the wrong ideas, had said a woman’s place is in the home. I wonder if the caller is right, but I don’t say anything.

“Can you believe it?” the telephone voice says. “We even have to fight our own. Maybe they’re just scared.” Her voice sounds uncertain.

“Maybe,” I agree and hope she can’t detect the fear in my voice. I continue quickly, “Anyway, I just wanted to check about registration.”

“I’ll take your name, and then you just sign in tonight.”

“Veronica Vale,” I lie. With a name like that I could be a movie star or a newspaper writer, someone whose name, when it appears in print, looks good.

She gives me directions before we hang up. I had meant to ask her what they do at the meet­ings, but there hadn’t seemed to be a right time to ask. I glance at the clock and know I have to rush through the chores if I am to be ready in time to go.

First I call Cathy, the woman across the street, to ask if her oldest daughter can babysit until Tom gets home. She thinks I have a doctor’s appointment because she knows Tom likes me home for dinner. It seems easier to agree with her and to construct a story about a badly infected throat. She sympathizes and says her daughter will babysit.

Although I don’t usually lie, both of the ones today are necessary and seem to add to the excitement. For Cathy is one of those efficient women who makes the rest of us all feel inept. She always looks at me sympathetically whenever I forget and complain about the kids, or housework, or feeling tied down. I know she wants to help me and I don’t want to give her the chance of making me doubt my decision to go tonight.

Ironically, I spend the whole afternoon cleaning and straightening and preparing a dinner that the babysitter can just heat up and have ready for Tom. At the same time, I know the house will be messed up when I get home, the kids will be tired and whining, and Tom will be irritated I’ve been gone so long. I feel the consuming and all too familiar resentment.

I leave Tom a note telling him I am at a meeting and that I’ll be home late. No specific time, just late.

I look at my pantsuit in the mirror and decide it will do. And, as I leave the house, unlatching the back door for the babysitter, I think how it is like going for a doctor’s appointment. I am always afraid I won’t be able to explain the symptoms clearly enough, or, worse yet, he won’t find anything wrong with me. And what if that happens at the meeting? What if we all have the same symptoms, and there is nothing wrong? What if it’s normal to hurt, to cry out in pain? What if we are told it’s all in our minds?

But, like a doctor’s appointment, I have to go through with it, I tell myself as I park the station wagon and enter the building. I find the room with no trouble. When I look in and see other women who look like the women at last week’s P.T.A. meeting, I feel an immediate affection for them.

I turn to the woman at the desk next to the door. The woman smiles encouragingly, and I wonder if it is the same one I spoke to on the phone this morning.

“Name, please.”

“Veronica Vale,” I lie again. I watch as she writes the name I’ve chosen for myself. It flows across the paper and gives me confidence.

I walk into the crowded room and find a seat in the semicircle. The woman next to me is twist­ing the clasp on her purse. I smile at her and she leans over to me and confesses she hasn’t been to a consciousness raising group before and isn’t sure why she’s here tonight. When I tell her that I feel the same way, she asks my name. I hesitate, confess that my name is Janet, and start to giggle.

She looks puzzled, but I don’t know how to explain that sudden urge to deceive, to be glamor­ous. The meeting starts and I settle back to listen.

The speaker stays seated toward the front of the semicircle. Only her hands are in constant motion as she explains that last year she started feeling depressed and had attended one of these meet­ings. With the other members of the group, she probed her dissatisfaction and had come to see her­self differently. Because the group helped her, she took training to become a group leader.

Her right arm gestures in a half arc drawing the women closer to her as she confides, “But I began as some of you are beginning, not quite sure why I attended the first meeting. In fact, for the first meeting, I told my husband I was going to a meeting for Girl Scout leaders.” I hear the soft laugh­ter of others who had lied tonight. And I know I’m not alone.

The leader calls off the names. I don’t answer when she calls Veronica Vale. It sounds silly when she says it out loud. Then the group leader asks if anyone’s name is not on the list. I give her my name, Janet Monroe.

Next we play a game. We must pretend that we’re someone else and choose one thing that person would have done today that we did not do. I choose to be Cathy, the woman who lives across the street. I have no doubt that she would have baked the raspberry surprise cookies today.

The leader asks me to pull my chair into the middle of the semicircle. She remembers me because my name wasn’t on the list, and I think she suspects why.

I’m nervous, but I do as she asks. She pulls her chair out next to mine and asks who I’ve chosen to be. I tell her briefly about Cathy, the perfect wife and mother.

The leader instructs me to speak as my neighbor would and answer all questions as she would. If not in real life, at least in a game I get to be the woman I’m so jealous of.

“Why did you waste time baking cookies today?” the leader asks.

I’m startled for a moment and then remember it’s a game. I play along. “It only took an hour, and I know the children would enjoy them when they got home from school.”

“But you could have been reading a book or taking a nap,” the leader says. “The children will eat those cookies, and what will you have got for your time and effort?”

“But I like the children to be happy. That gives me pleasure. There’ll be time enough for me when the children are grown.” I’m proud of my response.

“But how do you know there will be any you when the children are grown?”

If I were really Cathy, I would know what to say. But I’m not Cathy, and I’m stuck for an answer.

The group discusses the last question and then I exchange places with another woman who tells about the person she’s pretending to be. We only get halfway through the semicircle when it’s time for the meeting to end. I feel comfortable with these women and know I’ll be back next week.

It’s only seven o’clock and I’ve still got time to try the raspberry surprise cookies, which will probably make me ill. I decide to tell Tom about the meeting. In fact, I’ll even tell him about Veronica Vale. It’ll be good for a laugh.

**Real Enough**

Miriam is cleaning her closets. She throws out the old stuff, saves some for Goodwill.

On the top shelf in the back, she finds her blue beret under her summer straw hat. She shakes off the dust and tries it on.

In the mirror, she sees. The blue has faded. Her husband, daughters, and grandchildren watch her from their silver frames on the dresser.

Thick carpeting shuffles her steps on the stairs. Voices play in her head, a musical jewelry box. Anyone can lift the lid, watch her twirl. But the gears have rusted, voices sound hoarse.

Her husband’s voice from the bedroom, looking for socks. Her children’s voices crying for night feedings. Older now and from the living room, wanting to know if dinner is on the table. Grand­children, asking for presents. Other voices from other rooms. They’re glad to meet the mother of, wife of. They all forget her name.

Lately, she forgets the names of neighbors. Forgets she cleaned the oven yesterday. At fifty-nine, she reads articles on senility and refuses senior citizen discounts. Lately, she’s taken to reading the classifieds.

Her husband chides, “Lucky for you. You never had to work.”

Miriam pulls last night’s newspaper from the trash can under the sink. She cuts out an ad she first noticed two weeks ago when she wrapped chicken bones. Just an ordinary ad. “We find jobs for people,” it said. In small letters, the name of an employment agency and an address. Tomorrow they can find a job for her.

Next morning. She stands with her back against the metal bus stop sign. When the bus opens its doors, she rummages in her purse for change. She is on the second step when the driver takes off. She grabs the pole and hands him a dollar. He points to a sign above his head: Correct change only. They make another stop. People rush at her from behind. She folds the dollar bill and stuffs it into the fare box.

Holding onto the seats, she stumbles to the back, finds a seat over the motor. After a while, she bounces with the bus, rocked by a mother with hard, yellow arms.

Miriam opens her purse and pulls out the ad. The clean black strokes against the white. The same words, no matter how often she checks.

A man squeezes into the aisle seat next to her. She knows he’s reading the ad in her hand. Quickly, she stuffs it into her purse. His tweed wool suit is worn and out of style. He is old.

His right hand moves in his pocket. Miriam cannot turn her eyes away. She bites the side of her cheek. The man withdraws a small penknife. She gasps.

Waving the knife in Miriam’s direction, he says, “You okay, lady? You look like you’re going to be sick.” Reaching across her, the knife still in his hand, he raises the window.

He watches Miriam as he takes a small block of wood from his pocket. Both hands are visible now. They’re larger than she expected. She follows their movements.

When the bus jerks to a stop, the man says without looking up, “This is where you’re sup­posed to get off. Just walk back one block. It’s the grey building across the street.”

Miriam brushes past his legs, never doubting his words.

She spends an hour filling out forms, using words where she can and ink lines where she can’t. The girl behind the desk takes her papers, tells her to come back tomorrow for the interview. Miriam pushes open the heavy glass door. The ball jangles her departure.

The rest of the afternoon, Miriam shops but buys nothing. She knows she must leave herself enough time to get dinner ready before her husband gets home. Every day they eat at 5:30. Even on vacations they stop what they’re doing and eat.

On the way home. She sinks into the seat on the bus, leans against the window and closes her eyes. She feels someone slide into the seat next to her and is depressed like some nights when her husband lies down beside her.

It is the man of the morning working with his penknife, scraping away slivers of wood. Although his hands never stop, his back stiffens. Miriam knows he recognizes her.

“Thought you were sleeping,” he says without looking up. Says it in the same tone Miriam’s husband uses when he comes to bed after reading late. She never answers then and she doesn’t answer now.

“Get your job?” he asks. “Don’t know why you want a job. Doesn’t look like you’re starving.”

Miriam pulls in her stomach and looks away. Looks under the window where school children have scratched their names and dates into green paint. Scraggly lines recording every bounce.

He nudges her arm. Says something that sounds like “sorry.” It may be just the sound of his shoes against the metal floor.

Avoiding his eyes, she looks at his hair, full and thick. Her husband is almost bald now. Even her hair is thinning. It no longer holds a curl.

“For your grandchildren,” he says as he drops the carving in her lap. “A bear. I used to hunt them when I was younger. Up in Canada.” And he pulls the bell and is gone.

In bed that night. Miriam wishes she had given back the bear, wonders if she should tell her sleeping husband about this afternoon.

It’s the same driver the next morning. Before the doors open she has the correct change in her hand. She’s practicing for the interview, making up questions she has a tough time answering. She moves toward a seat.

As the bus turns right, she grips the seat in front of her, feels the stickiness of other hands. Tired, she shuts her eyes against the Indian Summer glare. She smells familiar wool, knows the man of yesterday is sitting beside her.

Miriam opens her eyes, watches his penknife, an extra finger stroking the wood. “Don’t you ever make mistakes?”

“Nope. Can’t make a mistake ’cause I carve whatever turns out. Easier that way.”

“Another bear?” she asks.

Maybe. Maybe not. Once I made a whole wooden garden. Used to farm once. Down in Virginia.

Miriam sees his hands pulling out weeds, spading the soil, much as her hands move in her small garden. She drifts, content to have him beside her.

She wakes startled as he touches her elbow.

“Your stop,” he says.

Miriam makes sure her beret is in place as she enters the employment office. The girl behind the desk motions her forward, asks her to sign her name in a book filled with pages of other names. Miriam takes a seat. No one else waits with her.

When her name’s called, Miriam walks past the closed doors, searches for room 115. She finds it and knocks.

The woman behind the desk is younger than Miriam’s daughter, has a tan that hasn’t started to fade yet. The young woman smiles, nods her head. She writes down what Miriam says. In the end, she shakes Miriam’s hand.

On the way out, she passes a girl in a waitress uniform. She moves to the side, lets the girl pass.

Miriam walks through Hudson’s, stopping in the book department to read the first paragraphs of the best sellers and in cosmetics to squirt her wrists with a new fragrance. She waits until it’s time to go home again.

The man gets on at the stop after Miriam’s. Out the window she can see St. Matthews, built 1896. A work crew is sandblasting the bricks, replacing the crumbling mortar.

“There’s hope for us yet,” the old man chuckles, pointing to the church. “Get your job?”

“No,” Miriam says, picking lint from her sweater.

“Do you mind?”

She doesn’t answer, glances away to the man in red swim trunks laughing from an ad over Miriam’s head. He is applying a suntan lotion. Soon he’ll be replaced by a man with a muffler wrapped twice around his neck, offering to protect her from chapped lips.

The old man offers Miriam a chunk of wood. “You try it,” he says, laying the penknife in her hand.

“I can’t,” she says, wondering if the man has been drinking, wondering how he spends his afternoons.

“Just start shaving the parts that don’t seem right. It’ll come,” he says, folding his arms against his chest.

Miriam starts skinning the wood like a potato until the next layer shows through. Then she begins, timidly at first. She remembers the circus she carved long ago from Ivory soap—a monkey, ringmaster, even a small cage. One day she took the whole circus into the bath. Watched it float and melt.

The old man is gone when she looks up. She knows she’ll have to take the bus again, return the knife.

That night her husband is watching the news. Miriam cleans the handle of the knife until it shines and puts it back in her purse. Not feeling like doing needlepoint, she files and polishes her nails. Her mother used to tell her it was a pity she had her father’s hands. If they had been longer, more slender, her mother said, she might have played the piano better. Miriam always hated the piano, hated the way the music teacher said, “Stretch those fingers. Reach.”

The next morning. She watches the old man walk down the aisle toward her. She remembers other old men she watched from car windows. When he sits next to her, she hands him the knife. He examines it, puts it in his pocket.

He rubs his fingers over the torn armrest. “Nice hat,” he says, not looking at her.

She touches the beret, angles it more over her forehead. “You like it?”

“I used to own lots of clothes, a real dandy,” and he chuckles at some memory. He runs his fingers over his worn lapel. “But this here suitcoat’s been with me a long time.”

Miriam inhales deeply: the mustiness, the wood, the wool, even the fumes from the bus. But she can’t detect the sourness of the first day.

Watching the city move past her, Miriam tries to count the going-out-of-business sales. As the bus stops in front of Drop Inn, rocks hit metal below her window. She sees two children running as the bus driver shouts, shakes his fist.

The man beside her throws back his head and laughs, a raucous sound that fills the bus and turns heads. He touches Miriam’s arm. “Kids,” he says. “Always have to remind us they’re around.”

He hands Miriam the knife and wood. Silently, she sets to work, returning the knife only when she gets off at her stop.

The bus rides become routine. Her husband doesn’t notice the dust piling up around the house. Her children ask where she’s been lately when they try to call.

A cold morning in December. Miriam shivers as she waits for the bus. When it comes, she’s glad of its headlights in the morning darkness.

The old man is already on the bus. He has saved the window seat and she hurries to claim it.

When seated, she opens her purse and hands him the carving she finished last night after her husband was asleep.

The man turns the carving in his hands, rubs his thumb over the surface. “I knew you had good hands for this,” he says, dropping the carving into his inside coat pocket.

From time to time Miriam looks at the small pocket bulge.

“I got on at the first stop today,” the man says. “The driver was in getting coffee and left the bus idling.”

Miriam thinks about sitting on the bus alone.

“I could’ve just driven it away, the man says, carving his rhythmic laugh into the wood.

“That would be nice. But you’d get in trouble.” After some thought, she says, “Wonder how far you’d get before they stopped you.”

“They wouldn’t bother with an old man like me.”

“They’d want the bus back.”

“They’d have to stop me first.”

Miriam pictures it. Police cars, speed, people left waiting under metal signs, shifting gears, the old man’s laugh.

“Your stop,” the man says.

She needs to sit down someplace and think. She has seen the Greyhound Terminal but never had a reason to go there before.

Now she walks five blocks over. She sits on one of the long benches in the terminal eating an egg salad sandwich she bought from the machines. People come and go, alone and with others, carry­ing suitcases or magazines, studying the departure and arrival signs, moving through turnstiles, going places.

Back on the city bus, headed home. Miriam watches the old man swaying, sees the bulge still in his pocket. He looks younger.

When he’s settled and carving again, she says, “I’ve never been to Canada to hunt bears.”

“You could do it,” he says. “Even now,” and his voice trails off as he concentrates, moving his right hand faster, more sure.

He folds the penknife, puts it in his pocket, and hands the carving to Miriam. “For you,” he says.

After pulling the bell cord, the man stands up, leans over to Miriam and whispers so quietly and quickly she almost misses the words, “Tomorrow. Be ready. We’ll go hunt bears in Canada.”

Miriam is at the bus stop early the next morning. She wears heavy boots and mittens. She is ready. She watches the bus plow through traffic like an ice cutter. It comes to a full stop before the doors swing outward. The everyday driver motions her on.

Although Miriam leans forward at each stop and wipes the steam from the window, the old man does not appear. She hopes he isn’t ill, hopes he hasn’t gone without her.

For the next two weeks she rides the bus alone, saves his aisle seat. She remembers asking him once if he really ever hunted bears in Canada. He said maybe he had and maybe he hadn’t. He told her about flying a plane, shipping out on a freighter, working on the assembly line. Said whatever he hadn’t done for real, he dreamed of doing and that was real enough.

Sometime during the third week alone, Miriam gives up on seeing the old man. She settles easily enough into cleaning house during the day and doing her needlepoint in the evenings.

Mid-afternoon in May. All day Miriam is raking up the winter leaves, clipping the dead branches. She wants to get the roses in early.

But she grows tired. Wants to take a shower, get into some other clothes.

She is changing into her favorite dress. There, back on her closet shelf, she sees the blue beret. She puts it on. It’s been a while, she tells herself. But just maybe she’ll run into the old man, she thinks as she locks up the house.

The bus is on schedule. She boards and takes her usual window seat. At the next stop, a heavy-set lady pushes in beside her, brown paper bags erupting in her arms and flowing into Miriam’s lap.

“Lordy, it’s been a lost day,” the lady says as Miriam helps her wedge a shopping bag between the seats. “A gardener, I see. I can tell a lot about people from their hands.”

Miriam looks at her hands, at the soil ground under the nails, into the chapped corners. “Just some rose bushes back by the garage,” she says.

“Some people have green thumbs,” the lady says as she takes off her shoes and massages her feet. “These feet of mine sure aren’t good for much anymore.”

“Used to own a nursery once,” Miriam says. “Up in Canada. Sturdiest flowers you ever saw.”

“I can’t grow anything, anything that lives for long,” the lady says. Too tired to fuss with plants after waiting on people all day long.”

The lady rummages in the bag at her feet and pulls out a bag of chocolate-covered raisins. She offers some to Miriam. “Too tired to even cook for myself when I get home,” she says.

Miriam lets the chocolate melt on her tongue, rubs her hands together. Tomorrow she will bring the lady cuttings from her grape ivy. Ivy grows well in dark places, even grows in Canada’s cold climate. The lady’s hands look right for growing ivy.

**Rearranging Furniture**

Mr. Bertilano leans across the desk toward me and balances the pencil until the pen falls. Sets it up again. He’s the boy with the erector set. Tighten the bolts. Call in the girlchild to “ooh” and “ah.” She can use the wrench only after he shows her how.

I know why he calls me into his office today. I’ve been expecting it, but I’m not prepared.

Two years ago, I sat before him just as I’m sitting now: Picking imaginary lint off my skirt, biting the inside of cheek, listening to his words, keeping my eyes on his first shirt button, not daring to look into his face. Two years ago, he leaned back in his oversized leather chair and laughed from side to side. He laughs like that again today.

Two years ago, he said there were no openings, said he’d call me if anything turned up. I knew he wouldn’t, knew it from the way he looked above my head as he said it.

Today, he looks at my face, probes it for signs he expects. A wrinkle perhaps at the corner of the mouth or a slight twitch in the right eye. He knows I know.

“You’ve done a lot since you first came to us,” Mr. Bertilano says, then waits.

“Yes,” I agree, wanting him to make it real, put it into words.

The buzzer rings and Mr. Bertilano pushes a button. “I told you to hold the calls, Shirley.” To me, he says, “Five years now she still can’t follow simple directions. If I could find a good secretary, I’d fire Shirley as fast as that.” He snaps his fingers.

I believe him. He’d fire all the Shirleys in the world if he could. All the Charlies, too. But most of all, it’s the Shirleys who irk him.

Two years ago, during the interview, he called me Shirley. I corrected him. He pleated the corner of my resume and doodled circles at the top, by my name.

I pictured his black wingtips behind the desk, one shoe kicking at the thick green carpet. Just like the team captain’s white sneakers in fourth grade, drawing circles in the sand until Miss Smyth divided the girls, half on each team. All batting last.

But there had been no Miss Smythe to nudge the wingtips. Only me.

I made my own opening. I just walked into the first department with the first empty desk and sat down. The five other people looked at me and I introduced myself as the new copy writer. (I sus­pected correctly that Mr. Bertilano rarely moved from his own office.)

The bald man walked over and dropped copy on my desk, saying, “You better be good.”

At lunch, one of the women told me that Charlie was okay once you got to know him. It’s just that Charlie usually did the hiring and firing in the copy department. “Doesn’t look good for Charlie,” the woman had said. She’d been right.

Today, Mr. Bertilano capsulizes my progress, ticks off each step on his fingers, pudgy fingers that don’t move as he strikes them one by one. “You’re a real dynamo. On your way up and moving fast. You can handle the rush jobs. The advertisers ask for you. The theme issue you suggested on mothers and daughters was terrific. The working-woman series drew letters from all over the country. You know what sells.”

He’s the King of Id and I’m the favored wizard, at least for the moment. He’s on the balcony, making pronouncements as I stand below, waiting. I can laugh at the King in the comic strip.

“Three days after you started, Charlie came griping to me about you. He said you were too high and mighty and should be fired. I told Charlie he must be drinking too much again. I asked him how I could fire someone I hadn’t even hired. Charlie went roaring out of here like a mad bull.” Mr. Bertilano taps the pen against the black signet ring on his little finger. “When you were still here after the first week, I hired you.” He pauses and shakes his head. “My god, most men don’t have the guts to just walk in and take over like you did.”

“I’m good at my work,” I tell him. I needed a job. That’s all it was, nothing more. How can I tell him the anger I felt two years ago when he looked above my head.

“You certainly proved yourself. You’re tough and good. Later even Charlie had to admit it. You were the only one Charlie couldn’t bully,” Mr. Bertilano says as he drops the pen into the desk drawer and shuts it.

In my mind, the sun pounds on Mr. Bertilano’s bald head, melting his bulk into a puddle of golden butter.

“It’s time to move Charlie out. He’s getting stale. His job’s yours if you want it,” he says cross­ing his creased cotton-shirted arms over his chest.

When I ask what will happen to Charlie, Mr. Bertilano tells me that Charlie is his problem, not mine.

I remember the time in fifth grade when I beat Richie Neuman in a running race. I won the Siamese fighting fish and everyone gathered around to watch the electric-blue fins sweep the sides of the glass. Richie, who already had a fish tank and heater, offered to buy the fish. But I won it fair and square. On the way home, I dropped the fish down the sewer and smashed the bowl against the curb.

It’s like that again today. And even though I’ve rehearsed the words, they won’t leave the dressing room.

Mr. Bertilano waits for the curtain to go up.

I lower my head and accept the promotion.

“That’s my girl,” he says, and I want to punch his smug face, make his eyes rattle like jelly beans in a plastic egg.

That night, I call my mother to tell her the news. She says, “That’s nice, dear,” and tells me Sarah Memet’s daughter just had a baby boy last week in Grace Hospital.

I ask her if she wants me to have a son.

She ignores the question, tells me Sarah’s daughter plans to nurse the child. “Sarah’s so happy,” she says.

“Sarah didn’t have the baby, her daughter did.” My voice is whiny, the same tone Mother gets when Father builds a table in his basement workshop. I hate it when I sound like her. Sometimes I wish I were like other daughters, married and having babies. I think she’d like me better. I’d probably like her better too.

Mother changes the subjects, asks about my latest boyfriend, asks if I want to bring him to Sunday dinner.

I try to picture Ken fitting his long legs under the white lace tablecloth, trying to talk about the archeological dig he’s just left in South Dakota to my father who grunts at anything he doesn’t under­stand. My mother will flutter about, pouring coffee, asking Ken if he can bring her a pot for her begon­ias since she so loves old things.

The next day my mother will call and tell me what a nice boy Ken is and warn me not to scare this one away with all my talk. I don’t want my mother to meet Ken.

As if she knows what I’m thinking, Mother says. “I’ll be good. Sometimes I think you’re ashamed of us.”

She asks me about coming this Sunday. I tell her I can’t. She says, “I understand. It’s just that your father misses seeing you. You should call more often. Someday you’ll know.” This is typical of my mother’s vague threats that make me dream of falling bedroom floors and strawberry Jell-O that won’t harden in the mold.

I never know how to end phone conversations with her. I fumble with good-bye words and she says, “So I have to go finish dinner now,” and hangs up the phone.

A tiny, nagging Mother voice follows me into the kitchen. “Eat better. You wouldn’t be so nervous if you’d eat better.” I fill the bowl to the top with potato chips, slip the grilled cheese sandwich from the skillet and pour the bottle of Pepsi into a glass from McDonald’s.

“Plenty of milk and fresh vegetables,” the Mother voice persists. “It’s only a couple of miles. You can’t spare the time to come over for dinner? Such a busy person, my daughter.” The clucking tongue.

I pull out the photograph album Mother gave me last Christmas. The scenes are snapshots I haven’t mounted yet. “So you won’t forget us all,” Mother said as I opened the Santa Clause package. Everyone laughed, even my sister-in-law. Grandmother nodded solemnly, and said with authority, “Your family is all you have. Value it.”

Clearly, Mother had selected the photographs. I wipe the chip crumbs from Mother as an infant in Grandmother’s arms. Mother in a weeping willow tree, her dress tangled in the branches. Mother in a bathing suit at the beach, her knees turned inward, her breasts full. Mother at the kitchen sink washing dishes. Mother giving me a permanent, rollers between her lips.

I finish my grilled cheese sandwich and wipe butter from the plastic pages. Wedding pictures, formal expressions as Father poses beside Mother. Father has no pictures of himself as a child or young man. In the photographs, he’s only a husband and father. Father in the workshop building my dollhouse. Father holding me on my red bike. Father and Mother dressed for his retirement dinner.

And the me that exists in the photographs, in my mother’s eyes. My First Communion dress, white lace itching my neck. My first birthday party. My first date with Billy next door whom I always detest for telling everyone I wouldn’t kiss him goodnight. No graduation pictures. Someone forgot to buy film. My parents argued over whose fault it was, clearer than any snapshot.

I worry about the promotion as I wash the few dishes, dust, vacuum, rearrange the furniture. It’s my mother’s habit, remembered from the times I talked back or the neighbor’s cake rose evenly and hers fell. The female cure: eat right, clean house, say nothing, rearrange the flowers in the vase.

I know my mother would be shocked if she knew I called Ken or that he slept here some­times. When she calls and he’s here, I tell her I’m alone, reading or baking. Usually, I can hear her smile over the phone. Then she tells me if I had a nice husband, I wouldn’t have to be lonely. I tell her I’m not lonely. She tells me I’m a really pretty girl and bright. I feel the way I used to when I was sixteen and getting ready for a date. She’d make me twirl slowly. Then she’d rub a spot of makeup on my forehead and say, “There. Now you look fine.”

I dial Ken’s number and cross my fingers behind my back for luck, a gesture left over from childhood. When Ken answers, I tell him about my promotion.

Ken is quiet. His voice finally comes from far away, as if he’s not holding the speaker to his lips. “Congratulations, boss lady.”

It’s not Ken’s voice, Ken’s words. Those two ugly words: boss lady. Before, I’d only hard them said about other women. Heard them said by women I’d worked with at Ford’s, heard them whis­pered over promotional brochures we were working on. And the men said the same—boss lady, bitch, whore—all the ugly words.

Ken is laughing now. “I can’t believe it. A boss lady who forgets where she puts her car keys.” He tells me his theory that in the future, archeologists will know how many female and male bosses existed in each corporation. All they’ll have to do is count doors. Those doors without locks belonged to female bosses; the ones with locks belonged to male bosses.

I tell him he’s not funny and he says I can’t take a joke. I tell him I’m really worried about tak­ing the promotion. “What if I’m not good at it? What if I get to like the job and someone else comes in and does it better? What if I get fired like Charlie?”

Ken says I’ll do fine, says I worry too much.

I want to pull him through the wires, lean my head against his chest. Then I could ask him what “fine” means. Instead, I ask him to Sunday dinner at my parents’ house.

He says I must be getting serious if I want him to meet my parents. He warns me he’s leaving for South Dakota in the summer. But, he says, he’ll even wear a suit Sunday.

When I tell him to fall down a flight of stairs, he hangs up the phone.

I call him back and say, “Can’t you take a joke?”

The speaker must be closer to his lips; his laugh comes across loud, deep. I know he’s no longer angry.

“Why don’t you come over?” I don’t want to tell him the apartment seems empty or that I’m afraid to be alone tonight.

Ken says he has to finish the report he’s writing, has to present it to the funding committee tomorrow. I try to persuade, use my smiling voice when I tell him he can write it here. He says I’m too distracting.

“But tomorrow night I’ll take you dancing to celebrate your promotion.” Then he adds, “That is, if the boss lady’s not too tired for dancing.”

I hear my mother’s voice in his, warning, “Don’t step on cracks.”

He says seriously that he’s looking forward to meeting my parents Sunday. I warn him that he won’t like them. He says I’m getting too hard. Just teasing, he adds as he hangs up the phone.

In my dreams, Ken is one of the advertisements on my desk. His body slides from the slick paper and he tap dances across my open calendar. My mother hands him a chocolate cake. He kisses her hand and pulls her into the waltz position; the cake falls to the mirrored dance floor. I try to lean forward but I’ve become fat, fatter than Mr. Bertilano who’s standing behind my swivel chair, clapping his hands. My enormous breasts sag toward my lap, keep me from reaching the dancing figures. “Bravo!” Mr. Bertilano shouts.

I wake up at the sound of my own voice. My pillow is damp. The room is dark. When I get up to go to the bathroom, I bump into the chest of drawers I’d moved earlier tonight. I wash my face and leave the bathroom light on.

The next morning I tell Mr. Bertilano that I can’t take the promotion, that, in fact, I’m giving my notice. He drops the silver pen on the floor and has trouble finding it.

“You can’t do that,” Mr. Bertilano says from under his desk. “I’ve already told Charlie.”

I pick up the pen at my feet and hand it to him.

“But why? I deserve a reason. You can’t just give up your future here. Why don’t you take a few more days to think about it?” He rubs his hands together.

Acceptable reasons (much better than real reasons) are tough to come by. But I sort through possibilities. Finally I say, “My fiancé was told yesterday that he’s being transferred back to South Dakota. We’re getting married.”

“Well, I can’t blame you for choosing marriage.” Mr. Bertilano pats my shoulder. “But the winters are cold in South Dakota. If you ever need your old job back, just walk in and pick a desk.” He chuckles.

He puts his arm around my shoulders and walks me to the door. “Don’t forget, you’re always welcome here. You’ll never find a better boss.” I shake his hand.

It reminds me of the day I moved from my mother’s house.

**Rosy’s Mother**

Three quick knocks, a pause, one louder knock. It’s Vera’s knuckles against the wood, Vera on the other side.

Vera tries the door and walks in, calling, “Rosy, are you home?”

Her shoes click against the tile, stop by the table in the hallway. Perhaps she wipes off the dust. For sure, she reads the cards, sees: the cross in moonlight, a spray of lilies, stained glass windows, signatures.

“Rosy,” she calls again.

Since we were ten, I told you to call me Rosalie, but you never remember. “In here,” I call from the living room.

“You ought to keep that door locked,” she says and hugs me, half lifting me from the couch. “You’ve sure kept your figure.” She pulls her striped blouse over her hips and sucks in her stomach. “That’s what five kids do to you. Put on twenty-five pounds with the last one.”

Sitting next to me on the couch, she says, “You know I looked in on Roxie all the time.”

I nod my head. Of course, I know. Didn’t Mother tell me in every letter about you bringing the children, even your husband, for Sunday dinner? Didn’t I hear how your little Robbie got his first tooth? Didn’t I hear how she hated to bother you to take her shopping? Didn’t she always want to know when I was coming home or getting married or doing something with my life?

Vera starts to cry and pulls a wadded Kleenex from her sleeve, tucks it back again after wiping her eyes. “Sorry, I remember how you hate tears.”

“It’s okay,” I tell her. After all, you loved my mother better than I did. On the days when your mother worked, you couldn’t wait to get home from school and show my mother your papers. I went to my room and drew pictures of robins flying west for the winter. Their red breasts were larger than the sun.

“I’m going to miss her, Rosy. Remember how all the kids always came to your house?” She pauses and tears at a small hole on the arm of the couch.

How can I forget? They came even after I left. They come still. Children and their mothers come, bringing cards drawn on manilla paper and casseroles. The cards pile up on the hall table. Macaroni and cheese, tuna surprise, Hungarian goulash, and even Mexican Delight are stacked in the refrigerator.

“How I used to wish my mother, God rest her soul, was like yours,” Vera says.

You used to want it all, Vera.

“I can still hear my mother screaming, ‘Don’t track up that floor or you’ll get a whipping.’” Vera tucks her foot under her.

“At least your place never looked like this.” I wave my hand at the newspapers and magazines stacked in the corner, the dirty clothes piled on the chair.

When Buddy Lawson came to get me for a date, Mother just scooped the clothes on the floor and kicked them under the chair. Buddy sat down and before I knew it, Mother turned on the radio and Buddy danced her all over the living room, showing her the latest steps. By that time, we were late for the show and Mother’s hair was out of the French twist, hanging loosely on her shoulders.

“She had trouble climbing the stairs toward the end,” Vera says.

“Sure,” I say. Didn’t Mother always have trouble climbing the stairs or doing much of any­thing? Didn’t Father tell her often enough that she drank too much?

“Do you want something to drink?” I ask Vera.

She follows me into the kitchen and looks over my shoulder, into the refrigerator.

“So you’ve met the neighbors,” Vera laughs and reaches for the nearest casserole dish. She peels off the Saran wrap and sniffs. “It’s spoiled, Rosy.” She dumps it down the garbage disposal. One by one, she empties all the dishes.

I rinse a glass and pour her a beer.

“The kids in the neighborhood are going to miss her,” Vera says, walking out of the kitchen and into the living room.

“The kid next door made her this.” She takes a clay object off the mantle and turns it in her hands.

“What is it?”

“I don’t know.” Vera sets it back in its place. She drinks the rest of her beer and puts the empty glass next to the clay. “Let’s get started,” she says.

“I’ll do it later.” I don’t want you poking around in my mother’s stuff, finding things I never knew were there.

“It’ll go faster with the two of us and don’t you have to get back to work soon?”

“I quit,” I tell her. Quit because I never stay in one place too long. Quit because my legs are giving out and waitress work isn’t what it used to be.

“Oh. A man? Roxie always wanted grandchildren.”

I don’t answer.

“It’s about time. You should have written and told me.” Vera hugs me again.

“I’m not getting married.” I pick up the clothes from the chair and put them in a plastic garbage bag.

“Save those for the church,” Vera says.

I can’t picture my mother’s clothes in a rummage sale. Older, heavy-set women lifting dresses to their bodies, measuring the fit across the hips.

“After I get the beer stains out,” I say.

“Your mother did like her beer,” Vera laughs and picks up a dress from the floor. A pink-flowered dress with chartreuse leaves split down the front to show cleavage.

“Wore this one to her ‘Welcome Summer’ party last month,” Vera says, running the dress through her hands. “Great party.”

I open the window and turn on the fan, adjusting it so the hot air upstairs is sucked out the window.

“Lots of parties. Kids running in and out all day,” Vera says. “Just like the old days.”

Mother sat up all night writing Halloween party invitations to everyone in my class. You were the one who told her when I tore them up and dropped them down the sewer, piece by piece. I watched the names she wrote disappear into the hole. You passed out all the invitations after that.

“I’m glad you’re staying. It’ll be fun to have you back home again. Roxie would be happy.” Vera drops the dress to the floor. “I want you to meet Brad. He’s divorced now and looking.”

“I’m done looking.” My voice cracks in my ears.

Vera isn’t listening. She moves toward the stairs. “Let’s do the bedroom first. That’ll be the hardest.”

My body is heavy, filled with the house dust and summer pollen. Vera is already up the stairs; her feet move above me in my mother’s bedroom. I follow.

“Look at our old school papers,” Vera holds up a dancing clown; its accordion legs bounce as she waves it at me. “Mine from first grade,” she says. “Didn’t you make one?”

“Probably not.” Sweat drips into my eyes. It’s hotter upstairs even though I’ve kept the drapes closed.

Vera dumps the clown into a cardboard box she’s using for trash. “I’d keep it if I didn’t have enough of my own kids’ stuff to store.” She sorts through more papers. “Here’s all your stuff tied with red yarn.” She tosses the packet to me.

Mother must have retrieved them from the trash where I threw them as soon as I got home from school.

I rip up the papers and throw them into the box.

“Are you okay?” Vera asks, putting the back of her hand against my forehead. “Just warm.”

I sit down beside her on the floor and lift papers from the bottom drawer, spelling tests and stick drawings signed by names I don’t recognize.

“Neighbor kids,” Vera says.

Your papers, their papers next to mine. All pushed down to make room for the next. My mother’s voice the night I left, begging, “At least tell me what I did.” I wrote a year later and she answered.

In the top bureau drawer, behind costume jewelry, Vera finds more papers, official papers. She reads, tucking loose hair behind her ears. Th sudden intake of air.

“Roxie never told me you were adopted.” Vera holds out a document and when I don’t take it, drops it in the middle of the bed.

“I’m not adopted.” I shake my head. “Everyone says I have my mother’s ears.” I pull back my hair.

In the mirror, I watch Vera’s face, see the way it takes more space than mine. She leans toward me as I whisper, “You’d like it to be true, wouldn’t you?” Her face moves toward the middle, away from me. “You always wanted her for yourself.”

A gurgle starts low in my throat and rises to fill my mouth like cool spring water. There’s a slight mineral taste to the laughter. It’s my house now, Vera. And my mother.”

“I should have cleaned all this before you got here.” Vera straightens the bedspread, pulling out the wrinkles where she sat. She leaves the room and closes the door behind her. A toilet flushes in another room.

I read the paper, twice, before I lay it down.

“Get out of here,” I tell Vera when she comes back and sits beside me. The white chenille ridges are rough against my fingertips.

But she just sits there, a lump of clay beginning to harden in the dray air.

I ball up the stiff piece of paper, roll it between my palms. Saliva gathers on my tongue. “Get out,” I scream and pull back my arm. “Out.” The paper ball hits her on the forehead.

“I’m sorry,” she says and moves to put her arm around me.

“Get out, now.” This time the paper bounces off her cheek, onto the floor.

The bed creaks as Vera moves. Her footsteps go past the stairs, into the bathroom. Water runs behind the closed door.

The old skeleton key is still in the bathroom door; it clicks as I turn it.

Vera rattles the knob. “Let me out,” she says.

I don’t answer. Instead, I go into the bedroom and pick up the paper ball from the floor. After putting it into an ashtray, I dump drawers, looking for a pack of matches. There, between the silver bobby pins and cold cream, a box of safety matches. The smell of sulfur and smoke. A burst of flame.

“What are you doing?” Vera screams from the bathroom. Her shoes are soft thuds against the door.

At first, I worry the wood will split but it’s old, probably petrified by now.

“What’s burning, Rosy?” She uses her mother voice, softer now. “It’s going to be okay. Come to the door so we can talk.”

After the flames, only charcoal swirls. I carry the ashtray to the bathroom door, turn the key. Rushing past me, Vera almost knocks it from my hand. Her feet loud against the wood steps.

Kneeling, I hold the ashtray above the toilet and watch the ashes sift down, some clinging to the white porcelain sides. Depress the silver handle and all are caught in the whirlpool. For a while, I stare into the clean water that bubbles back up and settles.

I go downstairs where it is cooler and pull back a corner of the living room drape. The sun is hot against the window. Children next door are playing in a plastic wading pool; they fill buckets with water and dump them over each other’s heads. Squeals and shouts fill the afternoon.

Opening the refrigerator, I take out cans of beer and line them up on the white Formica table. Sweat runs down their aluminum sides and puddles at the bottom.

I pull out a chair and sit in Mother’s place. I drink from the cans, wiping the foam from the corner of my lips with my finger. After the fifth beer, I draw hearts on paper and pierce each with an arrow. I am particularly careful with the feathers on the shaft; they must be evenly spaced and slanted at the right angle. I print: COME TO MY PARTY TOMORROW AT NOON.

Tonight I’ll bake gingerbread men with chocolate chip eyes and cinnamon grins. We can play Red Rover, Red Rover and I’ll hold tight to my partner’s hand so you can’t break through.

My eyes are tired and the stains under my arms reach clear to my waist. Stripping off my clothes, I stand in front of the fan until I am cool. Mother’s dress is still on the floor where Vera dropped it. I stoop and gather it to me, a silk ball between my breasts. It slides easily over my head, down my hips. The armholes gape like dead eyes. I fold the extra material toward the middle and belt it tightly, knowing that with all the beer and cookies, I’ll soon fill out, maybe even burst the seams.

**Under the Stars**

Even though I don’t like steak, especially when it’s pink in the middle, I cut it into neat pieces and chew, remembering to keep my mouth closed. I decide not to ruin dinner, not to tell them now. Instead I tell Mom about the dance routine I’m doing for the variety show and even get up to do a few steps.

With a forkful of mashed potatoes, Mom waves me back to my seat. “Don’t dance on a full stomach.”

I do two quick sidesteps, take the fork from between her fingers, and lay it on her plate. She giggles as I pull her toward me, bow, place my right hand in the small of her back, and waltz her around the kitchen. We bump into the stove. Lids rattle against the pots.

“Crazy. The both of you crazy,” Dad mutters.

I twirl Mom back to her chair. She picks up her fork and pauses, the mashed potatoes halfway to her mouth. Her eyes widen, a showcase for those gold flecks she always gets when she remembers. She reminds Dad about their first summer when they danced every night at the Walled Lake Casino.

“Just the stars overhead,” she says to me. “Nothing like that around here anymore.”

Dad clears his throat twice before he reminds her that her father never knew, that she was too young to go to a place that served liquor.

“Father never trusted you. Said you were too wild; told you that to your face once.” Mom slices the mashed potato walls; gravy flows in all directions.

I wonder if my parents are making this up; I know they’re not. I’m surprised that they ever danced under the stars. Maybe they’ll be able to understand what I want to tell them after all.

“A bad influence on me,” Mom chuckles, remembering things she isn’t saying.

“Should have married Henry Miller like your father wanted you to,” Dad says, quickly drop­ping his eyes to his plate and sopping up the rest of the gravy with his bread.

Mom puts her hand over his, squeezing gently. “You can’t still be jealous,” she says.

My dad jealous? It’s tough to imagine. I’ve always thought jealousy belonged to my age and movie stars. Maybe tonight’s not a good night to tell them. I better check it out with Mary Jane.

I pull the phone into my bedroom and shut the door. As soon as Mary Jane answers, I tell her about my parents, almost bragging. In the background, I hear Mary Jane’s mother screaming at one of her brothers.

Mary Jane whispers, “You better never try it. They’d kill you.”

“I know,” I tell her. “But to think they actually did it. I mean, you know how straight my mom is.”

Mary Jane says she thinks her parents were born adults, little pinched-faced worriers who started screaming and never stopped. Says she can’t wait to get away to school and have some fun. Asks if I’ve had my parents fill out the scholarship forms yet. Says her parents don’t want her to go away to school. All the usual. Strangers, drugs, wild kids, no supervision. The whole bit. Says she told them she’s going into nursing.

I guess if I had Mary Jane’s parents I’d lie too. But I don’t lie to my parents and I know the whole discussion will make Mom cry, later tonight when she thinks I can’t hear. I hate to make her cry.

But Mary Jane says to go ahead and get it over with. All mothers have to cry sooner or later and it’s always best to get a thing over with before you think too much about it and never get around to doing it.

Maybe she’s right. She’s got a good mind. Even the kids who don’t like Mary Jane have to admit she’s got a good mind.

A shrill ringing comes over the line. Mary Jane says her mother sets a timer when she’s on the phone. A five minute limit. Then, the jangling bell. Says her mother is taking some sort of class in night school on how to organize time. Says she ought to take one on how to organize her mind.

“Do it now,” Mary Jane hisses and hangs up the phone.

My parents are still at the table, sipping their coffees and talking. They don’t see me standing in the doorway, so I move in closer, knowing that in a few minutes the smiles will disappear. I feel bad about the whole thing.

“Whatcha got?” Dad says, seeing the papers dangling from my hand. “Some more physics problems you need help with?”

He’s proud of his science and math abilities, says all the males in his family have that ability. Every time he works with me, he reminds me that girls don’t inherit that trait, then ruffles my hair and says, “But you wouldn’t want to be too smart anyway, would you?”

I sit down in my chair and push the papers across the table to him. When Mom gets up to do the dishes, I touch her arm and say I need her to stay too.

Dad looks at the papers. Says he’ll need a couple of days to fill them out. Asks me why I’m applying to a college in Florida.

I take a deep breath and tell him it’s the only place where I can learn to be a clown.

He throws back his head and laughs, gets up, and pretends to slip on a banana peel. From the floor, he asks if I’ve heard the one about why the clown crossed the street.

I shake my head, thinking how stupid he looks sprawled on the floor.

“Because he wanted to get to the other side.” His face reddens as his laugh deepens and I turn my head away. Mom just stares at both of us.

I tell him I mean it. That’s what I’m going to study. And Mom tries her own tactics. Tells me no man would ever marry a woman clown. Imagine the children going to school and saying their mother is a clown. Mom wipes the corner of her mouth with the dinner napkin.

Dad’s still making corny jokes and no one’s listening. He stands up and pats Mom’s hand. “It’s nothing to worry about. She’ll change her mind. When she was four, it was a policeman because he had a gun. Then a teacher because she wrote on the blackboard. A cashier at a grocery store so she could ring the cash register. A candy counter lady so she could have all the coconut bon-bons she wanted. Don’t worry, she’ll change her mind.”

“A teacher or nurse I can understand. But a clown? Probably one of Mary Jane’s ideas.”

I run up the stairs. It’s been a long time since they’ve seen me cry; I don’t want them to see me now. I hate them both and I don’t believe they ever danced under the stars.

Mary Jane’s voice is reassuring until the timer goes off and her weird mother starts screaming. Maybe it’s just that all parents forget how to have fun.

It takes four pages in my diary to get it all down. I’m already into September and it’s only March. But it’s important that I keep track of everything because when I become a famous clown, I’ll write my autobiography.

Sometimes, Mom’s voice gets louder, comes through the floor like carbon monoxide fumes. (Dad thinks I can’t remember anything about science, but he’s wrong.) She keeps saying it’s not a suit­able job for a woman. But there’s a lot my parents don’t know about me, a lot they wouldn’t want to know. Sometimes I know how much I’m letting them down. But it’s my life and I want something more exciting than sitting at the table after dinner drinking coffee.

Two days later, Dad hands me the papers all filled out. Says I have to make up my own mind. He thinks he’s being clever but I know he and Mom are firm believers in child psychology. They have one whole shelf devoted to such books. Before, it was always how Dr. Spock says it’s only a stage. Now, it’s Dr. Ginnott with his *Between Parent and Teenager.* I haven’t the heart to tell them it’s really between me and me.

It’s the next week in school that we have to get up and give our career speeches. Mary Jane raises her hand to volunteer. She tells everyone how she wants to be a clown, shows chalk drawings of the kind of face she’s going to use. When she starts the side shuffle and goes into a routine, James Becker who sits behind me, begins throwing spitballs at her. Even though he winds up for each throw, she doesn’t notice him. She’s telling jokes when a spitball lands in her hair and moves back and forth each time she wrinkles her forehead. The whole class laughs and she gives me the high sign as she bows and sits back into her seat next to me.

I can’t let my eyes meet hers. Instead, I focus on the next speaker who mocks Miss Greenstead when he says he wants to be a teacher and fiddles with the chalk the way she always does. Miss Green­stead makes him sit down and warns the class to take the world of work seriously.

With my pencil, I doodle Bob’s initials on the inside cover of my physics book. I sometimes think he notices me but he’s never asked me out. No one but Mary Jane knows I have a crush on him and I can count on her to keep her mouth shut. I’ve studied the other girls he’s taken out and they all seem kind of flighty and dumb. That’s why I groan when I get my physics test back. I would die if he ever found out I get A’s on them.

When Miss Greenstead calls my name, I move to the front of the room and direct my talk toward Bob. I can’t let myself look at Mary Jane or I’ll start giggling. I tell Bob I’m going to Beauty School. He sits straighter in his chair and winks at me.

When the bell rings, Mary Jane walks out of the room, holding her books to her chest and not looking at me. She’ll get over it.

Bob strolls over, puts his hands on Mary Jane’s desk, leans over, and asks me to the dance Saturday night. I’m so nervous I hear myself popping my gum. I swallow it and try to casually lean against my desk. He moves closer, picks up the physics paper I’ve been shredding between my fingernails.

“Hey, I’m not asking you to elope, only to go to a dance,” he says.

“Sure. Sure, I’d like to go.” I wish I hadn’t swallowed my gum. My mouth is too dry now.

When I see Mary Jane at the locker after school, she still won’t talk to me. I have to rush to keep up with her and explain that being a doctor or a research scientist is more prestigious than being a clown. We can make more money too. As a team, we might find a cure for something and get our pictures on magazine covers. I can see she likes the idea and when, four hours later, she tells me that we might even practice someplace like France or Brazil, I know everything is all right again between us.

Besides, I can just picture my parents when I tell them. My dad will lean back in his chair and say, “Everybody in our family was always good in the sciences.” Mom will raise her coffee cup, set it down without drinking, and finally say in a flimsy voice, “It’s a good skill to have with small children around. They get hurt a lot, you know.”

I’ll ask Mom and Dad not to mention it to Bob. And I’ll ask Bob to button his shirt so my parents won’t think he’s a bad influence or anything like that.

**Until She Gets Home**

Five years ago. At Amelia’s wedding, Mother Ernestine takes John aside and whispers, her wet lips moving against his ear. John says something Amelia can’t hear. Then he links his mother’s crepe—covered arm with his and moves toward her, his new wife.

Still Amelia hears Mother Ernestine’s words. “Take care of him. Fathers give away daughters and mothers give sons.” Yet, she and John are old enough to give themselves, if they want to. And at 35, they both want to. At least they think so then.

A year ago. At Father John’s funeral, Mother Ernestine weeps, dabs at her eyes and weeps some more. She clings to John’s arm, stopping now and then to rest her body against his as they walk through the cemetery. Amelia walks behind John’s two sisters, careful to avoid tripping on headstones.

The cemetery has regulations. No towering monuments. Only small, unpretentious markers, extending no more than two inches above the ground. Name and dates only. No plastic wreathes. Grounds are maintained. Cost included in original purchase agreement.

Mother Ernestine becomes angry. She wants a large headstone, carved marble. Something to mark his life. They show her the contract her husband signed, all in proper order. For a year, Mother Ernestine tells everyone he must not have known what he was signing. Father John is wrong even in death.

John exhausts himself trying to split his time between his mother’s house and his. At both, the dripping faucets, the peeling paint, the blocked-up sinks claim his time. With each season, comes new demands—snow, floods, green grass, brittle leaves. He grows tired, older looking. He loses weight.

Mother Ernestine sends covered dishes home with him, always his childhood favorites. Big bowls of spaghetti, apple dumplings, homemade breads, and stews. Amelia’s freezer becomes over­crowded and she takes to dumping food in the garbage disposal.

John buys his mother dresses of many colors. She returns them for black. He introduces her to widowers. She declines invitations, politely. She only accepts invitations to the house that come directly from Amelia. For as she tells Amelia at dinner one night, “I don’t want to intrude on my son’s life.” Then Mother Ernestine dabs at her eyes with a lace-edged handkerchief and Amelia excuses her­self to go to the bathroom.

One night while Amelia and John drink their usual before-bed glass of wine, Amelia tells John about her promotion at work.

“It was that new account. They liked my ad campaign. Head of the department and a raise. That’s the offer.” She isn’t sure John is listening, but she continues, “Of course I told them I’d like to talk it over with my husband first.”

“How many other women bosses do they have?” John asks, holding the wine up to the light and squinting one eye.

“Five.”

“About 150 boss slots. That’s only three percent for the women. Doesn’t look good for the company.” John’s mathematical mind reduces everything to numbers and graphs.

Amelia often thinks John could, on a moment’s notice with the use of his calculator, recite her vital statistics—her birth date, weight, height, measurements, and life expectancy. At times his eyes remind her of grocers’ scales, moving back and forth trying to find the right balance.

To break the silence of her thoughts, Amelia says, “John, stop measuring. I’m good enough at my work to handle it.”

He laughs, swirls the wine in its glass, and says, “Take the job. They need you.”

They do need Amelia. Her latest account is a soil remover that’s rubbed into a garment, dries to a white powder, and removes grease, dirt, and stains. The woman in the ad rubs it into everything. All spots removed. A clever tune—a brief funeral dirge followed by the wedding march. Slow motion. The miracle of it all. The woman smiles. Fade out.

“Do you need me?” she asks John, setting her wine glass on the small table, leaving a wet ring where wine has dribbled over the rim, onto the stem, over the base.

“For what?” he asks, smiling.

“For nothing,” she answers.

“I’m teasing,” he says. “Of course I need you. Let’s go to bed.”

Amelia needs to sleep.

Mother Ernestine comes to dinner at Amelia’s invitation. She doesn’t look well. Her skin is drying out and her hair is losing its curl. She talks about getting a new permanent, getting her hair colored, getting an apartment, getting old.

John tries to console her. “You’re only 63, Mother.” He gives her a hug. If you’d get out more, you’d feel better.”

“I can’t go out without your father. That wouldn’t look right. Besides I think I’ve got cancer,” Mother Ernestine says, helping herself to another spoonful of mashed potatoes.

“It doesn’t matter at your age,” John says.

Amelia picks at her food, keeping her head down as the two talk, wondering if it’s the going out or the cancer that doesn’t matter.

“Cancer,” Mother Ernestine repeats between the mashed potatoes and peas.

“We all die from something, Mother.” John knows how to handle his mother’s complaints, her dramatic illnesses.

“First your father, now me. Then you and Amelia—dead. Your sisters are already dead to me. They don’t care. That a mother should bear such children is a waste.”

Amelia thinks Mother Ernestine might make a good advertising agent, writing the copy herself after she snares the client.

Over dessert, John asks Mother Ernestine to live with them.

Mother Ernestine cries, louder than her funeral sobs. She hugs John, says she can’t think of such an arrangement, says she doesn’t want pity, doesn’t need anyone. She can look after herself, she says.

After she finishes her dessert, John drives her home. He is gone a long time.

Amelia does the dishes, wipes the table, showers, and reads a book until John returns. She wishes she could go to bed and sleep, have the double bed to herself for a night.

When John finally returns, Amelia pours the wine.

“If you asked her, she’d come,” John says.

Amelia already knows this and says nothing.

“With your promotion, you could use some help around the house. Mother likes to cook and we’d be some company for her. She’s lonely, Amelia.”

“I know,” Amelia says. “I’m lonely too.”

“That’s ridiculous. You’ve got your job, me, all our friends. How can you be lonely?

Amelia knows he can’t understand. To him, anything that doesn’t make sense just can’t be. She doesn’t try to explain.

“What do you think, Amelia? It’s a good deal for all of us. We have two spare bedrooms. Plenty of room. She’d be happy with us.”

“You’re right, of course.” How can she argue with his logic. She can’t think of anything that would tip the scales in her favor.

John leans over and kisses her on the forehead, saying softly, “I’m glad you don’t mind. After all, she is my mother. I owe her a lot.”

“I owe her a lot too,” Amelia says.

Amelia calls Mother Ernestine from work the next day and invites her to live with them.

Mother Ernestine is hesitant, finally saying, “Well, dear, if you really want me to. I’ll be glad to help out.”

John takes care of all the details. The house sells quickly and for a good price. Mother Ernes­tine’s belongings are sorted and moved in with theirs. Her favorite chair, a pink-flowered chintz, is set in front of the television, across from Amelia’s blue velvet couch. The living room begins to look like a resale shop.

Amelia works later at the office, becomes more involved with the clients, is preoccupied with intricate advertising campaigns. She tells Mother Ernestine and John to eat without her. But they still wait to eat until she gets home, no matter how late.

At dinner, Amelia is quiet, tired. They try to draw her out with questions about her work. Like a sullen child, she doesn’t always hear the questions, admonishments.

John gets angry and says, “You’re working too hard.”

Mother Ernestine disagrees with him. “It’s her age, John. She’s going through the change.”

“Can’t be. She only just turned forty.”

They talk as if Amelia is not there.

“Women who never bear children go through it earlier,” Mother Ernestine says, clearing away the plates.

Amelia has never heard this before. She wonders if it’s true.

John is no longer angry.

Amelia still says nothing. She knows nothing to say in her defense.

Amelia goes to bed without her wine, letting John and Mother Ernestine carry out the ritual, drink the blood-red Lambrusco without her. She hears them talking quietly.

At work, Amelia is restless, forgetful. She feels senile and begins writing notes to herself. Tasks that must be done. Words that must be written. Squiggly lines of letters. She may need glasses to stop the movement, the blurry words.

Amelia calls the oldest sister. She asks about her nieces and nephews, the new house, the heavy-set brother-in-law. She waits while the sister answers, waits to pose the real question.

“Your mother,” Amelia says, “is getting on my nerves. She’s taking my place. Could you…”

“The bitch,” the sister screams, “always chose John. He can keep her.”

Holding the empty receiver, Amelia waits for the dial tone. She punches buttons and listens to the time. “At the tone, the time will be five forty-five and ten seconds.” The shrill beep. “At the tone, the time will be five forty-five and twenty seconds.” The shrill beep. “At the tone…”

The shrill beep intervenes. It marks passing time, destroys continuity; the smooth, calming flow of darkness and light.

Amelia is on time tonight for John’s favorite dinner—thick, simmered spaghetti sauce with fresh herbs ladled over rich noodles, crusty homemade bread with softened butter. Mother Ernestine spends much time in preparation. Amelia isn’t hungry.

Together, they watch the news. Mother Ernestine in her pink, chintz chair; Amelia on the blue velvet couch; John in the black, overstuffed leather recliner that used to be his father’s.

It’s the usual news every night. An old man is mugged, a fire erupts after a three-car crash slows traffic on the expressway, the police have a lead, the mayor is at a conference. Amelia keeps hearing shrill beeps.

There is live coverage of a 45-year-old man who is barricaded in his aged parents’ home. He chased them out with a rifle which he is now using against the police. His old mother is in her bath­robe, sobbing into the cameras, telling the world that she doesn’t want her son hurt, that he means no harm. The father, also in a bathrobe, is standing stoop-shouldered, watching his house.

The son is till shooting, but everyone is out of range. The son isn’t talking to anyone. He won’t even answer his mother when she pleads through the bullhorn.

“Those poor people,” Mother Ernestine says. “To have their son go crazy like that and turn on them.”

“The police will get him,” John says.

Amelia silently applauds the son, her hands fluttering against her knees.

Amelia will buy John a rifle for his birthday next month. Maybe she will buy herself a rifle for Christmas in memory of the son she’ll never have.

**Waiting**

I hear Marilyn before I see her. Her shoes tapping against the oak floor, coming fast around the corner.

“For God’s sake, Sarah, how long have you been waiting?” Marilyn says, pushing her hair into place. “Are all these others waiting too?”

I nod. “But we’re next. I put our names in as soon as I got here.” I motion to the owner, tell him we’re ready.

Marilyn slides into the chair the owner pulls out for her, leans her briefcase against the bottom rung, reaches for the menu he hands her.

“What’s all this hocus-pocus stuff? Psychometry, smoke readings, tarot cards?” Marilyn asks, pointing to the symbols on the menu. “Lunch, you said. That’s all, just lunch.”

“This is nonsense, Sarah. I want to eat. Tea room, you said. Just around the corner from my office.” She looks past me to the poster on the far wall: a hand spread wide, palm up, writing too small to read. “What have you gotten yourself into now?”

“It’s Mama, Marilyn, I can’t do it.”

“Can’t. Can’t. Can’t. Can’t. That’s all you ever say.” Marilyn reaches over and drinks what’s left in my tea cup. She puts the soggy Lipton tea bag on a napkin, slices it with her knife, spreads the wet leaves. “Read these. Go ahead. Tell me what they say.”

I see them again. Mama standing behind the screen door, shaking her finger at me. Her other arm encircles Marilyn’s thin shoulders and pulls her close against her hip. Mama and Marilyn. The flour spilled on the floor behind them. The sweet smell of sugar cookies.

“It’s decided,” Marilyn says. “There’s only you and me. Someone has to do it. Even the tea leaves say so.” Marilyn laughs as she stirs the brown leaves, shapes them into an “s.” “Come on, Sarah. It won’t be so bad.” She glances at her watch.

I trace the lifeline in my palm, cup my hand to make the line appear deeper, stronger. As I reach for Marilyn’s hand, she draws back, drops her hands beneath the table, away from me, the older sister.

Marilyn is the younger, the tougher, the more responsible. Mama says so every chance she gets. Mama reminds me when she can’t sleep and calls me late at night. “Your sister is going places. Probably to be a partner soon in that CPA firm,” her voice groggy from the sleeping pills that don’t take hold fast enough for her.

And I know Mama is right. My sister is the one who had my house assessed before my divorce, who made sure I got my fair share out of Charles before he left, who got me the job typing for a law firm two blocks over from her office, who worries I’ll get fired if I stay too long at lunch.

Women come and go around us. They climb the stairs to sit with psychics.

Marilyn refuses to turn her head, to see these women, to scan their faces when they come back down. I see them all from my chair facing the stairway.

“It’s too late to do anything else,” Marilyn says. “I’ve already told Mama you’re moving in next month. She’s counting on you, Sarah.”

“I can’t give up my job. I just can’t,” I tell her, knowing she thinks I’m just trying to make more trouble for her.

“Christ,” Marilyn mutters, turning her eyes upward. “You call that a job. Sitting all day: typing up legal briefs and answering phones. Just other people’s words, Sarah. That’s all it is. Dead end.”

“I like it,” I say.

It’s my first real job in over 25 years. My first since I worked at the A & P when I was in high school. Unless you count all that time married to Charles.

“Yes, other people’s words,” I say. “That’s what I’m good at.”

“This is crazy,” Marilyn shouts. People look at her. “Absolutely crazy.”

She picks up her briefcase, stands, holding the case against her tweed skirt. I stand too, holding Marilyn’s eyes with mine, yanking the briefcase from her curled fingers. The clasps spring open, papers cascade onto the table, over the floor.

“Don’t touch those,” I tell the owner who stoops to pick them up. I put my foot on top of the nearest papers, leaving dirty smudges on the parallel rows of numbers.

Marilyn sits down, ignoring the spilled papers, whispering through her teeth, “Sit down, Sarah. What mumbo-jumbo have they been feeding you here?”

“You promised,” I say.

“Be sensible. I promised to meet you for lunch.”

“It’s our turn.” I stand and move behind her, try to lift her from her seat. She stands, knocking over the chair. I hand her the briefcase. “You’ll need the papers too,” I say, shoving them toward her with my foot.

She picks up the papers, puts them into a stack, slips them in a folder and puts a rubber band around them. I hear the metallic click as she latches the briefcase.

“Let’s go, Sarah,” Marilyn says. “Don’t make a scene.” Her face flushes, voice grows raspy.

“The stairs,” I say. “Just up the stairs.”

“I’m late for an appointment, Sarah. Can’t keep clients waiting for long,” she says, trying to pretend nothing is happening.

“They’ll wait. I’m waiting now.”

“If I do it, then will you stop this foolishness?”

We’re halfway up the stairs when she pauses, leans toward me. “Have you been giving them money?”

I laugh. “Money? I already paid for both our readings.”

“I mean donations. Lots of money. Have you?”

I don’t answer. I know that drives her crazy. She’s used to talk, lots of her own words.

“Well, have you?” she says again, grabbing my arm.

“Have I what?” I say, shaking her loose.

“Money. We’re talking about money. Money you’ve given to these fakes. Money to burn candles or cast spells or do whatever it is they’re supposed to do. You never did understand money.”

“But you do. Isn’t that good enough?” I nudge her ahead of me into the small room.

Lillian sits in front of us, her flesh overflowing the chair. She smiles, reaches for the clear quartz crystal, the size of a human heart.

“Ah, Ladies,” Lillian says, “please sit down, sign the guest book.”

I sign the book and hand the pen to Marilyn. She writes down Mama’s address, hiding behind Mama, wanting Mama to open any mail that might come, knowing Mama will drop it in the garbage pail under the sink.

“I do tarot cards, astrology or psychometry,” Lillian says. “What’s your pleasure?”

“Nothing,” Marilyn says.

“And you, little one?” Lillian asks. “Have you gone ahead and done it yet?”

“Soon,” I say, hoisting Marilyn’s briefcase to the table, slamming it down hard between Marilyn and Lillian. “What does this tell you?”

“No,” Marilyn says, reaching for the case. “You can’t do that. It’s mine.”

“No reason to be afraid,” Lillian says, closing her eyes, rubbing her hands over the smooth leather. “Just sit back. Open up to the experience.”

Marilyn starts to stand up. I grab her wrist, pull her down, watch her rub the red welt I raised.

Lillian draws back, stares straight into Marilyn’s eyes.

“Well,” Marilyn says, “your gifts fail you? Can’t you see anything?”

Marilyn’s eyes survey the room. I try to see it as she does: the tobacco-stained, flowered curtains tied back with the heavy drapery cord; the palm-reading poster same as downstairs; the dish for tips.

“Are you not tired?” Lillian asks. “Too long carrying others on your shoulders.” Lillian shrugs. “You can shake them off if you will. But, no, you pile them there. Your ballast. Like numbers for you—solid, hard.”

Lillian caresses the briefcase, her eyes steady on Marilyn. “Beware,” she warns. “I see you with paper dolls…bending their legs, dressing them in fashions out of date. You hide them where they can’t be found.”

“It was you.” The paper dolls Daddy gave me for my birthday, long ago. Forgotten until now.

“Enough,” Marilyn says, walking from the room.

I take the briefcase Lillian hands me and run after Marilyn, down those steep steps, out onto the concrete, into the October afternoon.

“You set me up,” Marilyn says as I catch up to her, stand beside her as she stares at the five-tiered wedding cake in the bakery window.

“Want something?” I ask, feeling guilty she hadn’t eaten. But then she probably skips lunch most days anyway.

“Yes. I want you to keep your promise,” she says to my reflection in the window. “Stay with Mama. Won’t be for long, you know.”

“Too long,” I tell her. “I don’t want Charlie’s words, or your words, or Mama’s words. Not anymore. I won’t listen.”

“There’s nothing else to do.” She pauses. “You planned it all didn’t you? With that fat woman. You told her about me, about Mama. You gave her money to do it.”

Why can’t she just say she’s scared—scared and tired? Even when we were little and I got her on the high diving board, she wouldn’t say it. She jumped while I had to push past all the kids waiting behind me, crying while I climbed down the ladder. But not this time. I won’t do it. Simple as that.

“Only six months, Sarah. That’s all they give her. That’s not long. After that I’ll find you another job. I promise.”

“That’s only what Mama says. You know Mama.” I take Marilyn’s hand, turn it palm upward. It’s all there for the reading. I should have guessed sooner. “There’s nothing wrong with Mama is there?” I shake her shoulders, “Answer me.”

Marilyn stumbles over her briefcase, falls. I kneel beside her.

“Why?” I kick her briefcase against the wall of the bakery. “Answer me. How could you do it?”

Marilyn fingers the hole in her nylons, just above the right knee. “I can’t go back to the office like this.”

“Now. Tell me right now. Go on.”

“You wouldn’t understand. You had Charlie. Mama had me. Just me.”

We both hear the cars passing in the street. No one stops. No one speaks.

“It’s not too late for you,” I say, knowing it may be.

“I’m in for a big bonus this year,” she says, lifting her head. “May even be offered the partner­ship. If not this year, next year for sure.”

“Marilyn, I’m leaving.” I say it without bitterness. “I need to go other places, hear other voices.”

“They did this to you, didn’t they? Those people at the tea room. That fat woman. It’s just a con game, Sarah. How dumb can you be?”

“Dumb enough.”

“But you don’t have any money. You never were good at thinking things through.”

I hug Marilyn, help her to her feet, hand her the briefcase.

“You’ll be back,” Marilyn says, turning toward her office. “I’ll tell Mama you can’t stay, at least not yet.”

“You do that,” I say, waving and smiling at Marilyn as she walks away.”

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The post cards I write to Marilyn and Mama from other cities, other states, are brief. There’s not much to say. But sometimes I do think about going back for a visit, some Halloween when the kids are all dressed in costume and the moon is full. And I do stop at palm readers in different towns whenever the mood hits me. But I still haven’t run across anyone who could read me like Lillian did.

**When the Birds Sing**

I pay off the Checker cab driver, tipping him a dollar more than I usually tip, because I’m feel­ing a bit frightened and on edge. Sort of excited, too, I must admit, but that’s probably nothing but heart palpitations. As we had passed by houses in Highland Park with condemned signs on them, by the junkyard with the tires all piled up and that terrible acrid smell of burning rubber so bad I had to hold my handkerchief over my nose, by that guy with the cardboard sign with words misspelled telling people he “wood work fer fud,” by the old Methodist Church with graffiti spray-painted on it that no church-going person ought to see, the cab driver kept reassuring me that this was just something we had to pass through to get where I was going.

As I snap my purse shut, I’m sorry I didn’t tip even more. He probably could have used it if those photos taped to the dashboard were his kids. But it’s too late now. Now all I can do is move ahead with what I came for although I don’t know why I let Eartha bully me into being places I don’t want to be and doing things I don’t want to do, don’t even want to think about.

I can hear Eartha’s voice echo in my ear, the way it did on the phone yesterday after dinner, “Safe. You worry about safe when I need your help? There’s such a thing as being too safe, you know.”

Nothing wrong with taking precautions, if you ask me. Fewer people would end up as news stories if they were more careful. Just as the policeman told us to do when he spoke to our Golden Oldies Senior Citizens Social Club last week, I clutch my black leather purse with its thick straps and gold metal clasp tight against my stomach and stand straighter when two teenage boys in dirty tee shirts and jeans bump against me as they tromp up the steps to Ginopolis’ Pizzeria. I feel their heat as they pass by, their sweat against my bare arm.

Some women carry white purses in summer while I find black suitable for all times of year and good leather lasts forever, I had told myself when I paid more than I should have for it at Lord & Taylor’s over twenty years ago. I know what’s in every compartment, where I keep my social security card, my teacher’s retiree discount card, and photos of my nieces and nephews, all grown now with children of their own. I’m not about to let any young kid yank it from me like you read about in the papers all the time. Not that I’m accusing those two teenagers of being thieves. But you can never tell. I wait until they’re inside before I try to get my bearings.

At first I walk past the Boston Tea Room and have to retrace my steps until I find it sand­wiched between the pizzeria and a real estate office with pictures of prime property taped to the win­dows. It’s not at all like the elegant Russian Tea Room in New York where I went once with a group of teachers before going to a Broadway play. Instead, Eartha saw it advertised in the *Psychic Phenomena News*, she had explained last night when I asked her where she heard of it. She thought it sounded more reputable than Madame Tina’s, the psychic healer, or House of Spiritual Renewal. Besides, I don’t need healing or renewal although heaven knows Eartha sure could, what with all those donuts and chocolate bars she eats.

The wooden door squeaks as I pull at its sticky brass handle and squeeze through the opening. The candle-lit interior is heavy with incense that starts me sneezing. My eyes water. I hear Eartha’s voice out of the darkness, “Roger’s here. I just know it. Come on,” she urges. “Just four steps straight ahead. Just follow my directions. I won’t let you trip.”

“Not until I can see where I’m going,” I snap, wiping my eyes and waiting for them to adjust. Directly on my right is a poster of a hand, palm upturned, lines intersecting. It spooks me: a hand dis­embodied, no arm connected to a shoulder, nothing human about it.

“Ah, come on. Roger will show you the way,” Eartha gives me that straight-up hand salute, palm turned out, that expects the world to stop and notice. An affectation if you ask me. Even told her that once. Told her it was the kind of thing that works its way right up my nose like pollen.

“Darn it,” I mutter as the clasp on my purse catches a loose edge of the poster and rips it right across the wrist, right where the lifeline starts. Wonder if that means someone just got zapped off the streets of Detroit. Gives me the creeps to think Eartha really believes this stuff. As if lines on your hand can speak your destiny, lock it in. I only believe what I see and then I have to see it more than once to make sure it’s not a speck of dust or a gnat that’s gotten under my eyelid.

“I never should have come,” I tell Eartha after seating myself and ordering comfort herbal tea that’s advertised as a mixture of leaves and roots that soothes frazzled nerves. “This is just plain non­sense. Roger is dead, Eartha. Been dead almost fifteen years this past May. Heart attack, just like that. Only you persist in acting like he’s still hanging around after all that time,” I say and wipe my eyes again. Sometimes all her hocus-pocus stuff really irritates me. Mostly, I just ignore it. “Besides, even when he was alive, he wasn’t the kind of man who stood around waiting on things. I don’t know why I ever listen to you.”

“Sure you do,” Eartha says. “You know you have the power even though you won’t admit it.” She absently twirls a strand of her brightly dyed red hair around her index finger as if she can straighten out the kinks from her last perm. “Besides that, you’re a helping kind of person.”

“So, what kind of help do you need? You made it sound so urgent last night.” I watch Eartha tear shreds from the outside edges of her napkin and let them flutter down onto the black Formica table top where they lay like pigeon feathers. “Out with it, Eartha,” I say in my schoolteacher voice and lean across the table, closer to her. “Did you look at the man behind the counter flipping over those cards with funny pictures on them? It’s not safe for two women our age to be here.”

“Tarot cards. That’s all they are. They can tell your past, present and future.” Eartha looks over her shoulder at the man laying out the oversize cards, crossing some over others.

“My future? Not much of that left,” I say. “And I know my past. It’s gone.” At a table across the room a young woman in a yellow sundress rubs her bare arms, stands and walks behind the man with his Tarot cards and enters a curtained space behind him.

“Oh, the way you go on,” Eartha says. “You’re healthy as a horse. And seventy-three isn’t old anymore.” She presses her chest right over her heart and her large breasts rise and fall with each breath as if she wants me to ask about her health, which I refuse to do. “What is it you need my help with?” I ask, separating each word with wide spaces, hoping it’s something I can get over fast so I can get back home and weed my vegetable garden before it’s completely overgrown.

“It’s this skirt,” Eartha says. “Look at how these little people have changed since I last wore it. Doesn’t this man look like Roger? I swear it’s Roger,” she says, pulling up the long chartreuse skirt until the embroidered hem rests flat above her knees.

“Fiddlesticks,” I say. “You just want some excuse for showing off your legs. Disgusting, if you ask me. All those varicose veins and you’re not even wearing hose.”

“No one says fiddlesticks anymore.” Eartha taps her long red-lacquered fingernails against the table—clickety-clack, clickity-clack until I can’t stand her sound anymore—and then I see a silver star flash at the tip of one nail and grab her fingers.

“What’s this? Some cult thing like I see on television? I wouldn’t put it past you.” Although nothing could make me tell Eartha, I envy the way she stays up with things and never cares what any­one else thinks. That woman does just what she wants and her crazy ways do stir things up in my life.

“Afraid to look, aren’t you?” Eartha folds her hands over her huge belly and gives out with that rumbling, snorting laugh like she has a fishbone caught in her throat. “Come on, just take a peek. Maybe that woman who sold it to me years ago when I was in Ecuador with Roger was just making stuff up when she promised it was a magical story skirt with bird spirits sewed into every stitch.”

“Hogwash.” My hand shakes as I set my teacup back into its saucer with a slight clink. “Pure hogwash, as my father used to say. And, just for your information, I’m only seventy-one.” I can’t stand it when Eartha starts talking like this, as if anything could happen like a horse being born with a rabbit’s head or a grown man living in a thimble—all that crazy stuff she reads in that *Enquiring Minds* tabloid she buys every week at the grocery store.

“She did too tell me that.” Eartha fingers the hem of her skirt, runs it through her fingers, back and forth. “And she said the birds would sing their secrets when the time was right.”

“Can we just get on with whatever we came to do?” I feel under my chair with my foot to make sure my purse is still there. “Now that I drank my tea can we go?”

“You always were impatient,” she chides. “Just do, do, do. Then you don’t have to think about anything.” She waves the Tarot-card man away when he sets another cup of tea in front of her. “I told you I need your help. And I do.”

“So what do you want me to do?” Even though I block my ears with my hands, I can hear Eartha chanting, “Do, do, do, do, dupey do.” Over and over again. She even swings her skirt from side to side as if she were dancing a cha-cha.

I swear Eartha gets more juvenile every day, worse even than those second graders I used to teach the same things to, year after year, until the school board did away with phonics and refused to let the children sound out words anymore.

Finally Eartha seems to get tired of hearing herself and stops. When I drop my hands to the table and fold them, she says, “Don’t do, I don’t want you to do anything.” She spaces the words far apart and enunciates each one. “What I need is for you to just offer yourself up. Use your power. That’s all. Hear the birds. I know you can do it if you want, if you open your mind to silence, you will hear them sing their songs.”

Eartha stares at me, as if she’s said something profound, as if she’s giving directions for a test, as if she expects me to take her seriously. After all these years, I’ve certainly learned it’s better to humor Eartha, let her have her way. Even Roger knew that and he wasn’t what anyone would call a sensitive man.

Eartha points out one of the figures riding a llama. “Don’t you think that’s Roger? Now you can see why I couldn’t explain it last night. I had to show you.”

As I look where her finger points, the man on the skirt seems to move, take shape and reach out toward me. Must be this tea, I think, and push my cup and saucer to the middle of the table.

“Scared?” Eartha asks the question like a schoolyard dare. “Raises goose bumps on my arms when my Roger comes back to me. Last week his voice came to me. Woke me out of a sound sleep. Never could get much sleep when Roger was alive, what with his snoring and all.”

“Nonsense. You know this stuff is a bunch of hooey,” I tell her, reaching down and opening my purse for a tissue to dab my forehead. I can feel the pens and pencil, my wallet, my breath mints in all their normal places and the tissues that come out one at a time. I hunch over her skirt for a closer look at the man who seems to have climbed down from the llama and is drinking now from a tin cup. “You moved the hem,” I accuse her. She shakes her head at me and I just mutter, “Yes you did. You moved it.”

Eartha stares at the astrology chart on the wall, gets up to find Roger’s sign, traces the large circle holding her finger against a line. “Born on the cusp. See. That’s what I blame for Roger’s drink­ing problems. Sort of caught between signs, never knowing which side to come down on. Still, he was a good man.”

“Hogwash,” I say, “Roger did what he wanted, when he wanted and dragged you along. That man never appreciated what he had in you. Complain, complain, complain. That’s all he ever did.”

Tracing one of the multi-colored birds on her skirt, Eartha says, “Well, I wasn’t a saint, either. You never really knew him. We got along in our way. We had adventures. Always something new with Roger.” She tucks a loose strand of blue thread under the green head feathers of the bird and smiles. “I miss Roger. All these years and I miss him. I just know that’s why he comes back to me from time to time.”

The bird seems to spread its wings and lift its head. Its throat ripples and I hear musical notes. Must be this air conditioning after all the heat we’ve had this past week that makes me feel faint or maybe it’s time to get my eyes checked again. Over Eartha’s left shoulder I see the young woman pull aside the curtain and leave the room and walk past us into the afternoon heat.

“Eartha,” a voice calls from behind the curtain. “Eartha Bridgeway, it’s time now.”

Eartha stands as I grab at her hand and miss. “Sit down,” I tell her, but she doesn’t seem to hear me. “Sit down,” I say louder. But Eartha is already moving toward the curtain and I watch it draw behind her.

I order renewal tea from the man with the Tarot cards and he brings me a small ceramic tea­pot with matching cup and saucer. Looks translucent like real china. The pink cherry blossoms drip from the painted branches and robins rim the edge of the saucer, feathers puffed as if ready for flight. I pour the tea, even fill up Eartha’s cup. I drink slowly from my cup and listen to the silence of this room shut off from the outside sounds. I try to recall the noises I heard before entering this room: tires against pavement, pigeons screeching, teenagers and derelicts brushing against each other, sirens. All I can hear is the sound of myself swallowing.

Then, the chirp of a bird I do not recognize, have not heard before, lingers on the rim of my ear before sliding into my ear canal. I reach down and lift my purse to my lap, stroke the worn, famil­iar leather before opening it and removing a breath mint. I unwrap it and place it on top of my tongue. The mint melts there, dripping back into my throat and I swallow the sticky sweetness.

I conjure up an image of Roger sitting in Eartha’s seat. He drinks a beer straight from the can and smiles at me. “Go away,” I whisper, “before Eartha gets back.” But he sits there just smiling as I clutch my purse and snap and unsnap the clasp, enjoying the hard, metallic sound it makes as it closes. Roger cups his ear and waves his arms as if he’s conducting an orchestra and I hear birds screech like untuned violins.

Roger reaches out his hand to me. I push it away just like I did that night years ago when he came next door to my house drunk while Eartha was at one of her night school classes. Can’t even remember what she was taking that year. Could have been Egyptian history, algebra, or maybe even pottery-making. She was always studying something. Birds weren’t singing that night when he turned on the radio and tried to get me to dance. And me with my hair in curlers, wearing only my old white chenille bathrobe and having to get up early for classes the next morning, I needed my sleep. To get him to go, I had to dance one dance, a waltz, I think, and he kissed me on the cheek and whispered the only thing he said all the time he was there. I still remember his words, “You are Eartha’s other self.” Then he waggled his finger teasingly and said, “You shouldn’t let her have all the adventures,” before tripping on the step and falling sideways on the grass were he sat and laughed while I locked my door and went to bed. All these years and I’ve never told Eartha about that night.

I squint my eyes and watch Roger fade slowly, his smile the last to go, first the teeth and then the lips as the birds now sing in soft harmony. The Tarot-card man just keeps playing his cards and does not look up. Maybe I’m going crazy but the song seems to be a waltz, a smooth gliding sound in triple time. So delicate and graceful. Captivating. And, yes, romantic. I never much cared for waltzes before but this one seems different somehow. If only I could place the tune or name its title, I would feel better.

“Excuse me,” I say, walking over to the man laying out the cards. I wait for him to look up, before continuing in a voice loud enough to be heard over the music. “Do you know the name of that waltz?” The whole time I keep watch on my purse at the table even though there’s no one around to take it.

“Ah, the magician in a foundation position,” he says as he turns over a card. “Means you’re strong and can have anything you want.”

“The waltz?” he says, flipping over the next card in his hand. “Look at that. I just knew it would be the death card.”

“Please, then, would you mind turning off the radio or the tape or whatever you have going? It’s the same waltz playing over and over again and it’s getting on my nerves.”

“Nothing I can turn off,” he says, kneading the back of his neck. “No radio, no tape, no cassette, no nothing we’re playing. Maybe you could turn it off.” As he stares at me, I note that one of his eyes looks greener than the other, maybe even a slightly different color, more of a hazel in his right eye.

“Must be the hum of the air conditioner, then,” I say, shivering and wishing I had remembered to bring my pink sweater. The curtain is still down behind him and I wonder what Eartha is doing back there and who she’s doing it with. None of my business I tell myself and turn toward the table where I can still see my purse nestled against the table leg.

“Wait.” He puts his hand on my arm and I draw away instinctively. “Aren’t you curious about the death card? Most people are. They don’t even want to see it.”

If he thinks some card with a black-hooded character carrying a scythe is enough to scare me, he has another think coming. “Not really. It’s only a card,” is what I say aloud.

“More than a card,” he says as he scoops the card into a single stack. In that position, the death card is positive. Means birth and renewal, moving ahead in new directions. A very good card, in fact.” He looks behind him and sees that the curtain is still drawn. “Want me to read you before your friend comes out?”

“No, thanks. I can read myself.”

“Of course,” he says. “I know you have the power. You should use it more often.”

When I get back to the table, Roger is sitting in Eartha’s seat again with his arms positioned as if he were dancing. I wave my hand at him and he goes. None too soon, either, because I hear Eartha’s feet against the wooden floor before I see her lift the curtain and walk my way.

“Can we go now?” I ask before she sits down. I lift my purse from the floor and stand across from her. I watch as she rubs her left arm and sinks into her chair. “Are you okay?” I ask standing above her and then sit down again when she doesn’t answer. She just looks at me with that determined stare she gets when she wants me to do something I don’t want to.

“I won’t do it, whatever it is,” I tell her before she can say anything. “Let’s just get out of here.”

She reaches over absently and lifts my hand from my purse and holds it in hers, slowly rubbing up and over each knuckle. With her other hand she fingers the embroidery at the hem of her skirt. “You are my dearest friend, my only family since Roger passed away. You are me and I am you in so very many ways.” She stops to catch her breath and lets go of my hand.

“Oh, fiddlesticks,” I say, embarrassed since I’m not used to Eartha going on this way. And the waltz continues to play the unnamed tune. “You’re just tired. Did something get you upset? What happened in that room anyway?”

“Oh, no,” Eartha says. “Nothing happened that I didn’t expect. The woman read my palm while the birds sang their story. And you heard, too. I know you did. She said you summoned them. Said I should tell you. Said…”

“Tell me what? Why can’t you just get to the point, Eartha? Why do you prefer to go all the way around the block and to the intersection before telling me? Why can’t you just spit it out. Could save us both lots of time. And just for your information, I don’t hear things that aren’t there.”

“Still the impatient one, aren’t you? You always did like to get right to the bones, no padding no soft-peddling.” She takes a sip of the tea, cold by now, and then drains the cup, the same way she drank the white, chalky barium before her x-ray at St. John’s hospital last month. That’s why Roger keeps showing up. He’s as impatient as you are, always was,” she says with a quiet chuckle. “But that’s okay, I’m ready.”

“No, Eartha. You’re just imagining things. Can’t be as bad as you think. Is it your heart? Is that it?” I twist my fingers in the leather strap of my purse and hang on. “Is it something else? Modern medicine can work miracles, you know.”

“Doesn’t really matter,” she says. “I don’t want miracles. I want one last adventure. One last trip to Ecuador to hear the entire story that the birds sing. I want you to go with me.”

“You know I don’t like to fly. Just last night on the news I heard about a big plane crash. Metal everywhere. And people’s belongings just scattered across the ground.” I watch Roger take shape behind Eartha’s chair and put his two hands on her shoulders while he gives me that look he gave me when he came over to my house drunk that night so long ago.

“At the end of the month, we leave.” With a flourish, Eartha pulls two plane tickets from her jacket pocket and drops them in the middle of the table.

“If this is one of your tricks to get me to do something I don’t want to do, so help me Eartha, I’ll get back at you.” I read our names on the tickets to Ecuador and the dates. “We can’t spend a whole month there. What about my vegetable garden?” Although I must confess, the whole thing sounds exotic and madcap. A real adventure as Eartha would say. And why not? What has 71 years of being safe and predictable gotten me?

“What about it? What’s a vegetable garden next to hearing the birds sing? Maybe we can find you a skirt just like this one that Roger got me.”

“I already hear them singing and they’re driving me crazy,” I say, sticking my fingers in my ears, trying to block the sound.

“Ah, ha. Caught you.” She laughs her deep belly laugh so loud it drowns out the waltz for a moment. I catch the rhythm of her laugh and laugh until my whole body shakes and my purse falls to the floor. “See,” Eartha says, “you finally admit it. You have the power, just like I always knew.”

“Okay,” I agree. “If you go, I’ll go. After all, I can always buy my vegetables at the grocery store.” Sometimes I have to agree with her just to get her to calm down. If I change my mind, maybe she can get her money back for the tickets. And I can go to the doctor with her next time. Hear for myself the way things are.

The card-turning man is shuffling cards as we leave and doesn’t even look up as we move to the door, shut it behind us and blink in the bright afternoon sun, too hot and bright after that air conditioning. Eartha is so busy chattering on about all the things we’re going to do in Ecuador that she doesn’t even seem to notice the beads of sweat running in ripples down her cheeks, smearing her makeup.

“We forgot to call a cab before we left,” I say to Eartha who stops to rest in a shaded doorway of a shop.

“So, we’ll take the bus,” she says. “I always take the bus. Gives me company for the ride.” Eartha wipes her forehead with the hem of her skirt as she peers into the shop window.

“Eartha, that’s just plain indecent,” I say as I move in front of her to block the view of passers-by. Brushing the skirt from her hand, I see a tiny figure enlarge for a moment and then grow small again. “Here, let me brush this off your skirt. I think you’ve got something on it.” I raise the hem slightly and peer at the figure that looks like me. I’m standing by a tree with another woman who looks like Eartha. We’re holding baskets on our head. They look heavy, as if they’re filled with water, maybe even grain to bake into bread. As I bend closer, I see there’s only one woman. Maybe there always was only the one woman but I would have sworn there were two.

“Look,” Eartha says, pointing to the multi-colored woven purse with a shoulder strap in the window. “I saw those when Roger and I were in Ecuador. We must get one. It’ll make us feel like real world travelers.”

I follow her inside and turn to look above the door at the small bells that sway as the door opens to chime our arrival. “Oh, no,” I say, “Oh, no. My purse is gone. I left it at that other place. We’ve got to go get it now.” I feel naked without my purse, as if somehow my whole life has been misplaced.

“Too far,” Eartha says, “and too hot. We can call them when we get home and ask them to send it to you.”

“I’ve got everything in there. How could I ever replace everything?” I link my arm with Eartha’s. “It’s life or death. I’ve got to get it right now.”

“Nothing’s life or death,” Eartha laughs as she swings me around as if we were partners at a square dance. Eartha looks at her watch. “Besides, they close at 3:00. Door would be locked if we went back now.” She’s still holding the purse she was looking at and slips it over my shoulder. “Looks good,” she stands back and nods her head. “That one’s yours. Just look at all the purple, blue, violet. All shades. And the little people and birds woven around the band in the middle. Made for you.”

“What do the people and birds stand for?” Eartha asks the young girl behind the counter who looks odd with a tattooed butterfly on her hand that seems to move its wings when she spreads her hand.

“Who knows,” the girl says, popping her gum. “Do you wanna buy it?” I can’t take my eyes off the movement of the butterfly as the girl’s hand seems in constant movement: brushing lint off her black t-shirt, scratching a spot on her left arm, pushing the hair off her forehead, rubbing the glass counter where she leaves streaks.

“Those are from Ecuador, aren’t they?” Eartha asks and the girl nods without even looking. “We’re going there you know.” The girl doesn’t say anything, just rings up the two purses Eartha hands her and puts them in a large bag. I got the rust-colored earth tones for me,” Eartha says, looking behind her where I wait at the door.

All I can think about is getting my purse back from that card-playing man, wondering if he will look through all my photos, check all the zippered compartments, or take the money, not that I care about the money. I just can’t stand the thought of someone looking through my private things.

As we ride the bus back, Eartha keeps showing me the tickets and the purses and chatters on about what she and Roger did when they went to Ecuador and what she and I will do this time around. She keeps talking about finding the woman who made her skirt. I don’t even need to nod or say anything. I stare out the bus window thinking about my lost purse and watching the people and build­ings rush by even though I know we’re the ones moving as we’re cradled in the belly of this green and white bus.

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It’s been a hot summer and it’s still sizzling as I sit in this plane and say nothing when the busi­nessman’s arm bumps my elbow from the arm rest. I check again to make sure that my tickets and passport are in that blue and purple purse Eartha bought for me. I hold the purse in my lap against the skirt that Eartha gave me, the chartreuse skirt with the people and birds. I stroke the birds and tuck that same blue thread under the green head of one of the birds, just as Eartha had done a couple of months ago. Was that June? Seems like ages ago.

Even when she got really sick, Eartha wanted me to move up the flight dates so she could go with me to Ecuador. Not that I had made up my mind to go anyway but then I never had the heart to tell her that. Instead, I postponed our flight and took all the books the library had on Ecuador and read them to Eartha. We looked at the pictures together to decide where we wanted to go and where we didn’t. Neither of us really wanted to ride a llama but Eartha said that was something Roger would have absolutely wanted to do. We both laughed about Roger riding on a woolly-haired, cud-chewing beast since he wouldn’t ride anything but in his car at home, not even buses, which he had said made him nauseous.

When I had talked to Eartha’s doctors about putting her in the hospital again, they all agreed there was nothing else they could do for her. Not that they didn’t try all kinds of medication and even surgery at first until Eartha made them unhook her from all the machines and just stopped taking her medication so she could go home.

One day while we were looking through the books, Eartha had made me promise that I would go to Ecuador myself if she wasn’t well enough to go. I had promised. It was then that she insisted I take the chartreuse skirt. Even when I tried to refuse, she got up out of bed, pulled it from the hanger and handed it to me. “If it goes,” she said, “then I go with it.”

Whenever I finger the figures on the skirt, they move and grow with the heat from my hand. I find the man who looks like Roger and the woman who looks like Eartha. They are standing together on a tiny road with houses on both sides. The blue, green, and yellow birds are singing the same waltz again and the title comes to me just like that: “Blue Danube,” a crystal blue river you can float on through Germany, Hungary, Romania, and finally into the Black Sea.

The plane engines rev up, loud in my ears but not loud enough to drown out the song of the birds. This whole week, I had been dreading this moment when the plane readied itself and lifted its wheels from the ground. I probably would have backed out at the last minute if I wasn’t the kind of person who keeps her promises. Once I say I’m going to do something, I do it.

“First trip to South America?” the man beside me asks politely, removing his elbow from the armrest.

“My first flight anywhere,” I confess, remembering the library books still stacked on Eartha’s night stand, her empty bed stripped of sheets and my black purse that I told the card-playing man to just hold until next time I am there.

**Flash Fiction**

**Archeological Dig**

In my father’s garage, I uncover artifacts of his past lives—my third-grade math tests boxed with his wife’s valentines, Merrill Lynch statements filed back to the 1950s, his mother’s note when he escaped the Ohio farm and hitchhiked to Detroit, an empty box of Miracle Grow.

What I did not find spoke loudest.

**By the Book**

Muriel knew all the ways to get a man. After her fifth divorce at sixty-five, she knew how to get rid of them, too. She planned to write a book about it some day.

“Ed, over here. You’re in my grief support group,” Muriel called and pulled out a chair for him.

Ed stood stunned for a moment. “Edith wore her hair like yours. Same color,” Ed said. “And the locket. Just like the one I gave her years ago.”

Muriel leaned over, pulling the locket from between her rounded breasts and opening it to show a photo of a handsome man. “My former husband, a good man. Gone a year now.”

“Edith died a month ago,” Ed sniffled, leaning toward Muriel, holding the locket, viewing the photo inside.

Wanting to pull him closer, Muriel satisfied herself with his moist puffs of breath against her chest. She closed the locket gently, skimming his cold hand with her warm one.

Muriel blushed, smoothed her skirt. “Maybe I remind you of your wife.”

“No, that’s not it.” Ed paused and stared at Muriel. A steady stare, eyes narrowing slightly. Then he snapped his fingers. “That’s it. The hospital.”

“That’s okay,” Muriel soothed. It’s natural to associate new experiences with your wife. Every­one does it after a loss.”

Muriel picked up her pen, started to sign her name as group leader on the attendance sheet. The pen didn’t write. She flicked it with her fingers as if she were releasing air bubbles in a hypodermic needle.

Ed paled and began to shake as the overhead lights dimmed and then went out.

“There, there,” Muriel said. “It’s all right. Don’t be afraid.”

“You are the one,” Ed shouted, recognizing the soft voice of darkness. He scraped back his chair and grabbed where he thought her arm would be. “It’s her. I’m sure it’s her.”

The lights snapped on, showing Ed with a death grip on Muriel’s arm. “Let her go,” others in the group shouted before they saw the two police officers rushing forward to save Muriel from the new guy in the group, a madman for sure.

The taller police officer wrestled Muriel’s arms behind her, snapped on the cuffs and gave the standard warning. “Good job, Ed,” the officer said.

“Oh, Ed. You would have made a wonderful sixth husband,” Muriel said. “Edith didn’t have long anyway and you were both suffering.”

“The volunteer who was always putzing about Edith’s room,” Ed said. “That’s who you are. You stole her locket. You killed her.”

“I only borrowed the locket. You would have had it back when you married me.” Muriel’s voice was harsher than the soft one he had recognized in the dark. “Besides, it worked last time. Even this time it might have worked. You know, give us something in common.”

Muriel hated hearing Ed’s sobs. She knew in time he would have grown to love her. The good side, Muriel thought to herself, was that she would now have plenty of time to write her book.

**Charitable Visit**

Martha ran into the living room, a mouse trap dangling from her ring finger.

“There, there,” Reverend James soothed his wife as he freed her. “How ever do you get in these fixes?”

“Caught like a rat,” I answered, scratching my leg cast.

“We’ll pray for you,” Martha said, flashing the money from my lingerie drawer.

**A Comforting Woman**

When I poured that Speedway gasoline, all five gallons, into the yellow jacket nest down by the back gate, I never figured Erlene would get as fired up about those buzzing devils with stingers.

“You’re an old pig-headed fool, Timothy Morton,” Erlene said, bringing me to, by dumping a bucket of cold water on my head. “You never do listen. Told you to just let them be.”

“Thousands came at me, chased me around the cherry tree and back through your marigolds. They flew right up under my best flannel shirt.” I moaned, hoping she would make some allowances for good intentions.

“Indecent,” I mumbled through puffed lips as Erlene just yanked off my clothes every which way. “No!” I shrieked as she went for my boxer shorts.

“Don’t go thinking I’m after your old scrawny body,” she said, ripping cotton in her bare hands, tossing bits and pieces on the grass.

Above me, I could see the yellow jackets skedaddle, probably tuckered out from all that sting­ing and the sound of Erlene’s screeches. I rubbed my hands over the welts on my face, my arms, my legs, even places I wouldn’t have thought those dive bombers could find.

Erlene slapped my hands away. “Don’t be scratching those bites. Spreads the poison.” She eyed me up and down.

I felt again the long-ago desire when I married her quick-like in the Church of God, just like she wanted back in 1941.

Almost lost my arm flapping it out the window when I left on that bus for San Antonio and stayed until I was shipped out to places I had never been, rifle in hand.

My thoughts hopscotched back and forth. A whole swarm of kamikaze yellow jackets were after me. I couldn’t hide, couldn’t outrun them. I felt their bites like bits of shrapnel pierce my skin. I was dying.

“Don’t you pass out on me,” Erlene scolded. She yanked me up by an arm, got me stark naked into the truck. I rested my head against the window, heard the helicopters overhead.

Leave it to Erlene to push our old Chevy pickup truck to its limits, speeding, hitting every pothole, slamming on the brakes for that fool squirrel that sprinted across the road.

She could yank up old complaints by the bucketful from the well I dug over thirty years ago. “Never did have a lick of sense,” she started. She had plenty of proof. “You bought this old pickup for more than it was worth new, I swear. Did you listen to me when I warned you the new preacher’s wife was a gossip? Of course not. You had to go and tell her my sciatica was acting up and all those church women swarmed over my house cleaning and fixing what I didn’t want fixed. And that shed you insisted on building right up near the house with tar for the floor. Can’t even get my hoe out in sum­mer without my feet sticking. Could fry an egg on it, gets so hot. That is if we had any eggs. Darn fool hens won’t even lay half of what they did after you ordered that new cooling contraption from the cata­log. Makes so much noise, scares them to death. Believe me, I know how they feel about death. Thought you were dead for sure when I heard that old shotgun go off during deer season and found you hanging upside-down with your ankle caught in the crook of the apple tree. You were supposed to be getting apples for canning, not hunting poor defenseless things. So what, they eat our tomatoes? You won’t eat venison anyway ‘cause it messes up your bowels. And how could I ever forget…”

Erlene’s complaints were so familiar, I fell asleep, not even caring I was naked as the day I was born, not caring that melting ice dripped onto places that should never be frozen, not caring I was dying.

When she drove up in front of the county hospital, I had to admire the way she took charge. Told that guard exactly what to do. I knew how he must be feeling. Something real comforting about a woman who knew her own mind and never forgot anything.

**Disappearing Act**

Betty had no choice. She was losing parts of herself, bit by bit, sometimes a whole chunk. At 57, her bones were thinning. Her gall bladder, tonsils, appendix, uterus, a lump in the right breast, two teeth, strands of hair—all gone. Her disappearing act, she joked with Charles last night before he told her he could not leave his wife of forty years. He had no choice, he said; his wife counted on him.

Betty counted on no one except herself. All 300 pounds of her flesh anchored her to her lawn chair on her rotted front porch. Boards were broken, slanting down, missing. A chipped ceramic bowl rimmed in red and full of peapods from her garden rested in her lap. She snapped the first peapod like it was Charlie’s finger, the one that used to stroke the surgical scar on her breast. Then, she emptied the other peapods, setting up a rhythm—snap, snap, snap.

She adjusted her glasses, watched the demolition of the boarded-up house across the street as the wrecking ball swung at the roof, the walls, the very foundation. Once she dated a man who destroyed houses. She had been with all kinds of men—teachers, house painters, clerks, bikers—and they all fell through.

Crack, a board splintered under her. Then another until she dropped straight down, still sitting upright in her chair. Peas rolled like pinballs in her hair. She looked straight up through the porch to the right of the rotted gutters and all she saw was blue sky. Then she heard a bell, a pinball scoring the jackpot, as the bald head of a demolition worker peeked over the jagged boards and reached down to help her up.

**Driving Home**

At 65, Bernie lost his license. One too many times he got caught driving recklessly.

Still, Bernie needed to get places. He rode buses, drove stolen cars, caused accidents, and walked away.

When the stroke paralyzed Bernie’s legs, he begged, doctors prescribed, and Medicare approved his own electric cart—all chrome and zoom.

Bernie revved the motor, zipped off the top step into noise and darkness. No license required.

**For the Birds**

Bird poop slid down our picture windows, plopped on our heads as we ran to our cars, polka-dotted our sidewalks, filled our nostrils with its stench. Everyone blamed me. All because I helped Ms. Mannerly hang one bird feeder from her cherry tree.

How was I to know Ms. Mannerly wouldn’t stop with just one. She kept adding until I counted seventy-seven feeders. “One for each year of my life,” she giggled.

Holding an umbrella and covered in a garbage bag with eye holes, Bill Stringer came barging into my house covered with bird droppings. I dumped my microwaved beef dinner into the garbage and tried to explain that the situation wasn’t my fault.

Bill jabbed his garbage-bag finger at my chest. “You better make it stop or else.” Next thing I heard was the door slam.

My answering machine was full of nasty messages each day. Every one of my neighbors except Miss Mannerly played pranks, They filled paper bags full of bird crap, set them on my front porch one night and set them on fire. Must have been at least 30 bags. Ruined my best shoes stomping out those fire bags.

I had already called the Humane Society, the Rescue Mission, police, fire department, city council, fifteen lawyers, social services. Even called the minister of the Baptist church at the corner of our street. He offered to pray for me.

I was sick of birds. Ravens dive-bombed me every time I went outside while geese hissed at me and pigeons strutted up and down the sidewalks like they meant business. The seagulls swooped down to grab a chunk of bread and one even snatched my lunch bag from my hand yesterday.

When Miss Mannerly came over this morning, her white hair was dark from bird stuff and one raven feather stuck straight up at the back of her head. “For you,” she said, swooping a red-checked vinyl tablecloth off a domed wire cage. Inside was a parakeet, fluffing its powder blue feathers.

“The color of the June sky today,” Miss Mannerly said, setting the cage on my dining room table. “Birds, such lovely creatures. Yours will sing and talk, if you let it.”

“Good to see you taking an interest again in something, Miss Mannerly,” I said. I worried about her since she came home from the hospital this winter after her second heart attack. I took her chicken soup which she poured down the drain, tried to talk with her and she was silent, brought her fresh fruit which spoiled. I sat with her every day saying nothing.

“The birds bring me messages,” she said, leaning closer to me. “They tell me the sea is shrink­ing and our houses stand where birds once lived. I build them new houses and feed them until their feathers shine. They have no one but us,” she confided.

“Our family is too large,” I tell her. “Like good parents, we must let them go.”

“Go? I must protect my children,” Miss Mannerly sobbed and the parakeet screeched until I draped the tablecloth over the cage.

“We shall,” I promised, knowing then what to do.

After she left, I ordered the biggest rental truck available. Then I bought artificial grass, potted trees, netting, and pounds of bird seed.

When I had everything ready, I found Miss Mannerly under her cherry tree in her back yard. Birds sat in her lap, perched on her shoulder, huddled at her feet. “They love you,” I said, “and we have a treat for them, a special place. Remember the nature preserve where I took you last year for a picnic?”

I saw that the bird she was caressing was dead. “Bill Stringer’s cat got it,” Miss Mannerly explained. “Awful thing.”

“We will make the birds safe.”

I showed her the truck, the map, the birdseed. She smiled and the birds followed her up into the truck. She chose to ride in back with her family. It took us twenty trips over the next couple of weeks to set them free. Now, we’re both busy cleaning up the neighborhood.

**Luck Rode My Shoulder**

When the ATM ate my card at midnight, I kicked that heap of metal twice and drew back for a third kick when those twenties spewed out of the slot like advertisements for how-to-get-rich-quick schemes.

“About time I had some luck,” I muttered into the moonless night while cramming my pockets with Andrew Jackson faces.

Until now, it had been a typical day. My boss at McDonald’s fired me for sassing a customer, my boyfriend took the last $20 from my purse for booze, my fat-butt landlord threatened to padlock my door and my kid’s high school math teacher called her slow just because she didn’t like the algebra alphabet of unknowns instead of real numbers.

Now, luck was riding my shoulder and I wasn’t about to hand out any transfers. My kid and I hooked up at Bob’s Big Boy. Over double burgers, vanilla shakes, and onion rings, my kid came up with a plan that would take us places we had never been.

Over the next week, my kid and I got makeovers, the whole shebang—face, hair, nails, clothes. We looked like any suburban mom and daughter treating ourselves to whatever struck our fancy. Our disguises fooled even us.

When we spent our last Andy, we sauntered into Comerica as natural as you please, waited our turn in line, wiggled our fists in our jacket pockets like we had guns and told that smiling cashier to fill our Sak’s bag with green—and with shaking hands, she did.

On television news that night, we admired our own blurry photos. We hardly recognized our­selves. Wonder what my kid’s math teacher would say if he knew she planned the whole caper.

The next five years, we jumped up, down, and across every state, stopping long enough to visit a few banks. We pasted our photos and stories into a scrapbook we carried with us. Luck continued to ride my shoulder like a Great Dane—sleek, loyal, pedigreed, and smart enough to sniff out money.

**A Man’s Best Friend**

Mary read the personals to Spirit, her gray terrier. “Men want too much,” Mary sighed. “They want you—long walks, devotion, loyalty, unconditional love.”

With Spirit licking her hand, Mary answered Macho Man’s ad.

Macho Man responded, asking Spirit for a coffee date, demanding she leave the unruly Mary at home where dogs belong.

**The Numbers Game**

Jim Palonko never asked for a spirit guide, never wanted those little balls of words pinging against his eardrum like some jazz improvisation. He never knew what was coming next, which note would rumble and shake the very chair where he sat. Like that spirit guide was boss. Like Jim would do what he was told even though the swooshing in his ears hurt deep down where he could not itch. He could not add the columns of figures in front of him. Yet, he knew his real boss was waiting for the number, the total of all. That final number.

Don’t think Jim Palonko did not know numbers. He did. They had been drummed into him at Walsh College where he went when his father paid for him to be an accountant, which he did not want to be. Unlike his father, Jim Palonko did not believe in the power of money or of CPAs. He did not know what he believed in but it wasn’t numbers.

Still, he became a numbers man stuck in a cubicle adding figures for twenty years. Today, he knew what he wanted. He would fix his spirit guide who set up house in his ear last year. He had a plan. He powered up his cassette player, turned it up full volume to Muddy Rivers. So loud the other voice was silenced. Then he lowered the volume, decibel by decibel, until there was almost silence when he removed his earphones, set them on his chair and walked away.

When he looked back, there was another man sitting in his chair. This man had a shape, hummed a few bars of those pinging words that used to roll around in his ear like seven zeros.

**Performance Art**

Women loved Oliver. Oliver loved women but not himself. Oliver edited his image, hired a PR agent. Olivia got her start pounding drums in an all-girl band every Saturday downtown.

**Playing for Love**

I can’t believe I just heard that. Not again. But Ben lobs last night’s phrase at me once more during our tennis match: “Irreconcilable differences.”

What does he know about differences, about how he seems to crawl inside the television to watch tennis matches, baseball, football, golf, even bowling. All those balls, games won and lost. Never hears me, never pays me one bit of attention. I could be anywhere, do anything. At least, that’s what I had counted on.

My return is out-of-bounds. “Irreconcilable differences?” All those rolling “r’s” send the yellow ball wobbling over the net, curving, landing just outside the chalk with a soft plop.

Ben strides to the line, flips the ball up with his racket, raises his arm, and serves. “That’s what I said, ‘Irreconcilable differences.’”

That ball slams into my gut and I’m down flat on the concrete, wind knocked right out of me. Maybe it’s the summer heat, over 100 degrees today in Phoenix. I rise from the fire, questions flaming and burning my mouth.

“Who says?”

“I say.” He sweeps his racket from right to left, pointing out the empty courts and taut nets. “See anyone else?”

“No one else dumb enough to play in hell.”

“Anything can be reconciled. Give and take makes the ball bounce,” I plead as Ben turns his back, pulls at the crotch of his white shorts.

Silence. That red globe of sun beats down on both of us at high noon, Ben’s favorite time to play. A good workout, he used to say when we were first married seven years ago. Since then, we’ve sweated in our bed, the air conditioner going full blast, stained sheets twisting beneath our bodies.

“Dick, Harry, Tom. Then, Sam,” Ben chants, tapping his racket against concrete in beat with each name. “Working through the alphabet?” He admires the ball before he swings.

The ball hits my chest like a massive heart attack. I scream, fall, and curl up, a small ball of myself.

“Sam. My tennis partner for more years than I’ve known you,” Ben shouts, walking around the net toward me. “Every year we win the doubles trophy.”

With each footstep, Ben curses, then stops. From now on, it’s singles for me.” He sighs twice. “This is a new game, sweetheart. Forty-love. Next point, I win.”

I smell Ben’s sweat. I hear the whoosh of his tennis racket through dry, desert air. Up, then down. Metal edge against my skin. I hear him speak or it may be me spitting out that phrase, “Irreconcilable differences.” Each syllable pulses hot, moist as a forbidden kiss. I can’t believe I heard that. Again.

**Rub Out**

“Call me despot, will he? That puny accountant,” Gina’s boss shrieks, “Bring me all the erasers.” A few swipes. His name disappears from the floor plan.

“Don’t,” Gina pleads. She loves that puny guy who is no more.

“Now all men. Only holes in the plan.” She caresses her blood-red nails.

Gina draws the last eraser hidden in her bra.

Rub-a-dub, the boss’s name is gone.

**Sharing Space**

Sam told Rachel he had to work late tonight and wouldn’t be able to see her. She chuckled.

Sam didn’t know that when Rachel meditated, she went outside herself, not inside. Tonight she winged over rooftops, bounced off stars, zipped through storm clouds, her third eye focused on her lover, Sam, a family man.

On the back of her retina, Sam was upside-down, his arm around his wife watching a comedy show, not laughing. Rachel’s eye flipped the married couple right-side-up in her mind and back again. She turned them like glass fragments in a kaleidoscope, shifting their jagged edges in the show she directed.

“Nothing’s wrong,” Sam said, removing his arm from his wife’s shoulder and wiping his fore­head with a tissue.

“I didn’t ask,” his wife retorted, narrowing her eyes as the man on the sitcom broke an heir­loom vase practicing new tango steps. The actor stuffed pieces of the broken glass vase in his jeans pocket.

“Men think they can get away with anything.” When the glass poked through the denim and cut flesh, his wife laughed. “He better watch out what he slices.”

“What?” Sam snapped, reaching for the remote control.

“Oh, no you don’t.” She held the control in her fist. “Just because you don’t want to see it, doesn’t mean I can’t.”

When Sam sniffed, he smelled Rachel’s White Shoulder perfume as if she were sitting on his lap, caressing his chest, reaching into his pockets. Sam held his breath, not wanting to speak.

“I don’t smell anything,” his wife said, as if Sam had spoken aloud.

“Hear the wind chimes?” Sam recalled Rachel’s wind chimes hanging all over her house, knew they bumped together in the slightest breeze making a tinkling sound that always startled him.

“We don’t have wind chimes,” his wife said as the actor on TV sat at the Formica kitchen table. He was trying to glue the vase back together so his wife wouldn’t know he broke it. “Won’t work,” his wife predicted.

“Might,” Sam said, even though he was no good at repair work.

“No way,” Rachel whispered in Sam’s right ear.

Sam jumped up from the couch, his eyes darting everywhere. Blood dripped down his leg as if he had opened old wounds and let them flow freely. He limped toward the bathroom. Slivers of glass dropped from his pocket, left a trail from where he started to where he ended up.

“You’re making a mess,” his wife scolded. She chortled at the guy in the sitcom who had glued his fingers to the broken glass.

Sam’s wife took one deep breath after another trying to name the perfume filling her living room, scenting her space with another woman. “Sam,” she screeched.

Rachel winked her third eye. This production was a wrap. She turned the kaleidoscope once more, wondered where the glass chips would fall.

**Still a Novice:   
The Mystery Food Reviewer at Work**

I have my scruples, you know. Even for a hundred dollars, I won’t whisper my name in your ear or write it on your hand. No way will I confess where I’ve been or where I’m going. At least, not to you I won’t. Not to any of you.

But who I am is not really an issue since none of you even ask. You pass within an inch of me. Yet, you dare say nothing. You avert your eyes and pull your wool coats around your necks on this cold night when the chill wind skitters across the river.

Tonight I hunger for warmth, for comfort food, for Northern Italian cuisine, either Chicken Piccata or Fettuccine Gabriella, something different from the authentic Nepal dishes I indulged in last night. I can still savor the manakamana sekuwa cooked in the Tandoor oven, even though the lamb chops were a bit leathery and the Himalayan spices scorched my tongue.

Actually, it is quite cozy by the foot of the dumpster where I dine. I insist on smoothing out my white linen tablecloth on the concrete behind the fancy schmantzy restaurant, the trendy place where those in the know order dishes such as Provimi Veal chops or Veal Saltimbocca.

I set my place with my grandmother’s china, crystal glasses and silverware. I slip on plastic gloves and an apron to sort through the food placed into the dumpster. I uncover small servings of chargrilled lamb chops, broiled salmon, medallions of veal, lasagna verde alla Bolognese—and finally, a bit of chicken piccata nestled against a crumpled brown bag. My saliva glands work overtime as I scoop it onto my plate and position it just right.

Each bite ignites my taste buds. The chicken breast is moist and flaky. The capers are pungent, strong enough to make their presence known. The baby artichokes are too grown up, too full of them­selves, too overwhelming.

You can expect attentive service with a starlight atmosphere if you accept alternative seating. It’s worth the price. Only eleven pages remain in the spiral notebook which I pull out of my coat pocket along with a stubby pencil with no eraser. Getting down to work, I fill the lines with words, the more words the better. Words like *capers, mushrooms, potatoes, tomatoes, carrots* sprout across the lines, straight rows of words fresh as just-pulled scallions.

Read my words carefully. After all, I get paid for each one. Don’t ask my name or look for me where you think I might be found munching on a melon. I must dine invisibly until I earn enough to eat inside.

**Takin’ Care of Business**

“You,” I shout to my buddy who’s goin’ up the fire escape two steps at a time. “A big rat got you runnin’ scared, Sinker?”

“No rodent gonna take a bite of me. Got me, Skintight?” He throws his laugh down those iron steps so hard it bounce off the rust and shatter on my shaved head stickin’ out the third floor window.

I let Sinker have some time alone on the roof with his weeds. He don’t like being bothered when he’s tendin’ to business.

I wait ‘til the sun drops some more in the sky before tip-tappin’ up after him. Don’t know one sneak up on Sinker without payin’ so I start whistlin’ and snappin’ my fingers to make myself known.

Sinker’s one of them big dudes. Everyone know Sinker and no one mess with him. If he just sits on ‘em, they count ‘emselves gone. Ya know what I’m sayin’?

“Who you be talkin’ to? Ya goin’ crazy on me, Skintight?” He punch me hard in the head. “Here, go hang these weeds.”

I done like he said cause we was friends. “Wanna go get us some of them catfish from the River tomorrow? Have us a down home fishfry?”

“Ain’t had me none of them since last month,” Sinker said, wipin’ sweat from his head. “Cooler there by the Deee-troit River. Let’s go.”

“Tomorrow,” I says as the sun drop further and the moon start climbin’. “Don’t have our rods,” I remind him.

“Makes no nevermind. We borrow some rods,” and he laughs like mama’s boyfriend.

When we gets down there, Sinker grab us two rods right off. No one says nothin’. They knows what’s good for ‘em. We catch us some big suckers before everything falls apart. You knows how that happens. Everything sweet like sugar. Then, bam—and it all falls apart. That’s how this went.

Sinker snatch that hook out of the fish mouth. Then, he get all wrapped up in the line. Then come the fall. A really big splash cause Sinker a big sucker himself. I never swim before but I jump in after my friend. My hand grab the wood stickin’ up. I don’t mean to hold on but no way can I get my fingers unstuck.

“Over here, Sinker.” Then I spot the big rat just sittin’ on the wood above me. He watchin’ like he want to jump in after Sinker. But that rat just sit there, raise his paw almos’ like he tellin’ time.

Sinker kick best he can but he go down and come up with a mouth full of dirty water. That rat just lick his pay like nothin’ happennin’. I reach out my hand to Sinker but he go down and don’t come up again.

Ain’t no one else to watch Sinker’s weeds but me. Sinker would be proud. I takes good care of ‘em.

**Temptation**

There is no Agatha Christie story. Not even a novel by that woman who sleuths by alphabet. No Sam Spades required. Just a simple mystery.

Who ate that last chocolate-covered cherry?

Not ants who cannot carry boxes. Only you, my love. While I slept, you saved me from myself, from craven, calorie-laden lust.

**That’s Who I Am**

You may not know my name but you’ve seen me around. I’m the guy you know from some­place but can’t quite remember, the one you smile and wave at because I may be a neighbor, the clerk at Home Depot, the man with six children you see at church on Sundays, or even someone famous.

On my way home from the Engine Plant, I yield the right-of-way, avoid orange construction barrels on Telegraph, watch my speed, keep six car lengths from the Explorer. In my rearview mirror, I glimpse a Harley weaving in and out of traffic, spraying rocks as it swerves onto the shoulder and back onto the rutted road. That hog closes the distance between us. I see the helmeted driver hunched forward as the front tire nudges my bumper. Crowds me, just like my supervisor did all day. That supervisor’s mouth is full of rotten teeth and brown words.

When the stoplight ahead turns yellow, I speed up, then slam on my brakes. That hog smashes me, falls on its side. The rider raises his face shield. Blood streaks his lips and I confess: “If I could ride a Harley, top speed on a straightway, I wouldn’t wear a helmet.”

He asks my name.

**White Sunfire**

“You might call it entrapment,” Danielle said as we stumbled over curbs, beer cans, broken pavement, marking our way to her gallery exhibit in a renovated loft on Michigan Avenue. “At least that’s how the *Art News* critic labeled the pieces.”

I never knew what to expect from Danielle’s work, I thought as she snatched up a shard of green glass and peered through it.

“Leprechauns, drunks, tulip stems,” Danielle mused. “An emerald abandoned on these Detroit streets for me.”

“How will you use it?” I was curious. I wondered if she knew, if she ever moved in one direc­tion like I did. I thought of myself as heading east, across an ocean and toward temples of gold where the soul could rest. Not a vacation but a past life where I knew who I was and what I wanted.

“When it speaks to me of greenness, then I will know.” She held the dirty piece of glass to her ear before rubbing it clean against her sleeve. “Ah, such tales are melted in green.”

As we moved along, Danielle stuffed her pockets with found cash register receipts, pebbles, bottle caps, pens, cigarette butts, and objects lying in the gutter waiting for her to snatch them up, rescue them. She turned these objects into art, into pulsating power that grabbed you around the neck and wouldn’t let go.

In the autumn dusk, I was confused by these city streets as Danielle cut through alleys, turned corners in a neighborhood I did not recognize. I shivered, hoping people we passed did not know I was lost and dependent on my artist friend to get us where we were going.

When Danielle touched my arm, I jumped, startled at the warmth of her hand through my jacket.

“Here, Danielle said, pointing to the gallery sign. Its name, Aloft, was painted in gold script on a forest green background.

The freight elevator had brass grillwork, polished to a sheen that blinded me momentarily. Danielle pushed the button and the grille parted. Then, green elevator doors opened. Slowly, we rose in a jerky motion that threw me off balance.

When the doors opened again all I saw was stark white. Nothing but white walls and one white canvas hung on a pillar in front of us.

“Come on,” Danielle urged, guiding me past the pillar and inside the huge room. “What do you see?”

“White,” I stammered. “Lots of white.”

“Over here. Look at this canvas,” Danielle directed. “This one was done for you, my friend.”

As I stared at the whiteness, I began to see brush strokes. Then the texture, the shapes covered with white. “There,” I said, “A matchbook, I think.”

“To light your way.” Danielle laughed. “The dark scares you.”

“Never did,” I argued. I began to see more, at least I thought I did. “A light bulb, a stick, a lighter, a flare, and the shape of the sun.”

“Yes.” Danielle spoke softly. “You see. Keep going.”

The painting pulled me closer and closer until my face pressed against it. “Color,” I whispered. “Yes, gold, full of yellow, orange, red fire.” My face flushed with heat. I felt drowsy, peaceful as if I were in a safe place I had never been. “Enchanted work,” I could hear myself tell her. “Your very best ever.”

“For you, my friend,” Danielle said. “I listen. I paint your dream over with white. You see with your own eyes how it is love I paint, not entrapment.”