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♡ DEAD WIFE STORIES ♡

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Thank You:

KG

MI

mom & dad

marge

&

all the kitties



"Welcome to *White Terrace*"

Our naughty gated garden home where
someone has heightened surveillance, keeping notes
they've neatly coded cryptic, assembled into colored threads:
 five murders, five wives
 filed by five colors
 (aligned to rainbow in succession)

Now you are poised to sort thru + to solve our endearing local mysteries, if
you care to, as we & the dead sink muzzles into the TV screaming against
the intrusion of another year...

Every particle of coincidence scintillates especially for you.
Read carefully!

♡DEAD WIFE STORIES♡

FOREWORD

A floral echo on DVD cellophaned and televised
with her* jewelry pixxxilated and on record
outside the abattoir, inventoried
like artillery

every soft & supine cavity moist & poised on the table
WHITE DIAMONDS satin body talc (3.0 oz, \$21)
to suppress solvents,
to trace the lip and ventilate to lifelike
her* nostrils cottoned soaked thick with insecticide

(note: supplemental injections provisional for
appendages injured infested or putrescent;
see index for FAQ, troubleshooting tips)

"the features set" –
crystal Swarovski rhinestones sutured
along the trench of each eyelash,
axillary sewer-structures glittered crisp with ethanol,

then: parceled w/ lilies and issued as ornament
waving muted mouthed
towards her* exoteric electric rampart of topiary
(the patio strung with x-mas lights year-round, happily)
cyan or fuchsia or mint fluorescence flowered smelling
like plague
like cats wailing

Something quivers sinister stalking this cul-de-sac:

* ("her" is all five in this instance, each a stand-in for another)

the invitations delivered from KopyKat printed in
her choice lavender & jet, on glossy cardstock
to be lace-trimmed and crept into mailboxes after 7 pm
when walking the dog(s)

(a week to RSVP // to categorize appetizers & shop plastic-ware)



:youmustbeeatingsomuchnowadays\
:ialwaysfeelhungrytosomeextentyouknow\
:

she cannot take the dog(s) out anymore

vasculature resonant to vivisect proclivity
vexed, prehelmed to hemorrhage
results extend to a thin vessel catering
an ectopic upswell w/ the ease of astringent

“But he says she ate part of the newborn’s brain and bit off
three of his toes before stabbing herself twice” (USATODAY.com in News)

...the right to make modifications as we are woke when the smell of the sauce
bubbling in the microwave as big as a

List of Objects Dropped on New Year’ s Eve...

Mobile AL – a giant electric Moon Pie
Fayetteville AR – a hog
Flagstaff AZ – a pinecone
Pensacola FL – a pelican
Sarasota FL – a pineapple
McDonough GA – Nugget Drop at Truett’s Grill
Des Plaines IL – a diamond
Vincennes IN – watermelons
Havre de Grace MD – a wooden duck
Eastport ME – a sardine
Winterport ME – Nana Del’s Peanut Butter Cookies
Brasstown NC – a live opossum in a cage
Elmore OH – a sausage
Port Clinton OH – a walleye fish named “Captain Wylie Walleye”

(CONT →)

Beavertown PA – a beaver
 Bethlehem PA – a giant Peep
 Lebanon PA – a 100-lb stick of Lebanon bologna
 Seven Valleys PA – a broasted chicken
 Plymouth WI – a big cheese
 Prairie du Chien WI – a carp

but nothing like that happens here
 > we depreciate, distend, ticketing dire tints to distillates

~~pigs in blankets for everyone over 5 years and~~
~~she looks like she's swallowed a watermelon whole~~
~~like that's not very nice~~
~~but~~

she's gotten so big heavy round + hungry

a ripeness docked across revulsions, its metastatic concavity
 disentombed from the cervix, sores infectious, **overexposed**,
 this surface particular punishing for a woman once appraised as viable: her cavity
 wrenched
 and endlessly
 consumptive like a gullet

(all the rest is receded, the cranial partition to contour, systemically bound)

"that's a very standard part of the process" ---- "and soon you'll have a
 beautiful baby boy or girl of your own" [THE DOKTOR WITHDRAWN BEYOND VINYL]

THEN: those four years spent suckling mares
 foals scattered parentless across the country nursing colic
 as she nurses leakage from better mothers
 eating everyone

NOW: excreting all-smiles and public warmth
 with repeated assurance of coded clones
 a **boviform** obstruction of mobility ➡
 the dog(s) look betrayed as if drowned on the carpet
 eating popcorn and bloating ~~just like mommy~~
 barking @

Dick Clark on TV vivified by a machination electromagnetic
an engine, or Ryan Seacrest with a wheel beneath the desk

Our friends barking at Dick Clark on TV fingers slotted through pretzels wearing them as rings
All fifteen in party hats interrogating the dogs - "When will cake be served?"

:cake?

///she swells, is full, a timeline implanted divides and she devours it

Week 1 ■ Why do I maintain sentiment close to going to throw up?
Week 2 ■ As long as she **eats** properly — and as long as her doctor is
 not ... more: video
Week 3 > > rigor extrudes ulcerous and seeping into non-vacancies
 a valve prolapsed to sunder mutiny,
 this lust acidic past fixing.

her appetite incites the bite and it is becoming her and not its own thing
(WHICH THING IS MINE TOO - - -) and i gotta
worsen the third heart sound, fourth heart sound (a murmur)
adnascent dermis charred on left intercostal raced radiating to process and
accompanied by palpable disinterment:
the baby desquamated in residence
it' s worse, candent with acute corrosives

:honey are you going to bring the cake out?
:be a good little puppy and microwave this

(so simpered)

1995-1998— The Ball gets computerized, aluminum coated, rhinestone, and has
a strobe light system. \displayed now at the WATERFORD CRYSTALL FACTORY //
as a symbol to salute the 100 million at home with

she needs to split, considered throttle-thick with debasement
& Big as a house*!!

* bigger, actually, than this house

Past Midnight...

1098765432 ❶

Coagulation softened by the vermicular interior of her.
Pretzels sucked off the floor by the nervous dog(s),
[phobic](#) of blood, inconsolable.



IN 1994, DONALD TRUMP AND EX-WIFE IVANA TRUMP STARRED IN A COMMERCIAL.
THE COMMERCIAL TERMINATED REVEALING IVANA TRUMP ASKING FOR THE LAST SLICE,
TO WHICH DONALD RESPONDED, "ACTUALLY DEAR, YOU'RE ONLY ENTITLED TO HALF"

before the incision is made

(with distinctive roof) typical of U.S. Pizza Hut

the P'ZONE returns!, sweetened, wholly prescient of PIZZA * PASTA * DESSERTS
breadsticks & salad bar - "Dippin' Strips pizza]]" and the **stuffed** crust...

as a traditional pizzeria, one slice of PIZZA HUT pepperoni pizza
weighs 96 grams. + Buffalo wings and *all kinds of fun*.

the stuffed crust cheese stuffed not directly into the crust but injected or pumped
intramuscularly to eschew clotting

Actually, Dear:

*your treatment aligned to finesse, as ageless,
only the pulp of familial meats sweating under sediment
entrusted to an altered cry, the title indefinite, identified
through illness to paralysis: a smile colonized
w/ toxins half-bred as parasitic.*

Yours **Forever**.

***** my world would end if

-IF EVER A MAN HAS LOVED HIS WIFE

-proof: Whitman's Sampler®? (40 Oz)

-3 cherry cordials per box, in either dark or milk chocolate (or sugar-free)

(the best yet!!!) sentimentally: a requiem in units of whole blood

if freshness could linger warranted under her fingernails

~ she: a newborn nurse

seafood muscled between her lip, fattened// and/ or// greased

then if I ever loved her I still would.

Collagen in fibrous sheets sliced and needled into drooped socket

from tendons ligament & skin

lavishly resident in cornea, cartilage, bone, blood vessels, & intervertebral disc

she, synthesized,

irreversibly.

now nothing other than

interstitial fluid denatured

and boxed as JELL-O

even though there's still that crown
& sash in the bureau underneath her
Victoria's Secret, those old photos** of
her

There is a failing along the filament

ALTHOUGH:

aging is irreversible, several infirmities of ☹ (the first, teratogenic)

require her needs *may* solidify. The operational blood outcome - -

**A) In which she wears a neon bikini and lazes cross-legged on the lawn. Near the pool.

**B) In which she climbs into the Buick her skirt windblown. Leaving for a date.

**C) In which her face in close-up is revealed ten years less lined. Impossibly static.

Does Surgeon want to continue the Blood Exsanguination procedure? > Yes

> No

(2 large Xtra cheese pizzas and breadsticks and a 2-liter Mountain Dew)

+ ①Infectious Waste Bag, 20 gallon; ②Hard Surface Disinfectant and Virucide Solution; ③Sterile Latex Exam Gloves; ④Surgical Scalpel, **Stainless Steel**, #11 -

:Not much of a Valentine's day for you, am-I-rite, Doktor?

:

and it must be unwound to be redeemed.

The animal has no pulse motionless on the stainless steel table. Its blood is drained and stored in a canister, replaced with a chilled saline solution. The animal will remain in this state for approx. two hours and then the blood will be heated and recirculated into the body. The animal is then alive again - the heart beats - and breathing and most of the animals do not suffer any type of permanent brain or organ damage.

also please refer to the case of the woman submerged frozen for 80 minutes who eventually made a total recovery (Jorgenholm, Hilda)
and assorted nematodes (i.e. *C. elegans*, vermiform, fluid-filled)

"What Wunnerful Heartache"

...\\...

a clean cut,
a senescence deferred :: we are suggesting that the alternative to this is death
:I'D NEVER WANT TO GROW OLD WITH ANYONE

" ■■■■ "

she looks like new on lace
yellow hair combed, pinned
and he got her favorites, Queen Anne Cordials
a dozen roses
and he bought a lot of ice

Observed are two raised pyramidal growths, cleaving his perineum not malignant but something pinkish as it swells over the skylight.



On inspection post-appearance, no indication of:

- calcium spur
- polyp
- cyst
- tumor
- rogue bone nodule

This could be FOLLICULITUS. This may be ROSACEA. These could be INSECT BITES.
call your doktor. try an antihistamine, & apply a cool compress to the site of distress

(these things happen to everybody)

-but that's why we listen

she's in the kitchen she cannot hear anything he is

watching 48 Hours

he will not consume microwaved foods

he will not stand too near to telephone poles

the voices visible there, hovering, trigger a motion inside.

-but listen:

We discern no personal element

only this timeless, superstitious flare:

a coursing of horror so neatly implanted, detected as outward interior, scarred

with a tendency to insulate tremors between phrases

Timeline

(6 pm, Tuesday) She is in Aisle 11 buying fun-size Snickers® and Kit Kat® bars.

(8 pm, Tuesday) She is changing bloody undergarments in the Friendly®'s restroom.

(11:30 pm, Tuesday) There is a blue movement seeping through the skylight. He is...

??don't see what you're looking for?? Let Us Assist You

(7 am, Wednesday) She is helping the kids into their costumes for school.

(5 pm, Wednesday) They are putting out the pumpkins and she is waving away the kids into the semi-dark and the dog is eating the candy corn from the dish in the dining room.

(12 am, Thursday) He is walking her to Secret Lake. There is a blue movement seeping through.

HALLOWEEN BLUE MOONS IN THE 20th CENTURY

~1906 ~1925 ~1945 ~1955 ~1974 (in the UK only)

~predicted for ◇ ◇

XXXXXXX says:

October 13. @ 3:55 am

we can see pleiades with our naked eye during nighttime and it looks like a rosary,

blue and "fully visible on the night the world will end"

it looks like

(an *invertebrate* blessing of token veracity)

+++++

REALITY MAY INCLUDE FACTORS OF DEBT WE NEVER CONSIDERED

A GLOSSED INTERSTICE
RISEN
AS SHE ENTERS

after a few moments

//

each orbit elaborately rendered a protraction

//

(12:02 am, Thursday) This is time that never passed.



Maybe it's time. I had a dog just like her once.
A stray, palpable liver dysfunction,
But "haven't I made a difference for that dog?"

At half-past one we dined: had a very good
dinner of soup, corned beef, pancakes, hard
crackers, cheesecake, whipped cream,
coleslaw, grilled shrimp, grilled pork chop,
pickles, canned gravy, pudding, rotisserie
chicken, garlic bread, waffles, Vermont
cheddar cheese, sour cream, pumpkin pie,
Swedish meatballs, green bean casserole,
king crab legs, cream cheese, fettuccine alfredo,
baked beans, sloppy joes, mustard, peanut brittle,
cranberry sauce, French toast, beef chili,
manicotti, egg salad, clam chowder,
beef jerky, peach cobbler, etc.
In summary, delicious and nutritious
Thanksgiving Food.

and she answers w/
...hello, precious one...
we credit that: "Uncanny!"
TV Guide!

Plus, she also always knows what's
coming next
on the TV, but
we've never even subscribed to
TV Guide!
like subsiding into her thigh
softly, softly
"like a featherbed"
VHS tape snaking incisor, bicuspid
calls come in,
its mouth parallel to her throat as the
with the VCR gorging her
the way she rests now
There is no end to this fantasy, only

You felt as **happy** as I did
when she stopped gagging at
the site of deli meat.

Adipocytes, palatial,
frosted white btwn viscera
so she warms well pressed to the phones
with each wasp arching tenuous thorax
to her touch, "sweet as housecats."
Just like Anna Nicole Smith,
we saw her once on Swedish television

Want a perfect life w/ a perfect wife?
WANT TO SEE MY INNOCENT WIFE
PICS??

/comments of interest\
: watch those beauteous gams crumble
beneath her, house-of-cards-like
: those stretched-out pitbull-gams are
making my tighty-whiteys grow
exponentially !!
: we're proud, and we want to oggle yr
gams, ham gams, sugar sweet glam gams

So we view the bride. We are at peace
w/ the presentation of meat. We acquire
the marriage license

she envisions an infinite velvet ➡

How to Cook a Turkey//

How to Cook a Thanksgiving Turkey//

Perfect Turkey Every Time « you are here

know the actual weight on the turkey excluding giblets and the ice many fresh turkeys have stuffed inside them to keep them cold. It was cooked uncovered, you can see the skin "sealed" the white meat unbelievably moist and tender. You just want to be able to slip your hand between the skin and the breast meat. Rub melted butter on the breast, you might want to use a rubber glove. The only way to be absolutely sure is to stroke the thigh meat, the interior breast. Just a little bit to be sure.

The crux of this occultism

incubating in **suspended** skin

a solidity which resists resuscitation:

she is viscous.

She encloses mysteries like yeast

itching under each descendent lobe,

arcane inflammation anesthetic as

the panniculus* is sown a garland of prophecy,

herniating into dreams

The macilent
animal, like my
former dog,
ardently
consumes.
It was
beautiful!
I mean, look
at her
strange,
fetishistic
obsession
with the Olive
Garden®.

BALLOON INTRODUCTIONS to the MACY'S DAY THANKSGIVING PARADE during the 1980s...

1988: Nestle® Nesquik® Bunny

1987: Ronald McDonald, Snuggle Bear, Ice Cream Cone Novelty Balloon

1986: Baby Shamu

1985: Betty Boop

1984: Garfield, Raggedy Ann

● "falloon" = (balloon + float)

● "balloonicle" = (balloon + vehicle)

Falloon// Balloonicle additions to the parade

include: Jello®, Buddy from Pets.com, Rudolf, Energizer

Bunny®

Creamed Peas with Bacon

"YUMMY!"

Ingredients

8 slices bacon

2 (15 oz) cans peas

¼ cup all-purpose flour

1 (12 oz) can condensed milk

salt to taste

Directions

1.) Lay the bacon in a large skillet. Cook over medium-high until each pink strip reddens, hot through. Remove from heat, grind bacon to bits and put aside.

2.) Stir peas into the bacon grease remaining in the skillet. Cook on low until peas are warm and well-lubricated. Sift together flour & salt in a small bowl. Stir in condensed milk and whisk until creamed. Pour mixture over greased peas; cook on medium heat until thick and hot. Add bacon.

± We must try and be reasonable when we consider doing these things.

BUT SHE IS SLOW VOLUPTUOUS // HER ACCRETION IS TAINLESS
SUCH STRICT CONSUMMATION OF DENSITY

STILL, SHE IS VAST HEAVY W/ NURTURE AND FORECAST

....

enshrined in the feigned cavern ➡

1. ^ [Basement Membrane Zone] ↗

(an enticement via meatus into ingress)
straining out the white clots

*Grading of abdominal panniculi

Grade 1
Barely covers the hairline and mons pubis but
does not drape genitalia.

Grade 2
Extends to drape genitalia.

Grade 3
Extends to drape upper thigh

Grade 4
Extends to drape mid-thigh.

Grade 5
Extends to drape knees or beyond.

a satin languor of the
palms, scarless :: or
only 1 scar,
deliciously fraught.

((explicit w/ the gift of a wristwatch
of watching as she tenders the box
within which we house a divine
spreadable cheese
she eats w/ her hands))

The body, overlarge,
altered to infiltrate reception so she can say
"Perry Mason is coming next on CourtTV"

:one of the holes is 3" and you can see inside my stomach
invasive verging beneath a concussive choler
the tidal hostess
decelerates
contained by grief:
putrefaction locked between her thighs
between the pleats enfolding scarce air
only this confection resonating grease, like the walls
"Well-Oiled"
and the tang of rodential mass-grave
still clogging the sink despite
Febreze® / / Mr. Clean® / / Scrubbing Bubbles®

Lymph, supine in the cradle,
soft-curdled like milk
& skull pulpous: an egg receding
into the whole of her,
this exertion ebbing over the mattress
propulsive, the viral thaw

:When can I talk to more of you?

while smooth tiers of substance are accessed
and the gates close
and the phones -

~~"LIVE TO CLEAN SO YOU CAN LIVE TO CLEAN"~~

**

oozing
to
light
pink
for
at
least
two
hours

1. Varicose veins disentwined with the aid of
abrasive agent, citrus-scented

2. Forfeited amniotic sweating past fat to
destabilize oracular procession of the
circulatory motorcade

3. Deepest mesentery cycled out away from
the body cavity, obstructing sleep as
precision-necrosis, superficially drained of
marrow

**

it crawled
from out of
cystic space,
its intimate
architecture defiled,
a genesis
in extreme unction:

4. This viscera requires storage into
freezing but exits seductive her tenement,
frivolous//sallow

// still ringing

: by what part of her body do

you feel most tempted?

: i guess that part

: which?

: over there

" our blood
which seemed so
solid is rotten... "

peanut butter, Cocoa Puffs®,
strawberry milkshake, Enten-
mann's® Crumb Cake, tapio-
-ca pudding, oysters, chicken
nachos, macaroni & cheese,
poached eggs, crab rangoon,
apple pie, lasagna, cheese da-
-nish, Twizzlers®, corn dogs,
cheese fries, taco salad, Holl-
-andaise sauce, kielbasa, bar-
-beque ribs, cotton candy, st-
-uffed shells, mayonnaise, co-
-conut shrimp, whoopie pies,
Brown Sugar Cinnamon Pop
Tarts®, mozzarella sticks, t-
-ater tots, ham & cheddar o-
-melette, pigs-in-blankets, ch-
-icken cordon bleu, sauerkraut,
ketchup, pierogies, fish st-
-icks, English muffins, eggno-
-g, Philly Steak & Cheese Hot
Pockets®, chicken pot pie, cr-
-eamed chipped beef, Klondike®
Bars, thin mints, Cheet-
-os® cheese puffs, Chex Mi-
-x®, ravioli, gravy, Skittles®,
spareribs, ranch dressing,
Rice Krispie® treats, pepper-
-oni, maple syrup, onion ring-
-s, whipped cream, Oreo® sa-
-ndwich cookies, deviled eggs



She is not her so perfectly
They are not any part of me

The Blondes are Calgon@
Hawaiian Ginger - Vanilla Swirl - Cotton Candy
steam misting the mirror//shower curtain
but there is the sullen drone in a lower place
symptomatic of underground facility:

"center of operations" -- of unspecified control --
the sub-base vault (Area B, 600,000 square feet)

EVEN AS HAIR IS STRAIGHTENED AND PULLED BACK
AND THEY GO TO JOIN THE OTHERS.

...and everyone that talks
w/ her says she smells so good!
[TESTIMONIAL]

...so this scent is just perfect for me!
[TESTIMONIAL]

I told "her" : your eyes are all black

and : she perished in "the incident"

"she" is laughing @ me because they have told
"her" to respond in this specific way when I
try to speak about what is happening now to
the family

every *relic* entity seems salient in this new void

three (3) precisely stiffly parallel before the Yule Log TV flicker
three (3) platinum terse and lips only parted
(pink, rose, blush)

proliferating darkness, w/ vigorous Will

BUT BARELY SUBCUTANEOUS

vaccinated into surveillance, serosa gleaming. beneath the fleece, black ✕...

✕... the color black referring to its deep and secret agenda oriented to encircle absence
what was extinguished is sloping. now breathless,
& unfit to file further reports to recessed authority

An intervention braided like static through needles
(like hooves on the roof the night before)
to rend the nerve-to-wire & expel transmission :

- a pattern forms at + about the point of intrusion
- no blood is sealed across dorsal vestibule
- incised wound in neck, minimal-excessive on line w/ intention
- spinal canal and cord intact, meninges atypically lucent
- the fingernails are long and clean painted various floral tones

When you touch her thigh, it feels like plastic, almost.
Saran™ Wrap sheathing the crest of her anatomically
routine vulva, vinyl pelvic-plane,

NOTE: Mid-way thru inquiry still no
evidence of video apparatus. Their
technology is remarkably advanced.

The Blondes beating against the upholstered glow
of all thousand bulbs
fresh w/ pine & hair moist
but this is not joy, their joy of oversee

(new dresses, new matte white shoes, new lace socks)

wrapped at the Mall, by professionals,
the boxes have all the thrill of burial
under the white//black//blue//purple light
of this red room

and they don't even check their stockings anymore

nonpublic negativity nested in audio-visual may have detected a narrow extension of you:
the high toxicity of the soft palate // throat hot green w/ strategy

We Will Contact You if what you want always totals
Television Exposure to be PART OF THE EXCITEMENT
 of your babies' beauty

when the Blondes were glitz-sick
 bedrooms rotting and pink with ribbons, plaques,
 the nasal purr of holography nauseous @ the back of the closet

"What lovely, lovely girls"

Except unfortunate they're precious artificial, - in sparkle organza or chiffon - kandy pink or pink lite -
 Cupcake Skirt (or Southern Style)

...up there waving w/ carnations as if she were actually born...

she is fodder for the restoration of a genetic preset
 deviated to bear invasive duplication:

They put her here.
 She is now approx. .75" taller
 And her hair has lightened markedly
 Ever since "the incident"
 And her nose will bleed for days

: what else can I do to *STOP* this?

Induced in Cross-Section:

Subliminal slices of ultrasound drilling
 (w/o permission)
 into projections of grey matter
 the "column" of white nerve -
 qualifying solid paired bodies
 as a cluster of frequency

Neurons designated on a micro-level,
 programmed as points of exit
 to decussation of pain and vibration
IMMEDIATELY SHUT DOWN

their scalps pinch with signal
 a knot of retinal force retaining focus
 trained to televised hearth (as if directly
 unfolding back thru the cable box)

The sofa flushes metallic, bilious, receptive.

in truth self-sealing circulated through a visceral husk, post-harvest

these congregations are not so benign, sequins gauzing collected corrosive mind, the Blondes
 greeted speechless by others secreted by reflective rotating Comfort Inn® entry and
 my ear itches from three states away -

There are very good reasons for *everything*.

I smell like blood, Lynda thinks as she stands in the center aisle (#11) of SuperFood® staring into a wall of candy, hundreds and thousands of fun-size bars packaged in neon green, orange, purple, black plastic. There's no sign that the women standing nearby smell the blood on Lynda but they're polite, wear neat hairstyles; with their manicured fingernails pressing into bags of Milky Ways® to find the printed net weight, they're not the type to even acknowledge foul smells in public. Lynda suspects that as women they perhaps have once "been there," and so refrain from sidelong glances out of sympathy for their debased comrade. If the women were her friends they would maybe take her aside to recommend various products and tricks for reducing feminine odors but they're not, so Lynda stands squirming as they pretend that there's not a thick aura of raw, salty spoilage adhered to her otherwise deodorized body and continue choosing their candies without acknowledging her.

She wore black pants to go to the grocery store because she has been bleeding heavily enough that five times already today her maxi-pad has flooded, black clots floating on a slick of blood slipping down her leg and necessitating a total wardrobe change; she did not know when it would happen again and she did not want anyone at the store to see blood on her jeans, bright and intimately shameful, as though she were an under-prepared high-schooler all over again. She feels like Mercedes Bitter, who in eighth grade had not known how to "protect" herself and had left a crimson pool in the dip of her olive green plastic chair. No one ever said anything about it to Mercedes but her social life was void from that moment on.

Now Lynda senses a wetness drooling warmly down her thigh so she grabs bags of Snickers®, Kit Kats®, an orange bag of chocolates wrapped in foil to look like eyes, and trots, briskly but keeping her legs stiff & tight together, towards the express checkout lane. The young woman working the cash register, nametag reading "Michelle" to the right of three pink star stickers, looks at her like she can smell the blood.

On the phone with her husband in the car in the SuperFood® parking lot, Lynda says that she'll be home a little late because she'll have to stop and pick up dinner, because she's been feeling out of it and can't think of anything to cook tonight. Her husband's voice is unfocused, mechanical. He suggests that he drive the kids and meet her at Friendly's®. They can get ice cream or waffles

with faces or whatever. It would be a treat. Everyone has been having such a hard time just lately, he says.

Lynda's underwear are markedly damp now so she drives over the speed limit to Friendly's®, parks crooked in a RESERVED space, asks for a table for five and rushes into the Ladies' Room. Inside the stall she peels her pants down with her eyes shut; she doesn't think she can stand to see more blood today. Her pink underwear are soaked black, the pale of her groin glossed red, starred with livid jewels of pulp clinging to the skin in rich, gelatinous ribbons. There is blood streaked up to her waist and more rushes out of her when she lowers herself to the toilet. The blood splashes into the bowl viscid and steaming, silken as it darkens Lynda's pubic cleft. She feels a cramp twist angrily the rubber cords of her belly.

Lynda wonders if she should call the Doctor, or a friend. Maybe everyone bleeds this way once in a while; maybe it's a symptom of impending menopause. Lynda is still young, but it's a fact that some women transition earlier than most. Maybe it was something she ate?

The reek of blood is overwhelming as it issues from the stall in palpable purple-hued crests of greasy miasma. It smells like a murder scene, like butchery and dissection and motor accidents. Lynda looks between her legs into the toilet as infinite blood pours from inside, more than the five pints she remembers reading human beings are supposed to have, more than she can imagine carrying within her body. The water level in the toilet rises, its bleached porcelain lacquered with liquid gore. I'm dying, she thinks. I smell like I'm already dead.

Her physician is a man. The nurse, Jodie, is a pleasant young woman but Lynda would have to see Dr. VanCleave, tell him what the problem was, invite his latex fingers to probe her blighted vault. She couldn't call.

She changes out of the soiled underwear and into the fresh ones she'd hidden in her purse, affixes a new "Advanced Leak-Guard" maxi-pad and rolls everything bloody in toilet paper to tuck inside the silver DISPOSAL bin fastened to the wall. Blood leeches through the thin tissue onto her fingertips. Her interior churns and aches as she flushes the toilet over and over to erase the glaze of blood that coats the basin's bowled walls, inexorable and scathing.

The Friendly's® is warm and yellow-bright with forest green or burgundy booths. Oversized laminated menus excitedly detail chicken entrees and 800-calorie desserts. The waitress leads Lynda to her table, where she waits for her husband and children to arrive, watching out the window for their van, restless as new moisture collects between her legs.

Faye Presley and her daughter Lola live on Silent Swan Way, five streets down from Swimming Pool Circle. They often walked their dog around the circle before he went missing last winter, and sometimes took the route on their evening walks even after the dog's disappearance, since Swimming Pool Circle was the most forested cul-de-sac in all of White Terrace and thus one of the loveliest for strolls. On the night of November 24, the pair are halfway around the circle, with Lola telling her mother about how the Stadler girls were snobs and more than a little creepy - even though everyone else in her fourth grade class seemed to worship them, which Lola thought was dumb - and Faye half-listening but more focused on peering into the windows of the houses, trying to catch a glimpse of their various interior decorating schemes, when they hear a deep growl from across the median garden. Faye reaches for her daughter's hand.

"What was that?" Lola asks and tugs her mother in the direction of the sound. Faye resists.

"Possibly a raccoon or a possum. We're not going to find out," Faye says. Her voice is unsteady, drained of its typical authoritative maternal firmness. There is another growl, this one colder, slightly sour. A second animal?

"A possum? Are you joking? It was a dog - what if it's Hank, Mom?"

'Hank' is the name of their missing German Shepherd, whose return only Lola still believes possible. Faye and her husband long ago agreed that Hank had probably been hit by a car and wandered into the woods behind White Terrace to die alone, but Lola refuses to accept such a grim conclusion. She's sure Hank is somewhere, alive.

Lola pulls away from her mother and runs towards the source of the growling. Faye is preparing to follow when she hears her daughter gasp. A second later, the woman finds herself struggling to keep her balance as a throng of black dogs surges past her, teeth bared, copper eyes wild, jowls flapping. There is no barking, no sound at all except for the heavy padding of dozens of paws beating against cement. Faye's heart races as she watches the dogs recede down Secret Lake Path.

Lola is sitting on the curb in front of Clifford Niles' house when Faye finds her. Beside her is a black garbage bag, slumped and gutted, spilling its contents into the street. More torn bags bulge

from the mouth of Niles' forest green garbage bin. Food scraps are scattered across the yard and driveway. In the darkness Faye can make out smashed crackers and chunks of pickle, brittle pink dismembered crab shells, soggy bite-marked loaves of garlic bread, globs of cranberry sauce. A whole turkey rests recumbent in the grass, its knobbed legs turned pathetically skyward. Several cheesy macaroni noodles cling to Lola's sneaker as she sits. She picks up a moist Oreo® from the pavement and stacks it on top of a Little Debbie® Fudge Round stranded inches from her left toe.

"Don't eat those," Faye warns.

"Wasn't planning on it," Lola says. She rolls her eyes and wipes her small hands on her jeans.

Faye wonders why Clifford Niles would have this much food in his garbage. Clifford Niles lived alone, as far as anyone knew, and never seemed to have company. He had attended a number of White Terrace festivities over the years – the summer's big barbecue block-party, the poor Horners' (formerly) annual New Year's Eve celebration –but always alone; he never talked very much and not once had he invited anyone into his home. Even Faye herself, who had prepared a Thanksgiving meal for 15 people the day before, didn't have this much food in her garbage. What was Clifford Niles, widely considered a bit of a recluse, doing with enough to feed the Honey Hollow Volunteer Fire Department?

Lola stands up, brushing cookie crumbs from her lap. She turns to survey the debris-strewn lawn behind her.

"This is totally weird," she says. "Not to mention disgusting."

"Let's go home," Faye responds. She thinks she spots a curtain twitch in a darkened window of the Niles house. What was he hiding within that 6,000 sq. ft. Colonial-Revival-style home? Who has he been feeding?

An enormous white dog rests her head in the lap of a white-blond woman, both drowsing on the sofa in the comfortably dim living room of the woman's parents' home. The room is trimmed with the tinsel and velvet bows of a lifetime of acquired holiday décor. An aluminum tree rotates in the corner lit red then purple then blue as the color wheel cycles through. The tables flanking the sofa are cluttered with porcelain ice skating girls frozen mid-spiral, their scarves streaming in implied wind. With their eyes painted shut, cheeks painted rose-flushed with the cold, the skaters dart through an audience of resin kittens springing from foil-wrapped gift boxes. The kittens raise their paws in celebration of both the skaters' grace and the deathless bliss of the holiday season. On the mantel, a troop of miniature reindeer dressed in charmingly lopsided Santa hats look on with quiet approval. The television is tuned to KCCI-8's annual all-day presentation of the Yule Log, which crackles and spits obedient flame over a hushed soundtrack of instrumental carols.

The dog is roused by a hiss of static interrupting "Let It Snow" and turns her massive head to the TV. The Yule Log has disappeared from the screen, though there is still the rustle of its burning, still the friendly vapors of song seeping in. Now the log has been replaced by a blond woman seated on a sofa, flanked by two identical little girls, both blond and exact duplicates of the older woman. The three of them are huddled together under a blanket with mugs of hot chocolate, maybe tea, staring through the screen at the dog, or so it seems. But no, the dog realizes as she lurches from the couch and approaches the TV, the blondes are not staring at her where she stands in her owner's parents' living room in Iowa. Rather, they are watching their own TV; the dog is seeing them as though she were inside of it, hidden behind the screen. The dog looks over her shoulder at the woman on the sofa to check if she too is witnessing the same anomalous projection where the Yule Log should be, but she's sound asleep.

The TV flickers between Yule Log and living room, "Let It Snow" starts over, quivering, like a record skipping. The music stretches and contracts, falters. On the screen is the log in the fireplace and stockings hanging from the mantel, then that image warps and out of the static the blondes resurface, one blinks, another takes a sip from her mug. Then the log convulses back into view. After a few minutes, the TV tremors wane and the screen settles on the image of the blondes. "Let it Snow" continues to play.

The dog watches as a man enters the frame of the televised interior. The man approaches the blondes from behind as they stare into their television. He is not disguised in any way, no pantyhose pulled down over his face, no black ski-mask. He is just a man, with graying hair and anxious eyes. The dog raises her paw to the screen, whimpers: a boxcutter in the man's grasp glints in the TV glow. He leans over the back of the couch and presses the blade first into the throat of the girl seated to the left of the woman. She drops her mug and it spills onto the sofa. The cocoa soaks into the upholstery in a dark, widening stain. The girl's hands leap to her neck in a reflexive effort to slow the blood cascading from the cleft in her neck. The woman shrieks. The second girl tries to stand to run but is caught from behind by the man, who swiftly slits her throat and lets her limp body fall forward to the carpet. The mother is the last to die.

The tune of "Let it Snow" slackens and the music oozes through the TV speakers like swamp algae. Blonde hair drifts in the tidal swell of raspberry-black blood, clings to ruined necks, tangles between stiffening fingers. The woman and one girl are collapsed into one another on the sofa so that their torsos form an ungainly triangle. The other girl is prone on the carpet with her face wrenched upward, unfocused eyes passively taking in the ceiling. The man looms behind the couch and stares into the TV. A banner at the bottom of the screen scrolls "*White Terrace - - White Terrace - - White Terrace - -*"

The dog barks, waking the woman. On TV, the Yule Log trembles back onto the screen. "Let It Snow" begins again.

"Diamond, what's wrong with you," the woman yawns, sits up, runs a hand through her thick hair. "You're going to wake up Mom and Dad."

"Three people are about to die," the dog says without making a sound. She puts her front paws in the woman's lap so their faces are level. "Have you ever heard of White Terrace?"

The Honey Hollow Dairy Queen® stands at 760 Shelter Road, past RiteAid® and Pizza Hut® but before the hospital on the drive out of town. From White Terrace, a 15-minute walk via Secret Lake Path leads directly to the parking lot at the rear of the restaurant.

The Dairy Queen® is easily identifiable for its traditional red gambrel-style roof and barely asymmetric red ovoid logo lit and looming above the front entrance. Unlike many Dairy Queen® locations, the Honey Hollow restaurant offers lunch and dinner items in addition to its frozen dessert menu and resultantly is open year-round.

In January the Dairy Queen® hurts somewhat for the mirth it emblemizes during the summer months, with its red-and-white-striped umbrellas packed mildewing in the storage shed, its red plastic picnic tables obscured beneath two feet of snow. What color is visible is lurid, suggestive of sinister infectious albinism, something swelling just below the skin. The light pouring from the restaurant's broad windows jaundices the snow and casts a warm film of infirmity over the cars parked outside.

Inside the Dairy Queen® a pretty teenager named Veronika Craft sits behind the counter, missing New Year's Day ham with her family, idly chewing on the corner of a scalene triangle of Texas Toast taken from the Popcorn Shrimp Basket she heated up for lunch. There is no one else in the Dairy Queen®. No one else has been in the Dairy Queen® all day, and no one is expected, since it's New Year's and not a soul in Honey Hollow eats fast food on holidays. Yet the restaurant is open, and Veronika volunteered for the 10 am - 6 pm overtime "Holiday Shift," so there she is, reading a lifestyle magazine and counting the minutes til close.

At 3, Veronika elects to take the garbage out before it gets too dark and the dumpster adopts the repulsive "yawning void" mode typical of receptacles in their nocturnal aspect. She begins with a cursory inspection of the restaurant for loose trash left by Anabelle Owens, who closed the previous evening. Anabelle Owens is a doughy girl with psoriasis who glares at everyone and eats all the Bugles® at employee picnics and pool parties, who never picks up the garbage at the end of her shift, and who on this occasion had left several discarded Blizzard® cups on the floor beneath tables and behind the plastic Ficus.

Veronika tosses the cups into the trash. She knots the bags, puts her coat on over her uniform of blue polo shirt//red apron, and drags the garbage out through the employee exit. The bags cut through the snow outside, canceling Veronika's and what looks to be a large dog's footprints in a shallow furrow. When she reaches the dumpster, Veronika fails to notice the few purple-red blots staining the snow at her feet. It is only once the girl raises the lid and readies to hurl one bag and then the next into the dumpster that she peers into the darkness and her eyes catch on the white angles of the corpse.

Settled splayed over drifts of black plastic, the body is a woman's, her abdomen split, blood coagulated in gobs like cherry jam down her thighs and smeared over her bare chest. Her skin is blue-white, the bowels bulging through the evisceration wound grayish-mauve. Veronika cannot tell if she recognizes the dead woman. She heaves one bag of garbage into the dumpster, resulting in a sick squashing sound when the plastic contacts cold flesh. The remaining bags are left in the snow when Veronika runs back inside the restaurant.

The most popular item at the Honey Hollow Dairy Queen® - the one Veronika finds herself preparing most regularly - is the Blizzard® Treat, a dessert comprised of soft-serve ice cream blended with bits of crushed candy or cookies or fruit ooze, maybe hot fudge or marshmallow, chocolate chips, etc. Veronika removes her coat and selects a red//blue Blizzard® cup from the top of the stack. She floods the cup with chocolate ice cream, adds two scoops brownie pieces, two scoops M&M'S®, two pumps from the fudge sauce dispenser. The Blizzard® blender churns the dessert once, twice, three times, per Dairy Queen®-sanctioned standards of mixed-ness.

Veronika licks fudge from her red spoon as she dials the telephone. She takes tiny bites from the corner of a brownie chunk.

"Hello? Honey Hollow Sheriff's Office," the voice on the other end of the line barks, nasal & perfunctory.

"Hi, this is Nikki Craft, at the Dairy Queen® on Shelter Road," Veronika says, a spoonful of ice cream slipping beyond the base of her tongue.

"Is there a problem, Miss Craft?"

"Yes, I'd like to report a body?"

"A dead body?"

"Yes, there's a dead body in our dumpster here, Sir - " Veronika crunches M&M'S® between her molars; there's brownie snared in her braces.

"A dead *human* body?"

"Uh-huh."

"We'll send someone right there, " the voice says. A breathless rush of sound swells in the background. "You just hold tight - "

"Okay," Veronika says. The eventual bleat of the dial tone indicates that the cop has hung up.

Veronika glances down at her lifestyle magazine on the counter, open to page 47, an article about making your own baby food; she swallows another mouthful of Blizzard® and shivers.

Dr. Glen VanCleave considers himself a lucky man. He has been sleeping with his 23-year-old nurse and assistant, Jodie, for over 18 months. The couple has been meticulous in their discretion so the affair is known to no one, a rare event in Honey Hollow, where even the most trifling scandal is stalked down and, once uncovered, talked over for decades. The Doctor is grateful for Jodie's tact and prudence as regards their private encounters. Indeed, he is quite fond of her overall. She is not only a lissome and adventurous carnal partner, but also a hardworking employee and pleasing public face for his practice. The Doctor is always sure to give her a generous Christmas bonus.

Dr. Glen VanCleave pats Jodie's athletic thigh as she lounges on the mauve-upholstered examination table. They have just concluded a particularly aerobic coital session, and the Doctor has not yet fully caught his breath. He likes to think of himself as uncommonly fit, but he is still a man of nearly 65 years of age and as such has certain limitations. In general, he is proud of his physical condition. He renews his romantic palpation of the lovely Jodie by smoothing his palm over her tanned stomach. Although she has a trim, charming figure, her midsection is marred by a slight but detectable layer of belly fat, a significant problem for women in the early phases of the physical decline associated with advancing age.

"Jodie, would you please remind me of your exercise regime?"

Jodie sits up frowning and begins to button her blouse.

"I mean no offense," the Doctor says. "But you know, you're never too young to take measures against the symptoms of aging. An active defense is essential, especially for a lovely girl like yourself. It's so dreary to see beauty squandered out of indolence."

His voice is both admonishing and genuinely doleful.

"Yes, Doctor," Jodie sighs. She straightens her collar, tugs at the hem of her skirt. The Doctor moves to stroke her cheek but she waves his hand away. "I run on the treadmill at the health club five days a week. I swim on the weekends. I ice skate in the winter."

"Very good." Jodie's skin is soft and firm, as yet unwrinkled, but the Doctor recognizes the beginnings of laugh lines when she smiles at him, irritated, and lowers herself from the examination table. "You drink plenty of water?"

"Eight glasses a day, like Mom always said," Jodie says as she crosses the room and takes her coat from the rack.

"And you're eating well? Plenty of salmon, tuna, blueberries, tomatoes, broccoli, sweet potatoes, brussel sprouts?"

"I hate brussel sprouts. Yuck," Jodie says. Her fingertips settle on the doorknob; she leans her shoulder into the door. Then, turning to the Doctor, an expression of easygoing exasperation on her plain, pretty face, she says, "I'll see you tomorrow, Glen."

"You wear sunscreen every day? Even in winter?"

"Good night, Doctor," Jodie says, and laughs. The door shuts soundlessly behind her as she excuses herself from the examining room.

Before meeting Clifford Niles, Pamela Doll was a kennel worker with a nasty crystal methamphetamine habit. She spent her days hosing down cement runs, shoveling soiled shavings from the doggie romper room, changing litter boxes and loading heaps of urine-soaked towels into the washing machine, excusing herself at lunchtime to chemically rekindle in the backseat of her crumbling Oldsmobile Firenza. Pamela lived in a trailer off of Route 101, just outside Honey Hollow. She shared the cramped quarters with her sister Theresa, who also enjoyed a narcotics-based lifestyle and who was employed on a part-time basis as a topless waitress at a "gentleman's club" a few towns over. Pamela and her sister survived on a meager diet of Cheese Nips®, Reese's Pieces®, lunchmeat and Gatorade®, which Pamela purchased bi-weekly (after every pay day) at the Git-N-Go on the drive home from the kennel.

When Pamela Doll met Clifford Niles, she weighed 95 lbs and had a body mass index of 16.8. That was four years ago.

Pamela met Clifford when he dropped off his English Bulldog, Spud – who has since gone missing – at the kennel to be boarded while Clifford was away on vacation. Pamela was on her hands and knees scrubbing ferociously at a vomit stain on the rug in front of the rawhide chew toy display. It was summer and her ribs jutted through the synthetic fabric of her lime green tank top, her spine spiked like a ridge of sharp teeth splitting her back. Clifford knelt beside her. He pretended to examine a package of flavored rawhide twist-sticks.

"Hello," Clifford said.

"Hi," Pamela said. She gnashed her teeth, which were an unbecoming methamphetamine-decayed yellowish-grey. Her lower lip twitched.

"What's your name?"

"Pamela."

"Can I take you out to dinner, Pamela?" Clifford placed his beefy hand over Pamela's vigorously scrubbing, emaciated ones. Pamela gazed up at him. She clenched her jaw.

"Are you trying to rape me because I'm not going along with any bullshit. Just saying. Also I don't necessarily eat dinner if you know what I mean. It's not necessarily something that I do. So

if you're trying to rape me and you think you can do that just by throwing a steak in my direction, you're most assuredly chasing up the wrong tree, bucko."

Six months later they were married in a ceremony at Clifford's dead father's beach house in Florida, with Pamela's sister Theresa as the sole guest. At that point, Pamela had weaned herself from crystal meth and gained 75 pounds. Her wedding dress - a bejeweled satin and tulle strapless confection in ivory and cotton candy pink - was a size 16. Clifford prepared the marital meal himself, a feast of lasagna, Belgian waffles, corn chowder, grilled swordfish, and beef stroganoff, among other delectables. Their wedding cake was 5 layers, Devil's Food, glutted with chocolate mousse and ganache, liberally frosted with chocolate buttercream so rich it was effectively chocolate butter. Clifford served his creation with ice cream and whipped cream and chocolate shavings.

Pamela gained 5 or maybe 7 pounds that day.

As the years passed, Pamela expanded. Clifford earned enough money selling real estate from his home office that she could quit her job at the dog kennel and spend her days lounging in front of the television in the basement, snacking from the platters regularly proffered by her doting husband. It was not long before Pamela weighed a hearty 350 lbs, at which point she could no longer easily ascend the basement stairs. So Clifford had an enormous bed installed down there, ensuring that Pamela would be forever comfy-cozy without ever having to leave the basement. He brought her food hourly. Pamela's size multiplied; she was blossoming into a very big, very happy girl.

As she grew, Pamela began to notice a peculiar new set of talents. She knew who was going to be on Friday's episode of Oprah by Tuesday night. At 7 in the morning, she knew what would happen on that evening's primetime sitcoms. Her power of premonition extended beyond the TV Guide as well. Pamela dreamt of plane crashes, celebrity divorces, landslides, and corporate mergers weeks before they would occur. Her prophecies were always perfectly on-target. In packing on a few (hundred) extra pounds, Pamela had unknowingly catalyzed a remarkable series of imperceptible biological alterations that together contrived to render the swelling woman clairvoyant. The new layers of adipose cells lushly spreading over her every tissue busied themselves secreting cytokines, pro-inflammatory proteins which entered Pamela's vagus

nerve and were ferried through its afferent fibers, winding between the jugular vein and carotid artery, along the carotid sheath, finally climbing to the peach-toned bulbous base of her brain. The inflammation incited by the cytokines affected primarily Pamela's amygdala and thalamus, two structures held deep within the brain in the anterior region of the temporal lobe. The amygdala is an almond-shaped cluster of neurons that serves as a chamber of warning, ceaselessly scanning and processing sensory information – tiny vibrations, barely audible whispers from unknowable reaches of space and time – of which the conscious mind never becomes aware. Bound to the amygdala by a neuronal web is the thalamus, a set of symmetrical bulbs situated between the cerebral cortex and the midbrain, wherein all incoming stimuli from the environment is received, evaluated, and forwarded on to the appropriate cortices. The thalamus additionally functions to regulate consciousness and levels of arousal, states of sleep and wakefulness. Pamela's amygdala and thalamus, inflamed within her lipid-soaked body, behaved in an unexpected fashion. Together, they formed a sort of receiver, a receptor for all manner of stimuli undetected by normally functioning brains: electric currents coursing backwards from the future relaying messages of what was to come, the thoughts of persons sleeping hundreds of miles away, the secret codes woven into the Technicolor pulse of the six o'clock news broadcast. Pamela's brain opened to all of it, a whole expansive universe of unknowable information.

All she had to do was figure out how to exploit her burgeoning gift, how to profit from her prescience. She had to develop a business plan.

And so Priestess Pam's Phone-a-Psychic Hotline was born. Soon she was taking hundreds of calls daily. Every day she predicted breakups and financial windfalls, new jobs and podiatric infections, cheating boyfriends and food poisoning. She enjoyed her work, talking to people and helping them with their problems, even if those problems were petty and insignificant, as they usually were. She charged 99 cents a minute and earned \$800 a day. She worked the phones 7 days a week, taking breaks only to eat, sleep, and watch her favorite TV shows.

During the four years that Pamela Niles, née Pamela Doll, lived as Clifford Niles' ecstatically wedded wife, not once did she leave the house. Why would she? She had everything she needed right there, in her palacious subterranean suburban cloister on Swimming Pool Circle.

Dr. Denise S. Nova is the Medical Examiner for Forever County, a typically relaxed appointment, since Forever County is happily nestled away in a quiet, peaceful little corner of the country. She sees the occasional waterlogged inebriated drowning victim, frozen octogenarian or post-prom Dumpster baby, but on the whole her work is light. Until lately, that is. Lately, Dr. Nova has been swamped.

There have been those Honey Hollow women, disemboweled, decapitated, and otherwise dispatched.

There's been that little girl torn to pieces by feral dogs, the pretty maid with the head wound the cops pulled from the river, the teenage boy who hung himself in his basement.

And now three more bodies: a young mother and her twin daughters. All three found Christmas afternoon in their living room, cause of death: multiple incised wounds to the neck. Apparent dissection of the spine and brain stem performed post-mortem. Such pretty girls, too. What a shame.

Dr. Nova autopsies the mother first. She follows standard procedure, opening the body with a Y-shaped incision (shoulder-to-shoulder, then extending down to the pubic bone), sawing through the sternum to reveal heart, lungs. She inspects the organs of the abdomen one by one for any irregularities. Slides are prepared with samples of blood, interstitial fluid, and bone marrow. The mother's heart and liver and spleen are weighed, her intestines and stomach split and probed, their contents (Dr. Nova identifies partially digested brown cake, a white liquid: probably milk) perused. All is well within the mother's abdominal and chest cavities. Were it not for the curvilinear wound gaping horizontally across her larynx, or the hollow carved at the vertex of her cervical spine, the woman would be in exemplary health.

Now Dr. Nova must examine the brain. She opens the cranial cavity by slicing the scalp from one ear to the other over the crown of the head, peeling back the skin, and cutting through the calva with a special electric saw that cleaves bone like butter but stops when it touches soft tissue. The saw, manufactured by the Kalamazoo, Michigan-based medical technology firm the Stryker Corporation, has an oscillating rather than circulating blade, and therefore cannot cut through yielding surfaces (i.e. human flesh). Using forceps, Dr. Nova retracts the dura mater,

which she notes is smooth, translucent white: overall, unremarkable. As expected. But beneath the dura, between the leptomeninges and the rippled surface of the cerebrum, Dr. Nova notices something peculiar. With the very tip of her scalpel she slices delicately through the arachnoid membrane. She uses tweezers to extract the anomaly, a metallic object the size of an aspirin tablet, square and dotted with raised black and gold circuits. Dr. Nova inspects it closely, but she is able to identify neither its function nor its origin. It is unlike any medical device she has ever seen, but there's no way it could have found its way onto the woman's parietal lobe by accident, so what is it? And who put it there?

Dr. Nova seals the metallic object in a ZipLoc® baggie. Still puzzled by the object but committed to finishing the autopsies by dinnertime, she moves on to one of the twins. The girl's toe tag reads, "Stadler, Breanna."

By the end of the evening, Dr. Nova will have three ZipLoc® baggies lined up on her desk, each containing the same mysterious metallic fragment she plucked from the brain of the mother. Disconcerted, the Medical Examiner will call the forensics lab to have them send someone over to see if their technology expert can identify the objects. A man she doesn't recognize will come to retrieve the samples, which she will gratefully hand over to him, despite his unfamiliar face and austere manner. She will complete her autopsy reports, sign them, and drive home to eat cheeseburgers with her family.

The objects removed from the brains of Amber, Breanna, and Tiffani Stadler will never be returned to Dr. Nova's office, and she will never receive any information about their composition or purpose. It will be as if they never existed.

Wyatt Larsson had just replaced the wireless telephone in its cradle after taking a call from his girlfriend, Veronika, who was paranoid again, talking nonsense about dogs, etc., when the Doktor hurried into the largely vacant Pizza Hut®.

"Hello, Wyatt," the Doktor says. A thin smile snakes between his hard features and accentuates the prosthetic quality of the Doktor's face, the way it seems possible to peel skin away from his head in thick sheets.

"Hi, Dr. V." Wyatt stares past the Doktor at a poster depicting ENLARGED TO SHOW TEXTURE cinnamon breadsticks, \$2 with the purchase of a large cheese pizza, served with white icing for dipping.

"I should have an order ready to pick up." He holds a bouquet of roses at his side, a dozen, wrapped in crisp translucent plastic. He places the flowers on the beige counter. "Called it in about 20 minutes ago."

Wyatt thinks of all the occasions this man had had to grasp his, Wyatt's, scrotum, the hundred times he's felt this man's chilled latex finger trace his pubic bone. He notes the starched collar of the Doktor's white coat, dotted with recent blood still as red and as wet as the tomato sauce Wyatt spoons from a vat in the back of the restaurant when assigned to production duty. Wyatt fumbles through the orders log, skimming each page for the sharp V of the Doktor's name.

"Two large extra-cheese, an order of breadsticks, and a 2-liter soft drink?"

"That's the ticket," the Doktor says. The spray of blood at his neck seems to swell as Wyatt watches, widening and brightening as the liquid is sucked into new fibers.

The Doktor's pizzas are cooling on the steel COMPLETED table, the abbreviation "DR V X-CHZ" scratched in red permanent marker on the top of each cardboard box. The breadsticks are packed in a smaller box, this one marked "DR V BRDSTX," as though Wyatt hadn't been working at Pizza Hut® for over a year and couldn't read the "MMM...BREADSTICKS!" already emblazoned in script on the side.

"You can choose your soda from the cooler," Wyatt says in accordance with the Pizza Hut® counter assistant script, and lowers the Doktor's boxes to the counter. The plastic confining the roses crackles, nudged by the corner of a pizza box. A petal, livid-red and filmy, drops to the flesh-toned laminate. As the Doktor opens the cooler and bends to select a 2-liter Mountain Dew®, Wyatt imagines his coat saturated with blood, the Doktor as the villain in some medical splatter film: *The Surgeon Returns IV, Dr. Death's Pharmacy of Terror, Nazi Pediatrician From Hell*.

"I just got out of surgery a half-hour ago," the Doktor says. Wyatt arranges the various boxes and the soda in a plastic bag boasting 'The Best Pizzas Under One Roof.™' The Doktor's face convulses through a series of animatronic expressions. "Late night. No time to change. I know it's not very civilized but I wanted to get home, considering the holiday. Your mother tells me you have a lady friend, so naturally you understand."

"Yeah," Wyatt says, unable to return the Doktor's conspiratorial man-to-man smirk. Wyatt knows he's been caught. The Doktor spotted him staring too long at the stains on his jacket; now Wyatt was a witness - he'd be the next to die! The Doktor would slip in through his window one night and silently inject him with the heart-stopping toxins that would carry him to the end of everything. His parents and the police would assume he'd died of a heart attack, a freak event, natural but so unfortunate since he was only 16 years old and had his whole life ahead of him, as his father would say. Wyatt endeavors to choke back panic and maintain standard customer service tones. "Have a good night, Doktor V."

"Thank you, Wyatt," the Doktor chuckles. "Say hello to Veronika for me. She's a lovely girl."

The Doktor leaves the Pizza Hut, humming, almost skipping. Rose petals scatter to the tile in his wake like scabs.

Fog drowns dense and indolent over the pitch-dark surface of Secret Lake, unstirred by the wind as it bawls through the trees edging the bank. A crystal varnish of frost clings to the cattails and tapered reeds that rise from the shallow water. The grass that verges Secret Lake Path is frosted too, so that all surrounding greenery glows pale and spectral under a sky pin-pricked by billions of raw stars. The night's color throbs cerulean blue to black.

It's 2 a.m. and 14-year-old Rosemary Larsson is not in her bed, where she's supposed to be. She and her friends - Clarissa Spalding, Brittany North and Brittany's boyfriend, Owen - have recently concluded a night of Halloween misbehavior, an evening spent unraveling rolls of Charmin® over neighbors' hedges, annihilating pumpkins, and hurling eggs at passing traffic. Now they are returning to their houses along Secret Lake Path, the unlit walking trail that cuts through the woods between Shelter Road and White Terrace.

Rosemary and Clarissa are dressed as dead cheerleaders, their faces powdered talcum white, the hollows underneath their eyes black-shadowed. Both girls carry black-and-white pom-poms dripping with scarlet-dyed Karo® Syrup. Brittany wears a stretchy black one-piece. There's a black tail safety-pinned to the fabric at the base of her spine, and whiskers traced with eyeliner on her spray-tanned cheeks. Owen, several steps behind, is without a costume but after much needling had agreed to let Rosemary powder his face, so that now he makes an acceptable if uninspired high school ghost.

No one wants to talk, but, immured within the saturated stillness that enshrouds Secret Lake, the teenagers feel a crawling need to make noise: Rosemary and Clarissa swish their pom-poms as they walk; Owen treads on every tree branch, every fallen leaf; Brittany hums a Whitney Houston song ("I Wanna Dance with Somebody") she'd heard earlier in the evening playing on the radio of a passing car.

Then, twenty feet ahead, something large and metallic glints by the bank. As the group nears the object, its form comes into focus: a cylindrical canister, stainless steel, like a trashcan but the size of Honda Civic. A circular ingress near the top is sealed tight.

"What the hell is this thing?" Brittany says. Owen knocks his fist against the side once, twice. Its whole silvery surface vibrates. Petulant, Brittany stamps her foot. She pouts.

Owen grazes his fingers around the rim of the opening. "It has to be some sort of Halloween prop that somebody left out here. Pretty cool, right?"

The girls are impatient to get going but wait and watch while Owen strains to pry open the latches sealing shut the canister.

"I don't know if this is a good idea," Rosemary says. "There could be some totally barf-me-out radioactive zombie slime in there. Why don't we go home?"

Then a hissed exhalation of air released from the high-pressure interior as the portal door comes unstuck discomposes Owen, who loses his balance and falls at the feet of the girls assembled behind him. He scrambles upright, offers a timorous laugh.

"So, uh, let's have a look inside, then?" Owen's voice is barely audible.

"Whatever."

"You go right ahead."

Owen leans and peers inside the vessel. He says nothing for a long time, and then:

"Well, we better go."

"Like, what is it?" Brittany pushes past her now quivering, now yellowing boyfriend to see for herself.

Snarled and stiff at the bottom of the canister is the body of a woman. She doesn't have any clothes on. The expanse of her skin has acquired a dusty pastel blue, the color of thick clean ice. Pearls of milky condensation congregate along the inner creases of her elbows, the bulge of her stomach, the arch of her forehead. The sclerae of her eyes are pinkish, her lips chapped white and crusted with bilious grit. A magenta contusion glares garish from just above her right ear, a few viscid globules of chilled blood weeping from the central indentation of the wound.

Brittany staggers backwards. She kneels beside the canister to vomit a soup of Milky Ways® and Smarties® into the grass. When the contents of her stomach have been fully evacuated, she

takes off sprinting down Secret Lake Path. Owen chases after her. Rosemary and Clarissa follow, their pom-poms tossed aside as they run, landing splayed like thrashed futuristic housepets in the grass.

As the teenagers return rushing breathless to their warm White Terrace homes, the sky over Secret Lake seethes blue and unsympathetic, the air temperature plummets; the stones sparkle.

Last night Jason Horner dreamt of cervical teeth, an inflamed chamber bleeding acid through mucosal walls, a Buffet King restaurant choked with obese women gnawing on the greasy arms and feet of aborted fetuses. Black placental slime and stillborn blood dribbled down the women's rippled chins and onto their chests, seeping down between their bulbous cleavage. Jason's wife Kimmy was there and boy, did she look hungry.

Kimmy is always hungry. Jason worries about her. He worries what she will do to the baby.

In the dream, Kimmy wore sweatpants and a foam visor like the elderly wear on cruise ships. She sat at a long banquet table cramped between a dozen other women, some with stomachs so distended that their flesh swelled over the edge of the table. Their exposed skin was stretched shining sallow and brightened by vibrant braids of purple-black veins climbing upwards like ivy from the women's elastic waistbands. Several of the diners rested their heavy plates atop the terraces of their stomachs. Kimmy was pouring soy sauce into a china bowl of stir-fried embryonic entrails and bok choy when Jason awoke, sweating.

That was only a dream, of course. What scares Jason more are the teeth inside, withheld beyond sight; the teeth that even now needle their fine points further into the flesh of his heir.

Now Kimmy is prone on an examination table with a thin periwinkle sheet covering her genitals, a snotty aquamarine gel slathered over the turgid dome of her pregnancy. The technician moves the transducer probe of the ultrasound unit across the lower hemisphere of Kimmy's belly.

On the machine's display screen is an undulating blue-black and white image ostensibly representing the form of Jason's child. The picture is indecipherable. Jason feels queasy.

"And here you can see the heart beating..."

Jason can't see anything at all like a heart. Kimmy smiles and nods eagerly at the technician.

"The heartbeat seems to be normal, so that's good..."

The technician adjusts the transducer. Its grey head glides placidly through the lubricant over Kimmy's navel.

"And now we can see the baby in profile. Here's the forehead, the nose, the upper lip..."

"Amazing!" Kimmy squeals. She giggles and claps her hands. Jason does not see a forehead or a nose or an upper lip, only a writhing foam of coursing light and shadow. He feels a flare of panic shiver up his spine.

"Ma'am, I don't mean to say that you can't do your job," Jason says. "but I'm not seeing a baby on that screen."

The technician smiles patiently and uses her finger to point out various body parts - here's a forearm, here's an ear, a toe, a tummy - but Jason sees nothing.

"I don't see a damn thing!" Jason shouts. "Now, nurse, this is serious: are you absolutely positive the baby is still there?"

Kimmy moans, rolls her eyes. The technician looks bemused.

"I'm not sure I understand what you mean, Mr. Horner."

"Is the baby still there or isn't it?"

"Of course the baby is still there - "

"Maybe it's getting smaller? Is the baby smaller now than the last time?"

Jason hadn't attended the previous ultrasound session but Kimmy had come home in spasms over how gorgeous the baby was, how absolutely adorable and precious. She'd shown him a print-out and he thought he could make out a nebulous blotch that might conceivably be a fetus.

"No, Mr. Horner. The baby is growing normally. Your baby is healthy."

Jason folds his skeletal arms over his chest, vexed. He knows when he's being lied to. In his dream, Kimmy chewed the meat from the ribs of a newborn. Her body cavity contained rows and rows of spiny teeth, like a lamprey's, ringing the glossed membranes of her interior canals, and caustic digestive juices that liquefied bone. Her hunger was ravenous.

Jason is frightened for his child. He worries it might already be too late.

"Now walk, Breanna," Amber Stadler instructs. She is seated in a pink inflatable chair pushed against the pink wall of her daughters' room, dwarfed by an assembly of towering black, gold, and glitter-foiled multi-tiered trophies. Satin sashes in pink and ivory embroidered with titles like "JUNIOR GRAND SUPREME DREAM GIRL" and "MISS ALL-AMERICAN GLAMOUR PRINCESS" have been carefully draped over the trophies, while a shelf above Amber's head displays rhinestone tiaras, bejeweled scepters, and other trophies of lesser stature.

There are no dolls in the pink room, no toys or posters of tabby kittens "hanging in there." The only decorations are the awards, crowns, ribbons, and plaques that the girls have won in beauty pageants all across the country. Immaculately neat, the room lacks any evidence of organic life. It is as artificial and studied as a showroom in a furniture store or a model prefab home, a somehow perverse simulation of a pleasing habitat for two female children.

Breanna holds a pose on the far side of the room: left hand balled at her hip forming an equilateral triangle of free space between her bent arm and her side, her right arm flat against her body, fingers flexed away from her leg. Posture perfectly vertical, spine straight. She nods and walks forwards.

Her sister Tiffani, an exact replica of Breanna but with hair trimmed a few inches shorter and curled, observes soundlessly from where she sits on her pink comforter, legs crossed and dangling over the edge of the bed. Tiffani's bed, which is the same as her sister's, has a headboard comprised of curving gold-gilted poles, each one perfectly shined and gleaming in the clean glow of the bedside lamp.

Both girls wear pink sequined leotards and bobby socks with a lace ruffle at the ankle. Breanna has a pink bow pinned in her hair.

"Quickly, quickly. Shoulders back," Amber says as she scrutinizes her daughter. The lanky, fair-haired girl's walk is a strut, the side-to-side sway of her unformed hips exaggerated, each step fastidiously mincing, her pelvis pitched forwards and leading. Breanna casts meaningful glances at imagined onlookers to her right and her left, alternately. She stops in front of Amber and flashes a toothsome white smile to the pink wall behind her.

"And now go back."

"Yes, mother," Breanna says and sashays back across the room. Amber says, "Slower," and the girl slows. Amber says, "Pick your head up," and the girl's chin tilts further up to the ceiling.

"And now again."

Amber's tone is inscrutable. The expression on her tanned, cuttngly glamorous face does not change for even a moment as she watches her daughter walk back and forth, back and forth across the plush pink carpet.

After Breanna practices for 45 minutes, it's Tiffani's turn.

"Straighten up."

"Yes, mother." Tiffani's voice has the exact soft, poised timbre of her sister's.

When another 45 minutes of pacing and scrutinizing and perfecting every step has passed, Amber rises from the well of the pink inflatable chair.

"Breanna, would you like a cookie before bed?"

"Yes, mother."

"Tiffani, would you like a cookie before bed?"

"Yes, mother."

"What type of cookie would you like this evening? We currently have in the kitchen Oreos®, Chips Ahoy®, and Vienna Fingers®."

"A Vienna Finger®, mother," Breanna says.

"A Vienna Finger®, mother," Tiffani says.

And then the three Blondes form a line - Amber in the lead, Breanna in the middle, Tiffani at the rear - and file out of the pink bedroom to collect their desserts.

A new addition has been made to the stone wall enclosing the flowerbed in front of the Dunmire house. Casually insinuated into the top layer of cement-drab grey and beige fieldstone and overhung by the wilting stems of autumn's pink asters and chrysanthemums idles a very unusual, very beautiful rock. The rock is the deepest occult black and pitted with crystal-glittered pores that sparkle when struck by a car's headlights or the beam of a probing flashlight. On the rock's topmost surface is a fine skin of glass, a lamina whose luster shifts sapphire to heliotrope as though tuned to some internal pulse. Despite its solid stillness the rock has an aura of animation; its color seems to breathe.

It is a rock of a sort found only at Secret Lake, created by an anomalous heat caressing the dark silt at the water's edge. Scientists have proposed that the Secret Lake stones are closely related to fulgurites, the hollow tubes of glass formed in sand or soil struck by lightning. Sometimes fulgurites penetrate deep into the earth, snaking down in arterial roots many feet below the surface. The longest fulgurite on record, with a branch measuring 17' in length, was found in northern Florida. A fulgurite's glass membrane is typically white or black or a sedate, earthy tone resulting from the mineral composition of the sand from which it was formed, nothing like the rich oscillating hues of the glass glazing the stones at Secret Lake. Scientists are unable to explain the Secret Lake stones: neither the nature of their vital glamour, nor their substance, nor the source of the intense temperatures responsible for their genesis.

The mysterious stones are highly prized in Honey Hollow, and many people in town use them to enliven their lawns and gardens, so it is not so strange that Lester Dunmire would have one in his flowerbed. What is strange, however, is the darkening raspberry stain on the corner of the stone. Even stranger are the several strands of blonde hair clinging to the stain's gummy surface, their thin transparent stalks lit blue then purple by the cold smolder of the stone's respiration.

Two women stand very close behind a table crowded with assorted finger foods and bowls of chips and dip in a living room thickset with festively attired people. The iliac points of the women's pelvic bones draw together as though eager for collision. The space between them is heart-shaped. One of the women, the blonde, is dressed in a cropped ivory sweater and a pair of high-waisted skintight Lycra® lemon-gold leopard-print leggings: very Versace Euro-glam and on-trend for winter. A black patent leather belt encircles her waist. The other woman, the brunette, wears a basic bateau-neck, long-sleeved sheath dress in electric blue velvet. Fuchsia crystals drip heavy from each ear. She plucks a pretzel from a dish on the table and begins to scrape off the salt with the pink-painted nail of her pale forefinger. Her neck strains forward so she can better hear what the blonde woman is saying.

"Kimmy looks wonderful but honestly Jason has been just *too* bizarre since they found out," the blonde says. A demure expression of distaste twists slightly her magma-red lips. "I mean, have you heard how he hassles her about her weight? It's obscene!"

"The woman is pregnant," the brunette says. "What does he expect?"

"And it's not only that," the blonde says. "It's like he monitors everything she eats. I overheard him earlier tonight asking if she didn't think she'd had enough shrimp. At her own party! Then he follows her around, asking her if she really *needs* that meatball or this spring roll, this smear of Brie or that crab cake..."

"My friend Michelle, who works at SuperFood®, told me he doesn't even let her do the grocery shopping anymore. He goes to the store and buys rice cakes and spinach and grapefruit," the brunette says. "Honestly, who puts his pregnant wife on a diet? It's beyond cruel."

"I know!" The blonde's words are elongated into four or five sing-song syllables. Her leggings cast a golden aura as she shifts her weight from one 6" square-heeled loafer pump to the other. "Isn't it a mother's God-given right to eat cheeseburgers and ice cream 24-7 from now until she pops it out? I always thought that was the only reason anyone ever had babies."

They giggle. Across the room, another huddle of women eye them suspiciously. These women are slightly older, less showy in their party outfits; their lipstick is two to three shades duller on average.

"I can see that girl's navel," one of them hisses through her teeth. She herself wears a navy wool blazer – tastefully discreet shoulder pads, sailor-style gold buttons, black velvet lapels – over a white blouse tucked neatly into the waistband of a houndstooth pencil skirt. Her graying ginger blonde hair is slicked back and braided. "In January, no less."

"As if you wouldn't show yours if you had a body like Claudia Schiffer," the woman beside her says. She smirks. "Especially if that body cost a pretty penny and Prince Charming likes his generosity well-known among the serfs..."

"Wait," the woman in the houndstooth skirt says. "Are you implying –"

"We've all heard quite enough of this petty nonsense," the third woman interrupts. In matching black turtleneck and pleated silk skirt, her look is the apex of suave widow-librarian-chic. "Old news, every word. I have a far more interesting tidbit for you, if you'll bite."

"Oh, do you? How fascinating. Pertaining to who?" the second woman says. Her outfit consists of an Ivy League-emerald sweater, a modest few strands of pearls, and a pair of sleek black velour trousers. The sweater is threaded with tinsel, which lends enough sparkle for a festive gleam without crossing into unintelligent twinkle territory.

"To whom," the woman in black corrects. "Why, to our host himself, the one and only."

The woman in the houndstooth skirt raises a fastidiously plucked eyebrow.

"Yes, ladies, I heard through a most reliable friend at the Credit Union that our dear young Mr. Horner had an episode, what one might even call, oh I don't know, a 'meltdown' yesterday morning."

"Regarding what?"

"My friend of course did not want to be a busybody so was sparing on the details, but she believes she heard Mr. Horner mumble something about a 'goddamned baby' right before he tossed his collection of stress balls to the floor and stormed out of the office. Now whatever do you think that could be about?"

"You have to be kidding us," the sweater-woman says, dismissing the story with a languorous flick of her wrist. "I've heard exclusively positive things about Mr. Horner's performance at the Credit Union."

"This only happened yesterday," the woman in black is unfazed by her besweated acquaintance's skepticism. "You're truly hearing it here first. My friend is of the opinion that Mr. Horner is cracking under the pressure of Kimmy's pregnancy. Isn't that just too bad?"

"Terrible," the woman in the Houndstooth skirt says. She is still glaring across the room at the young woman in the leopard leggings, a pout of offended disapproval on her face.

"Now, what did you say your friend's name was?"

Two women seated on the couch a few feet away eavesdrop as the reliability of the account of Mr. Horner's tantrum is debated. The pair on the couch look like a matched set, each dressed in a tight-fitting black cocktail dress with a red satin bow blooming over the crest of her bosom. Perched atop their heads are novelty foil 'HAPPY NEW YEAR' hats.

"Jason *does* seem to be fundamentally disturbed about the baby," the one on the left says.

"Really and truly," the one on the right says as she feeds an overweight glazed-eyed golden retriever the corner of her chocolate petit four.

"Just look at him," the one on the left says. The women watch as a tall, peaked man standing by the punch bowl – this being Mr. Horner – bows to lower his ear to the domical belly of a blushing redhead, his bride, Kimmy. With a look of grim query contorting his ferrety features, Mr. Horner rests his head on his wife's stomach for a moment, then raises it, reluctantly. He returns to an upright position. "I've seen him do that at least a dozen times tonight."

"Highly unusual," the one on the right says and nods.

"He's always petting her belly, too. Rubbing it and knocking on it and so forth. Like he's testing for something."

"She looks completely great though, doesn't she? Radiant and whatnot," the one on the right says. She's distracted by a man picking an ice cube out of the punch with his fingers. She frowns.

"Yeah, I guess so," the one on the left says and crosses her arms over the bright red bow at her chest. "But I dunno. I think there's something enormously and wildly weird going on here."

"Undeniably," the one on the right says. "Very much so."

Someone turns up the volume on the television and Dick Clark's voice drowns every other voice, each thread of party chatter, as he announces there's only ten minutes til the ball will drop. Soon it will be a new year.

"*God morgon*, Babette," Doctor VanCleave says when the maid comes through the front door carrying her paper bags brimful with bleach and Windex®. The Doctor is adjusting his tie in the mirror; he directs a wink at the maid's reflection.

"Good morning, Doctor." Babette is 19 and disarmingly Scandinavian: platinum blonde, blue-eyed, with an accent - the vowels long, the pitch reeling - that burbles from between her lips like cold pancake syrup. She eats pickled herring from a tin at lunchtime and has an almost preternaturally top-heavy figure, emphasized further when squeezed into her petal-pink maid's uniform. She is the highest-grossing maid in White Terrace and always receives generous tips and bonuses, sometimes gifts: expensive perfumes, chocolate truffles, jewelry, lingerie sets from her bolder employers. She sells most of that stuff or gives it away to friends.

The Doctor, his tie tidied, rushes to help her inside, endeavoring to disencumber her of her bags of supplies, which she clamps to her chest. "No thank you, Doctor. I can manage."

"As you please, my lady." The Doctor chuckles, then steps backwards with his hands raised as if to demonstrate the innocence of his intentions. He takes his black cashmere overcoat from the rack, then pauses at the door to flash Babette a bright white Colgate® smile. "Looking lovely today, by the way. Per usual!"

When the Doctor's BMW has pulled out of the driveway and commenced the loop around Swimming Pool Circle, Babette relaxes. She sets her load on the bench in the foyer, removes her coat and hangs it on the rack next to Evelyn's fur-trimmed parka. Evelyn is the Doctor's wife, a cheerful woman who is regularly at home while Babette cleans. Babette likes Evelyn; she is talkative and stylish and encourages the maid to take breaks to watch *All My Children* with her on the gigantic television in the living room. Babette does not hear the television now but Evelyn's coat on the rack means she must be home, so where is she? Maybe she is still asleep, Babette thinks. Evelyn is usually awake and dressed and drinking hot chocolate by the time Babette arrives at the VanCleave house, but maybe she's sick today. Maybe she's reading.

Babette makes her way to the kitchen, where she sets about making herself a cup of tea. The kitchen is beautiful, as are all the kitchens she cleans in White Terrace, with granite countertops and gleaming cherry wood cabinets stocked with expensive dishware. The VanCleave's chose the

regal "Black Galaxy" granite for their counters, while their neighbors the Horners, who Babette used to clean for prior to Kimmy's disappearance, opted for the more relaxed "Key West Pearl." The VanCleave's refrigerator is black to match the countertops. So is their stove. And the microwave, and the blender. Their toaster is black, too. Babette respects such coordination and pays special attention to leave all that black metal gleaming like an oiled stallion. She knows Evelyn appreciates her diligence.

Where *is* Evelyn?

Babette sips her tea and sneaks an Oreo® from the package in the cupboard. The house is silent. It is also exceedingly neat. There is not one PopTart® crumb on the counter, not a single wadded napkin on the breakfast bar (Doctor VanCleave always leaves his napkins wadded on the breakfast bar). The dove grey tile has been recently swept and mopped and polished. Even the faucet has been scrubbed clean. Babette twists open her Oreo®, licks the frosting from the middle, and wonders what she's supposed to do today, since everything is already so immaculately spic and span.

The shriek of the steaming kettle stirs the sulking maid from her rumination. She turns the burner off. The kettle's hiss persists, though waning, as Babette steps into the dining room, which would be as neat as the kitchen were it not for the large blue plastic tarp spread unevenly over the table. At the center of the table, the tarp bulges and pleats over an object hidden underneath. The air in the room is curiously tinged with the stench of ammonia and roses.

"Evelyn? Are you here?" There is no answer, but Babette discerns a slight quivering of the tarp. She takes a deep breath and, on the count of three, rips the tarp from the table with one purposeful tug.

Babette blanches, she cannot even scream, she scrambles backwards when she sees what was concealed under the tarp. Strapped and wired to what looks like a high-tech hot plate sits Evelyn's severed head, its hair brushed and arranged in a clumsy updo, its face inexpertly made up with crimson lipstick and blue eyeshadow. Surrounding the head are cellophane-wrapped roses in various states of wilting decline, heart-shaped red satin boxes of chocolate-covered cherries, scattered Sweethearts® conversation candies reading "Hey Baby" and "Don't Tell."

There is no blood anywhere; it has all been drained and washed away. Then Babette sees Evelyn's mouth begin to move. The maid scrambles backwards as the head's lips spasmodically purse and pucker, wrenching Evelyn's anemic face into an endless variety of pained expressions.

"Buh-buh-buh-buh-" the head says.

Babette finally manages to eek out a hoarse scream before losing consciousness. Her legs give out beneath her; her head slams against the stony, spotless kitchen tile. The tile's color is called "Mystic Abyss," a dark slate grey flecked with mica. Between Babette's parted lips seeps a trickle of blood, the only ounce of the stuff in the whole VanCleave home.

The bird in the oven is a 45-pounder, specially purchased from a farm outside of Honey Hollow due to the dearth of sufficiently large turkeys at the SuperFood®. It barely fits in the oven, and Cliff must wake up at 4 a.m. to allow it 12 hours to roast, but it's going to be worth it. Turkey is Cliff Niles' favorite poultry to prepare, preferable to chicken, duck, goose, grouse, pheasant, and partridge. He likes the bulk of a turkey, its broad chest and meaty thighs. He likes the deep interior cavity begging to be gorged full of Pepperidge Farm® stuffing, the slick greasiness of a turkey's browning skin. Cliff Niles adores using his turkey baster and bastes his turkey regularly, usually once or twice per hour. So after waking at four o'clock to put the bird in the oven, Cliff does not return to bed. Not only does he have to be awake for basting, but there are also a host of other dishes to be readied and realized. There are hors d'oeuvres to prepare, soups to simmer, pies and breads to bake. Plus, Cliff will also have to make breakfast, and since it's a holiday he wants to do something special. French toast. Bread pudding. A quiche. Sausage. Maybe he should fry up some hash browns? What would Pamela like?

Cliff smiles as he opens a can of pureed pumpkin and thinks of Pamela, his Pammy, asleep downstairs in the California King-sized bed he bought for her last Christmas. She's grown since then, gorgeously. She's made wonderful progress – far better than any of her predecessors – and Cliff is proud of her. Her body is marvelously oviform now, deliciously rippled and rolling. Cliff can tuck his head beneath the drape of flesh that billows from her belly to her knees and breathe deep the sultry balm of her skin, so moist and warm between its creases.

He cracks one egg into the pumpkin puree, then another. He pours in ½ cup whipping cream. The cream is beautiful, heavy and velvet-white sloshing into the Pyrex® mixing bowl. Cliff thinks of cows, of the voluptuous milkmaids who tend them, their laden bosoms swaying as they expertly finger the rosy teats of their bovine charges. He adds ¾ cup sugar, then nutmeg, ginger, cloves and cinnamon to the pumpkin mixture and beats with a wooden spoon until the ingredients are incorporated. He likes to picture Pammy in a milkmaid costume. Maybe she'll let him braid her hair today.

Cliff pauses to baste his turkey.

He pours the pumpkin filling into a partially pre-baked crust, one of the six he rolled out the night before, and finds room for the uncooked pie in the refrigerator. He will bake all the pies together later on. Before supper, which is scheduled for 4:30 p.m., Cliff will have made an apple, pecan, blueberry, mincemeat, and coconut cream pie. He also plans to make a cheesecake, Pammy's favorite. Pammy's face is the color of cream cheese. Her hair is the color of a graham cracker.

Cliff chops sweet potatoes and imagines Pammy gnawing on a turkey drumstick in a swimming pool full of CoolWhip®. She wears a latex bathing suit and paddles her feet flirtatiously through the whipped topping, her toenails painted the color of maraschino cherries.

Cliff opens the oven and inserts the meat thermometer into the thickest region of the turkey's thigh. It is dawn now; the turkey still has 10 hours left to roast and Cliff decides to get started making breakfast. He has settled on stuffed French toast, banana waffles, sausage links, ham-n-cheese omelettes, and home fries. Cliff is excited for Pammy to wake up and call for her breakfast. He knows today is going to be extra-special.

Some women are born to have babies, lots and lots of squirming, screaming, writhing, wriggling, wet and squishy babies. From an early age, such females delight in peering into strollers to coo at their contents, playing peek-a-boo with infants across the aisle in restaurants, holding a toddler's sticky fat fingers while it takes its first bumbling steps across the living room. They are the girls who laugh when a youngster hurls a precious heirloom against the wall, who warble with joy when a baby barfs Carnation® GoodStart® down their shirtfronts. While changing diapers, these girls hum and twitter, breathing deeply of Desitin® and dreaming of the day they receive their own bundle of warm sweet bliss. When they reach puberty, their breasts inflate to lunatic dimensions, their pelvic bones widen in ardent anticipation of the first red head to squeeze between their arches. These women have huge ovaries and uteri clogged with a deep slime of endometrium; accordingly, their menstruations are torrential. Once mature enough to begin their reproductive careers, they pop out the little ones with such fervor and rapidity that even their own mothers lose count. As soon as one bun is out of the oven, another is tossed in to bake. Delivery room photographs show these women beaming triumphantly from their hospital beds, happier than pigs in slop. Eventually there is no room or no money for one more little angel, and it is then that a woman afflicted by such a high degree of gestation-lust might accept a small fee to act as a surrogate for unfortunate ladies less fertile than herself. When menopause rusts their gears and forces these career-procreators into retirement, they are absolutely devastated. Many of them commit suicide or move to Mexico or take up needlepoint.

Kimmy Horner was such a woman, with one problem: when Kimmy turned 19 and went for her first gynecological exam, the doctors declared her infertile. Sterile. Barren. Her reproductive organs were a parched and desolate wasteland, doomed never to bear fruit.

Kimmy was highly sensitive about her defect and for some time after receiving the news, she avoided babies and children entirely. If she couldn't have one (or ten!) of her own, she never wanted to see another tot again. Her boycott lasted for approximately a week and a half, after which point she dived back into babies with the frenzied, wolfish hunger of an addict pitched from the proverbial wagon. Kimmy babysat for every new mother in town. She filled her apartment with baby dolls and Precious Moments™ figurines, Anne Geddes posters and paintings of nursery rhyme storks. She made regular excursions to the Cabbage Patch Kids® store to watch the cloth children pulled gently from between the leaves of their cabbage mothers.

She learned to knit and began making baby sweaters for her friends, whether or not they were expecting. In Kimmy's mind, anyone with the biological capacity to give birth was as good as pregnant already, their futures inevitably overflowing with adorable grubby-faced youngstock, instead of fallow and bleak like her own.

Kimmy grew up. She married Jason Horner, her college boyfriend, and the couple moved to the small town of Honey Hollow, where Jason's high-paying job at the credit union enabled them to make quite a comfortable life for themselves. But for Kimmy, existence remained a hollow, shambling march towards a disappointed death. She began paying thousands of dollars a month for fertility drugs, despite the doctors' insistence that her condition was hopeless. She bought dogs, two roly-poly golden retriever puppies who grew up into big yellow snuffling morons.

Then a miracle occurred, an event so impossible it could only be a gift straight from heaven above: Kimmy Horner got knocked up.

Never in the history of Honey Hollow had there been a more enthusiastic pregnant woman. Kimmy faced morning sickness and bloating with pure rapture; she smiled every time she saw her stretch marks in the mirror. The mood swings and swollen breasts flung her into paroxysms of fathomless glee. When the doctors tried to tell her to prepare for things to go awry with the pregnancy, that she shouldn't be physically able to have a baby at all so not to get her hopes too high, Kimmy just giggled and whistled and offered to bake the doctors lemon squares.

The world was blossoming all around Kimmy; everywhere she looked something beautiful, bright, and new glittered before her. Everything Kimmy smelled was sweet as milk and honey, and everyone she talked to had the dulcet golden voice of an angel.

Kimmy could not wait to meet the baby growing inside her. She knew that life would be extraordinary once the baby was born, that she and the baby would be happy together. When she dreamt, she saw their future stretched out before them like a satin ribbon, pink or baby blue and illuminated by light so bright it made Kimmy Horner's heart ache.

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The garbage outside the back door of Dr. VanCleave's office is packed in vivid red and yellow "INFECTIOUS WASTE" and "SHARPS" bags, each one bearing that alien-parasite-orifice design symbolical of biohazard. Dr. VanCleave's nurse and assistant, Jodie, places the garbage out back every other evening to be picked up by the man who drives the medical waste disposal van, an elusive individual never encountered by any of his clients.

These bags are always full of grim and distasteful debris – stained scalpel blades, bloody surgical gloves, gallon bags of viscous adipose the color of fertilized eggs – so neither the medical waste disposal man nor Jodie nor anyone else ever opts to peer inside or question their contents. The silvery tang of ammonia undercut by decay is enough to extinguish all curiosity.

Thus it was obvious to no one when Dr. VanCleave left an extra bag on the back patio with the others, this one atypically large and awkward, its red plastic stretched thin over malformed protrusions. Had anyone unsealed this bag, he or she would have been greatly unsettled by its gruesome bounty of

wet fur, white vertebral spikes jutting from purple muscle, blood-splattered muzzles, tongues lolling, loose teeth, eyes frosted with milky putrescence

In total, the heads of a dozen or more dogs, strays and housepets, some still with collars on. In but one glimpse into the bag, one could have discerned with ease the curly head of a Bichon Frise, the inky aspects of two black Labradors, a mutt named Rusty with a jaunty bandana adorning his abbreviated neck, a Cavalier King Charles Spaniel's snout puckered permanently mid-grimace.

Had anyone unsealed this bag, what wild conjectures would its ghastly goods have roused of the horrific experiments performed by Dr. VanCleave in his office, in the backrooms and basement spaces unseen by patients? Or of the terrible end that befell poor Rusty, Buster, Buddy and Rex? But the bag was never opened, and at bedtime young children across Honey Hollow still ask their parents if their pets will ever come home...

Several women who wanted to know if their boyfriends were unfaithful, a girl seeking advice on what color to dye her hair, and a man wondering when he would finally move out of his mother's house, each one of the desperate souls who dials Priestess Pam's Phone-a-Psychic Hotline Friday morning listens with growing disappointment to three ascending tolls, then a consummately enunciated message from the synthetic phone operator:

We're sorry. You have reached a number that has been disconnected or is no longer in service. If you feel you have reached this recording in error, please check the number and try your call again...

The voice then recedes into a metallic upsurge of white noise.

Mrs. Tabitha Pettiford of Cottage Grove, WI, called Priestess Pam every day during her lunch hour and is shocked and disturbed by the psychic's sudden disappearance. Priestess Pam was dependable, devoted; the best phone psychic in the business. She had even once accepted an emergency call when Mrs. Pettiford had phoned at 3 a.m. to ask for guidance regarding her cat's kidney infection. It was obvious from talking to her that Priestess Pam truly cared about the people who called her hotline, so why would she without warning disconnect her phone, leaving the hundreds who relied on her counsel in the lurch?

Ms. Sharron Dewey of Sebago, ME, feels similar stirrings of disquietude upon receiving the operator's canned message. She immediately senses trouble afoot. Whether the psychic had been kidnapped or suffered a cardiac event, something was very wrong and Priestess Pam needed help. Pam had assisted Sharron through episodes of weakness and need, rescuing her from financial, emotional, and medical crisis on countless occasions, and now Sharron had an opportunity to repay her kindness.

She dials 911.

Dispatcher: 9-1-1, what's your emergency?

Dewey: I'd like to report a missing person.

Dispatcher: Okay, well, that is a matter for the sheriff's office. Would you like me to transfer your call now?

Dewey: Sure. Fine.

Dispatcher: All right. Just a second -

(There is a series of chimes then a purr of static and then)

Cumberland County Sheriff's Office Phone Operator: Hello, you've reached the Cumberland County Sheriff's Office. How may I help you?

Dewey: I'd like to report a missing person.

Operator: Mmm-hmm. Who's missing?

Dewey: Well, I don't know her full name, but I suspect that something dreadful has happened to Pam, of Priestess Pam's Phone-a-Psychic hotline?

Operator: Mmm-hmm. I'm sorry. I have other calls. Good day, and happy thanksgiving.

Dewey: But -

The dial tone threatens to extend into eternity and then Sharron hangs up.

For days and days, Priestess Pam's clients continue to dial the Hotline. They listen as the artificial operator recites her flat condolences and then allow the static to wash over them, always expecting to hear Pam's whispered predictions carried from a place deep inside the black immensities of their telephones.

An assemblage of pink-cheeked teenagers dressed in navy, black, and burgundy pea coats and parkas huddles waiting on the front porch of the Stadler house at 2 pm on Christmas day. There's a perfect 1.5" of fresh clean snow dusting the lawns of White Terrace and everyone is polite and smiling, sated by the morning's acquisitions.

Among the teenagers are Wyatt and Rosemary Larsson, as well as Wyatt's girlfriend Veronika Kraft. Veronika has a black-and-white-checkered scarf wound around most of her head so that only her blue eyes and the fine bridge of her nose are visible. She stands very close to Wyatt. She thinks she hears a dog bark, but there are no dogs living on Swimming Pool Circle any more. Veronika Kraft is very quiet.

A red-haired girl with too many freckles and too-thin legs rings the doorbell a second time. No one answers its trill, although the Stadlers are clearly home: their minivan is in the driveway, "Let it Snow" plays on the stereo inside; the lights are on.

Every year since they can remember the children of White Terrace have convoked to sing Christmas Carols at the homes of their parents, their parents' friends, their teachers, etc. The Stadler house was always the last stop on their circuit of the subdivision, since Ray Stadler, who owned a bakery in downtown Honey Hollow, would invite everyone in to eat leftover donuts and Danish in the living room. Mrs. Stadler and the Stadler twins, once they were born, would sit watching from the kitchen table, never saying or eating anything. They sipped soundlessly from large pink mugs of hot chocolate. Ray Stadler seemed forlorn, even distraught when the kids would have to leave. "Come over any time," he would call as they filed out the doorway, "Please!" His wife said nothing.

Mrs. Stadler and the twins were odd, but glamorous and divinely blonde. The youths of White Terrace grew up in awe of them. Everyone's mother both despised and longed to be Amber, so statuesque and faraway; they would model their hairstyles after hers and speculate about her over coffee with other wives and mothers while watching their kids run screaming around the playground. And they were unequivocal in their desire for their children to overachieve like the Stadler twins, with their pageant trophies and good grades and impeccable table manners.

The redhead rings the doorbell a third time. The teenagers are growing restless. Everyone wants his or her donut, and their throats burn from singing "White Christmas" and "Joy to the World" dozens of times over.

"Why don't you look in the window," someone suggests. "Maybe they're in there but just can't hear the bell!"

Mr. Stadler had never failed to hear the bell before. In fact, he always opened the door before anyone got around to ringing it.

Veronika Kraft wants to go home.

A boy in a blue wool hat who doesn't look like he particularly needs another donut today trudges across the lawn to the Stadlers' big picture window. He presses his face to the glass, his bulbous cheeks momentarily jaundiced by the warm light sweating through the frosted panes.

Then he faints. A spiraling of snow is buffeted upwards then settles again over his collapsed mass. A few girls hurry over to see if the fat boy is all right. While one of the girls kneels beside him, her ear tilted towards his face to listen for breathing, another stands balancing on her tiptoes to sneak a glance into the Stadler house.

Through the window, the girl sees Mrs. Stadler and her daughters and instantly knows the reason why no one would answer the door. Crumpled on the sofa are three bodies slouching stiffly like life-size Barbie™ dolls, throats cleft deep enough to reveal the cartilaginous rings and tough muscle of their tracheas. The twins' red and green Tartan flannel nightdresses are torn, the dresses' lace necklines darkly stained. Their mother, positioned between the two children, had been stripped down to her cream-colored bra and panties. Her grey-blue chest is brightened by blood that ceased flowing fresh hours ago and so idled as if captured in a photograph, congealed into shining, still cascades of pulposus jelly. The sofa was saturated black, its upholstery seeming to exhale a mist oily and rich with the wraiths of erythrocytes. Embroidered throw pillows lay sopping and in disarray on the splattered carpet. A few feet away, the Christmas tree sparkles cheerfully.

The girl screams and backs away, her complexion greying, as a group of carolers gathers at the window, pointing through the glass at the tableau arranged inside. A gust of wind carries a scattering of snowflakes spiraling down from the roof of the Stadler house.

Veronika Kraft doesn't want to look. Neither does Wyatt nor Rosemary Larsson, and together the three walk through the drifting snow silently home and promise themselves never to think of the past year's happenings in perennially pleasant and picture-perfect White Terrace. Soon they will have new calendars to hang – insipid gifts from distant aunts or uncles, probably – and the old one, inscribed with its score of impenetrable horrors and anomalies, will be unceremoniously dumped in the garbage, or chewed apart by the dogs.

Lester lies paralyzed, naked and tethered by unseen bonds to a table in a domed white room. The room is cool-lit by the glow of three ceiling-mounted exam lights, one of which is trained on Lester. Its antiseptic illumination narrows his pupils to pinpricks and sears candent through a lace of nerves to the place where his scalp meets the metal table. Lester cannot blink.

He had been eating a French cruller in his car in the parking lot at the Post Office.

He had been sleeping in bed in his house on Swimming Pool Circle.

He can't remember what he'd been doing before but now he was here again and this time they'd taken Lynda, too. Before they had spared his wife, they had promised him they wouldn't take her, but there she was, rigid on a table at the opposite side of the round room, bound just as he was, wreathed by the short grey-blue figures Lester has known and feared since childhood. Some of the figures wear black hooded cloaks, while others wear nothing, their skin stretched and shining like opaque cellophane over the frail armature of their bones. The flesh encasing their soft skulls is even finer; through its lucent tissues are visible the figures' minute black brains, which pulse with an aurulent electrical current. The figures have wide black eyes with which they can glimpse every shadow and whisper in Lester's mind. They can do this whenever it pleases them. Lester has sensed their surveillance itching at his frontal lobe when shopping for cereal at the SuperFood®, selling stamps at the Post Office, making love to Lynda under their down duvet. Lynda. What are they doing to Lynda?

Lester is unable to speak, so instead he steers the thought at the cluster of figures hovering over his prone wife: "What are you doing to her?" They receive the thought. They process it. Lester hears a drone in his head, the sound of the figures discussing their response.

YOU NEED NOT WORRY ABOUT YOUR WOMAN, SIR. The answer stings as it washes through the wet spaces of Lester's ventricular cave complex. Several voices interweave to broadcast the statement and the sound is fuzzy, tremulous, like a poorly tuned radio.

"That's my wife," Lester thinks. "You have to let her go."

YOU KNOW WE CANNOT. SHE IS ESSENTIAL TO THE SUCCESS OF OUR PROGRAM.

As Lester watches, the figures lower a black machine over Lynda's abdomen. The machine beams a thin spine of neon green light, which the figures focus below her navel.

"Stop! You can't touch her!" Lester is begging now, his thoughts ragged and faint when the figures receive them. "Keep me, kill me, I don't care - just let Lynda go."

WE HAVE NEVER KILLED A HUMAN SUBJECT. This transmission is stern, edged with a shortness that from any other speaker would indicate annoyance but cannot in this instance, since the figures lack the necessary limbic connections for emotion.

"Please let her go!"

YOU DO NOT HAVE THE PARTS WE REQUIRE. WE MUST HAVE THE WOMAN.

One of the hooded figures palpates Lynda's belly with the palm of its hand. Another parts her legs and introduces between them a rectangular glass tray. The machine is adjusted so that the aperture emitting the light is just three inches from Lynda's skin. The ray flares from green to blue, then flickers out. In its place, a wide-gauge needle descends from the machine. Lester watches as the metal barb slowly, agonizingly bears down on Lynda's exposed midriff. Two seconds after the needle pierces through his wife's flesh, a flux of deep interior blood surges from her genital orifice. The lewd sanguine liquid collects, steaming, in the rectangular receptacle positioned between her legs.

YOUR WOMAN IS VERY GOOD.

When the figures are satisfied with their sample, the machine is deactivated, its needle disengaged from Lynda's body and receded into its cartridge. One of the figures carefully pours the blood from the tray into three vials and hands them to an assistant, who rushes the samples out of the round room.

"Why are you doing this to us?"

The fluctuant collective voice reconfigures to assume a kindly tone; finally it transmits:

CATAclysm IS IMMINENT BUT INSIDE YOUR WOMAN THERE MAY BE A KEY TO THE FUTURE. YOU HAVE BOTH BEEN CHOSEN. THERE IS NOTHING MORE FOR YOU TO UNDERSTAND, SIR.

The light over Lynda is switched off and then the figures glide in formation across the room towards Lester and then everything is so bright that Lester can no longer even think.

In a salon painted soothing pale citron and cluttered with mirrors and neon wall art, Evelyn VanCleave reclines cradled deep in the cushions of a pedicure spa chair as a silent Chinese teenager rinses Evelyn's toes with rose-scented water. She is seated between her two closest girlfriends, separated from them by gauzy cream-colored curtains that drape luxuriously from the ceiling. On her right is Naomi, wife of the chief anesthesiologist at Honey Hollow Hospital, while to her left lounges Helena, wife to Dr. Neil Thornhill, the town proctologist.

Together, Naomi, Helena and Evelyn form an exclusive club: the Doctor's Wives of White Terrace.

"Evelyn, my darling, what's Glen getting you for Valentine's Day this year?" Naomi's viscid voice oozes through the curtain. Evelyn imagines her friend's voice as the red ropey tongue of a cartoon frog, infinitely stretchy and sticky and able to insinuate itself inside, under, or around anything in its path. She saw a frog with such a tongue once in a commercial for children's cereal.

"Oh I don't know," Evelyn says. The teenager at her feet noiselessly pats her toes with a plush black towel. "Flowers. Chocolates. Glen never does anything drastic for Valentine's. It's such an impersonal holiday, after all."

Naomi yawns. "Boring!"

"I am almost 100% positive that Neil is going to surprise me with that Miata I've been eyeing," Helena interjects. "In silver. Black leather upholstery. What a good boy!"

"I know for certain that Rod made reservations at La Mer," Naomi's tone is conspiratorial, as though her husband's expensive Valentine's Day plans were a matter of closely guarded government intelligence. "But I'm hoping for a little something from Zales, too."

"OoOo," Helena warbles. "As in what?"

"Nothing extreme, of course, but I do just love, I mean *love* their Prestige™ colored diamonds collection."

"OoOoO!"

"Evelyn," Naomi whines. "You're so boring. Isn't there anything you want?"

"I could use some lipo," Evelyn answers after a moment, her tone gloomy. At 35, Evelyn is still in good shape but her husband constantly badgers her about the fat accumulating around her mid-section, the gradual dimpling of her thighs. He would also like her to dye her hair, which is beginning to dim from vivid gold to a refined ash blonde. "Or maybe a brow lift."

Evelyn's toenails are painted a dusky ruby-black, Naomi's a glittered plum; Helena's an iridescent currant.

Driving home in the Land Rover after a post-pedicure, pastry-intensive lunch spent debating Evelyn's physical failings, Naomi says, "Evelyn, you cannot let Glen get you so depressed. So you're not 27 anymore! Big deal! As if he can do better! He's no spring chicken himself, after all."

Evelyn was 25 when she married Dr. Glen VanCleave. He was thirty years her senior, and promised her a lifetime of comfort and security, cashmere sweater sets and no more sleepless nights spent fretting over car insurance. Her friends and family had fussed over the age difference; they were full of warnings and cautions and chastisements, but Evelyn, who never concerned herself particularly with the ever-predictable opinions of her wearisome relations, would not be swayed. She knew what she wanted, and what she wanted was to be cared for by the handsome small-town doctor with silver hair like her father's. She felt she had put in her time and strived for long enough. She didn't want to work as a promotional model anymore, didn't want to hand out dog food samples while wearing a bikini at veterinary conventions or splay herself over the hoods of convertibles to rotate for hours at car shows. A stable, leisurely life, a life in which not another minute would be spent being ogled by hordes of middle-aged nerds in company-monogrammed polos and khakis: that was what Evelyn wanted.

Dr. VanCleave eagerly provided the young and supple Evelyn with that life. As long as she was his wife, she would never have to work again. She didn't even have to clean, or cook, or do any of those things an average housewife might do. Instead, she shopped, and she was happy. She ate at expensive restaurants, went on cruises, watched soap operas (the ABC platform: *All My*

Children, One Life to Live, General Hospital) while running on the treadmill and slept in when she felt like it. Never again did she fill out another tax form or pay another utility bill.

But as Evelyn aged and left her twenties behind, her husband's attitude towards her shifted. Now, at 35, Evelyn feels like a disappointment to him, a faded relic whose presence he could barely tolerate.

"I just wish I could make him happy again," Evelyn says. She resolves to get some work done after all, as a Valentine's Day present to Glen. The holiday is a week away, so there's still time for a quick Botox® injection or even a chemical peel. She could dye her hair like he's asked her to do so many times.

Evelyn VanCleave does not want her husband to think her ungrateful.

There are two coffee cans on Jason Horner's countertop, only one of which contains coffee. The other can, which once held a coffee more expensive than Jason's usual brand and had been a Christmas gift from a neighbor, reverberates as though hollow when struck with a metal spoon. This ostensibly vacant can sits a few inches further to the right of the coffeemaker than the full can, thereby signaling its alternate, non-coffee-related function.

But Monday mornings possess a renowned power to befuddle and bedevil, so it is not astonishing that when Jason wakes for work at the Honey Hollow Credit Union one Monday and staggers down to the kitchen to make his morning coffee, he unwittingly reaches for the wrong can. His spindling ectomorph's hand clasps the top of the can and with a press of his palm and a tightening of fingers, the plastic lid burps open. The release accompanying the unsealing is not characterized by the bitter, mahogany flavor expected from coffee but instead has a uniquely unpleasant odor, the stench of putrid cantaloupe and deliquescing potatoes, of old grease and used surgical gauze. Jason stumbles backward and coughs; not again, he thinks, but compelled by a curiosity he cannot quell, he bends over the counter, his skeletal forearm shielding his nose and mouth from the coffee can's fumes, and takes a look inside.

The umbilical cord, or funiculus umbilicalis, is a gelatinous cable that links the developing mammalian fetus to the placenta. The cord contains three vessels: one vein and two arteries, which serve to supply the baby with nutrient-rich, oxygenated blood from the mother and to carry off the oxygen-exhausted, post-consumption dross-blood. Umbilical cords range in length from 20 to 30 inches. The cord in the coffee can is a segment approx. 7 inches long, sallow pink, beginning to blacken at either end, coiled and twisted to fit within its quarters. It is glossed with whitish mucous, the probable origin of the can's noxious emission. The mucosal glaze is mottled with patches of pale green fur.

Jason reseals the can and replaces it on the counter, nearer to the microwave than the coffeepot. When he gets home this evening he resolves to find a more fitting place for his solemn keepsake. This cannot keep happening, he thinks.

He proceeds to measure his coffee from the correct can. The coffeemaker radiates a heady, vibrant, masculine pungence as Jason dresses in chinos and striped periwinkle shirt, a necktie the

yellow of newly hatched chicks. For breakfast, Jason eats two slices of toast with butter and grape jelly. He finishes his orange juice in two swallows. Before leaving the house, he unplugs the toaster, turns the thermostat down to 60°, and fills his spill-proof stainless steel travel mug with approximately 15 oz. of robust, steaming hot coffee.

After several days of deliberation, Ray Stadler opts not to report his sighting from the night of Friday, October 4th to the police, although he would come to regret his decision following the events of that Halloween and Lester's subsequent testimony. Had he reported the incident, however, Ray would have presented the details thusly:

At roughly midnight on the evening in question, Ray was sitting at his kitchen table reading old letters from his wife, Amber, who was away for the weekend, having taken their two daughters to compete at the Junior Miss Dairy Princess pageant several states away. He knew it was around midnight because the microwave, which usually exhibited the time in sickly electric green on its digital display, was broken; it just flashed 00:00 over and over and he'd had to check his watch. 12:01. 12:05. Then he saw the light.

It pulsed cyan, royal, cerulean blue as it glistened through the glass of the French doors that opened from the kitchen onto the patio at the rear of the Stadler home. Ray rose from the table. The letter he'd been reading drifted drowsily down to the linoleum as he moved to the door and pressed his face to its shatter-proof glass. The oil from his skin left a smudged imprint of his nose, his forehead, as he gazed spellbound at the indigo illumination uncoiling in flickering tendrils across the sky. The nucleus, where the light blazed brightest, centered over Lester Dunmire's house.

Ray slid open the door and stepped outside. The air was cool and tasted like burnt leaves, standard elements of early autumnal ambience, but an additional peculiar something coursed through the atmosphere of Ray's backyard, something trembling and electric, something ultramarine: the light was material. It crystallized in Ray's throat and frosted his lungs; its current traveled from his retinas down along his spine, sparkled through muscle fibers and into the lawn. A web of opalescent capillaries shimmered across the grass, and Ray found himself frozen where he stood.

As he watched, the roof of Lester's house seemed to twitch. A rectangular section of glass was wrenched upwards as if by invisible exertion, then hovered in the beam. Ray recognized this length of glass as the master bedroom skylight, a feature of all homes built on Swimming Pool Circle. Seconds later, the crown of Lester's head appeared, raised through the opening where the

skylight had been. Next his neck became visible, then his torso, as the whole of Lester's body was lifted. He hung there, suspended in the blue light, his posture rigid and upright as if he were standing at attention.

Then the light over the house mushroomed and flared to white and Lester Dunmire disappeared.

Ray woke up in his bedroom early Saturday morning - he couldn't say what time, because when he checked his watch it was dead, flashing 00:00 over and over - still dressed in his khakis and t-shirt. His shoes were still on his feet, although the soles had melted and the leather was charred.

He chose to believe he'd been dreaming, a notion the credibility of which increased when Lester showed up to buy his usual dozen donuts at Ray's shop the next morning. Based on this reasoning, Ray never reported the incident to the police. He never could explain what happened to his burnt shoes, but he had his own problems and soon the events of October 4th were relegated to the very back of his mind, never to be spoken of to anyone, even after that horrible thing happened on Halloween and everyone in White Terrace whispered over their fences and hedges about Lester's strange allegations. Ray simply threw away the shoes, along with his dead watch. He could afford new ones.

There's not much left of Pamela Niles:

- *A crust of drying bile adhered to the fibers of the toast-colored carpet
- *Several scraps of rubbery sallow skin strewn over the bureau, the stereo speakers
- *One foot-long segment of small intestine suspended from the ceiling fan
- *Gallons of blood and gristle soaking into the mattress

Cliff has lined up his cleaning products on top of the TV set: Mr. Clean®, Resolve® Carpet Cleaner, Supreme Clean® Clear Ammonia, Windex®, several white washcloths, a scrub brush, Febreze®. Cliff is wearing yellow rubber gloves, the ones he usually wears to wash dishes.

On the floor at the base of the stairs is a super-sized black garbage bag into which Cliff has been tossing the larger scraps of his dissipated wife. He hasn't yet had the heart to relinquish her pretty head to the bag, so it is perched watching him from the bookshelf. One of its eyes is AWOL, having burst from the socket at the instant of eruption, and its dainty round-tipped tongue lolls from a now toothless, obscenely distended perma-smile.

Cliff stoops and picks a greasy, orange-brown morsel of liver from the foot of the dresser and throws it into the garbage bag. He spots one of Pam's teeth under the dresser, behind an old can of gravy. Cliff puts the tooth in his pocket, with the others he has found. He always keeps their teeth.

He'll attend to the gravy can later.

The ceiling above the bed and the adjacent walls are splattered with blood. So too are Pam's telephones, her slippers, the notebooks in which she recorded all her significant dreams. A stack of dirty shattered dinner and dessert plates, salad bowls, assorted cutlery and a butter dish is semi-submerged in a pulpy red lagoon at the center of the bed. Most of a pecan pie has been overturned onto the floor.

There are slivers of bone snared between the blinds, tatters of Pam's lavender flannel nightgown pasted with blood to the TV screen. Cliff sprays the screen with Windex® and wipes it down with a washcloth. He sprays a few cursory splashes of Febreze® into the salty haze of blood-thickened air that hangs, almost visibly, at chest-level.

Tomorrow he will have to rent a steam cleaner for the carpet. If Cliff remembers correctly, they're available for only \$27.99//day at the SuperFood®: a very reasonable price.

It was ten o'clock at night and snowing when Ray Stadler swerved to avoid hitting what looked like a black dog or a man on all fours running across Airport Acres Boulevard, which is nowhere near an airport at all but is instead a twisting dirt road that cuts through the dark woods east of Secret Lake. Ray was driving his wife, Amber, home from a party at one of Amber's cousins' condominiums in a neighboring county, where the couple had eaten a large number of deviled eggs and cocktail shrimp while uncomfortably listening as Amber's Uncle Nick related the story of how he lost his forearm to frostbite after being pinned beneath a snowmobile several decades prior.

Amber was asleep in the passenger's seat when the car went off the road.

The car, a white Buick Regal, spun out to the right and ploughed through a snow bank, balancing several seconds on the ledge of the steep embankment adjoining Airport Acres Boulevard before overturning and toppling into the woods, where it finally settled wrapped around the trunk of a large Eastern White Pine. The struck tree showered snow and needles onto the car's battered roof, while from below resounded the slow swallowing groan of virgin snow compressed under the tires. Motes of white powder from the detonated airbags whispered through the interior.

"Amber?" Ray croaked. In the seat beside him he saw a complex tangle of metal and upholstery, shards of turquoise glass glittering red light over a knotted form soft, wet and impossible. The car had collided with the tree on the passenger's side. "Amber?"

Ray could not hear his wife breathing. He thought he saw what might have been her fingers tremble.

When the police arrived they eased Ray out of the car on a basket stretcher. They explained that Amber would need to be extricated using hydraulic equipment, and that they would not stop until she was freed from the vehicle. Ray watched as the police and paramedics and volunteer firemen and other uniformed personnel struggled to disentangle the car from the pine tree, chopping at wrenched panels of the Buick with the Jaws of Life™, until the EMTs drove the ambulance and Ray inside it to Honey Hollow Hospital.

The police officer that came the next morning to tell Ray that Amber had "passed on" was a hulking Clydesdale of a man with a carrot-colored crew cut; a man whose air of condolence was unwieldy and who nearly knocked out Ray's catheter with a sympathetic squeeze of the invalid man's arm before rushing panicked from the room.

A few days later, a woman who looked just like Amber was wheeled into Ray's hospital suite by two austere doctors. Both doctors were men in their mid-thirties with slick side-parted hair and somber black suits under their lab coats. Ray stared speechless at the threesome.

"Aren't you happy to see me?" the woman who looked like Amber said. Her teeth were whiter and pointier than Amber's when she smiled. Looking from her to the expressionless doctors, Ray felt a wave of nauseous apprehension wash through his gut. The mint green walls of his suite seemed to contract around him. His tongue felt heavy and oversized in his drying mouth. He swallowed.

"That's not my wife," Ray said. "My wife is dead."

"Who told you Amber was deceased?" one of the doctors asked in a clipped, mannered voice.

"The police told me," Ray said.

"The police were mistaken," the other doctor said. "Your wife is alive. See? This is your wife."

The woman who looked like Amber offered a small wave from her wheelchair. Her skin had acquired an unnatural metallic glint that it hadn't possessed prior to the accident. Prior to her death.

"That's not my wife," Ray repeated.

A new year has settled over the tract homes and shopping plazas of Honey Hollow, a year unblemished by the messy uncertainties of its precedent. Although snow still blankets winterized lawns, and icicles continue to grow in thick stalks from gleaming aluminum gutters, the residents of Honey Hollow are glutted with a springtime sense of optimism, resurrection, purification. They lay sleeping between flannel sheets dreaming easy of car washes, polite interchanges at breakfast benefits, soft-serve ice cream, silent auctions, new vinyl siding, throw pillows, Easter, carnations, Best Western® hotels, raffle tickets, vacation resorts, Hershey®'s milk chocolate bars, and early retirement. In a master bedroom in White Terrace, a husband tightens his grip on his pretty wife, who in turn curls closer into his embrace. The homes are warm, the people happy. Their thoughts are clouded by neither anxiety nor fear; no grey skies obscure their vision of the broad bright field of the future tidily unfolding itself into infinity, like a crisp linen tablecloth.

It is now Monday morning, 2 am. In 5 hours, the workweek will begin. The men will rise from their beds and stagger down the stairs to drink coffee and orange juice and eat 2 full bowls of Cheerios®. They will drive their silver//champagne//black 4-door luxury sedans to their offices, where they will sit down at their desks, twirl pens between thumb and forefinger and think about meatloaf for 7 hours. Back at home, their wives will begin to stir. They will moisturize and shave their legs. Any children will be packed onto the school bus and given money for the hot lunch line. After a few hours of morning talk shows, it will be time to drive (the minivan, the Subaru station wagon) over to the SuperFood® to do the shopping for the evening's meatloaf.

At 2 am, the SuperFood®'s doors are locked, its fluorescent lights dimmed. The store will not open for another five hours, when the first shift of cashiers and customer service representatives will pull into the parking lot already wearing their black SuperFood® aprons and blue polo shirts.

At this darkened hour, the SuperFood® is empty. The parking lot is empty, and so are the streets. The streetlights, tireless, continue to cycle through their color-coded progression, their machinations lonesome without the usual soundtrack of idling engines and audience of impatient vehicles. Throughout Honey Hollow, cars and their people are silent, sleeping. And yet, inside the overlarge warehouse-like interior of the SuperFood®, there seems to be some presence,

something roaming the aisles, unseen by the dozen discreet video cameras mounted to deter and expose would-be shoplifters. Whatever hides away within the store casts no shadow beneath the arctic glow of the store's night lighting; its feet fall silently on the beige tile. To an observer peering through the thick glass of one of the store's two automated entrances, the SuperFood® appears deserted, as it ought to be.

But just out of sight, in the fresh produce section, a red shopping cart rolls unhurriedly past the tropical fruit display. The cart pauses, and a large coconut levitates from the bin. The whiskered fruit hovers in the air for a few thoughtful seconds, then settles in the child seat at the front of the cart.

The spectral shopper is Evelyn VanCleave. Although she is invisible to the unfocused viewer, with a certain degree of concentration and credulity it is possible to discern the quavering outline and diaphanous vapor of her ghostly form, an image that more than anything resembles a holographic projection of her living self. A similar-style wraith might be seen in an old episode of Scooby Doo, scaring customers away from an amusement park or candy factory. In death, Dr. VanCleave's wife has been reunited with her attractive head, an article that has fared less well in its earthly aspect. Her hair is swept back into a bun at the nape of her neck. She is dressed in a pale pink cardigan, a white blouse and cropped white linen trousers. On her feet she wears a pair of delicate periwinkle suede pumps. Evelyn picks up a peach, squeezes it, raises it to her nose, then sets it down again, reflectively. The fruit is overripe. She rolls her cart in the direction of the citrus crates.

In the frozen foods aisle, the apparition of Kimmy Horner leans into the ice cream freezer. She is again immense and swollen with child, so that the soft cotton of her lilac maternity tunic stretches taut over her abdomen. She holds the freezer door open and lets the chill air swirl around her in frosted plumes. Kimmy's outline is rimmed by a faint nimbus of white light that glitters when it catches on the ice crystals drifting from the open freezer. Smiling, Kimmy reaches for a half-gallon container of Edy's® Rocky Road.

A few aisles over, Amber Stadler and her two daughters, twins Tiffani and Breanna, stand in a precisely straight line facing a row of shelves surfeit with name-brand cookies and crackers. The

snack foods are contained within crisp plastic packages in hues ranging the entire color spectrum, from rich primary red to electric orchid. Simultaneously, each blonde and radiant Stadler female takes a blue-and-purple package Double-Stuf® Oreos® from the shelf. The twins are dressed in matching pastel pink dresses, each with a blue ribbon tied into a bow at her waist, the type of dresses little girls wear to church on Easter Sunday - puff sleeves, full satin skirts with taffeta petticoats. Amber whispers something to her daughters, who nod in response. Together, the Stadlers neatly set the cookies down in their shopping cart, where the three packages of Oreos® join three bags of Pepperidge Farm® Goldfish® crackers, three Entenmann's® crumb cakes, and three boxes of CinnamonGraham Dunkaroos®. The image of the blonde threesome flickers momentarily as Amber and the twins turn back to face the cookie shelf.

In the SuperFood® Bakery, an immaterial but still awesomely large Pamela Niles lolls on the beige tile, beached before the glass of the cake display case. Pamela's pallor is milkier than it was in life, her curves more liquid. She reclines against the cake case, white lobes of fat sliding away from her body over the floor, expression remote as she absentmindedly places one after another pink-frosted sugar cookie into her heart-shaped mouth. Her nightgown is long and white and gossamer; through its thin veil are visible the mystic undulations of her heavenly anatomy.

Nearby, Lynda Dunmire orders a rib roast from the large black dog seated behind the meat counter. The dog does not have latex gloves on his paws or an apron or a little white paper hat set atop the plane of his heavy head, but he fetches Lynda's cut from the cooler all the same. The woman is unfazed by her canine helper and smiles politely when the dog emerges from the cooler clenching a big roast between his jaws. The roast impacts the steel counter with a dull wet sound. A glistening cord of drool dribbles down the fat-marbled wall of the meat, tarrying in the indentations left by the dog's teeth. The dog barks and Lynda laughs, their voices coiling together, winding upward into the rafters and echoing through the store.

In only two hours, the first shift cashiers and butchers and bakers will file in to the SuperFood®, unaware of the store's nocturnal visitations by the wraiths of White Terrace, Honey Hollow's lost wives and daughters. They will not see the phantom crumbs of cookies consumed by dreamy Pamela Niles, nor the smudges of Kimmy Horner's hands on the glass of the ice cream freezer.

They will miss completely the moist red stain on the meat counter where the dog relinquished Lynda Dunmire's 5-lb rib roast. These and other uncanny traces of the women's presence will have faded from the SuperFood® before the store's mortal, respiring shoppers arrive, just as the traces of their lives in Honey Hollow fade even now, interred beneath a thousand budding hopes and dreams for the new year. It is so painless to forget, to not pay attention, especially when there are gardens to tend and new puppies to feed and potato salad to prepare for potluck suppers and any number of assorted relevant everyday tasks to perform.

But someone has to watch. Someone has to remember.

There are still so many mysteries left to solve...

