Cyclorama: a collection of short fiction and poetry about the lives of women

Kata O'Bannon Alvidrez
Iowa State University

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Cyclorama:
a collection of short fiction and poetry about the lives of women

by

Kata O'Bannon Alvidrez

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)
Major Professor: Debra Marquart

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

1999

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Graduate College
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of
Kata O'Bannon Alvidrez
has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

__________________________
Committee Member

__________________________
Committee Member

__________________________
Major Professor

__________________________
For the Major Program

__________________________
For the Graduate College
Dedication

I would like to thank my daughter, Maureen Veronica Alvidrez, for her limitless patience and for believing in me even when it meantfending for herself—making her own dinner, begging friends for rides, watching movies alone down in the basement. It’s not an easy life to have one parent, much less one who is always sitting at the computer saying, “Not now, honey.” Still, it was always Maureen’s strength of character and independent spirit that inspired me to write about these women, the troubled and angry women I knew she would never become.
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Acknowledgements

I would like to my committee members, Debra Marquart, Brenda Daly, and Jill Bystydzienski for their support in the final weeks of my thesis preparation. Their valued feedback and suggestions made it possible for me to complete this body of work. They are each strong women who model the power of women in today’s society.

Thank you to Debra for her careful attention in workshops and in review, which allowed me to see flaws in plot and point of view that I could no longer identify after too many readings and too many drafts. Thank you to Brenda for her remarkable emotional support which allowed me to maintain my vision, a vision of a better world for women who are empowered by language to change their lives and create new paths for women to wander in their search for love and meaning. And thank you to Jill, who agreed, not having any idea what she was getting into, to participate on my committee with only a couple of weeks to prepare only because she is as concerned with women’s stories as I am.

Thank you also to Iowa State University’s literary magazine, Sketch, and to Iowa State University’s online literary magazine, knotgrass, for publishing my work. “In a Perfect World” has also been published (under the title “She Is Appalled”) in the literary journal Appearances.
INTRODUCTION

A cyclorama is "a series of large pictures, as in a landscape, put on a wall of a circular room so as to appear in natural perspective to a spectator standing in the center" (Webster's New World Dictionary, Third College Edition, 1988). In the same way that a series of pictures can help a spectator imagine the splendor of an exotic place without having to go there physically, a collection of short stories can help a reader imagine the depth of human concerns without having to be there emotionally. We only need to be willing to listen and watch as the people and places in the stories unfold.

_Cyclorama_ is a compilation of poems and short stories, ranging from short-shorts to the more traditional short story form, all dealing with the issues facing women from early childhood through old age. Happy endings are for the most part missing, but this is a part of the American female experience—lives filled with and formed by a vast range of experiences that dictate the difference between right and wrong, disappointments that paralyze the human spirit for days or even lifetimes, life lessons that teach women the rules of being the daughters, mothers, and wives our society expects. Some women love their roles, but many others are bitter, or resigned, or lost in a fog of denial that clears only when it seems too late to change anything.

These stories attempt to address the complex issues facing women today as well as the strength of character women must have in order to face each day in spite of overwhelming odds that the day will bring with it more disappointments. Women are the strong ones, the ones who nurture and build those around us, and because of that they often settle for less than they really want and need. They have learned to content ourselves with the "happy middles" of life, those fleeting moments of pleasure that inevitably come their way.

The compilation begins with stories of early training in the rites of womanhood that include subtle messages regarding submission to social expectations, particularly in terms of
meeting the needs of male members of the family and community before personal needs. The training is rarely a result of direct instruction, but instead occurs through the modeling provided by both adult women and men in a young girl's life. Adolescent relationships are explored for their insights to the confusing and often contradictory messages facing young girls when their friendships begin to supersede their relationships with mothers and other adult role models. These experiences often clarify personality traits and relational patterns for adult life, as illustrated in the stories concerning young adult women, both single and married.

In addition, the issues facing older women, particularly single middle-aged women, are explored as a means of illustrating the effects of this "early training" on adult women who are struggling to balance their family responsibilities, as defined and reinforced by social messages and family modeling, with their individual and personal needs. These personal needs, which are rarely acknowledged until the woman is in crisis, often assert themselves when women come face-to-face with the overwhelming demands of getting older in contemporary society: isolation from the extended family, the death of loved ones, divorce, loneliness, loss of beauty, and catastrophic illness. In these situations, women are suddenly thrust into situations where their co-dependent relationships with men cannot "fix" the problems that they have never learned to fix themselves.

Cyclorama is an attempt to address women's issues in a way that allows all readers to see themselves and the women in their lives more clearly. Readers may think they would not make the same choices these women have made, and readers think the women are foolish, but an alarming number of women do live under these circumstances. According to the 1998 US Census, over 75 percent of all female householders with no spouse and with related children under 18 years of age are struggling to survive on less than $16,000 a year. These women all grew up reading fairy tales of knights in shining armor and princes who married commoners—the stories that are read to children and which form contemporary ideals of relationships and marriage. The low income of these women is directly related to their lack of education and career, both of which continue to be given less emphasis in a young woman's training than in a young man's in spite of the fact that men and women no longer have such disparate roles in contemporary society.

There has also been a great deal of controversy concerning the topic of beauty over the last 25 years as the advertising industry continues to promote an unrealistic image to which young women aspire—often resorting to liposuction and reconstructive surgery when expensive cosmetics and diets don't work. These images of beauty have haunted women of my generation
throughout the years but at no time more than today now that we are aging; we were so certain that these unrealistic definitions of beauty would change with our growing political clout, but the changes that have occurred have been short-lived and the effects of this youth-and-beauty obsession has taken a serious toll on all women's self-estees. Even our educations and careers have not freed us from the same chains that kept our mothers and grandmothers guilt-ridden and self-conscious.

Women must begin to redefine our lives and our roles in modern society. The short fiction in this compilation calls attention to the issues that plague women, issues that sometimes begin in childhood with abusive parents and passive role models, but which are exacerbated by social expectations. Some women unconsciously replicate these abusive situations in their adult lives, but the reader is still compelled to ask why she stays. And the answer must be that there is no good reason to stay. We must recognize the patterns, refuse to be victims, stop sitting back and waiting for Prince Charming to save us. He isn't coming.
Epitaph for One Who Should Be Dead But Lives In California

he could have loved her had he wanted to but love in his youth had always been rationed in conditional portions and he couldn’t give anyone (even her) anything he never had as if denying her could make him feel better and so she learned to live without anyone who might make rules, who might set a price for affection, who might want anything in return (which is entirely human) so she was always alone inside herself (like him) and the price he paid was not to have her innocent love admiration respect adoration which he could have had if only he had wanted this priceless gift but the price she paid was to be loved only from afar seen but never touched by those who would have given her all but lacked the golden key to her impenetrable heart the heart of a lonely child-woman wandering the ghostly halls of her nurseries and burdened with questions and twisted perception and intelligence beyond capacity to understand the bogeymen and nighttime apparitions of big hairy hands and hard lips doing things sad and cruel and always in the name of love those hands and lips wrapping themselves around her pudgy fingers and cheeks and knotting themselves in fine strands of hair and squeezing tiny buttocks only just out of diapers and caressing silky skin that one day may have been milk-laden breasts suckling a child of her own and forcing grease-embedded fingers into tiny places where one day she might have discovered sensuality but not then not now maybe not ever because today there is an impenetrable wall between her and the touch of anyone who might remind her of the touch of a father who could not give his child his love without also stealing a piece of her soul.
But We Were the Ones Who Showed Him Their Nest

Making mud pies from leftover cement and lime, scratching the hard earth for gravel used to thicken the place between bricks, rounding up boards once used as concrete forms, in the meager shade of the barbed bougainvillea we found the buried nest of a rat.

Dad took up the babies gently in his big brown hands, rolling the silky pink bodies in his coarse palm. We watched as he took them away—strange little living things, eyes still tightly shut against the light—wondering what would he do.

We chased him down the walk, firing anxious questions.

“Whatcha gonna do, Dad? Where you going, Daddy? Can we keep them, please?”

“Go back to your mud pies, never mind me,” he barked.

Whistling then, he filled the sink with steaming hot water and placed them tenderly, not even squirming, not even guessing, in a soft cloth bag which he held submerged for countless moments.

Breathless and silent, we watched this man we had loved without question, his strong arms swinging in a wide arc as he flung his soggy missile into the dark forever of a trash bin standing nearby.

Forgotten mudpies baked in the hot California sun and the bougainvillea bloomed in silent rapture.
Sister Mary Teresa, Slideshow Barker

“No lo creo,” Blanca whispered after Sister Teresa turned off the lights and started the slide projector.

Slide day was usually our favorite part of Health-6, but Blanca was just staring at her hands and shaking her head. We had just learned exactly how the sperm finds its way to the egg from Marianne Carrick, the girl who knew what no one else knew. All it took was a dollar and unspoken secrets were ours. We usually met out on the playground, far from the big ears of snitches and the nuns who would have punished us severely for talking about sex. Marianne with her flaming red hair was like a bright buoy on the sea of pavement, but we exchanged our valuables quickly and moved on.

It would have been easier if Sister Teresa had told us, but the sisters never talked about sex. Boys and girls weren’t even allowed to play on the same side of the newly-painted basketball court; the penalty for crossing the line equaled three recesses sitting alone on the front steps of the convent. Our only contact with each other was at lunch when a boy could show his interest in a girl by buying her a candy bar.

Sister Teresa made her presence known, especially in the classroom where she often stood on a platform in front of the room where she could see each of us clearly and point to us with the stick we all called “The Point.” She stepped down from her podium and turned off the lights before retreating to the rear of the room where the slide projector was ready and waiting. Because she was such an imposing figure of a woman, in height and width and personality, there was always gossip suggesting that she had been a man before she joined the convent. What was most distinctive about her, however, was that she had a large and lumpy brown mole growing on her cheek just south-east of her mouth, and from it grew a long black hair, as stiff as a wire, that bounced up and down whenever she talked. The impulse to reach up and grab that hair had
haunted many of us girls from the first day of school. To avoid temptation, we looked at the ground whenever Sister Teresa spoke to us.

Sister Teresa’s voice bordered on elation as she narrated the slide show from the dark recesses of the room. We could imagine her eyes growing wider, the dark mole twitching excitedly, as each new slide brightened the room with its theme of flesh tones or bloody reds. Her voice grew louder when she talked about diseases of the organs, as if she were channeling God’s deepest and darkest lessons to us through the images of blackened lungs and enlarged livers.

But her voice was practically indistinguishable from glee when the images showed deformed children walking barefoot on dirt roads or sitting in the corners of rustic huts. Nature’s atrocities on the human body were a message from her Heavenly Groom and it was her duty to protect us from a similar fate.

Disease and disfigurement were Sister Teresa’s special interests. She often threatened to withhold the weekly slide show if we didn’t behave, but we knew that she was more interested in the slides of human disease and deformity than we were. Every Friday, even if we had been “rotten little children,” as we often were, as a reward for having completed our lessons on the food pyramid or the names of the non-gendered organs of the body, we were treated to Sister Teresa’s private collection of slides from around the world.

Sister always started with a lecture to remind us that everything God put on this earth He created for a reason: “Don’t laugh at the deformities or twisted expressions of these victims. Demonstrate Christian charity toward those afflicted with disease and pain for surely God had a reason to inflict these people with such punishment.”

We believed her and we lived with the fear that we might do something in our day-to-day lives giving God cause to “bless” us with Siamese twins or a Mongoloid baby, and then everyone would know we were sinners.

We sat silently in the darkened classroom, boys on the left, girls on the right, all facing forward. Some stared at the images on the screen, but most simply stared ahead, their hypnotized expressions reflecting the colors in the slides that flashed across the silver projector screen.

“Notice the rotting flesh of this child. It is falling off his arms like the peel of an orange. People with this disease have all been exiled to an island where only other victims of leprosy live. Why do you suppose God gave this disease to these people?”

Ding.
“These are the blackened toes of a diabetes patient, gangrene in its final stages. Just remember these toes when your mother tells you not to eat too much candy. That’s where diabetes comes from, you know. And I’ve seen you boys giving candy bars to the girls at lunch—don’t think God doesn’t see you, too. Remember, He acts in mysterious ways.”

*Ding.*

As Sister continued her intonations from the back of the darkened room, I turned back to Blanca. She was wringing her hands and sniffling.

“Blanca, what’s wrong?”

“I just don’t believe it,” she answered, tears welling in her eyes.

“Why not? It makes more sense than anything else we’ve heard.” I was thinking of my mother’s version, which brought to my mind images of tiny little men in wetsuits leaving the sleeping man’s body and travelling across the bed sheets to enter the woman’s body.

Blanca just shook her head.

“Listen, Marianne knows a lot,” I reminded her. “She’s worth every dollar we’ve paid.”

*Ding.*

Blanca waited for Sister to start again before leaning across the aisle to whisper, “Yo se, *pero* this time she’s wrong. I want my dollar back.”

“You know the rules. Once you hear the secret, no refunds.”

“Oh, Rosa, *mi hermana*… she wouldn’t… she couldn’t.”

“Oh, yes, she could, Blanca. Why don’t you ask her where that baby came from? Everyone’s already wondering…”

Blanca grimaced at the image in her imagination. “*Dios mio*, Rosa. I never want to grow up if I have to do that.”

Blanca’s eyes were growing wider with each *ding* of the projector. Images continued to dance across the screen: now a runny-looking scab, yellow with impetigo (“Don’t pick your scabs!”). Then a shrunken lung dark with emphysema (“This is what happens when you smoke!”). And next a gaping space where a man’s nose had been eaten away by cancer (“Surely this man did something to anger God, just like this next woman who…”).

Blanca gagged, a cough-sound coming from deep inside her that was followed by loud retching sounds. When she began spewing vomit on the floor between the desks, everyone jumped up to avoid the spray.

“Eewwwwwww!” sounded in a chorus across the room.
Blanca sat completely frozen, her eyes staring vacantly at a slide showing a mother and child looking just like the Madonna in our lunch room except the child’s head was twice the size of his mother’s. Dark sad eyes peered into the camera lens as ours turned to the back of the room, in anticipation of Sister Teresa’s angry response. With all eyes on her, Sister sighed loudly from the back of the room, pausing as if the scene about to unfold could be wished away before the lights clicked on. When the room brightened, her large deeply-pored nose curled up her forehead at the sight of Blanca’s puddled indiscretion at her feet.

Taking another slow breath and releasing it in her trademark sigh of resignation, Sister Teresa lurched to the front of the room to excuse us from class with the traditional sign of the cross.

“In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost…”

“Amen!” we chimed as we scrambled out of our seats.

“Never mind, the mess, Blanca,” Sister murmured to Blanca as the last of the boys left the room with a backward look. “Maybe too much candy at lunchtime. Hmmm? Sugar is not your friend, is it? And neither are those boys who have been buying it for you. Just look at your sister. Hmmm?”
Blood Sisters

Let's be blood sisters, Betty said, and then they can never break us apart.

Meeting in the driveway at school, just around the corner from the convent and hidden behind the oleander bushes, we used a razor blade to cut Xs in our thumbs.

Soft fatty tissue gave way to bright red drops that glistened in the California sunshine.

We pressed our thumbs together, laughing with tears running down our cheeks, shouting, "Sisters! Sisters! Forever sisters!"

And when Betty's father died, just three years after her mother, her stepmother sold the house, parcelled out all of her dead husband's things, and took Betty away.

But the first time I found blood between my legs, I knew that she would not forget.
Birth Control

When I was seven, I learned from Father Evans that my mother was going to go to hell. I begged her to change her ways, I pleaded with her to make peace with the Holy Ghost, and I prayed to Jesus to forgive her. Finally, I made deals with God the Father, promising never to play doctor with the boys next door, never to make my Barbie and Ken dolls sleep together, and never again to touch myself between my legs late at night when everyone was sleeping if only He would forgive her.

Father Evans had said she would go to hell if she didn’t take communion on Easter Sunday.

My mother said she couldn’t because she used birth control pills instead of the rhythm method, which had given her three daughters already.

My father said three girls was enough, couldn’t she do anything right? Where were his sons?

My heart said someone is wrong and it must be God because his was the only voice I couldn’t hear, the only one who didn’t answer questions.

Just in case, I decided to swallow some of my mother’s pills, placing them on the tip of my tongue exactly the way Father Evans put the Holy Host on our tongues each Sunday morning, my knees pressed hard on the cold tile floor of the bathroom.

This way she wouldn’t be alone in Hell. It just wouldn’t be fair for her to go there, burning in the hot flames for all of eternity, while my father and Father Evans went to Heaven.
Anna DeLeon may not have been a pretty girl, but when I was 14 years old she was a goddess in my eyes. I didn’t care about her crooked teeth that crowded to the front of her mouth the way houseplants all lean toward the light. And I liked her nose, angular and arrow-shaped just like the Aztecs’ noses in our history book. I often wonder what she looks like today, 30 years later, and I find myself hoping that life has given her something in return for the hard times of her youth.

Anna was skinny, her sharp elbows often jabbing me when she laughed. Those knobby bones poked through her olive skin, adding to her gangly ways. Her arms and face were pockmarked even at 13, and her shins were blotched with the purple bruises of a tomboy.

“Anna lives in the barrio, Liza! I didn’t work to get us out of there so you could bury yourself again!” my father was always quick to point out. He thought of himself as white and insisted on no Spanish at home, but he still sent me to a school where the difference between brown and white meant at the very least a bloody nose if you didn’t hide out in the library or a teacher’s classroom before school and during the lunch period.

“Stand up for yourself!” my father would say when I complained that someone had stolen my book or my pen or my sweater. It was always something, but I was terrified of those girls who traveled in groups of eight or nine, never alone like me.

By the time we got to high school, the major difference between Anna and me, both of us still swinging on the monkey bars every recess until the last day of eighth grade, was that she was going to have a baby. Not just someday, but in five months. And as soon as she started showing, they would make her leave school.

“Education is the key to improving your life!” my father often spouted to anyone who would listen. In his twisted logic, it might have seemed that poverty was a result of refusing
education, but I didn't see Anna refusing, even though I knew it was a lot harder for her than for me. She always tried, always worried over her algebra on the way to school in the morning. And I tried to help, but it wasn't my strongest subject either. Plus my father was a math teacher and he lectured me nightly, throughout dinner even, on the algebraic rules.

We were finally in the ninth grade, most of us bussed from the neighborhoods surrounding East Los Angeles, all of us lost in the maze of buildings and schedules and unfamiliar kids. I was excited about starting high school, but I was also bitterly disappointed. Not because Anna was pregnant (a concept I had not yet fully grasped) but because I thought we would be best friends all through high school and we both knew they would make her leave. We had seen it already. I was mad that she wouldn't have a chance to do all the things we had planned during junior high—the dances, the football games, driver's education.

But I was madder than ever that she wouldn't be around, so I could be a friend to her, after she saved my sorry gringa butt from the Brooklyn Avenue Terceras.

Those hard-ass girls always got away with stealing from white girls who were afraid to fight back. One-on-one, I could have taken any one of them in their thick black eyeliner, chunky mascara, and blood-red lipstick. I had some serious monkey bar muscles. The problem was that you could never find just one of them to take on: they traveled in packs like wild dogs, feeding off the effects of their mass on pale-skinned girls who were afraid of their own shadows.

It happened one Friday afternoon just before P.E. while I was getting a breath of the fresh air outside before walking into the girls' locker room, which always smelled like chlorine. I could hear banging locker doors and cackling laughter that I recognized as the Terceras. As I turned into the aisle where my locker was, I saw Evita pulling a set of gym clothes from a locker and stuffing them into her gym bag.

I paused, being as chicken as any other gringa facing one to eight odds with a Mexican girl gang dressed in black leather coats and black stockings, all of them staring at you like some kind of cockroach on the wall. They laughed again, first Evita, and then the others in an echoing kind of titter.

When they started walking away, I noticed my locker was open. Man! Those were my gym clothes Evita had stuffed into her bag! No way was I going to sit there and say nothing.

"Hey! Have you got my gym clothes?" I called out. Not accusing, just asking.
“What’s it to you?” A little *chola* called back to me, her eyes flashing at me as she snapped her gum in huge flaps of her jaw. “Eh?” she called out again.

“Listen, I just need my gym clothes back, okay? Nothing personal.” If I showed up without gym clothes today, Coach would definitely call home and mention that exercise routine I taught the freshmen using the 45 with the “The Stripper” on one side. Then I’d only be in more trouble.

“What you doing? Accusing us? You accusing us of stealing your gym clothes, white girl?” Evita was in my face and the rest of the girls were right behind her. Where was everyone, I wondered. Waiting for me to start screaming?

“No, I just need some gym clothes. I don’t care who they belong to—I just need some gym clothes. Got any spares?” I tried to smile.

“No,” Evita said, narrowing her eyes. “No, I think you just called me a thief, girl. And no one gets away with calling me names. Right, *amigas*?” Her friends nodded knowingly, little smiles in the corners of their painted mouths.

The bell rang and other girls started moving through the locker room.

“We know who you are, gringa. We’ll find you outside, maybe today, maybe tomorrow, but you better watch your butt. We’re taking you out. Nobody takes on the *Terceras* without getting hurt.”

Great. I had no gym clothes and I would be dead by sunset the next day.

After scrounging around for someone else’s sweaty gym clothes in every corner of the locker room, I decided to cut gym class. If my life was in danger, why waste time going to P.E.? Instead, I went to the smoker’s corner where I knew I would find Anna. She might have an idea to save my life.

Anna was right there, sucking down Salem menthols as if they were better than air. She had a way of resting her crossed arms on her little belly and hanging that cigarette out in a sophisticated looking “L” that I knew would look ridiculous on me.

“Omigod, Anna, Evita says she’s going to take me out. They stole my gym clothes and I asked for them back and they all turned around and looked at me like I was some kind of idiot—which I guess I am—and Evita says I called her a thief—which we both know she is—and they said today or tomorrow I had better watch my butt ‘cause they know who I am.”
"Hijole, chica! Slow down! They're not going to kill you. They just want to rough you up!" Anna obviously didn't think this was a problem.

"I don't want to get roughed up, Anna! What am I going to do? If I get caught in a fight, my father will kill me!"

"Ay-yi-yi, Liza! I guess I'll have to go take care of some business with those bad asses. You stay out of the way. Stay with me, but behind me when we find them."

My head was pounding and my palms were running water like a leaky faucet. My heart had been beating double-time since we left the smoker's corner in search of the Terceras and when we found them I could barely move my legs to stay behind Anna's skinny little butt.

"Evita! We got beed-ness, you and me!" Anna called out. She was so masterful, so loud for a tiny little woman with more baby inside her than muscles and bones.

"I don't got no beed-ness with you, DeLeon. It's your little gringa I got problems with!" Evita called back. We were standing on opposite sidewalks, staring across a street than cut straight through the school. I felt like I was in some old cowboy movie, two lonely cowboys facing a gang of Mexican bandits, all of them on horses and carrying machine guns, and all I needed to see was Anna pull out two six-shooters from her pockets which she would then fire in rapid succession until every single one of the Terceras was lying on the ground.

"Conference!" Anna called out and the Terceras looked at one another with smug disgust until Evita stepped into the street. Their eyes widened as Anna approached the middle of the street where the two "conferenced" in private.

I stood there, helpless, wishing I could hear the conversation, wishing I wasn't there at all, wishing Anna and I were back in the eighth grade swinging on the monkey bars, laughing at the boys who gathered around to see if they could catch a glimpse of our underwear as we swung back and forth and around the ladder ends. Anna was giving Evita her evil eye, the one that scared the heck out of me before we were friends, the one she gave to other girls if they sat too close to her on the bench in the playground. Evita was waving her arms around, clearly defending herself, letting her long black hair fly into her mouth as she spoke. Finally, Evita put her hands into her pockets and Anna put her hand into her bag. She rustled around a bit and handed something to Evita, something I couldn't see, and they each smiled.

"Okay," Evita said loud enough for everyone to hear. "You got a deal. But keep that little gringa outta my way, you hear?" Evita turned toward the string of busses that was forming in the bus lanes at the corner and the Terceras followed in a straight line. Anna came back to me,
Cyclorama

The yellow fallen leaves swirl in little tornadoes that are surely wreaking havoc on the black ant civilization of Star’s backyard world, but Star isn’t thinking about them anymore. The ants are her summer buddies, the friends she keeps through the hot summer months when there’s nothing else to do but watch them through her magnifying glass, being careful not to allow the sun to vortex its way into a beam of fiery light that will sizzle them in milliseconds.

Star’s fall buddies are her dolls, the blue-eyed curly-headed baby girls in their lacy bonnets and frilly dresses. Star often wishes she were small enough to wear their dresses, dresses that remind her of storybook times and princesses and wicked witches and evil stepmothers who eventually get punished for the pain they inflict on innocent girls. Her dolls she had to leave in her bedroom, lined up in a row next to her pillow, because Father said they would be ruined if she played with them outside. Star sits next to the window with Crystal, her favorite doll, looking out the window with her, and she watches the fall leaves blanket the St. Augustine grass, its thick pad of undergrowth known only to her, the keeper of the backyard secrets. She dreams of lost summer.

As much as she loves her baby dolls, Star still longs to be outside with the ants and the summer wind and her private corner under the lilac tree, not only for today but for always, safe from the angry voices of Mom and Father each night as they argue about which bills to pay and which to pretend they haven’t received. Mom always has to play the liar, the one who answers the phone when creditors call and demand their money, the one who speaks so sweetly, innocently, saying “I’m so sorry! I am sure we didn’t get that bill or we would have paid it! Can you send another? Then I’ll get it off to you straightaway.” Even Star wants to believe Mom when she talks to the bank.

Still, fall also means school time, late hours at Girl Scout meetings and weekly catechism lessons with girlfriends, and Star knows that means less time at home pretending that she has homework to do even though she gets most of her homework done at school during Study Hall and recess and on the bus riding home. She doesn’t like to talk like the other girls on the bus, the ones with eye shadow and pale pink fingernails who are full of new gossip each afternoon when they board the bus for the 25-minute ride home. Still, she listens hungrily, as if every word is feeding her some morsels of a world she only half inhabits.
Star doesn’t like to talk much at home either. She listens. She talks to her dolls, but only when no one is at home, knowing they would all laugh at her and call her a baby. She loves watching television before everyone else gets home, especially the old reruns about families like the Brady Bunch and Father Knows Best, and My Three Sons and Bewitched. Father doesn’t like it when Star watches TV, says if she has nothing to do he’ll find something. Even if everyone is watching TV together, he doesn’t like to see her sitting in front of the television with idle hands, so he always finds something for her to do like polishing the furniture or arranging the books in the bookcase according to the alphabet. He says it’s good practice for when she grows up and becomes a secretary.

“Is that a dustbunny I see under that chair while you sit there doing nothing?” He shouts and she jumps, startled by his voice, but he probably thinks she is jumping to clean the floor. He always smiles at her when she gets up, that half smile that she thinks means he’s happy.

Even at night, when Father watches the television news, his daily excuse to lecture the girls about the state of the world, he can’t let her sit idle. Her sisters often do homework at their usual seats in the family room while Mom types up Father’s examinations for the next day, and Father has to search to find something for Star to do. Sometimes he even makes her rub his hard and calloused feet, his yellowed toenails scraping the tender undersides of her arms when she reaches around to his rough heels. Star always tries to look busy when Father is at home, but it isn’t easy in a house that is always spic and span and when you don’t have enough homework to get through the lonely recesses at school much less through the night.

As the leaves swirl, little dust devils picking up in every corner of the yard, Star imagines the day she will enter the convent. This is her favorite daydream and everything she does is in preparation for the day she gives herself to Jesus, the day when Jesus will take her as his wife, only she won’t ever have to touch him, won’t ever have to look at his misshapen feet or listen to him complain about how the dishes aren’t done or that dinner was lousy, why didn’t she learn to cook. Being a nun was above all that. The Church took care of those things like paying the bills and worrying about the rent and cooking and nuns never had to worry about listening to men mean long in the night like Mom did. The sisters at school said no men were ever allowed inside the convent unless every single one of them was outside, in their classrooms or in the yard, or on vacation with their families, the one time they could take off their veils and wear tennis shoes and pink polyester shorts and barrettes in their hair.
Star already knows she won’t come home for her vacations. She’ll find other places to go, maybe to the Holy Land or Rome or Mexico where she can work as a missionary. But she won’t go home again, not ever, not after all she has seen and heard in her eleven years. She knows that it will be better to stay in the convent forever than to live outside where women have to live with men—marry them, sleep with them, feed them, lie for them, have their babies.

“Star!” Mom’s voice, piercing in its strained intensity, winds its way through the hallways from the kitchen and into Star’s room.

“Yes!” she calls out, knowing that this will only irritate Mom more. She’s so unhappy these days and Star has seen her crying by herself more and more lately.

“Dammit, Star, come here when I call you!”

“Forgive her, Jesus,” she mumbles under her breath before shouting, “I’m coming!” She is already halfway down the hallway, already knows that she was supposed to be in the dining room setting the table for dinner, even before Mom called.

“Set the table, Star, and make it snappy! Your father will be here any minute now!” Mom stirs a big pot of spaghetti sauce, the homemade meatballs rolling around her spoon like giant dumplings, while she mops her forehead with a kitchen towel. The fresh bread in the oven is starting to smell that heavenly smell that Star loves so much, filling her head and the whole house with its richness. One thing Star can say about Mom is that she can cook, no matter what Father says, and Star knows she will miss Mom’s cooking when she moves into the convent. None of the rest of the kids get home-baked bread every day, but then none of the other kids has to live with Father who refuses to eat store-bought bread.

As soon as Father arrives each afternoon, Sandy and Patsy run up to the house through the side yard, toss off their school things and then blow through the house as if they have been in their rooms, calling out hello to Father, ignoring Mom, and then just as quickly disappearing back into the bedroom they share. They don’t ever come out again until dinner is served and then they leave as soon as they are finished, complaining that they have too much homework to do to sit and chat after dinner, even though that is the whole reason Father bought the big oak dining room table last month. He says the family needs to start acting more like a family, eating together every evening, and talking about our days. No one ever talks, but Mom says it will happen in time.

“We’re just not used to sitting together after all these years of eating separately,” Mom had explained when Father got angry at the dark silence.
Star's sisters are coming home later and later these days, always studying they say, but Star knows better. They’re hiding out, sometimes only across the street at the house where the two gay men live, Stan and Lynn, watching through Lynn's lace curtains for Father to drive up in his 1963 powder blue Buick Riviera.

That car is Father's pride and joy, he always tells his friends, and every time he says it Patsy mimics him under her breath: "My pride and joy, my pride and joy, my pride and joy... too bad you didn’t have cars instead of girls!"

Both of Star’s sisters are big talkers and the only time they get quiet is at dinnertime, but not until Father comes in and sits down. Most of the time, Father pretends to be deaf, anyway, but every now and then he hears Patsy mouthing off at him and he’ll slap her across the face before he takes his place at the head of the table. She never says a word back, just stares at him all through the dinner, until everyone is finished eating, and then she’ll say, “May I be excused?” and he grunts at her which means it’s okay with him.

Father usually sits at his end of the table and stares at everyone for awhile, as if he is thinking about who everyone is. Then he demands that someone start passing around the food. Everyone watches him closely after he finishes his first serving because no one ever knows what he might want for seconds. Sometimes it’s bread he wants and he will stare at whoever is closest to the bread until he gets eye contact. Then he looks directly at the bread and everyone knows that means “pass the bread.

Star hates family dinners, but especially when Father is in a bad mood and she has a pretty good idea that he will be sour-faced tonight after the argument she heard between Mom and him that morning. Mom had cried, long sobs that made Star want to run in and kiss her that way Mom kissed Star when she was sick. Father had shouted, saying things Star couldn’t understand, until Mom finally stopped crying. Then the bed had creaked again and again, and Star had heard slapping noises that reminded her of Father’s hand across Patsy’s face.

“Damn it!” Sandy whispers through the lace curtains that hid her from being seen by the kids playing out in the street.

“What is it?” Patsy asks while holding a hairdryer close to her toes. She’s painting her toenails, clear, of course, because Father would notice if she used any other color. He had complained about Mom’s friends from work who wore dark berry-colored polish on their long
slim fingers, saying that nail polish was only for hookers, why didn’t she find some friends who knew how to behave like decent women?

“He’s here. Early. Asshole.” Sandy chews on the cuticles of her index finger, biting her fingernails to the quick ever since she was little, the wet edges never healing from being gnawed and the shape of her nails deformed by the process.

“Damn!” Patsy says. “My nails aren’t dry! Now I’ll have to ruin them and start all over. Asshole. Why can’t he just get into an accident and die on the freeway?” She sighs, allowing herself to imagine the scene in her mind as she has so many times before, but she had been wishing for something like this for years now and nothing had happened.

“Yeah,” Sandy agrees, already gathering her school bag and sweater, shoving bobby-socked feet into worn tennies. “Lynn! We’re leaving! The Creep is home!”

Lynn glides into the living room in that distinctive hip-swishing way he has, his hands in oven mitts shaped and painted to look like lobster claws, and surveys the street through the curtains. “Yup, looks like he’s home. You girls have a nice dinner, now, and then get straight to your rooms, okay? Don’t let him be alone with either one of you and you’ll be fine. You’ve only got three more weeks until graduation and then you can leave. You can handle three more weeks, can’t you?”

“Yeah, three more weeks. If I don’t kill him first,” Patsy said, thinking of her smudged toenails.

Sandy took a deep breath and opened the door. “Thanks, Lynn, I don’t know what we’d do without you.”

“Oh, girls, I just wish I could go beat that man up, but you know it wouldn’t do any good. You’re sure he won’t bother Star now, right?” Lynn looked back and forth between the two girls, identical twins except for the different clothes they wore, Sandy always in loose slacks and Patsy always in knee-length skirts that she rolls up at the waistband at school. They’re such pretty girls, he thought, but that was still no reason for their father to treat them the way he did, hitting them and locking them in their rooms at night, calling them names no one should even think much less direct at 17-year old girls. He had a feeling even more was going on than the girls let on, but he didn’t ask.

“She’ll be fine,” Patsy and Sandy answer in unison, their practiced response to Lynn’s tiresome question. After all, Star is only eleven and he hadn’t started up with them until they were in high school. Maybe by then he’ll have changed.
Lynn watches the two girls dart across the street and slip into the back yard through a side gate, knowing that they always leave a back door open so they can slip in without him seeing them, but he worries that one day Mr. Turner will find out where they hid out, where they catch their breath and let out all their angry thoughts about him. Lynn finds himself hoping the next three weeks go smoothly, for everyone’s sakes.

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“Damn kids!” Bob shouts from the driver’s seat of his favorite car, his Buick Riviera, as a small boy on a bike darts across the street. “One of these days, one-a-you little punks is going to get hit by a car and then who’ll be screaming?” Bob Turner isn’t in the mood to brake for kids, especially after the day he’s had at school. It isn’t enough that he works harder than any of the other teachers at school—after all, he has always had a better work ethic than anyone he knows—but he’s had enough of their petty mean-spirited gossip. Since when do teachers start taking sides against each other, taking the word of some little bitch who says he touched her “in a private place” when they all know damn well she’s lying. It’s not the first time she’s called out rape, and it won’t be the last. Dressing the way she does, she’s asking for it anyway.

Bob isn’t in the mood for any more arguing, but he knows it’s inevitable. This family dinner tradition he tried to start is going badly but now that he’s started it, God dammit, he’s going to finish it. In three weeks, when Patsy and Sandy graduate from high school, things will change if he doesn’t get control. He can feel it in the pit of his stomach, feel that he losing them, and he doesn’t like it. They probably have some romantic ideas about leaving home, he had told Star one day, “But we’re going to put a stop to that immediately.”

“Good girls leave home for the convent or their husband’s bed, do you hear me?” he had told Patsy and Sandy when they had first suggested they get an apartment near the college. Patsy had glared at him with those insolent eyes and half-smiling lips that Bob often wanted to smack with the back of his hand.

Sandy had stood there listening, her eyes wide open and as deep as the canyon behind the house. She’s often quiet, never adding to the conversation, as if she has no mind of her own, but Bob likes that about Sandy. No conflict. Bob needs that in his life, for a change. He often wonders how much Sandy has told Patsy about their nighttime meetings, if that is why Patsy is so rude all the time. He has an idea that Sandy doesn’t even remember, after all, she always keeps her eyes closed, maybe she sleeps so hard she doesn’t even wake up, or maybe she doesn’t want
Patsy to try to tell her it's wrong. Patsy's a jealous one, always trying to come between him and Sandy.

Bob understands. Sandy was always his cuddly one, always the one to snuggle up with him on the couch while they watched television, especially on those nights when Joannie was working late. Patsy just feels left out.

Bob pulls the Buick's nose right up next to the wire guide that hangs from the garage rafters, the pointed tip of the hood just barely kissing the fluorescent tennis ball that hangs from the wire. He congratulates himself once more, as he does every afternoon, on his fine driving skills and reminds himself to talk to Joannie about the way she parks the Toyota Corolla on her side of the garage. There is no reason for such sloppiness, unless her whole point is to upset him. She's certainly good at that!

"Hi, Bob! How was your day? Can I take your briefcase for you?" Joannie says the same damn thing every day, but Bob likes the routine of it all so he doesn't comment. He heads straight for the bedroom where he can strip off his tight-fitting suit, the sweat-drenched dress shirt, and his shoes and socks. This moment is probably his favorite moment of the day, when he can free himself of his work world uniform and relax, a king in his castle.

He leaves his sleeveless T-shirt on, along with his Jockey underwear, and then heads for the dining room where he expects dinner to be served, hot and steaming from the stove, along with a cold drink to parch his tight throat.

"Where are the girls?" he demands, seeing immediately that Patsy and Sandy are not in sight.

"We're here, we're here!" Patsy sings from the hallway, the two of them entering the room with flushed faces and guilty expressions Bob recognizes well.

"What the hell are you up to?" he asks, looking directly at Sandy, knowing she can't lie as well as Patsy.

"Nothing, Father, nothing, just studying. I-I-We forgot it was dinner time, you know, with getting ready for final exams," Sandy stutters, but she usually does stutter so Bob overlooks the possibility that she is lying to him.

"Well, I guess that's understandable," he grumbles. "But don't get into the habit. I want my family gathered together for dinner, like a real family, and I want it to be a priority!" His business with the girls done, he looks across the table at the serving dishes and groans. "Now
what the hell is this, Joannie? Pasta again? Do we have to have pasta every night? What the hell is your problem?"

"Um, well, uh, Bob—" Joannie’s head is down, her whole body in the penitent position as if she is kneeling in the confessional.

"Speak up, woman! You’re not a child!” Bob says, remembering well that she was just a child when they married, but back then she had been happy and outgoing and fun, and in those days she always wanted to have sex, loved to have his attention. Those were the days, he tells himself glumly, remembering this morning’s argument once again.

"Bob, we’re out of grocery money. This is all I could come up with. There are meatballs, though, you love meatballs. Just eat those and the girls and I will eat the pasta. You like pasta, don’t you girls?"

"Umm-hmmm,” the girls all hum in unison, including Star, the angel of the harem, the only one who never makes Bob feel bad about himself.

Bob looks around the table, at his wife who lies under him like a corpse when he tries to have sex with her, at his twin daughters who he fears he is losing completely, and at his littlest daughter, the accidental child who would save him from them all.

"Fine!” he announces his fury only barely submerged behind his flashing eyes. “You eat pasta and I’ll eat the meatballs. But Star,” he says, looking across the table to her.

At the sound of her name, Star jumps in her seat, looking up at him like a frightened animal, her eyes wide open the way Bob remembered Sandy’s that night he had told the girls they couldn’t get their own apartment.

"Star, you go ahead and help yourself to a meatball, too. No reason your growth should be stunted thanks to the fact that your mother manages our money so poorly.”

"Oh, no thank you, Father,” Star whispers shyly, her eyes pleading somehow, dark and mysterious in a way that captivated Bob’s imagination. “I love pasta,” she insists. “That will be fine for me.”

"Dammit, Star! I said have a meatball!” And then, seeing her tremble, he softens his voice. "And why don’t you come sit over here with me, sweetheart? Come sit next to your Daddy, the only one who really loves you.” Bob pats the corner of the table, its white tablecloth shining in bright contrast to his large sun-darkened hands, and he strums his fingers on the table while waiting for Star to take her place with him at the head of the table.
Star pushes her chair back slowly, looking once at her mother whose eyes are still down, staring into her empty plate, her hands resting on the silverware on each side of the plate. Bob watches Star’s eyes as she stands, sees her glance at her two sisters who look away quickly. He sighs when Star finally gathers up her plate and silverware in one hand, her tall glass of milk in the other, and he waits patiently for her to find her way around the table to his side.
Only Blue Songs to Sing

They had each been ten the year they met, two funny looking girls in mismatched hand-me-downs, both taking clarinet lessons in the Brightwood Elementary music room. Mrs. Franco said that the two of them could only accompany one another because they were both tone deaf. Both Frances and Sara disagreed and quickly became best friends, mostly for survival but also because they were so alike: painfully shy, gawky, four-eyed, bobby sox and oxfords when everyone else was in fishnets and mini-dresses.

They spent their early years together in innocent play at recess, swinging with complete abandon on the gymnastics rings until the relentless taunting from the older boys embarrassed them back into the corners of the schoolyard. One entire semester of junior high was vainly spent trying to wear down the soles of Sara’s saddle shoes, rubbing them viciously on a cement block wall and thinking they could be more like ordinary kids if they just looked more like them, believing that the only difference between them and the other kids was on the outside.

Their fathers were even more alike than the girls were. Mr. Chersky was an orthodox Jew, a determined socialist, and an uncompromising husband and father: his word was law in his household and he had decided that Frances was to going to be a doctor. He dreamed that she would dedicate herself to service in Israel. Frances, on the other hand, dreamed of being the next Julie Andrews. Sara let her sing the little songs she wrote and they imagined the day others would applaud them both.

Sara’s father was a non-practicing but outspoken Catholic, as uncompromising a master of his household as Mr. Chersky. Mr. O’Brien expected Sara to become a teacher like him and to marry young, while Sara dreamed only of moving to New York City and writing ballads for the most beautiful voices in the world. Frances told her all the time how beautiful her songs were and they conspired to thwart both of their fathers’ goals for art’s sake.
There were days when the only relief was in playacting, both Frances and Sara acting out their tragic deaths at the hand of some storybook villain, dying young and under such violent circumstances that their fathers would mourn for the rest of their lives that they hadn’t loved them more. Draped in J.C. Penny’s blue sheets and striped towels, they lay on the abandoned train tracks that ran behind the row of houses where graffiti along the back walls defied the middle class beliefs of the houses’ front yards.

Inside the house, lounging around in their pajamas, they played modern day Camilles, feeling vindicated in their tragic plays of debilitating illnesses, incurable diseases, and inexplicable fainting spells. And when they weren’t dying of leprosy or leukemia, they lived in other daydream worlds, talking for hours about what they would do when they left home. On rainy days, they wrote scripts describing their passage to New York City where they were sure to be discovered by talent scouts—as if anticipating every possible detail could make the plans more real. Frances would be starring at Radio City Music Hall and she would sing one of Sara’s very best, most romantic love songs. Of course, this would make them both very rich.

By the time the girls were in their late teens, Frances’ father seemed to grow suspicious of so much passion. Frances’ mother was first to warn them that Mr. Chersky wanted them to stop doing sleepovers, that they could meet after school to study together but then it was time to go home and have dinner with their own families. When Mr. O’Brien heard of Mr. Chersky’s feelings, he made his own rules, saying that Sara and Frances could only meet twice a week after school. The rest of the time they would each have to find other friends. Then Mr. Chersky said that he didn’t want Frances going to Sara’s house at all, even after school, on account of Mr. O’Brien’s gun collection. And Mr. O’Brien said, “No more. That’s it! That’s the end of this friendship!”

Undaunted, romantic as they were, the two girls continued in secret, writing long letters in tiny precise lettering on blue-lined scraps of paper that were folded into intricate little puzzles for the other to solve. They devised secret passwords and names so that no one would know they were talking to each other on the telephone.

“Hello?” Mr. O’Brien would shout into the telephone receiver. “Hello? Is anyone there?”

“Excuse me, I am calling for Ms. Sara O’Connor?”

“Wrong number!” Sara knew a wrong number meant Frances was home alone and that it would be safe to call her back as soon as her father was settled back in front of the television.
Other times, they left notes in each other’s lockers: “Dearest Rhett. Tara is falling apart and needs your skilled assistance. Please come to the back door where one of the slaves will give you sustenance… Scarlet.” From this, Frances knew that Sara would be waiting for her in the downstairs girl’s bathroom where they could catch up on what was happening at home.

The girls reveled in the forbidden, languishing in adolescent intrigue and danger, planning days ahead to leave their classes at the same time to go to the bathroom so they could exchange a week’s worth of letters and song lyrics and gossip.

It was just a month before graduation from high school when Frances disappeared. Sara called her house daily, hoping Frances might answer the phone until her mother finally relented, explaining that Frances had gone to Israel to live on a kibbutz. She said Frances herself had chosen to leave all worldly goods and all friends and acquaintances behind her. It was a horrible lie, Sara argued, certain that Frances wouldn’t leave without at least saying goodbye.

“They poisoned her and buried her body in the backyard,” Sara told her friends, spinning fantastic stories or murder and deceit to explain her loss, waging a private war against Mr. Chersky’s reputation in the community.

Sara plodded through the last month of high school, waiting patiently for Frances to write or call, certain that she would as soon as her captors slipped up and gave her a moment’s freedom. By graduation day, she had accepted that Frances would not be coming home. She tied up the folded notes and letters into a bundle that she meant to carry with her for the rest of her life, wondering who was going to sing her songs on stage at the Radio City Music Hall. Maybe she wouldn’t write them after all, she reasoned, if Frances wasn’t going to sing them.

And as Sara worked her way through college, taking first all the required courses and then moving into the teacher education courses, Sara wondered if Frances ever thought of her. And when Sara took her first job, a teaching position in a Catholic school where all the little girls who hugged and kissed each other hello and goodbye each day, reminded her of Frances. And when she finally married and had her own little girl, a little girl who loved to sing nursery rhymes to all of her dolls, all of which she lined up in her room as if they were her devoted audience, Sara wondered if Frances had ever forgotten her dream of being a star. Sara hadn’t forgotten anything, but she often wished she could.
Bad Blood Breeds

Dana was crazy. She hadn’t always been crazy, but it had started so far back that even her own mama couldn’t remember her any other way. Of course, Dana’s mama was even nuttier than Dana, in a different way, but we’re still talkin’ about two gone-bananas women. When Dana ran away to marry Sam, everyone kinda figured that was the end of Dana—even me. But she came back—jeez, ten years older than the three years she had been gone, but she came back. By then her daddy was dead and her mama had kinda gone to drink. As if that all wasn’t enough trouble, Dana come home with a kid.

This kid was real cute—everyone made over her like she was a doll or something—but you can’t forget that old rule of life: 2 + 2 = 4 (not 5). Dana was always a little unbalanced and it’s only natural that the kid would be a little strange too.

The kid—her name was Christy—anyway, the kid was okay at first, all smiles and goo-goo-gaw-gaw. But by the time she was two, she was a real screamer. If she wasn’t hanging on to her mama’s skirts like for dear life, then she was spittin’ mad and screamin’ and kickin’ like a looney. Now I seen tantrums, okay, but where does a two-year-old kid find so much to scream about? It was worst whenever Dana went out on a date, it seemed like. Not that she did that often like, but I’m the kind who watches out for all the kids on the street these days.

Anyway, I know normal and I know not normal, and I knowed that something was wrong with that kid. See, like when Dana and her sisters used to play out in the front yard, I could hear them talking. They was always talking about this boy and that boy and how they was going to tell their daddy on the other. When they was fighting, they used to call each other names like “witch” and “creep” and they’d yell that they hated one another. It was always two against one, but that happens with kids. I got the feeling that they was all kinda afraid of their daddy, but I
never saw him touch them. Never even once, and I watched. So I don’t know what they were
talking about, but I can’t help but wonder.

Anyway, by high school, my Danny and Dana were getting’ to be real close friends and
he used to say that she was countin’ the days ‘til she could leave home. Then one day, she told
my Danny that she couldn’t see him at school or even at home no more ‘cause her daddy did
decide that he was a bad influence. My Danny, can you believe that? Well, I marched right on
over to that house and asked Dana’s daddy what did he mean by calling my boy a bad influence
on his not-so-innocent daughter, and that more’n likely it was she who was a bad influence on
him. Well, he just stopped and looked real concerned-like, and said “Why, Melba, what in the
world are you talking about? I said no such thing! I’m going right in and straighten that girl out.
Please accept my apologies.” Well, we chitchatted for another minute or so and I came on home
to make my family’s dinner. ‘Bout a half an hour later, I hear this knock on my back door and it’s
Dana lookin’ all red-eyed and sniffly.

“I’m sorry I said those things to Danny, Mrs. Johnson, I won’t do it again.” Just as flat as
if she had memorized the words, she said it.

“Never mind, girl,” I told her. “You run on home now and put some cucumbers on those
eyes or you’ll be all swole up at school tomorrow. I’ll tell Danny.”

Well, she never really did spend much time with Danny again, at least not like before.
They pretty much stopped being friends and only seemed to meet by accident. I say “pretty
much” because that’s when Dana started getting a little crazy. I used to see her wandering around
outside at night in her nightgown, every now and then at first, and then almost every night.
Sometimes she’d be sitting in a curled up ball on the driveway, like she was cryin’ or something.
Other times she would race back and forth across the yard in a funny kind of walk -- kinda like
those walk racers in the Olympics. And other times she’d lie on the grass, just staring at the sky.
One time, I thought sure she’d fallen asleep and I went out to see if she was asleep or dead or
what. Well, she musta heard my door squeak ‘cause by the time I got ‘round the hedge of cypress
between the houses, she was gone. Anyway, then one time I caught her talking to my Danny. In
her nightgown and at two o’clock in the morning, no less! It seems they were both crawling out
their bedroom windows and who-knows-what went on. I talked to Dana’s daddy, after all it IS my
business when it concerns my son, and the next weekend I saw him putting those wrought iron
bars on the girl’s bedroom windows.
Well, Dana just got stranger and stranger. She never dated as far as I could see. I guess she was anti-social 'cause she never had friends over and if I ever saw her outside and not working then she had her nose in a book. She had thick glasses and long stringy hair and to see her reading was like Cousin It on the Addams Family on TV. She was a strange girl and I'm glad her daddy had the sense to lock her in at night, otherwise she might've ended up in trouble.

Then she met Sam. Actually, Sam was my Danny's school buddy and they only met accidental-like when Dana was weeding the lawn one day and Sam came over to our house to study. I saw him checking her out between the cypress trees and next thing you know they was talking like old friends. Ha! Now, don't get me wrong, I don't mind boys and girls talking and getting to know each other, but this is the girl who used to slink around under the moon like some kinda ghost or something. I just didn't want to see anybody get hurt, that's all. And this girl wasn't quite right in the head, in my opinion.

Anyway, these quick little conversations started happening all the time. Seems like every time Sam came by to see Danny, Dana would be standing outside for some reason like checking the mail or taking out the trash or watering the camellias. And more'n likely, Danny wasn't even home. I could tell she was straining to seem casual, but nothing happened by accident. Then, once, I even saw them kissing and that was the limit.

So I says to her daddy that night when he come home, "Well, Mr. Connors, I guess you know your girl Dana's getting pretty close to Sam Gilfillan, huh?" The look on his face changed from his usual smile to this angry twisty expression that I can't even describe. The minute I saw it, I was sorry I'd said anything but it was too late. He pulled himself together real quick-like, but I knew he was p.o.'d.

Next day, who do you think turns up at my door but Dizzy Dana and boy! was she mad. She was shaking and crying and she called me all kinds of rude things and she told me that I didn't know nothing about life and that I should spend as much time paying attention to my own family as I did hers. And she spit on my kitchen step and left. Well, I never! The only reason I didn't march right on over there and talk to Mr. Connors was because I had a peach cobbler in the oven and I wasn't about to risk burning it for some snot-nosed kid with no respect for her elders.

That next weekend, Dana run away in the middle of the night (when else?) and I'm sure she just broke her daddy's heart 'cause he died not six months later of a heart attack. Ungrateful kids. The more you love 'em, the more they seem to hurt you.
So anyway, now Dana's come back and she's got a kid. She doesn't seem to have any control over the kid, but maybe that's modern child-rearing, I dunno. Who am I to say? I just know that bad blood breeds bad blood and there's definitely some bad blood in that line of women. I even heard from old Betty across the street that Dana's grandma, who's not that old, is a little strange, too, and I don't mean senile. I hear that she drinks quite a bit and that she divorced her husband after 25 years of marriage on account of his drinking. Ha! Where do people get off, huh?

It's a damn shame, though, 'cause here's this kid, this Christy, who's gonna grow up with all these crazy women in the house and no men. I mean, the kid doesn't seem to have a chance in hell of changing her shoes. She's just gonna have to walk the same old path as the rest of them. Damn shame. Sometimes when she's quiet, she looks exactly like her mama.

You know, I really did feel sorry for those girls when they was little. Here they was, seven, eight, and nine years old and spending all that time alone at home while their parents worked. Sure, they was a little wild sometimes, but I kept my eye on them from my kitchen window and through the cypress tree hedge. Sometimes I could hear all kinds of screamin' and yellin' and doors slammin'. Gawd, one time they were all chasing each other around the yard, screaming names at each other and trying to pull each other's hair out when their father drove up. You never saw three girls forget a fight so fast. It was like they was different people all of a sudden. Now that's an authority figure if I ever seen one. He was some kind of teacher, maybe that's why those girls were so good when he was around.

Every weekend you'd see them three girls working outside -- cutting the lawn, weeding, taking out the garbage, or helping their dad out on one of his projects. He was always building or fixing something -- he even added on a whole addition to the house with no more help than those three girls. Come to think of it, I never saw no other kids around there except when the girls were alone. Oh, well, who knows.

Whatever went on, it must've been ugly 'cause Sam hasn't been around even to see the kid since... lemme see, since 1982? The kid was probably three. I remember, 'cause that was the year my Danny graduated technical school and we had a big party to celebrate, invited all the neighbors, and Dana came with her kid. I asked her -- not being nosey you understand, just neighborly -- I asked her "So how's Sam doing these days?" She up and started crying, ran out the house, and never even did say congradulations to my Danny.
I got a hold of my friend Betty later on and asked her what was going on and she said she
didn’t know exactly but she knew they had got a restraining order against Sam and that she
thought it had somethin’ to do with some sex stuff. Yeah, I bet, knowin’ that Dana. Anyways, I
never did see Sam again. Seems to me the kid might’ve been a little more normal if she’d had a
daddy around to balance things out, dontcha think?

Anyway, the little girl seems to have every possible toy, the nicest clothes, but oh! what a
nasty tongue! Dana didn’t have a nasty tongue, only she said strange things. Once she told my
Danny he should dye his hair, said that gray hair is for old people. And she says nasty things to
people, almost like she want to hurt them Like once she told me that I was nosey and that I talked
too much. Can you imagine? A little girl -- cute as a button, but a nasty tongue on her.

Things come back on people like that. You know it does. I wonder what Dana’s daddy
would say if he could see them all now. No tellin’ what he’d say, but you can be sure things’d be
different.
HAPPILY EVER AFTER
Guilty

They had dared me to do it,
my sister and her bad-news best friend.
Me a year older, less worldly
not wanting to be outdone again
by two girls not half as smart as me.

Searching for something worthy
I pocketed big black false eyelashes
a blond girl like me could never wear.
And I headed toward the door
my heart pounding behind my eyes.
Fresh air had just brushed my face
when that man grabbed my arm,
gripping my sleeve like a rope,
“Just hold on there, you little thief!”
he growled.

Today the pimple-faced girl at Wal-Mart
watches as I sort through the sale rack,
counts the number of items,
one-two-three
before allowing access to the dressing room.
A sign inside warns, “Shoplifters will be
prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law...”
The cramped dressing room
 grows smaller
reminds me of sitting in the back seat of a cop car,
hands in cuffs behind me,
the air close and musty
like the sweating men
laughing in the front seat
carrying me to the Van Nuys city jail,
ignoring my pleas:
"Please, please, don’t call my father!
You don’t understand...
I’ll do anything you want.
Anything."

I ignore the familiar reflex to run,
shimmy into the beautiful dress,
picked out for its rich earthy tones
and lines which will match my skin and eyes.
I smile shyly at the mirror image,
imagining how I will appear to others,
and see only my father’s daughter:
tear-stained cheeks and puffy eyes,
ashamed and peering from behind those bars.

As I leave the dressing room empty-handed,
I can see disgust in the clerk’s eyes
for she will have to gather those clothes,
count them once again,
and hang them neatly on hangers
where they will wait
for another perhaps less guilty woman.
In a Perfect World

Harriet is appalled by talk of loveless marriages and statistics of divorce. She will argue with anyone that there is hope for the institution of marriage even as we recount our personal tragedies and cite our disappointments in love.

Meanwhile, she spends Friday nights at the Sports Station, surrounded by the smoky laughter and beery smiles of good friends. We know she is watching for that long-awaited partner to approach. She says she will recognize him by his eyes and by the words he uses.

Football games shine in the rows of square TV screens around the bar. Husky, thick-necked men in dress shirts and loosened ties cheer their teams while we women in our short dresses and high heels vie for their attention. The women all smoke long thin menthol cigarettes and sip light draught beers while the men down their bottles of full-strength Budweiser in three or four easy swallows. Harriet sits silently, watching us flirt and tease, each of us growing glassy-eyed and freer with each passing hour.

At eight o'clock, she gathers her coat and waves goodbye to us and we wave with mock sadness for a polite moment before returning to our animated conversations. Harriet walks the two blocks to home where Bennet and Dashwood, her cats, are waiting by the window. It's true that she is happy to be home among familiar things where she often sits by the tall windows, by night looking at postcards from friends in Europe and by day watching children play tag in the street.

"Unless I have children," she tells us, "my parents will never be grandparents. They don't have much time..."

"So have a baby," we all say. "Get artificially inseminated! Adopt! Find some guy at the Sports Station and don't tell him!"
“I couldn’t,” she answers. “Besides, I want to be a stay-at-home mother. I don’t want my kids in daycare.”

In a perfect world, we all think, knowing our own experiences are of no consequence in this conversation.

Eventually, with a lot of encouragement, Bud then Jason, after that Michael then Benny call, shyly asking Harriet on dates.

But as they chat over coffee, she sees only Bud’s overbite when he talks about work on the assembly line. He’s sweet, she says, but he could never carry on a conversation with her college friends. It would only make him feel bad, she says, dismissing him from the list of possibilities.

She wonders while they pick up the dinner dishes why Jason’s wife left him. Was it his habit of washing each pan and utensil as he finishes using it? She describes the perfect corners on the sheets of his bed and the way everything is arranged in 90-degree angles and says he would drive her crazy if she had to spend any more than an evening with him.

On their Sunday afternoon drive along Highway 80, Harriet obsesses about Michael’s pudgy fingers and the scar on his lip. She couldn’t stop herself from imagining his last girlfriend making love to him last summer, a woman we all knew had moved on to bigger and better fish in another state. Still, she is certain that he will be thinking about the other woman even as he compliments Harriet’s hair or the light in her eyes.

In the dim theater light, she scans Benny’s face for any hint of ambition. She once thought he was attractive, but now she wonders as he guffaws loudly, tears in his eyes. Surely, nothing is that funny, she complains, describing the tears that ran down his cheeks and into the corners of his mouth.

Despite her apparent reserve, we know that Harriet wants to feel laughter bubble up inside like champagne from a vacuum-packed bottle. Instead, she hides out in her apartment all day during sunny weekends, passing on our invitations to picnics in the park and bicycle rides to a local pub where a country band will play later in the afternoon. Rather than go dancing with us, she dances in tiny steps around her apartment, singing softly to an imaginary partner.

Every day, Harriet dresses for her teaching job at the high school, carrying her low-heeled flats and wearing those perfectly-white athletic shoes for the eleven blocks between her apartment and the school building. She teaches with passion, letting her temper flare only when students try to defend their creationist theories or when the occasional rebel challenges her
authority. She takes long breaks midway through the day, standing in the hall and chatting with the vice-principal who has admitted to dreaming about her. She tells me that she is worried that what they say is true, that all the good ones are taken.

Still, none of us is surprised when, after three years, she decides to buy a house in this small blue-collar town where none of the men appeal to her and where friends know less about her than her curious neighbors who watch her late at night, her lips moving in some private conversation. Her blinds are always pulled wide open and the light reflects starkly on the snow-covered ground like headstones.
Until Death

This is how I get through my bills. I think about Matt and what has happened between us and how much he has cost me over the years and then I grit my teeth and write the checks to cover for his mistakes and his toys and I swear to myself that I will never fall for this crap again. It's become my mantra.

The phone rings and I think to myself, "Now what? Another creditor? Someone else looking for Matt?"

"Hello?" I answer the phone tentatively these days, never knowing what to expect, an angry boyfriend, a jilted girlfriend, a bill collector, someone who doesn't know Matt doesn't live here anymore.

"Betty, my love! How are you?" His familiar voice comes booming over the line, the same voice I lived with for 16 years, the same voice that melts me every time, no matter how angry I am with him.

"Matt. I'm fine," I answer flatly, thinking of the thousand reasons I am not fine, including two notices from the bank for bounced checks. I had paid bills before his child support check came back stamped "ISF" and now I will have to pay bank charges larger than the checks themselves. But still, I tell him I am fine.

"Aw now, Sugar, that doesn't sound like my sweet Betty. Wassamatta, BettyBoo?" His voice is wheedling, his kissing-up voice, the one he uses when he wants something.

"What is it, Matt? Why are you calling? You know I have work to do. That's why you have the kids this week." I try not to be abrupt with him, but sometimes my frustration leaks into my voice and I hate myself for not being able to let go of things. We used to be so good together.

"Let's go to the beach, Betty-love. The kids need an outing and it would be good for them to see us getting along. What do you say?"
“Oh, Matt. I can’t just drop everything and go to the beach with you! I have responsibilities!” He always does this. He knows I need to work and he knows I can’t just take off any time, but he always manages to make me feel like some kind of workaholic, as if he could have achieved as much as I have without working like I do. Who makes the mortgage payments? Who pays for the car? Who makes sure there is always food on the table? Who always saves our butt when he goes out and buys crazy things like boats and share rentals in Hawaii? I will work the rest of my life and still never catch up.

“Well, BettyBoo, the kids sure are going to be disappointed. I already told them you would go and now I’ll have to break their little hearts.”

“Jeez, Matt! Why do you do that? You always make me look like the bad guy! And why couldn’t you just take your new girlfriend anyway?”

“Betty, the idea is for the kids to see us together. Like real parents.” He was beginning to whine as he quickly added, “And besides, Sandy hates the beach. It does something to her hair, I don’t remember what.”

“Oh, I get it,” I said. “You need someone to watch the kids—can’t handle it alone, can you?” At this point, I was getting mad. Just thinking of that buxom Sandy-woman, the one with the perfect figure and salon nails (French-manicured, of course), hanging out with my children made me want to skip work for the rest of my life and live on welfare so I could be with them every minute until they left home. I hoped to God that Sandy the Valley Girl was just a transitional relationship because I couldn’t imagine her influence on our kids being anything but wrong, wrong, wrong.

“Fine, if you don’t want to come with us, we’ll go without you. The kids are both pretty good swimmers now, aren’t they?”

“Matt, you know damn well Jamie doesn’t know how to swim! You have to keep a close eye on her or she’ll just walk right in! Besides, it’s not warm enough for the beach yet. The kids will have to wear their coats all day and that won’t be fun for anyone. Why don’t you just go to the park for a little while instead?”

“We’re going to the beach, Betty, with or without you. The kids were counting on both of us, but they’ll just have to get used to life’s disappointments. We’re going to get shells and driftwood and whatever else they can find on the beach. Don’t worry, we’ll be fine without you.”
“Okay, okay, I’ll go.” He always knew how to make me do whatever he wanted. I thought divorcing him would wake him up, make him grow up, but I could see that nothing was ever going to change. “What time will you pick me up?”

“Oh, my car is in the shop, Hon,” he answered. “I was hoping you wouldn’t mind driving.”

“Fine,” I answered, seeing the whole picture finally. “What time do you want ME to pick YOU up?”

“Say around 11? I’ll have the kids ready. You could pack us a lunch if you have time. See you then, Sweetheart.”

When I dream, I imagine my husband coming to me with his arms outstretched, a smile on his face. He takes me in his arms and holds me close, just like when we were first married, and I feel safe and warm. I haven’t felt safe in a long time, probably since Davey was born. He couldn’t be trusted to finish anything. Couldn’t follow through on any promise. Now look at him, flirting with some young thing and I honestly don’t care. The kids are enjoying the beach and I am, too, I admit it. The wind is cool, but it feels good to be outdoors after a long winter.

“Until Death Do We Part...” That part of the marriage vow always comes back to me. I should have stayed, for the kids’ sake if nothing else. But I wanted to die every time he came home late with perfume on his clothes. It’s true, I ignored his cheating for a long time, for the kids’ sake. Like he always said, it didn’t mean anything, it was just sex. Plus, I love my kids, more than anything, and I wouldn’t have them if it weren’t for Matt. Small price to pay, I guess.

The beach parking lot is crowded when we arrive and I realize that it really is a perfect day to come to the beach. I can smell the salty ocean air as the wind whips my hair around my eyes. As we walk down the beach toward the lagoon where we have always had summer picnics, I watch little Jamie, all dressed up in her little white ski parka and red pants. She looks like one of Santa’s elves except for the fact that her pants are rolled up on her chunky little calves so she can put her feet in the water. The lagoon is warmer than the ocean, so I figure it’s okay as long as she only gets her feet wet. She’s knows better than to go any further unless her Daddy is with her.

“Jamie! Remember what Mommy said—no more than your feet in the water! Mommy can’t swim, so don’t go too deep!” As she splashes around, kicking water across the lagoon, I can’t help but worry, a sense of doom always weighing me down when there is water all around.
Matt laughs at my fears, tells me that the lagoon is safer than our bathtub at home, as if he has read statistics comparing tub deaths to ocean deaths.

"Okee, Mommy. Only feetsies!" Such a happy baby! Thank God for the differences between her and her Davey. He was so colicky, crying all night for months and months. I thought I would die of exhaustion in those first few months and Matt was no help.

"Can’t you feed him or something?" Matt often complained. “He’s so unhappy! I thought mothers knew exactly what to do!” Sometimes Matt made me feel so inadequate. I did everything I could to make Davey happy, but I couldn’t and the doctor said he would just have to outgrow it. And he did. Now, watching him chasing after the gulls on the beach, laughing and flapping his arms like a huge gangly bird himself, I wonder at the miracle of childhood, that they can forget so much so easily and enjoy life each day as if yesterday and tomorrow didn’t matter at all.

I see Matt is still chatting up the redhead, but now she’s sitting next to him on the blanket we brought for the picnic. They’re smiling and I can see he likes her by the way he leans in, almost confidentially, to talk into her ear over the wind. She throws her head back to laugh—yes, he was always very entertaining—and she uses her long fingers to untangle her hair. He reaches over to help her, as if she can’t handle her own hair after, what, twenty years? She can’t be any older than that, but he always did like the young ones.

“Jamie! That’s far enough!” I see her jump, startled by my voice, and I feel sorry for my harsh tone of voice. Jamie is always deep in concentration, the kind of child who can sit and stare at a trail of ants for hours at a time. She makes up stories in her head, she told me once, and gives everything names. Sometimes she’ll cry if I make her leave an activity too soon, before she has a chance to end the story she has started.

Just then, the wind picks up and I can feel my scarf unraveling itself from my head. As it blows away on some magic carpet of wind, I can see it rippling and waving like reflected water. It lands right in front of Jamie, flat on the water for a second or two before it begins to absorb the water and sink.

Jamie reaches out for the scarf, taking her little feet further into the water, her ankles, her knees, and then she has her little fist on the scarf, but I am shouting, I think, “No, Jamie! No, Jamie! Leave the scarf! Come back out of the water, Jamie!” But no sound comes from my mouth and I stumble toward the lagoon, reaching in the air between us for her little white parka, that puffy little down-filled parka that reminds me of marshmallows, but she seems so far away. How could I let her get so far away from me?
Jamie turns around, still standing in the water, and waves to me, holding her trophy in the air for me to see. “Mommy, Mommy!” she calls out, smiling broadly, proud to have saved my scarf from drowning. In her excitement, she seems to lose her balance, falling backwards into the water, and I feel my arms shrinking, my entire body turning microscopic, and my legs dissolving underneath me as I scramble toward my little Jamie whose parka hood appears to be bobbing up and down in the dark water of the lagoon and I can’t tell if she is standing or sitting or flailing in the water as I would be if I were her.

I turn to call for Matt, waving my arms madly, screaming into the wind, “Matt! Matt! Come quickly! It’s Jamie!” but his back is to me and I can only see flaming red hair blowing like a halo around his head. I scream louder, cupping my mouth for a moment and then flailing my arms in a hysterical pantomime. “Matt! Matt! Matt!” I shout, my voice sounding small and falsetto against the background of ocean waves and gull shrieks.

Matt finally turns his head, a happy grin spreading across his face as he sees me waving my arms in the air. He nods his head as if in slow motion, lifts his arm to wave. “Hi!” he mouths into the blowing wind, the smile on his face growing larger, his straight white teeth shining like a bright white light from his mouth, his hand moving back and forth like Queen Elizabeth in a motorcade, and then he turns his back to me once again.
American Rigby

They both lived in a mobile home park, manufactured houses set among large expanses of sod that spread like indoor-outdoor carpet across the flat graded land between the shoebox houses. Adolescent trees, sporting their two dozen leaves, bent easily in the gentle wind that blew across the manmade lake.

Marla recognized the man walking up the cement path, Larry White, who always wore too-tight double-knit polyester shorts that hugged his balls and crept between the cheeks of his behind when he walked. She smiled wryly at his black nylon socks and the beige boat shoes he wore to every homeowner's association meeting, thinking of her ex-husband who had never worn anything less than designer shirts, tailored slacks, and Italian loafers.

When he arrived at Marla's door, Larry's thin hair was windblown, sticking out in random flaps around his ears and the nape of his neck. His pale smooth forehead was revealing more and more of the top of his head these days, but Marla didn't think of him as balding. She found most men acceptable in appearance, even Larry with his bony knees and smooth patches of hairless shin.

"Hi, Larry. What brings you out today?" She spoke in a tiny voice, one that sounded thin and squeaky in her own ears.

"Hi, Marla. Ummm, well, I—" He stammered slightly, tiny beads of sweat oozing from the slight creases in his forehead.

"What is it, Larry?" Marla smiled at him, hoping to set him at ease, but he only looked away, his eyelids twitching below his bushy eyebrows.

"Well, we've known each other for three years, right? Ever since you moved into this development." Larry had a way of prefacing everything he said, as if he were afraid to have an opinion of his own. "And I think we've become good friends. Don't you?"
"That’s true, Larry. You’ve been a good friend to everyone here. Is there something on your mind?" She was beginning to wonder if something was wrong and her heart began to pump in a fluttering way that made her want to close the door and sit down.

"Well, Marla, you know... You’re a very attractive woman and—"

"Oh, Larry! Come on! What is this? I’m just a woman, nothing special." Marla’s head was swimming now and she wanted nothing more than for Larry to stop talking, turn around, and walk back down that sidewalk to his own cardboard house. Her flaws were like old acquaintances; she knew them intimately even if she didn’t care for them. Just this morning she had noticed more brown patches in her skin, age spots she could no longer ignore but felt she had to cover with a thick layer of makeup before she could face the day.

"Marla, I think you are a very special woman—no wait, please don’t interrupt me!" he waved in her face as if to turn away her words. He pursed his lips together and looked up at the doorframe as if collecting his thoughts. "I, I, well, I have this all rehearsed and I’ll forget it if you talk. I, I would very much like to spend more time with you," he added, twisting his fingers and pulling at the skin on his palm. "I mean, romantic time, Marla. Could you, would you, I mean, will you have dinner with me? That is, tonight? Or any other night, actually!"

Larry was sweating profusely by this time and Marla was dumbfounded. She could feel her cheeks growing warm and a tightness in her stomach that told her she had better get to the bathroom soon.

"Oh, Larry, how sweet of you, but I—"

"Please don’t turn me down, Marla. It’s only dinner. We’ll take it slow."

Marla tried to inhale, the pounding in her head making her want to sit, anywhere, right there on the floor, in front of Larry and anyone else who might see them standing at her door, him on one side of the screen door and her on the other.

"I’m sorry, Larry, but I don’t think so. I, uh, I just don’t think I’m ready to—"

Larry’s eyes dropped to the ground and he began twisting his fingers again. Marla felt sorry for him, sorry for herself. He’s such a nice man, she thought to herself. And I have been so lonely. But, he deserves so much more.

"Well, I guess I understand. If you change your mind, though, you’ll let me know, won’t you?" Larry’s eyes were still downcast and Marla had a sudden urge to open the door, pull him next to her and hug him, maybe even kiss him, but she stood motionless. She didn’t want him to
see her up close, and he would, eventually he would, and then he wouldn't imagine that she was attractive anymore.

"Yes, I'll tell you if I change my mind. It's nothing personal, Larry, you do understand that, don't you? Thank you for asking me, Larry. Thank you." As Larry backed away from the screen door, Marla moved to the side and began closing the door. "Thank you, Larry. Thank you, anyway," she murmured as the door clicked shut.

She reached up to turn the deadbolt and paused, thinking how terrible that would sound to Larry if he were still within hearing distance. She waited, counting under her breath, one, two, three, slowly all the way to ten, before she turned the deadbolt firmly into place. Only then did the tears begin to flow from her eyes, a trickle at first and then a torrent of angry tears.

Marla stumbled through her tears to the bathroom where she leaned close to the vanity mirror, looking closely at who she had become. She saw gray eyes, never blue like her mother's nor green like her sister's, the lids puffy and the lashes so thin that layer upon layer of mascara never made her eyes look anything but muddied.

She saw her too-large nose, which she had always hidden behind larger glasses, and the deep pores that reminded her of a thick porous orange peel. Models never had pores so large, Marla had noticed, and she had tried every over-the-counter product that promised to shrink them.

She saw splotchy skin, even through the thick layer of makeup, marked by the years of acne she had suffered through when she was young, and now those damnable brown patches that were spreading from her cheek bones, jaw, neck. The bleaches never worked, but she continued to use them in case the effects were cumulative.

And in her neck she saw creases in the skin that only reminded her of how short her neck was, how pasty white, how thick like the skin of an elephant. Even that expensive anti-aging cream hadn't worked to fill in those wrinkles like it promised.

Denny had warned her not to get old, not to let herself go, told her she would be alone forever unless she kept herself up. *Look at his new wife,* Marla often said to the mirror, imagining her smooth and perfect skin, her bright blue eyes, her tiny white teeth and soft lips. *She'll get old someday, too,* Marla reminded herself, but it did not bring her comfort, no comfort at all as she sat down on her couch and picked up the latest issue of *Cosmo.* Maybe this issue will have a solution for those age spots, she thought as she began flipping through the pages of beautiful faces and perfect bodies. The last issue suggested lemon juice.
Marla’s subscription to *Cosmo* had lapsed once and she had missed two full issues before they got it straightened out. Now she makes a point of paying a year in advance.
Women's Work

Dorothy sighed heavily as she shut the door to the washing machine, a well-worn machine that she prayed would last another year or two in spite of the eleven years of abuse it had already endured. She wiped a layer of dust from the white enamel top, quickly but with a certain amount of affection, using a wash cloth that waited to be laundered in the next load. Before Bob got sick, her appliances had always shined. Everything was clean, all was in order, and she always had an hour or so at the end of the day to read for a little while before the kids started arriving home from school. Now that Bob was home all the time and she was working, she could never catch up, much less read a book. She secretly wished he would find a place for himself in the family, something that would make him feel better about not working. She knew how hard it was for him to stay home, to let her go to work when it had always been him who supported them. But this is where they were, this is what they had to face now, and Dorothy believed it would be good for Bob if he felt useful around the house.

“Hey, Bob, would you mind making the kids lunches for me today? I’m running late and I’ve got a meeting first thing this morning.” Dorothy had been up since six but she still hadn’t caught up with the laundry and Sammie, her oldest daughter, was going to be so disappointed when she realized that her costume for the school play was still not finished.

Bob’s voice traveled heavily through the kitchen to where Dorothy was stuffing another load of laundry into the washer. “No, Dot, I can’t! Why can’t you take the five minutes to do it? I don’t know what the kids like and you do. Remember how they complained last time?” Bob had made lunches before, back when he was still working and Dorothy had been sick, and the kids had complained for days about ketchup on ham, honey on peanut butter, and didn’t Dad know anything about sandwiches?
Dorothy grimaced at her image in the mirror, her shoulders stooped and barely visible in spite of the thick pads she wore under her polyester suit. She hadn't bought new clothes since she'd had the kids, and she hadn't colored her greying hair for a good inch-and-a-half of roots. She was losing patience with Bob who could wear shorts and a tank all day and who didn't have a grey hair on his head.

“Listen, Bob. You'll learn what they like. Ask them! They'll tell you. And if they don't like what you make, then maybe they'll have to learn to make their own lunches.” She paused, listened for his response, hoping she hadn't pushed too hard. There was only silence.

“I can't do it all, Bob,” she added, a little hesitant to mention the obvious but feeling her resentment growing with each passing minute. Working, putting in her 40 hours a week in an office building for barely $17,000 a year wasn't going to pay the mortgage as it was, but she had to do it. It would at least keep food on the table and six kids ate a lot of food. It was his job to put food on the table, not hers and Dorothy wondered how long this self-pity would last.

“Bob?” she called out, realizing she hadn’t gotten an answer yet. If he wouldn’t agree to make the lunches, she was going to have to call the office and tell them that she would be late, another black mark on her personnel folder with another comment that her personal life was interfering with her effectiveness as an employee.

“Bob?” she called out again as she headed first for the kitchen where the pot of coffee had boiled down to a few drops that sizzled and smoked on the stove. She automatically turned the burner off and headed into the living room where he had left a pile of newspapers on the floor, his bedroom slippers peeking out from beneath the “Food” section. On the coffee table there was a smoldering cigarette in an ashtray already overflowing with smashed butts. She leaned down to put it out and then continued on her way to the bedroom to get her shoes and purse.

He'll burn the house down one of these days, she thought angrily, knowing better than to mention the cigarettes at all. They had often argued about the unnecessary expense of cigarettes, especially when he let them burn out in long gray straws of ash. Besides, they made the house smell, which is why he had never smoked in the house before. He used to care what I think. used to care about us as a family, Dorothy told herself, realizing that Bob's frustration was everyone's frustration.

When she found him, he was lying on top of their bed in his boxer shorts, all 250 pounds of him, the children’s clean clothes fresh from the dryer strewn in every direction around him and on the floor. His hairy muscular legs were spread wide and he was staring at the ceiling, his
fingers clasped, thumbs in a church-steeple which he opened and closed in an angry rhythm
Dorothy recognized immediately.

"Bob?" she said softly, a slight tremor creeping into her voice. "It's okay. I'll make the
lunches. I can call in and tell them I'll be late, okay?"

"No," he answered in a whisper. "You won't call in and tell them you'll be late. You'll
call in and tell them you won't be in at all. Ever."

"But Bob—" Dorothy felt her heart pounding, torn between the urge to reach out to him,
to comfort him, and the equally strong urge to run from the house, taking the children with her,
leaving him behind forever.

"Dorothy, call them now. This minute." His voice was calm and he began smiling
broadly at the ceiling. For a moment Dorothy thought he might be playing with her.

"Oh, Bob! You old kidder! You had me worried for a minute there!" She stepped into the
room as she spoke, drawing closer to him and reaching down to give him a kiss.

"I'm not kidding!" he roared, his eyes blazing with a sudden fury that she had never seen
before. He lunged from the bed and grabbed her roughly by the hips. As she fell into the bed on
top of him, Dorothy froze. Then he had rolled on top of her, holding her wrists above her head,
pinning her to the laundry-layered bed, the children's socks and underwear, summer shorts and T-
shirts closing in around her face and giving her the sensation of drowning in white cotton waves.

"Bob! Stop it, Bob! You're hurting me!" she cried out, softly she hoped, worrying that
the children might wake and hear them arguing.

"And you don't think I'm hurting?" he demanded. "I am a man, you hear me? I don't do
women's work! I don't do laundry and I don't do housework and I don't do children's lunches!
That's women's work and you damn well better start staying home and doing it if you know what
is good for you!" He was shouting and Dorothy could see the veins in his forehead standing up
like fat worms just under his flushed skin. She watched him, waiting for him to stop, waiting for
her turn.

"Bob, Bob, honey," Dorothy finally whispered. "It's okay. Everything is okay. Let me go
now, okay?" She looked into his face, pleading with her eyes for him to stop, to breathe, to come
back to the Bob she used to know so long ago. Gentle Bob, loving Bob, the Bob she had married,
the Bob who had played silly games with the children when they were little.
“No. You just want to get up and go to work. Work! My job is to work!” He was breathing heavily and sweat was dripping off his face into Dorothy’s. She winced involuntarily and he tightened his grip on her wrists.

“Bob, just let me up so I can call them. I’ll call in sick, okay? And we can talk about this.” Dorothy kept her voice low and calm but her heart was pounding in her ears so furiously that she could barely hear her own voice.

“Sick? Didn’t you hear what I said? There’s nothing to talk about!” he railed again, his face just inches from hers. She turned her head slightly and his face contorted into a twisted grin. “So you want to talk about it, do you?” he said, releasing her left wrist and leaning his entire weight into her chest with his folded arm beneath him. With his right hand he grabbed a white cotton sock, one of the boy’s socks and suddenly started stuffing it into her mouth. “Now let’s hear what you have to say!” he said, triumph in his eyes as he flattened his right hand over her mouth.

Bob leered at her as she felt her eyes filling with tears, gagging on the sock and from the weight of his body on her chest. His bare chest was heaving, his eyes rolling from side to side, his entire system racing with adrenaline, and she started feeling displaced, as if she wasn’t there under his body, but a distance away, watching the two of them on this cloud of cotton clothing. She felt the air leaving her lungs and a light feeling came into her head.

Dorothy heard Richie’s voice over the pounding in her ears. “Daddy? Daddy? What’s wrong, Daddy? Mommy?” Bob’s hold on her right wrist released and he let his body slump over to one side. As his body spasmed in silent tears, she gently moved his hand from her mouth and spit out the sock.

Taking a deep breath and holding her arm across her chest for a moment before trying to pull herself out of the sea of white laundry, she sat up and smiled at the small boy standing in front of her with his Daddy’s wide-open blue eyes that she loved so much.

“Everything’s okay, Richie,” she told him through ragged breaths. “Daddy’s just playing. You go on into the kitchen and pour yourself some cereal, okay? I’ll be there in a just a couple of minutes. Everything’s okay.”
Civil Service

Principal Liedelspech was standing outside of the office, as he did each morning for the last few minutes before and after the teachers were contractually due at the high school. Sara blew in with a gust of March wind and shook her hair into place as Liedelspech made eye contact and looked at his watch. She raised her chin, aiming it straight at the knot in his traditional necktie, daring him to comment on the minute and a half she was late. His eyes narrowed as he noted the challenge in her eyes. Only then did he notice the blue jeans, the athletic shoes, the two grocery bags full of potato chips and liter bottles of soda.

“No food in the classrooms, Miss Campbell.”

“Good morning to you, too, Mr. Liedelspech,” Sara answered as she brushed by him and into the teacher’s mailroom.

Her box was stuffed full with the familiar envelopes that she knew meant another long night of proofreading blue line copies of the yearbook and she sighed. It was her own compulsive attention to detail that drove her to repair the sloppy errors made by students who were less concerned with creating a quality yearbook than with just finishing “the damn thing” in any form so they could get on with their lives. But Sara also knew she would pay for every error she missed when the principal combed through the published version.

The ninth graders were already milling around the door to her classroom when she arrived even though class did not start for another half hour. Nearly a third of them could not read well enough to complete the homework assignment on their own, so many gathered at her door before class in hopes of a reprieve. And it was true that she could not resist a soft-eyed boy or a teary girl who came for help, even as she knew in her heart that what she could give would never be enough. They would not “catch up” to grade level and they would move on to the next grade just as they had been for the entire school lives.
By noon, Sara had taught four classes including two sets of freshmen who were reading *Romeo and Juliet*, one set of sophomores who were writing essays on *Shoeless Joe*, and one newspaper class who, even after nearly seven months of journalism instruction, still lacked the basic curiosity required for news gathering. Sara resigned herself to the remaining issues of the newspaper focusing on fashion commentary, movie reviews, and uninformed editorials.

Unlike any other school where Sara had taught, the majority of the teachers lunched alone at their desks, reveling in the rare silence and peace of 25 minutes before the listless and yawning students returned to the classrooms. Sara made a list of all that she would have to do that afternoon and evening in order to keep up with the river of paper that flowed constantly across her desk. It would be midnight before she would be able to head home, she thought to herself.

Sara had often seen the light in Liedelspech’s office burning long after midnight, and she had wondered what brought him back to school so late at night. She had met his wife at a faculty party once, a disheveled-looking woman in expensive designer clothes that could not mask the haunted expression in her hollow eyes. Bad marriage, Sara guessed, suspecting that Mrs. Liedelspech was the more unhappy of the two. She prayed that Liedelspech would be in his office tonight and felt a surge of energy run through her arms and across her chest as her heart accelerated slightly as she considered her promise to herself that morning.

Sara had brushed through her morning teeth, hair, blue jeans, and lace-up shoes with five minutes to spare by the time she had inserted the key into the ignition, pumping the gas twice before turning. Another day, no different than any other except that she was always pleasantly surprised when the engine started, its roar of angry cylinders blowing smoke out of the carport and into the clear cold Iowa skies.

“Today is going be different,” she had promised herself, telling the cold dashboard of her 20-year old car that today she would break with tradition, assert herself like the battered wife on television last night who finally, after years of silence and passive compliance, turned on her partner with a loaded gun.

By 2 p.m., when Sara’s yearbook class arrived, she had already emptied the grocery bags of their shiny yellow and gold bags of potato chips, candy, and caffeinated drinks and spread them across her desk where everyone could see them. On the board, she wrote “Proofing party after school today! Invite your friends!”
It was 11:30 p.m. by the time Sara finished the last of the corrections to the blue lines and packaged them up for the courier to pick up in the morning. She spent another 10 minutes picking up all the trash, including gum wrappers and broken potato chips, empty styrofoam cups and the stray black jelly beans that the six students who stayed an extra hour had thrown at one another as soon as their attention spans waned. As she gathered the litter, she wondered why it took the promise of candy to get her students to take time after school doing what Sara thought they would want to do no matter what.

By the time she was ready to gather up her coat and gloves, Sara’s heart was pounding. Her hands shook as she turned the key in the classroom door. And the sound of her athletic shoes squeaked repeatedly as she walked down the long hall towards the office where she would finally confront Principal Liedelspech. As she stepped into the office, she could see the long wall of teacher’s mailboxes and knew full well that there would be a note in hers. It didn’t matter what it said or how it was phrased, she knew that it would be yet another upset he intended to inflict on her the following morning.

It was his style to lay the foundation with a look or a gesture one day and not to address it until the following day with a note to see him at the end of the day. This always gave Sara sleepless nights, anxious mornings, and a long day of worry until the actual meeting the next afternoon. It was Liedelspech’s own style of torture, inflicted on only the quietest of the female teachers. Many left his office in tears, including Sara who had shed her last tear for anyone, including herself.

Sara stared at the row of mailboxes, trying to decide whether to get the note now or in morning. She peered into the box and saw the telltale little slip, lying on top of a larger pile of memos and newsletters, Liedelspech’s trademark scrawl barely legible: “I need to talk to you today. Meet me at 3:45 or let Marty know why you will not be here as requested.”

Sara tried to steady herself as she turned her back to the mailboxes and stared at the line of light beneath Liedelspech’s office door. She tried once more to imagine the conversation she had rehearsed, practicing it in her head again and again at home until she thought she had it right.

“I need to talk to you,” she will announce firmly, having decided earlier not to begin with a request of any kind.

“That’s fine. Make an appointment with Marty in the morning,” he’ll answer, facing his computer screen the entire time. He’s done that to her before.
“No, I think now would be better.” Her head was sure to pound and her mouth always went dry at the thought of defying him, like defying her father when she was young, but this man was not her father, had no right to make her feel so small.

“Miss Campbell,” he might say, finally turning to face her and look into her eyes. “It’s bad enough that you arrived late this morning and dressed inappropriately, I might add, but you have no right to barge into my office at this time of night demanding anything.”

“Have you been home for dinner, Mr. Liedelspech? Yes, I am sure you have. And you probably had a drink or two to relax you while you were there. And then your wild-eyed wife, who seems to be on the verge of a nervous breakdown, she probably went to do the dishes while you watched a little television news or read the paper. Am I right?”

Sara paused for a moment, taking a deep breath, imagining the next part, the hard part that she always messed up when she rehearsed. “Well, I have not been home, Mr. Liedelspech. I have not had any dinner. And when I do get home, it will be to an empty house where I will most likely collapse into bed—after setting the alarm for 6 a.m., which will give me approximately five hours of sleep before I prepare for another day of your abuse. I won’t take it anymore, do you hear me? I won’t tolerate another day of your intimidation games, your disrespect, your fucking bullshit! DO YOU HEAR ME?”

Sara’s shoulders slumped as she turned her back to Liedelspech’s office door, facing the mailboxes with a deep sadness she knew would stay with her forever. She had rehearsed her conversation with the principal again and again, but she could never get it right. She knew that if she didn’t do it tonight she would have to let it go, forget about it, move on. It would not do for her to go in there and lose her temper. Either way, he had won.

She slowly buttoned her coat and pulled on her gloves, bracing herself for the heavy snow that had begun to fall late that evening. She prayed the car would start and hoped that there hadn’t been any freezing rain that would mean another 15 minutes of scraping ice from the windshield before she could finally start the drive home. *I really should eat something before I go to bed,* she said aloud, knowing she wouldn’t. Instead, she knew she would go to bed imagining yet another stomach-wrenching session with Liedelspech tomorrow after school, the inevitable tears and humiliation, and her own hateful silence.
The Fine Family

Downstairs in the hospital’s only smoking lounge, Tony sips his usual cup of coffee, black with three spoons of sugar, and chainsmokes his Marlboro cigarettes. He could take his coffee upstairs but not his cigarettes and, besides, he prefers to stay here, far from the grating sounds of the women in the labor room. He had asked the nurse what is the point of Lamaze classes if they don’t teach the women how to deal with the labor in a more dignified manner, but she had turned away from him without an answer.

“Hey, I know you! Your wife’s in labor upstairs with my girlfriend. You saw her—she was in the bed next to you guys.” The pimple-faced young man’s blue eyes meet Tony’s in a hungry search for camaraderie.

“Yeh,” Tony grunts.

“Sure is exciting, isn’t it? I mean, this is the biggest thing that could ever happen to a man. Dana--that’s my girlfriend--she says that---”

“Look,” Tony interrupts. “I’m not in the mood for any chitchat, alright? Why don’t you go bother your bitch?”

“Hey, sorry, man,” the kid stutters. “I just thought---”

“Yeh, you just thought,” Tony grumbles as he turns and walks away, heading for a refill on the coffee. He can see the nurse from the labor room coming down the hallway toward the lounge.

“Mr. Gillam, your wife is asking for you. The doctor is coming in soon and she wants you to be there.” The nurse stands, her arms folded below her breasts.

“Yeh, I heard you, thanks,” Tony finally answers. “Tell her I’ll be there in a minute.”

“Mr. Gillam, I think she would do a lot better if you were there now. She’s very frightened.”
“I said I’d be there in a minute. Thank you.” Tony sighs as the nurse turns and walks back down the hallway. He had learned the fine art of ending conversations at will from his father who was always in control of such situations.

Thinking of his father made Tony squirm slightly. Talk about out of control, he told himself, wondering how had he gotten into this mess. This wasn’t his idea. It was Annie’s idea to have a kid, and now he would have to finish the job. A kid! How could this be? Yeah, he’d do right by the kid, he’d support Annie. But this was not how he imagined his life would be! He was supposed to be climbing the corporate ladder, making $30,000 a year by now and $50,000 by the time he hit 35. Now he would never get there. He’d be stuck taking care of Annie and a kid.

Annie was a lot of fun when he met her. A little shy, no experience in bed, but she was a good time, a good laugh on a cold night when nothing else was going on. Then she had to go get pregnant. Too many romance novels when she was young and now she expected him to be this perfect husband and father. If Annie’s dad hadn’t died when he did, Tony would be single today. No responsibilities, just free. But that Annie. She made him feel guilty, as if it was his fault her father had cut her off from the family when they moved into an apartment together. She had a choice. She didn’t have to do it, she wanted to be there. Made a choice and now Tony will have to pay the consequences. Yeah, that’s the way it always goes down.

When Tony thinks of all the women he has known over the years, he can’t accept that Annie is the one he married. She isn’t beautiful by any definition. She smiles too big and her gums show, she has a habit of picking at her face when she’s nervous which makes her look like a teenager, she likes to eat and will probably be fat someday. She’s a bookworm: mousy, and quiet, and scared of anyone she doesn’t know.

On the other hand, Tony enjoys the tall, slim, sexy-dressing girls he met at work. They know exactly how to wear their makeup and what parts of their bodies to emphasize. Their hair is always perfect, their clothes fitted and stylish, their cars clean and sleek, and they don’t care that he’s married. They’re mostly secretaries, but they have time to do their nails and get tanned on the weekends. They party together many week nights and some weekends when Tony makes the excuse that he has to go into work for a few hours. At least a couple of them could be his, if he wants. All he has to do is make the move, he knows that.

The hospital labor room is cold and Tony shivers slightly. Annie pulls the sheet over her arms tightly before speaking.
“Tony, will you ask the nurse for another blanket? I’ve got goose bumps I’m so cold.”

“You act like this is my fault,” he answers, not moving away from the doorway where he can stare out into the hall.

“Oh Tony,” she sighs. “No one is blaming you for anything. I just want you to ask for a blanket. Please, Tony.”

“I’m going to go have a cigarette,” he tells her, unable to stop the clenching and unclenching of his jaw.

“Tony, please stay. Forget the blanket. Just stay with me. Another contraction is coming soon. Please stay with me,” she begs him. He hates it when she does that and wishes she would just tell him to leave, tell him what he really wants to hear: “Yeah, get out of here, you bastard, and don’t ever come back!”

Instead she starts to cry. “Tony, aren’t you in love with me anymore?”

He considers her question as he recalls the time they first met. It was at a party and he had been drunk. At the time, he liked the idea of her—a pretty young woman with a college degree and a big crush on him. He was older than her, never finished college, but he had a good job. Later it had been hard to get away from her and he found himself part of the family before he knew what was happening.

“Women fall in love with what they believe a man will be someday—his potential, his greatest inner-self come to the surface with the love of a good woman,” Annie’s mother used to tell him over coffee in her shiny white kitchen while he waited for Annie to change clothes or finish some little chore around the house.

“You can breathe now,” the nurse whispers in Annie’s ear. “You have a few minutes to rest now. The doctor will be here soon. The baby is almost here. Don’t you worry now, okay?”

Tony considers the last 15 hours since they arrived at the hospital. The labor has progressed beyond the 12-hour expected labor and he is ready to go home.

“Science has taken man to the planets and back,” Annie tells Tony. “But no one can find a way to deliver babies without this kind of pain?”

_I don’t want to be married_, Tony tells himself, knowing that in some ways Annie feels the same. But he also knows that she’ll refuse to get a divorce now, that she can’t raise a baby alone. And besides, everyone would know that her father was right, that he was a loser, like he said. Not good enough for Annie.
“Oh, Tony,” Annie sighs, her eyes closed in exhaustion. Her hand brushes his cheek lightly in a gesture he knows she means as a truce. “He’s a beautiful little boy, isn’t he?”

“Yes, Annie, he’s fine. Just fine.” Tony is exhausted and all he wants is to go home, have a beer, relax in the house alone before Annie comes home and it all starts over again.

“The doctor says he’ll look perfect in just a few days. All the bruises will go away soon and you’ll be able to see how beautiful he really is.”

“Annie, I said everything is fine. The baby’s fine, you’re fine. I’m going home to get some sleep.”

“I just want you to be happy, Tony. I want you to be proud of our little son. He’s our own little son, a piece of you and me together. You’ll love him, won’t you, Tony?”

“What kind of question is that, Annie? What do you think? Geez, sometimes I think you just don’t think before you talk. He’s my son, isn’t he? Now go to sleep. I’ll call you in the morning and find out when checkout time is.”

“Okay, Tony. Me and your son, we’ll be here waiting for you. You’re going to be such a good daddy, Tony. I just know it. And when we come home, everything is going to be just wonderful, I just know it. We’ll get a house, right? Just like you promised? And we’ll have our own little yard with a swing for the baby, and—”

“Yeh, everything’s gonaa be just fine,” Tony answers, his key response to the sound of her voice. His gaze is on the horizon outside the hospital window.

“Can we call him Little Tony, honey?” Annie calls out to Tony’s back as he stares at the wind in the trees across the street, but he’s already lost to her, lost in a dream where he’s flying down an open highway on a brand new motorcycle, the wind blowing in his hair and a fine cougar of a woman holding him tight as they race away from this day, from this moment, which he will just have to deal with later.
The Mind of the Beholder

Dana’s mind often wandered back to her father’s death as she drove through the hilly neighborhood streets where her daughter attended elementary school. “He’s dead. He’s gone and dead and he’s not coming back. He’s been dead eleven years and another decade of thinking about him and blaming him for everything that’s wrong with your life isn’t going to fix anything.”

As she drove through the upper-middle class suburban neighborhood, Dana tried to imagine the lives the people who lived inside. Other than the superficial differences, such as paint color and gingerbread, the houses were all exactly the same, and Dana pictured beautiful mothers and fathers hugging at the kitchen sink, everything bright and cheerful, warm and clean, calm and secure, a station wagon in every garage. Growing up, Dana’s home had looked a lot like these houses, but hers had been different inside, dark and suffocating.

As she neared the elementary school, Dana slowed down so that she could take in every detail: the perfectly manicured lawns and hedges, the wildly blooming roses, the cool camellias in their shaded hollows, and the demanding azaleas. She imagined that she could taste the flowers and the grass and the fertile soil, that musty wonderful smell that escapes when you dig into clean, dark, almost wet dirt. She could almost feel it between her toes.

Pulling into the pickup zone at the school, she watched all the laughing and smiling children float out of the school doors like the soft soap bubbles she used to blow out of her bedroom window as a child. She wondered what it would be like to be one of those mothers who doesn’t work, one of those mothers who picks up her children after school every day instead of only on the days she played hooky from work.

Cherubic children with their blond locks and smooth countenances poured into their waiting mothers’ arms, mouths turned upward for loving kisses hello, and Dana recalled her own
dreams of marriage: a mom and a dad and a baby or two and at least one well-behaved family dog, one that had been in the family long before the children were born. Mom would be pretty, tanned, dressed in soft cottons, a model of maternal patience and love. Dad would be successful and confident, a serious businessman with plenty of time left over at the end of his day to sit down and read a bedtime story to the children. And then, once the children were safely tucked in, the rest of the evening would be spent together. Dad would be romantic, maybe pull a special little box out of his pocket, a surprise love-gift for his beautiful wife. She would be in an especially good mood, anxious to hear all about her loving husband’s day at work before they sat down to a candlelit dinner.

Dana was lost in her daydream when Christina threw her bookbag into the car through the open passenger window, and she jumped involuntarily.

"Cripes, Christina, you startled me!"
"Sorry Mom. Hey, could we get something to eat?"
"Hey, could you say hello?"
"Oh, yeah, hi, Mom.
"Hi. How was your day, Christina? Did you have a nice day?"
"Okay, I guess."
“What do you mean, ‘okay’? Did you have a good day or not?"
“Yeah, I guess so.
“Well, tell me about it. Don’t make me drag it out of you -- this isn’t twenty-questions."
“Well, I don’t know.... Oh, Mandy got sick and had to go home. She threw up all over the floor in the cafeteria and we all had to go outside to eat.”
“Well, wasn’t that nice to eat outside? It was nice and warm today, wasn’t it?"
“Yeah, I guess so.”
“So, what did you do in school today besides watch Mandy throw up?"
“Can we get something to eat?"
“Christina! What else did you do in school today?"
“I don’t know. I can’t remember. Can we get something to eat?"
“Christina, what do you mean you can’t remember? Stop and think about it for a minute. You’re not even listening to me."
“I’m too listening!"
“Then answer me.”
"What did you ask me again? I forgot."

"Never mind! Jeez, I wish you’d listen for a change. I’m so sick of arguing with you over every little thing. Put your seat belt on and let’s go.” Dana pulled the car out of the school driveway, finally cleared to go by the bus driver who had been loading kids since Christina first arrived.

“Can’t we stop somewhere and get something to eat, Mommy? I haven’t eaten all day.”

“If you ask me to get you something to eat one more time.... What do you mean you haven’t eaten all day? What about breakfast, what about what you were doing when Mandy threw up? You can eat when we get home.”

“But I’m hungry now!”

“Christina, did you hear what I said? You can eat when we get home! Now don’t say a word. I don’t want to hear another word out of you. And put your seat belt on. I’m not going to tell you again.”

Dana cringed inside, thinking of her cruel words, wondering why she was punishing Christina for her own miserable unhappiness. “Dammit, Christina! I told you to put your seat belt on! You wanna get killed?”

“Sorry, Mom....”

“God, I’m sorry too, honey. I’m having a rough day. You know I love you, don’t you? Even when I yell?”

“Yes, Mom, I know. I love you too.”

On the road, heading for home, Dana tried to remember her own relationship with her mother. She had so much difficulty letting herself remember anything good. Anger had become like an old friend.

They had no money in those days, both of her parents in school and working part-time. They lived in a little early California-style bungalow, three girls sharing a bunk bed, each taking a turn at having a whole bed to herself. Over the years, it came to be called “the little white house.” Dana smiled as she remembered her mother smiling, years after they had moved away from the little white house, as she told her daughters stories about the early years. When she laughed or smiled, everyone wanted to laugh with her; but it was so rare for her to smile.

“What are you thinking about, Mommy?”

“Oh, I dunno. I guess I was just thinking about when I was little. I was thinking about how my mom used to smile when she talked about this old house we used to live in.”
"Why did she move? Did she get a divorce too?"

"No, silly. They just decided to move into a bigger house. The first one was very tiny, very old, falling apart. Anyway, there was this hole in the wall and it just kept getting bigger and bigger until my father decided that he'd better fix it before the landlord saw it. I remember the wallpaper so well: it was this dark green with ivy vines going across it like a chainlink fence. I used to start at one end and try to trace the vine with my finger all the way across the room without getting to the end of a branch. I loved that wallpaper. My father was mad because he couldn't patch the hole without replacing the wallpaper on the whole wall. But when he opened up the hole to replace the plasterboard, he was really mad 'cause the hole was full of old dried-up food like half-eaten hotdogs and Brussel's sprouts and lima beans and bread crusts."

"He was mad? What did he do? Did he spank you?"

"I don't remember. Grandma says we all denied putting the food in the hole."

"Did you?"

"Now, honey, how would I remember something that far back? Huh? Don't ask silly questions."

Dana signalled to merge into traffic and a car horn blared loudly on her left. The driver shook his finger at her and Dana saw her father's face, equally enraged when he talked about how he had to live with pigs in a filthy pigsty. Dana stared blankly after the driver who had honked and she saw herself becoming her mother, always standing by helplessly, wringing her hands, tears in her eyes, but silent.

Dana shuddered. What she seemed to remember most, of all places and things, was her parents' bedroom where they got whippings. If she closed her eyes, she could imagine her mother hovering near the door with tears in her eyes, too scared to interfere. On the crucifix that was hung over her parents' bed, Jesus on the cross had a soft smile on his face, but the thorns in his forehead cut deep into his skin and bright red blood dripped down his face. The gaping wound in his side oozed more blood, and the nails in his hands and feet gave Dana a tingly feeling in her own hands and feet. She shuddered as she remembered how literally she believed that this Jesus had died for her sins. As the belt slapped her bare skin, she flinched involuntarily but she fought the tears. Afterwards, in the privacy of her room, the bottled up tears ran free but the anger and the resentment brewed deep down inside. She wanted to scream obscenities, break the windows, and slam doors, but she held it all inside; if there was a Jesus, He would hear her for sure.

• • •
Christina settled into the seat, lost in a daydream of Cabbage Patch kids and imaginary friends, her usual entertainment for the long drive home. Dana found herself back to that night her father had died.

It was after midnight, a day or two before Thanksgiving, when Dana woke to the sound of the telephone ringing: “Hello? Mom? Mom? Are you okay, Mom? Oh, God, I’ll be right there. Hold on, don’t do anything. I’ll be right there.”

“He’s dead,” Dana said to herself over and over again as she drove to her mother’s house. “Ran away from the scene of his crimes, a hoodlum after all.” For Dana, there was no going back, no last minute questions, no resolution to the war she had waged against her father for so many years.

Dana went through the motions of arranging the funeral. At the reception she sat back and watched all the mourners dispassionately. Her grandmother, so tired and suddenly so old, weeping quietly to herself, mumbling “My baby is dead! My baby is dead! Madre de Dios, mi hijo esta muerto.” Other people stood around nervously, unsure of what to do or say. Friends whispered among themselves, barely hiding their sudden realization that their lives too could be cut so short.

Dana’s mother occupied herself with cooking and clearing away dirty dishes and emptying ashtrays and wiping up already spotless counters, never saying a word, only nodding with tears in her eyes whenever anyone tried to offer condolences.

She certainly loved him, Dana thought to herself as she stood back, away from the crowd, watching, thinking. Who is this man you people are mourning?? she asked the crowd. Not the same man I knew -- not the same man I tried so hard to please. Not the same man, not the same man, not the same man.....

Over and over again, Dana rehearsed the things she wanted to say to him, had to say him, needed to say to him. How dare you die? How dare you run away when the going gets rough? How dare you sneak out of this life, creeping away into the night like a frightened mouse instead of the ferocious lion you pretended to be. I hate you, and I won’t mourn for you, not a single day, not a single tear. I hate you, I’m glad you’re gone.

Again, Dana signalled to move left in traffic, this time heading for the 19th Avenue exit that would take them into the City, finally almost home. She had first seen San Francisco when they came north from L.A. for her grandfather’s funeral.
Dana was only nine but she remembered everything about that day because it was the first and only time she ever saw her father cry.

It was summertime in Los Angeles and the doors and windows were all opened to let in the warm Santa Ana winds she loved so much. The Santa Anas were like full moons: everyone seemed to get wound up, intense, emotional. Dana felt a burst of electric energy that made her want to spin and spin and spin, never stopping, never losing herself to balance and gravity. She spun until the vertigo caught up with her feet and legs, sending her tumbling down into the grass. Her head continued to turn and the rose and camellia bushes all around her spun in circles around in her head. The sky was so beautiful, so blue, so big. Dana lay in the grass until the spinning had stopped completely and her breathing was calm and easy.

It was then, when she was lying in the grass staring at the big blue sky that she heard the strange noises coming from the house, strange muffled noises that reminded her of the neighbor’s dog barking when they had locked it up in the bathroom.

She tiptoed softly into the house, going from room to room, listening for the strange sound. As she approached her parent’s room, the sound grew louder but the door was closed. She put her ear to the door, but the sound of her heart beat too loudly for her to hear. Getting down on her knees and putting her ear to the floor, she tried to see under the door but all she could see were the dustballs that collected on the wood floors in-between mopping days.

Her heart beating double-time, Dana ran through the house back to the yard where she had been spinning. Catching her breath, she walked slowly toward the patio where a sliding glass door led to her parents’ room. There, sitting on the bed were her parents, her mother holding her father the way she used to hold Dana when she was small. And he, that mighty and bellowing father she had grown to fear, was weeping. Dana could hardly believe her eyes, but there he was, sobbing in her mother’s arms, burrowing into her like a tired little boy, letting her hold him and run her hands through his hair, whispering to her.

“I loved him, Joan!” he whispered to her between deep sighs. “But I never told him.” He pulled his head up, straightened his shoulders, and stood. He ran his thick fingers through his shiny black Vitalis hair and inhaled deeply. When he noticed Dana standing in front of the window, wide-eyed and open-mouthed with awe, his face changed and the angry man she knew so well was back.

“What are you doing there?” he bellowed. “Don’t you have anything better to do than to eavesdrop on me?”
“No, I mean yes, I mean, I was just playing and I, uh.... I’m sorry, Daddy, I didn’t mean to bother you.”

“Now, Madden, she didn’t mean anything, she—”

“The hell she didn’t! Why can’t you teach those girls some manners? Why don’t you leave me alone? Get out of my sight, the both of you!” he shouted as he pulled away from my mother’s arms and towards the door. “Just leave me alone.”

Dana’s memories of her grandfather were limited. The only thing she knew for certain was to stay out of his way. She couldn’t remember him ever speaking, even in quiet conversation, but she remembered his huge presence in the way one might remember a booming voice. He was tall and lean, hairline receded and balding on top, his wild grey hair sticking out from his head like a dishbrush. Long grey and white and black hairs grew irreverently from his eyebrows and his ears and his nostrils. Sometimes when he fell asleep on the front porch, Dana would stare at him trying to memorize everything. Dana tried to imagine him as he once was: a little bit of Abraham Lincoln, a little bit of Albert Einstein, a little bit of God, and at least of little bit of the devil or everyone wouldn’t have been so afraid of him. As an old man, he seemed to be respected but not loved, answered but not asked, dead but not gone.

His large hands, hands she knew had struck his sons’ faces with rage, were what fascinated her. The deep crevices and cracks in his thin age-spotted skin showed the human side of the man, the slim white bones, the blue veins, and the stringy muscles that only just barely gave the old man the strength to put a forkful of food to his mouth or to scratch his rough three-day beard. Dana thought of her grandmother, how she stood by him, and she decided that there must have been gentle times in the old man’s life.

Finally, Dana thought to herself as she eased into a parking spot only a half a block from the park where she and Christina met other single mothers and their children each Wednesday afternoon. They were early and no one else had arrived yet, so after locking the car and putting three quarters into the meter, Dana took a seat on a bench near the swings where Christina was already chatting with another little girl.

Mothers with their baby carriages and toddlers walked slowly in the warm sun as a warm summer breeze twirled leaves and dust in soft whirlwinds across the street. As the wind blew through the trees and pushed the fall leaves all around the playground equipment, Dana remembered a song that she had learned to play for her father on the piano, remembered how he
used to whistle the tune as she played and how he would whistle the tune later as he worked in the yard.

Okay, she said to the swirling autumn leaves. He gave me music, he gave me songs to sing, but it wasn’t enough. He was a quitter. He walked out on me and all the people who loved him and all the people who hated him..... and all the people who wanted to love him..... Why couldn’t he grow old like Grandpa? Why couldn’t he have stayed around for Christina, so that Christina could remember him, even if only as a helpless old man?

Dana imagined her father as an old man, tired and silent, still angry, still bitter, still disillusioned. It was better for him to die young, she concluded, better than to be helpless like her grandfather, wishing every day might be his last, waiting for this weary life to be over.

Tears welled up in her eyes and she felt her throat constrict involuntarily, her body and mind being more practiced at holding back the tears than at letting them fall. Memories like snapshots filled her head, crowding out all the little girl’s hurt feelings and the woman’s anger, until she could hold back no more. Then, like the acidic bile that collects in your gut until your body wrenches with spasms to expel the foul fluids, she burst into tears and sobs she could not stop.

Dana looked around the park, hoping no one would see her tears, not wanting to explain what even she didn’t understand, and she noticed that Christina and her new friend were spinning in crazy circles dangerously close to the hard corners of the raised sandboxes. She wanted to yell out to the girls not to fall and hurt themselves, to tell them how dangerous that game could be, to go to the grass area if they wanted to do that. But then she remembered her own days of spinning in the back yard and she smiled, imagining herself going outside that door and spin in the Santa Ana winds, too. She couldn’t do it, but she could let Christina do it, for once, without her mother’s displeasure in her ears.
A Fair Exchange

“I wish I could stay longer, amorcita. If I could, I would stay and take you out to dinner. It seems like the least I could do for you.” Eddie was pulling on his muddied blue jeans, looking down at Rosa, a crinkle in his eyes and a grin peeking from beneath his long moustache. She was still breathing heavily, damp with perspiration, her hair sticking to her scalp and lying in tangled strands across the pillow. She looked up at him and smiled, her pleasure at their lovemaking still tingling throughout her body.

“Oh, Eddie, just once I wish you could stay! Just once.” Rosa looked up at Eddie. She knew that at 35 she was running out of time, still unmarried, no prospects of a family in her future, and wondered if this handsome lover could be the one.

His white teeth flashed in a smile and she smiled weakly back at him, old tears of frustration threatening to fall from behind her mascara-thickened lashes. “I want more than this, you know, more than these short afternoons between appointments. Someday, right, Eddie? I miss you so much when we’re apart.”

“I know, honey. Someday. I need to get some bills paid and then I can relax. I can see a change in the market—you’ll see! Any day now, things are going to get better. Be patient, okay?” He sat on the bed to slip on his Mexican-style cowboy boots and Rosa pulled him toward her, her soft breasts slipping out from under the sheets.

Eddie reached over to touch her face, his coarse hands barely touching her smooth cheeks, his eyes looking deep into hers. “I gotta go to work, baby,” he told her, leaning down to kiss her goodbye and pulling her long dark hair out of her face, kissing her cheeks and then her lips, once, twice, three times, before starting to pull away.
Rosa leaned into his hands, held his face close to hers. She took his hand and placed it squarely on her breast, squeezing her eyes shut as if willing him to stay could make him lie down next to her once again.

Eddie gave her a little squeeze and then pulled away slowly, standing stiffly and reaching into his back pocket for his wallet and removing several bills. Rosa’s eyes were still closed and he smiled at her. “Adios, Rosa, mi amor,” he said, reaching into his pocket for the gold band his wife insisted he wear.

“Eddie—” Rosa started to say, opening her eyes suddenly, but he was already closing the door behind him, a dark-skinned little man whose wiry frame sometimes made her feel larger than life and self-consciously pale. She heard his engine start up outside the motel’s window and he honked twice, their signal to each other when one was out of the other’s sight. Rosa rose finally, slipping into her slacks and sweater. She leaned down to pick up her keys from the floor near the door where she had dropped them two hours before and reached for the doorknob with a sigh. He loves me. Someday he’ll stay, she thought to herself, imagining a ring on her finger and olive-skinned babies playing at her feet.

As she scanned the room one last time, her eyes fell heavily on the stack of crisp twenty-dollar bills lying President Lincoln’s face up on the bedside table and the tears she had been holding back finally began to flow like the Colorado River, carving deep canyons into her heart that she knew would never heal.
The young man standing at the door was maybe seventeen but already a clear silhouette of the man he would be. Black-haired and brown-eyed, his blue-black beard beginning to fill his jawline, he towered over her five-foot-two inches of blond hair and blue eyes. They had met once before, when Liza and Daniel signed the lease, and he smiled warmly at her as if they were already friends.

As he spoke, she noticed the muscles that flexed under his thin shirt. It was hot and she was suddenly conscious of her bare arms, her exposed neck and face, all in clear view. A crime in a country where women covered all parts of their bodies, including their faces.

Liza explained that her husband was not home, that perhaps he should return later. He listened patiently as she searched for the words in Farsi, correcting her once and then smiling at her embarrassment. Liza smiled in return, aware of hidden messages in his expression and captivated by the delicious contrast between his straight white teeth and wine-red lips.

The thought of kissing him reminded Liza that she and Daniel weren’t getting along any better here than they were Stateside, and yet she could not bring herself to leave him. At just 24, she felt defeated when she thought of the way he pushed her around in his anger, of his constant demands and her own frustration. Bitterly, her thoughts turned to the bedroom and their unmade bed.

Stepping back and opening the door, Liza watched the young man scan the room, feeling her heart race inexplicably when he seated himself in the only chair. “I like to learn new English words. You will teach me?”

“You already speak very well,” Liza answered, startled both to see him sit and to hear him speak English.

“I learn English in school. Not like. Parlez vous Francais?”
“Oh, no. As it is, I hardly speak Farsi.”

“France is international language. And is also language of romance.” He stood suddenly and approached her, placing his hands below her shoulders on her bare arms.

Liza tried to ease away from him, saying, “You know, my husband will be home soon.”

He nodded and leaned closer, his breath sweet like the sugar cookies they sold in the marketplace. Unable to take her eyes off the young man’s mouth, Liza froze as she recalled Daniel’s kisses, always hard, always bruising her mouth, when she heard his voice boom across the living room.

“What the hell!”

The young man released Liza and moved slowly toward the front door where Daniel stood breathing heavily.

“Goodbye, Mrs.,” he said, smiling at Liza. “Goodbye, Mr., sir,” he added as he passed Daniel. Daniel’s eyes were flashing angrily at Liza and he squeezed his fists one against the other like a streetfighter preparing to throw the first punch.
The noise! The noise! I can’t take much more of this noise!

The hospital noises in LeAnne’s head had begun as a constant attack on her senses, the blaring voices calling for doctors and nurses and unknown others by color and number codes LeAnne could not understand. She tried to ignore the voices, but instead she had listened to them, waiting to hear a familiar name, perhaps even her own, as if God could speak to her, answer her prayers, over the hospital’s PA system.

LeAnne Davis? LeAnne Davis? Calling LeAnne Davis. This is God calling.

Yes, God. Is it time yet? I don’t know how much more of this I can take.

Yes, LeAnne. It’s almost time. You’ve been a good little mother. Just a little longer now.

Can you wait a little longer?

“LeAnne?”

Yes, God, just a little longer.

“LeAnne!” a familiar voice wove its way into LeAnne’s conversation with God and she opened her eyes to see her husband standing over her.

“Oh!” she answered, startled.

“You’re sleeping? How can you sleep with all these people coming and going, all these machines ringing and clacking all the time?”

“Tired, Mark. So tired. Can’t do it any more. Ooooh!” she cried out, as another contraction began. “Don’t leave me, don’t leave me…”

“I’ll be back in a few minutes, LeAnne. Just hold on. You’re doing fine.”

He’s leaving me again, God. He’s always leaving. Why can’t he stay here with me?

He’s weak, LeAnne. Let him go. Let him go.

No, I love him. I love him, never let him go…
The hours were now marked by the doctor's visits, each visit a prayer for salvation. LeAnne lay there, helplessly, anchored to the hospital bed by the pain that wracked her body every 45 seconds, waiting only for the doctor to come into the room again, pulling up his rolling stool to the end of the bed and reaching between her legs to measure the number of centimeters her cervix should have dilated.

"Okay, Mrs. Davis. Pull your legs up for me now," he said, pulling her knees up and examining her for what seemed like the hundredth time. "This will only take a moment."

_This time, God. Please. Please this time._

LeAnne sighed, feeling the next contraction starting already. She clenched her jaw and prepared for the next wave of pain, a sea of wrenching screaming pain that lasted longer than the pauses in between.

• • •

"There's been no progress, Mr. Davis," the doctor told Mark. "She's only dilated a half a centimeter in the last hour. A single centimeter in over 30 hours. It's time for us to consider a Cesarean section before the labor causes distress to the child."

_Oh, God, nothing's wrong with the baby, is there?
Everything's fine, LeAnne. You'll see._

Mark took a deep breath, looking around the room at the equipment, the hospital bed, the harried-looking woman lying in the bed, silent, breathless, and dripping with perspiration. His own skin was cool and dry, his breathing regular, but he spoke angrily.

"What do you mean, a Cesarean section? You haven't given her enough time! She can do this!"

_But I can't do it, God, why can't he see that? You can do it, LeAnne, just hold on._

"No, the baby's head is too large for the pelvic opening. And your wife is exhausted. Look at her. Do you want her to endure more of the same?"

_Look at me, Mark. God, make him look at me! I can't do it! Why can't you see that? He can't see you, LeAnne, you know that._

The doctor rubbed his clean-shaven chin thoughtfully, assessing the young father who stood before him. Mark was dressed in a suit and dress shoes, all fairly new, giving him the impression of affluence, a lawyer perhaps, the doctor thought to himself considering the potential for a lawsuit.
“Twenty years ago, doctors would have let her go longer, give her a chance to do this naturally. You doctors today are more interested in making money off unnecessary operations. I know your business well, Dr. Smithson.” Mark’s nostrils flared as he spoke and he could feel heat in his ears as his blood boiled with fury.

“No, Mr. Davis. Twenty years ago, women in your wife’s position who did not get C-sections more often died. And their babies died. Is that what you want, Mr. Davis?”

Yes, that’s it. He wants me dead, doesn’t he, God? He wants the baby all to himself! I should have known better. All I am is another breeding mare to him.

“Of course not, you idiot. I just want to make sure it’s necessary!” Mark was fuming, ready to take a swing at someone, something, his arms swinging wildly in the air.

“It’s necessary. I’ll need you to sign the paperwork while we prep your wife,” the doctor added gently, seeing the anger in Mark’s eyes.

How could you, Mark? God, how could he forget about me? I won’t forget this, Mark. I won’t forget. Don’t let me forget, God.

Finally, LeAnne thought as the orderlies wheeled her into the operating room. My baby is coming now. Thank you God.

Only a little longer now, LeAnne.

The hospital noises came back as the spinal block took effect and LeAnne was able to breathe again. She strained against the restraints that held her flat on the table, her arms outstretched on boards where the anesthesiologist leaned over her, syringe in one hand and eyes on a blood pressure monitor.

I feel like Jesus on the cross, God. How long will it be now?

Not much longer. Hold on, little mother.

The nurses and anesthesiologists murmured among one another but LeAnne could only hear the voices on the PA system: “Code Blue, 178, please. Code Blue, 178” the PA voice called and LeAnne pictured the blue skies of summer, still six months ahead but a calming thought for the time being. Suddenly she heard her husband’s voice floating across the ceiling.

“But that’s my wife in there!”

“I’m sorry, you must have completed the C-section training first.” A woman’s voice, a voice LeAnne didn’t recognize, challenged him.
He won't like that, God. He hates it when anyone argues with him. Make him go away.

God, I don't want to see him. I can't stand the thought of him anymore.

“I did the training!” Mark’s voice came back and LeAnne could picture him, his hands on his hips, his face pushed up within inches of the nurse’s face.

“He didn’t have the training! No! Don’t let him in! Please don’t let him in! I don’t want him here...God, don’t let him in here! I don’t want him here!

“Well, okay, Mr. Davis. You’re sure you had the Cesarean section training then? I should really take a look at your certificate but we don’t have time. Put on the gown and cap and mask and you can go in.”

No, don’t let him in. Please, God, don’t let him in.

• • •

“Here you go! It’s your baby girl, Mrs. Davis. She is beautiful, perfect in every way. Don’t worry, her head will take a normal shape in the next couple of days. That’s just from pushing against your cervix.” The nurse began to hand LeAnne the tiny bundle and LeAnne tried desperately to lift her arms. She struggled but they fell away from her, weakened by the hours of labor, hours of gripping the sheets on either side of her body while she waited for body to release its hold on the baby waiting to be born.

Oh, God, how can this be happening? Help me, God. God, where are you? LeAnne wept as she heard Mark draw near.

“I’ll hold her,” Mark said. He reached over LeAnne’s prone body to take the precious little human being into his arms.

No! This is my bonding time, God, not his! I should be holding her! God, where are you now? As Mark cradled the child in his still-suited arms, LeAnne’s heart sank, the paralysis in her arms threatening to spread to her heart. LeAnne felt her eyes narrow as the joy of this moment, one she had waited so long for, leaked from her eyes in bitter tears. Her jaw clenched involuntarily and her arms lay helplessly at her sides.
WELL-TRAVELED ROADS
Eating Alone

after Li-Young Lee

I've stopped eating beans for awhile.
My diet demands it. Now I eat meat,
baked or fried. What startles me
is this burning emptiness of heart
not stomach. I eat, a hunger remains.
By the kitchen, an empty china hutch winks,
reminding me of dinner at Mama's house.

Since long before me, the family gathered
for Sunday’s meal. And I remember best
the beans. We ate them with tortillas—folded
like teepees, steaming—juices dripping
down our chins, appreciation rippling
across our faces. We laughed.

I remember Mama standing vigilant,
smiling at our laughter from the stove.
She pulled those lumps of masa, stretched them
until they would nearly crumble,
placed them tenderly on the griddle,
snapping in the iron hot heat.
Refried beans sizzling, ready to eat,
dee-p-fried carne bleeding seasoned oils,
pork chops simmering in a sea of green chiles
that burned our lips and blistered her hands.

I sit alone at the makeshift table,
the TV murmuring the news of the day.
A ground beef patty, my usual fare,
stares at me from its Melmac frame,
admonishing me to forget the past—remember the diet!—
but I can think only that I no longer know how to eat.
Image

She had grown up in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where all the boys were short, their dark brown skin and wavy black hair contrasting with her pale yellow hair and light blue eyes. She imagined them lying next to her in the shade of the patios where lovers lounged in the hot afternoons, but she felt overgrown, a woman in a horror movie, hiding her thick forearms and muscular legs under loose blouses and billowy cotton skirts. She felt anchored to the hard packed dirt, like a telephone pole on the flat highway, as she dreamed of moving to California where the men were tall and blonde and where she could finally look up into someone’s eyes. She dreamed of making babies.

When the cancer came, it fed first on her breast, then on her lung, and finally on her liver. The chemo brought on menopause, but she still dreamed of a lover’s arms, wanting them to touch her, to hold her tight, but she couldn’t even look at her own scarred chest without self-loathing.

She told herself that she was fat and ugly. She hated the cancer but despised her desecrated body more than the disease that chewed away at her organs like old rust. Late at night, she cursed herself and wished she were young again for just awhile.

At 40, nearing death, she began to remember herself as a beautiful young woman, an Amazon of mythical proportions and delicate features, the girl that every boy in Santa Fe wished to fondle. And in her imagination, she let those Mexican boys kiss her after all, their tongues exploring her delicate mouth and tender nipples until she moaned with the simple pleasure of being desirable.
Willing Travesties

They had been lovers long enough for her to know that he was waiting for her to climax so that he could have his with a clear conscience.

"But I'm not ready," she groaned silently as his body slipped into an insistent rhythm, each thrust telling her, "¡Ahora! Now!" His breathing became impatient and she sensed his mind had left already... dressing and heading for the door.

She knew the game and she had always played by the rules.

"Bueno, now," she whispered, quickening her breaths, pulling her pelvis up and into his, meeting each thrust with a matching thrust that quickened his pace and his sense of meeting her at the top of her climax. He finished in a fast and breathless squeal, the release that reveals the boy in even a gray-haired stoop-shouldered man like him.

"Te amo," she murmured, giving in to him completely.

"I love you, Diane," he returned sleepily.

At the sound of his wife's name, Rosa tensed and his body responded likewise--body waiting, mind preparing, ready to explain. Old lovers and other cheaters she had loved flashed between them like silent lightening.

She exhaled slowly. "For a minute, I thought you said "I love you, Diane," she whispered into his ear. "But I know now that you said, "I love you, tambien.""

"Claro, that is what I said," he agreed quickly, breathing raggedly. His taut arms relaxed. She snuggled closer into his arms and breathed his scent hungrily, savoring for a few precious minutes the illusion she felt she would die without.
Life Changes

Ted’s brow is permanently creased, three wavy lines crossing his forehead like rippled patterns left in the sand by a receding ocean. Spindly hairs, both the curls on his head and the overgrown hedge that hangs over his eyes, stand out in defiance of his efforts to tame them. Others, trimmed regularly by his wife when she shaves him twice a week, peek out from his nostrils. Those that curl lazily from his ears throw their silvery tendrils down into his sideburns where they disappear into the well-trimmed mutton-chops Ted has worn since his beard first came in. His father’s had the same distinctive shape and Ted considers them a worthy tradition.

Ted’s life is ordered by routine, starting with a 5:00 am rising even 10 years after his last day at the plant, after which he could have slept a little later, enjoyed the early morning hours with his wife of 45 years. Yet even his breakfast of cereal and toast, coffee and orange juice, is rarely interrupted by his wife who had learned many years before that variety is not a spice in Ted’s cupboard.

Maggie coughs in the other room and Ted wonders if she is well. As he combs his hair, it occurs to him he has heard that cough more and more in the last few weeks, although she never complains of illness. For years now, they have lived together in relative silence, knowing each other’s thoughts and nodding to one another in silent agreement to the unasked questions. She seems fine, he decides, thinking of how pleasant she always is these days.

She hasn’t always been easy to live with, Ted thinks to himself, smoothing his white cotton shirt into practiced pleats which will be held in place by his belted slacks, and he recalls the years when he half-expected her to be gone when he came home from work, her silent unhappiness always hanging about the house like a shroud. It was twenty years ago when the kids had finally left home and she had looked to him to fill the void.

“You’ve got to get beyond this,” he had said to her then, not unkindly, but the tears of resignation that welled in her eyes reminded him that she was not her old reliable self.
"I will die," she had answered him. "A part of me that lives today will die, Ted. I'm not sure I'm ready for that kind of death."

"Nothing has changed, Maggie. The kids are gone and I'm still here. I don't understand why you can't let that be, why you can't let me be. We've been married too long for you to start making demands."

In time, her demeanor had changed. She isn't the woman he married, but he no longer worries that she will leave him. Instead, she rises just before 5:00 am to prepare his breakfast while he dresses and fits his dentures for the day. And then, after buttering his toast, pouring his cereal and milk, filling his orange juice glass and stirring three teaspoons of sugar into his steaming mug of coffee, she waits for him to enter the kitchen. She pulls his chair out for him to sit at the kitchen table and places her hand on his shoulder in an affectionate gesture he recognizes as "good morning."

Now and then, she leans close and whispers in his ear. "I miss kissing you," she might murmur. Other times she tells him she loves him, moving away quickly as if to escape the silence. This morning, she squeezes his shoulder gently and moves toward the door, a trail of her perfumed powder remaining in the air for several minutes after the kitchen door swings closed between them.

Ted sips his coffee first, checking to be sure the usual three spoons of sugar have been added before unfolding his napkin and placing it in his lap. He picks up the paper and reads from left to right, top to bottom, starting with the first page and not stopping until he has reached the end of the section. Only then does he start to eat his cereal, now soggy with milk exactly the way he likes it and exactly the way he has eaten cereal since he and Maggie were first married. He sips his orange juice and notices that there is no pulp.

Again he hears Maggie cough, the sound muffled by the door but clearly thick with mucous. He tells himself that he should ask her how she is after he finishes breakfast. He also wants to know why there is no pulp in the orange juice, wondering why she would suddenly, after all these years, start straining the juice when she knows he likes the pulp.

Later, immersed in his television programs which start at 8 a.m., Ted is pleased when he remembers to ask Maggie about the orange juice. His memory is not what it used to be.

"By the way, what are you doing differently with the orange juice, dear?" he asks, peering at her from under his thick eyebrows. She sits across from him, working her fingers
rhythmically around the crochet needle and the fine yarn she pulls from a spool he has not seen before.

“Nothing, Ted. Why do you ask?” She speaks softly, sighing often, and he notices a pale look about her that he has not noticed before. Her hair, once blond and wavy and hanging in soft curls around her face with its porcelain complexion, is now gray and yellowed with age. She wears it tied back away from her face and he can suddenly see the years around her eyes and mouth.

She has grown so old, he thinks to himself, realizing that time has slipped away from them. Most of their friends have moved away to warmer climates, but all are still alive and well. Surely their time has not come yet, he muses as he scans Maggie’s body, her age-spotted hands and her sagging breasts speaking of harder times than he thought she had lived.

She has been a good wife, he tells himself, realizing that he has probably not appreciated her as much as he should have. She raised our children well, cared for our home, and rarely complained. But what had she complained about, he considered silently, wondering if there was anything she still wanted. He knew there was something different about the orange juice, but she seemed so tired. As he watched, she set the crocheting aside and leaned her head back into the pillows she had propped behind her neck. She closed her eyes and he decided to let her rest for now. He could find out about the orange juice later.

Years ago, Maggie had accused him of not loving her because they no longer made love as often as they had when they were young. “You never kiss me!” she had blurted out in the car one night as they returned from an anniversary party where the celebrating couple had embarrassed him with their drunken affection for one another.

“Well, I hope you don’t expect me to behave the way Nancy and Don did tonight!” he had retorted. “They were acting like teenagers and we are no longer teenagers, in case you haven’t noticed!”

She had sat silently on her side of the car, most likely crying, although he didn’t look to see if it was true. They had argued later that night, the last time she ever challenged him, and he had slept in the den for more than a month before she begged him to join her once again.

“Come back, Ted,” she had pleaded with him. “There’s no reason for you to sleep on the davenport. I won’t bother you anymore, I promise,” she had added, her arms hanging down at her sides as if she were too tired to raise them ever again.
He had returned to their bed, but they had never made love again and she had never complained. “She should understand that several decades of marriage mean something bigger than words or lovemaking might suggest to young people, like you, who don’t know yet what it takes to live with someone for that many years,” he had told his grown son whose concern for his mother had driven him to confront Ted. His son had shaken his head and walked away, probably never having imagined such a conversation with his father, perhaps wishing he had not asked.

After the morning news is done, Ted usually spends a few minutes doing his regular chores, checking the mail, starting the car for a few minutes just to keep the battery charged, emptying trash. He takes the kitchen trash bin into the garbage and then returns to the kitchen to replace the pink scented liner. As he tucks the trash bin back under the sink, he checks his watch for the time. His afternoon news report starts at noon and he heads for the living room where he and Maggie usually spend the afternoon doing their own separate tasks but in one another’s company.

Again, Ted looks at his wife sitting across from him on the floral print armchair she had picked out with so much enthusiasm. Her eyes are still closed and her hands are folded in her lap, and it occurs to him that he should have given her more. More kisses, more words, whatever it was she wanted all those years ago, he thinks to himself, still certain that these things are far less important than the 45 years they have been together. Then, relenting somewhat, he tells himself that maybe tonight, while they prepare for sleep, he will tell her that he loves her. She knows how he feels, but maybe she’ll like hearing the words, he decides just as the phone starts ringing in the hallway.

Ted waits for Maggie to rise and answer it as she always does. When she doesn’t open her eyes, he stares at her in disbelief. “Maggie?” he says, leaning toward her. “The phone is ringing. Aren’t you going to get it? Maggie? You know how much I dislike talking on the telephone. You need to get that, dear. Maggie?”
The Promise of Tampax™, Massengil™, and
the Cross Your Heart Bra™

“Blood is a curse that follows you until you are too old and useless for anything but cooking and cleaning and gossiping with other women about wasted youth,” Mari’s grandmother had told her. “But you don’t believe me, do you girl? I see it in your eyes,” she added, but Mari had insisted, with shining eyes, that she was not like other girls even as she planned the list of friends she would call that night.

That initial enthusiasm for her femaleness had waned many years prior to Mari’s 25th wedding anniversary, which she and Manny celebrated with Kentucky Fried Chicken™ and a bottle of Andre™ champagne while Manny watched professional wrestling on ESPN™. He switched over to a Cubs™ game while Mari put the leftovers into the refrigerator.

“Manny, if you don’t shut off that goddamn game, I am going to throw something into the TV, I swear I will!” she shouted from the kitchen, competing with the volume of the announcer’s excited play-by-play coverage.

He turned his balding head slightly in the direction of Mari’s voice. “What was that, honey?” he called out, his eyes never leaving the set.

“I said turn the goddamn television off or I’m gonna come in there and rip it out of the wall!”

Manny’s expression was bland as he did a quick internal assessment of Mari’s voice. She was unpredictable these days, sometimes shouting out directives she forgot before she had finished giving them, and sometimes ready to throw something at anyone who crossed her path. One had to be fast in order to dodge flying objects—whatever she might have at hand when the rage struck.

He felt a familiar rush of air near his temple when Mari’s hand released its hold on the Pyrex™ pie plate in Mystic Mauve to match her kitchen curtains and the Solex™ clock that
defined her white-on-white kitchen. The plate missed the television and hit the plaster wall instead, breaking into two neat pieces and leaving a gash in the wall.

Manny had personally been struck by any number of household items before, including round cakes on their cooling racks and hot soapy sponges from the kitchen sink, but Mari seemed unconscious of the graduating weight of her weapons. Manny often wondered if she missed on purpose and hit him accidentally. Her aim was poor.

"Geez, Marl!" he called out, at the same time putting the television on mute so she wouldn’t hear the game.

"Don’t Geez-Mari me!" she answered, suddenly standing behind him and drying her hands on the front of her Tommy Hilfiger™ t-shirt and Gap™ jeans. "I need some tampons and I’m not going out again. I’m exhausted."

"Won’t tomorrow be soon enough?" Manny asked.

"No, tomorrow won’t be soon enough! I need them now!" she shouted over her shoulder as she returned to the kitchen.

"Aw, Marl, you know I hate doing that! Send me out for ice-cream or laundry soap. Christ, don’t send me out for your women things."

Another pan dropped in the kitchen, and with a clatter that Manny was certain resulted from considerably more force than gravity. He could hear her slamming cupboard doors she couldn’t have any reason for opening except to close them as hard as she could and he sighed. She had been so sweet-natured—not bitter like now, soft-spoken—not harsh, petite—not blown up like a balloon of woman flesh that wrenched something deep inside of his gut every night as they prepared for bed. Each morning for 25 years, he had watched her rise from their bed, dressed only in brassiere and bloomers. He had loved her in the early years, and he loved her now, but mostly out of loyalty to who she had once been—the years before the hormone rages and physical changes that he knew she hated as much as he did when she lay next to him, weeping long into the night.

"Are you going out or not?" Her voice rose shrilly and he shuddered, a cold chill settling around him which he knew he could not shake off.

"Yes, dear, I am going." Manny looked around the familiar room, at his favorite chair, the remote control for the 52-inch RCA™ color television they had bought with their tax return last year, the pictures on the wall that had been there so long he could not remember not having them to stare at during commercials, their faded wedding portrait.
He reached out for the wedding picture in its dusty frame, thought a moment, and then turned to the door empty-handed.

“I love you, Mari,” he whispered as he closed the front door with a familiar pull he would surely miss.
Gravitational Release

Strains of an electric violin bounced around in Mindy’s eardrums making a connected hum of melody drive her train of thought. She tried to forget her physical self, the protruding belly, the heavy breasts, the thick thighs and tired calves, swollen feet rebelling against the demands of 280 pounds of woman.

As the recording spun through its memorized squeals and whines, she felt the weight of 20 years, bad memories and angry feelings, seep through the nerve endings in her brain, making a fast path through synapses, electric currents through memories of iron will, zapping every path of resistance, sidling around her breasts and into forearms of long-ignored ticklish places, soft hairs standing at attention. She imagined her arms light as at age 15 on a spring day, sunny days when the wind blew and the smell of the honeysuckle blossoms on the vine tickled her nose and she spun in circles around the blossoming garden. She felt the caress of her first love, the innocence of youth recaptured in clasped hands, her cheeks resting breathlessly against his denim shirt and hardened shoulder muscles.

The years settled into her belly and then spread like a lover’s hands to her hips and thighs, their throbbing now lost to the pulsing repetition of patterns of the violin’s voice. She allowed her shoulders to slump back into the cushions, felt the weight of her head ease from her shoulders as nerves jangled the news throughout her body. It was time. She closed her eyes, finally, succumbing to gravity.
Goldbrickers

1.

Madden was at the top of the ladder, shouting at the men from his wobbly perch. “Keep it straight now! Keep it straight, dammit!”

“Yeah!” the men grunted in unison as they lifted the framed wall on the count of three. Madden pounded a brace into place between the standing wall and the newly-raised wall and sighed heavily, the sweat from his brow dripping into his eyes. The hard physical work and hot summer sun were giving him a light head, but the men he had hired early that morning couldn’t be left on their own to get the work done. He watched them laugh and slap one another on the back, congratulating themselves as if raising a single wall were some kind of an achievement for which they could take credit.

Madden had picked them up at the corner of Brooklyn and Floral Ave. in East Los Angeles, a corner where contractors could pull together a crew for a day’s work and pay them under the table.

Mike had smiled broadly when Madden pointed to him from the driver’s seat. “Hey, thanks! I’m just looking a few extra bucks, but I know construction,” Mike had explained as he climbed up front in the cab of the beat-up Ford F-150. The truth was, Madden had thought to himself, you’re between between jobs and not particularly interested in a 40-hour workweek. Lazy, Madden thought as he gritted his teeth and tightened his grip on the steering wheel. He could see his knuckles gleaming under his skin and he thought about the last time he had been able to afford to take a week or two off.

The other two men, dark-skinned Mexicans who had leapt enthusiastically into the truck bed, introduced themselves as Jose and Miguel. They were regular day laborers, the kind of men
whose only chance to work in the States was under the table for these American contractors who were willing to risk a fine in exchange for good labor at cheap wages.

The work was going fairly well, Madden thought to himself, and it occurred to him that a little break might be good for them all. “Dana! Bring the men something to drink!” Madden had barked at one of the adolescent girls working in the yard. The two girls had been sanding redwood beams, dragging belt sanders back and forth, back and forth, over one 12-foot beam at a time, a mountain of beams piled behind them.

None of the men had refused the tall glasses of lemonade, but Madden could see from across the lot that the laborers were embarrassed in front of the girl. Dana, Madden’s oldest daughter, was wearing a paint-smudged tank top and shorts, same thing every day, and Madden had watched her carefully as she approached them with the lemonade. She glanced quickly at the men’s bare tanned chests, wet from the sweat of work, before looking at Madden. Once their eyes made contact, Dana dropped her eyes to the ground and stood silently, waiting for the men’s empty glasses.

Miguel said softly, “Gracias, mi hija,” and Madden could see Dana catch her breath.

“Enough goldbricking!” Madden was behind the men, his voice startling each of them. “Finish those drinks and get back to work! I’m not paying you to gawk at my kids!” Madden filled his tool belt pockets with the 8-penny nails before scanning the construction site through slitted eyes, his mouth contorted into what looked like a grin to anyone who didn’t know him.

Mike started lining up the two-by-fours and firebreaks on the floor in the same way Madden had showed him with the other walls while Jose and Miguel ran back and forth, bringing the 16-foot lengths over from the lumber pile.

“Lot of wood here, Boss,” Miguel said softly to Madden who stood watching the men, running a toothpick between his teeth. The sweat stood out on Miguel’s dark brow and Madden could see the effects of too much sun, too much work, maybe not enough food. He grunted at Miguel, having already put him in his place that morning when Miguel had asked through the open window in the back of the cab, “¿Eres Mejicano?”

Madden had hit the brake hard and causing the two men in the back of the truck to lose their balance. “You want the damn job or not? I’m not paying you to nose around my life. If you want to work for me, you’ll speak English!”

“Yeah, Boss, I want it,” Miguel had answered. Jose had grimaced, rubbing his elbow and giving Miguel a dirty look. It had set the tone for the day, and all three had worked quickly,
wordlessly, through the warming morning, stopping only to eat the turkey sandwiches Madden’s daughters brought them at noon.

At four o’clock, after a ten-hour day, there was no sign that the day’s work was ending. The men looked at one another as Madden barked reprimands at the two girls to get back to work every time they sat down to watch the men or rest their legs.

“We’ve got a couple more hours before it starts getting dark. Surely you men aren’t such pussies that you can’t put in a couple more hours!” Madden said, using the same impatient tone of voice with the men that he used with the girls. He stomped his feet, shaking the sawdust from his pants, glaring at the men who cast furtive glances at their watches and one another.

Madden watched as Mike sighed loudly, looking from one man to the other. He rubbed his sore arms with hands that were scratched and bleeding from banging into the open walls they had been raising all day, waiting for their response.

Jose flexed his back muscles and stretched from side to side, a silent groan in the way he exhaled.

Miguel kept his eyes on the ground, saying nothing, as if waiting for the others to speak for him.

“Alright, compadres,” Mike had finally announced. “Let’s do it!” and as Mike looked up again at Madden, Madden could see hatred in his deep-set eyes.

“Alright, compadres,” Madden had yelled into the small opening where his oldest daughter had entered the crawl space between the living room floor and the soft cool dirt. Dana had been enjoying a moment of quiet, unobserved for the moment, and her father’s voice had startled her back into reality.

“Uh, I’m almost done here, I was just checking what’s already done!” she called out, stammering.

“If it’s not falling down, it doesn’t need to be checked, goldbricker!” he answered and she knew that she was on his bad side for the rest of the night.

“I’ve got one more row and I’ll be out,” she called back, pressing the power stapler against the foil strip of fiberglass insulation. She considered her father’s foul temper, the many things she had thought but not said, and she gripped the stapler like a hammer with every muscle in her hand and arm. The staples pounded into the floor joists, bang-bang-bang, as she scooted on
her back from one end of the crawlspace to the other. The work was done, but she had not yet been released from the pounding sensation in her head that she feared would make her speak the wrong words.

After a deep breath and three repetitions of her mantra, *Eighteen in three years, eighteen in three years*, Dana was ready. She crawled out of the dark coolness, wishing she could stay there forever.

“Okay, I’m finished,” she told her father as she slapped the seat of her pants, freeing thick dry dust that was in not only her pants but in her shirt and in her hair. She would itch all night, she knew, imagining the tiny needles of fiberglass working their way into her skin. She sighed as he rattled off a list of things for her to do before dark, all of which could not possibly be done by then.

3.

“Madden, the girls have been working so hard this summer. Don’t you think they’ve earned a break?” Joan kept her voice quiet, tenuous, and she braced herself for her husband’s onslaught. She never knew what to expect—an angry word or an angrier fist. They were lying side by side in the double bed that had been their marriage bed, Madden refusing to buy a larger one in spite of the fact they could easily afford new furniture throughout the house.

“What the hell do they need a break from? You should have seen them out there today—staring at the workers, mooning all day instead of working. They’re still not done with the sanding and we’re putting those beams in two days from now.” His body stiffened when Joan reached out to him, her hand on his chest in an attempt to calm him.

Madden threw her arm away from him with a snort. “Why am I the only one around here who knows how to put in a full day’s work?” he demanded. “Even those guys I hired today were pissed off about putting in a full day’s work. By four o’clock they were ready to close up and go home. With a good three hours of daylight left! And you! Where the hell were you all day?”

Joan’s curly red hair tickled Madden’s nose as she crawled on top of him, laying kisses on his chest and working her way down to his belly.

“Get the hell away from me, you whore!” Madden growled at his wife, turning his back to her. “You can’t change the subject this way every time you think I’m getting out of control.”

“But Madden, the doctor said—”
“To hell with the doctor! I have a company to run!” he shouted, pushing her away and throwing the bedcovers over the footboard as he bounded out of the bed. “If I have to build the damn houses by myself, I will! Every goddamn nail myself, if I have to!”

Then, with a slight groan, he collapsed back into the bed and Joan reached out to him, relieved to see his change of heart. He lifted his legs back into the bed with a groan, his breathing ragged.

“Dammit, Joan. It’s bad enough the rest of the world works against me—that’s what’s killing me. Why can’t you let me be for a change? Why can’t you just...” Madden’s voice trailed off, his body stiffening against Joan’s. She nestled up to him, her hand caressing his scalp just the way he liked.

Suddenly Joan realized that Madden was no longer breathing. She thought of her two daughters lying in their beds upstairs. She thought of Madden’s angry tempers, the leather belt, the cruel words, the constant demands, her daughters’ angry expressions when they came in for dinner that night. She considered all the things she could do, should do, before she took her hand away from her husband’s body and curled up in a tight knot of blankets.

She had just recalled memories of better times when his body shuddered next to her. Joan held her breath and listened, her heart pounding. After another moment, she heard him inhale deeply, the breathing of deep sleep, and she knew that it was not over yet.
Old? I may be old in some ways, my body maybe, but that's nothing. And I wasn't always old, you know. I was young once, just like you, full of crazy dreams and a wild imagination. What are you—eighteen? Okay, seventeen. Have you got a girl? You know, when I was your age, I used to go dancing every Friday night and the boys looked at me, my strong legs and my tight belly—and my firm breasts, too—and they desired me in every way.

But back then the music was in my blood, in my muscles and my bones, and it was in my head so that I didn't even see those boys except at the end of a bony arm—the hand that grabbed mine, the fingers that circled my waist and twirled me across the dance floor. Oh, you should have seen how the light glittered in my hair and reflected off my pretty white teeth while the air lifted my skirts high above my knees before I found that arm again.

Oh, you dear boy. You can't imagine the joy of living then. No one had money—it was the Depression, you know—and many of us were lucky if we had enough to eat. Even the boys who had cars couldn't afford to drive them, the gas cost so much, and so instead we met in church basements and, sometimes, on the roof of the 5 & 10 where we could look out at the city lights far in the distance where we knew Benny Goodman was playing in a private club or where some fire was raging out of control just like our own lives.

Carl and I hadn't even met yet when everything changed. Daddy lost his job and Momma came to me one night, tears pouring down her cheeks, the flour from our dinner biscuits sprinkled on her arms like plaster dust after the last earthquake. Anyway, it wasn't enough that we were down to flour and baking soda biscuits with white gravy every night because, really, we were all hungry, everyone in San Francisco, even Momma's people that she cooked for. But when Daddy lost his job at the plant, it meant that we could lose our house, too. And I could see it in Momma's eyes that she didn't want to say the words, the words I didn't want to hear either.
“Ruby, you’re gonna have to quit school. I’m so sorry, baby, but there’s nothing else we can do.” She just stood there looking at her hands, all red and chapped from the constant wet of cooking and cleaning for the $2 that paid for our dinner. Still, all I could think about was the smell of the yeast bubbling to life in the kitchen, the loaf tins filled to bursting with soft dough Momma had been kneading when I first got home. I would miss school, but I would have missed our kitchen more.

“We need you to work, just like your brother and sister, at least until Daddy gets hired on again,” she told me. “It won’t be long, baby. President Roosevelt says we’re almost past the bad times.” Momma didn’t know how things would go, how long the Depression would last, and Daddy died later that year. He never did get back on at the plant and I knew he died of a broken heart. The light just went out of his eyes, like they were all darkness and pain after I quit school. He even stopped listening to the radio at night. I still listened to the music, late at night, by myself, but no one really felt like dancing anymore after they closed the plant, at least not until 1939 when Germany invaded Czechoslovakia and then everyone forgot for awhile how sad we were for all that we’d lost.

Daddy comes to me sometimes, right here in this kitchen, late at night when the neighborhood is quiet and I’m sitting here all alone daydreaming about the old days. That’s why I set a place for him at the table sometimes, so he’ll come by and visit me. He loved sitting in this old kitchen, too, and I always tell him that I don’t mind that I didn’t finish school. I had Carl to take care of me, a good husband he was, and look—we never lost the house. That’s what really matters. We’re all still together in the old house, a family. Just the way Daddy wanted.

Now, be a good boy and get me that knife there so I can split up this cantaloupe between us. You like cantaloupe? We couldn’t get it back then—couldn’t get fresh fruit anywhere once things got bad. Just using this old knife, my mother’s favorite knife, makes me think of her fixing dinner every night before things went bad, the way she made those biscuits—always kneading the dough until it was smooth and shiny, rolling it in flour and then pat-patting it into little balls until the air was filled with a fine white dust that settled on her arms and her glasses and on every flat surface in the room. Only then would she pull out the fresh fruit—sometimes watermelon, sometimes honeydew, other times just apples because that’s all they had down at the market. But she knew my favorite was the cantaloupe and when she carved it up for the dinner table, well, she always gave me the first taste. She would just pop a little square into my mouth while I sat there watching her.
“For my little dancing Ruby,” she would say. “Got to give the first bite to my dancing Ruby or it won’t be sweet for anybody else.”

And I believed her, you know it? To this day, I still take the first bite out of the fruit before I put it on the table. And it’s always sweet, isn’t it? Yeah, you know it is, but you think it’s just naturally sweet, don’t you? I can see it in your eyes, that love has nothing to do with how sweet this cantaloupe will taste. You’re thinking I’m just some crazy old woman with her old kitchen memories.

Say, how about I make you some biscuits right now? Just the way my Momma made them for us—you look hungry, you know it? You can put that gun away, Mister. I ain’t afraid of dying. I’m just going to make you some biscuits—bet you’ve never had any like these—and maybe I’ll even give you the first bite of this cantaloupe, see if you don’t sweeten it up just like I used to when I was your age.
Leaving

He had always been a shaggy man, Kate thought to herself as she considered adding their wedding picture to the box of clothes she was packing. She smiled as she imagined the frayed edges of his blue jeans trailing behind him like a strip of persistent toilet paper stuck to the bottom of his shoe. His long hair, hanging in his eyes, was his trademark and he was proud of his reputation as an old hippie who had stuck to the lifestyle associated with the age of peace signs and flower power. But Kate had grown tired of the reminiscing. She was ready to move into the future without the social idealism of the 60s weighing her down, making her stop and think. Life hadn’t turned out the way she had imagined and now, after having waited up all night for him to come home, like so many other nights, not knowing if he was alive or dead, she had had enough.

She opened one drawer after another, seeing familiar shirts and colorful boxers she had bought him each Christmas, this one from New York City, and another from Mexico where they had made love on the beach like two teenagers.

Today Darrell just looks like he did in the early days, she realized. Perhaps a bit gray around the temples, but still the same cheerful generous man who can’t say no to a friend or a beer. Kate, however, feels and looks like a different woman, one whose years of working and raising the children have sapped away the innocence of those early days when everything seemed possible, even the impossibly naive future she and Darrell dreamt the children would create after them. She never imagined feeling so alone, never imagined a time when even the smell of her husband in the bed next to her would make her sick to her stomach.

Kate began packing the battered Plymouth, tossing things into the trunk and back seat as if she could just load up the memories she wanted to keep and leave the rest behind. Darrell sat on the stoop, his head in his hands, when Kate finally stood next to him and said, “I’m leaving.”
He took her hand, kissed it, looked up at her, into her red-rimmed eyes, and mouthed the words, “Please, Kate.”

She pulled her hand out of his and climbed into the car she had loaded with clothes, a few books, and at least half of the pictures of their two boys when they were young. She knew that Darrell didn’t understand. They had been married since their teens and Kate was certain that it would be many long months before he would realize that this time she would not be coming back.

She looked at his thin frame, his bony jaw and sharp jutting shoulders, as he stood there in the yard watching her, and she wondered if he would eat well without her to remind him that beer was not adequate nutrition. She looked at his familiar buckteeth, the shabby t-shirt, and his bare feet that reminded her of so many camping trips and barbecues and all-night parties on the riverbank. He had always loved the feel of the earth between his toes.

Kate paused at the bottom of the drive, cinching the seatbelt around her shoulders and waist. She leaned out the window and nodded at him. “Goodbye, Darrell,” she said.

“You’ll call me when you arrive, won’t you?” he called out hopefully, his arm outstretched as if he could rein her in once more.

Kate pursed her lips firmly, shaking her head in frustration. “You agreed, Darrell. Let it go. You needn’t worry about me anymore. I’ll arrive or I won’t. It isn’t your concern anymore.”

Darrell’s expression was stricken and she winced. Don’t you dare feel guilty, she told herself, thinking of all the nights she had spent crying in bed, wondering what had gone wrong, why he wasn’t with her, why he could not sit quietly and grow older with her. She was tired, so tired of chasing after him, and once the boys left home there was too much silence in the house for her to bear alone.

Kate stopped in the road, leaning out of the window with her arm hanging over the side of the car door and looking directly into his eyes. “You’ll have learn to live without me, Darrell,” she said, enunciating carefully, her voice travelling across the lawn they had seeded together, wrapping around the Queen’s Lace they had planted when the boys were babies, and falling like lilac buds around his head and shoulders.

“Just like I learned to live without you,” she added softly, her mouth twisting bitterly as she rolled the window up and shifted into drive.

As the car slid down the road, away from him, she wondered how long it would take him to get to the Manhattan Club, where Kate knew he would forget, at least for awhile, that she was gone.
The Garden

"Aren't you done yet? What are you doing out there?"

Dana heard her husband's voice through the clatter above her head and could detect his growing impatience. He said he would wait for her to finish the garden tasks, but she was having difficulty keeping her mind focused, keeping in mind that there were other things he wanted to do. Instead the roses were calling to her, their thorny branches scratching at her bare tanned arms as she reached through the brambles as she snipped off dried buds.

"There are so many," she said to the crows who leapt from branch to branch in the stately old walnut tree that shaded the entire front yard. The black birds cawed at her and one another in fierce competition for the last word, but someone else always stepped in with another shriek. Sometimes Dana jumped in surprise, but she didn't mind.

Lenny hated those crows, hated the mess the crows made on the driveway, especially the cracked shells, but Dana had learned that this was yet another ingenious invention of the crows. She had watched them dropping the walnuts from high up in the uppermost branches onto the asphalt driveway. The shells cracked open and then the meat was there for the eating, good eating for crows, at least for whichever crow was the fastest or closest to the cracked walnut. Sure there were plenty of fights over who had launched this walnut or that, but what else did they have to discuss on such a beautiful summer afternoon?

"Dana! How much longer?" Lenny called from the house once again.

"Just a few minutes, Lenny!" she called back, wishing she could stay for a few more hours, stay in this garden she had created from neighbor's snippets and half-price sale plants at the local hardware store. They were already half-dead by the time Dana could afford them, but she had a gift for saving them. Her thumbs weren't only green, but her hands never lost the
embedded dirt creases that came from digging and planting and nurturing her many children in this garden paradise she had created all alone.

She stood to review her afternoon’s work and saw that the rose bush garden was ready for another burst of buds and blossoms. Dana could hardly wait to see them return, to smell the perfume that no man or scientist could duplicate, to gather the silky petals in her hands and sprinkle them along the garden walk like a flower girl who precedes the bride when the wedding march begins.

But now it was time to go inside, to give Lenny some of the attention he needed. She didn’t mind, but she would rather stay in the garden where life burst from every corner and where she felt at peace with herself.

There’s always tomorrow, she thought to herself, and braced herself for the evening’s demands—the cooking, the listening, the accommodating things wives do. You’re my wife, after all, he had reminded her several times. And a wife has certain duties. Dana already knew that, had watched her own mother perform those duties without complaint. Still, she had never imagined she would one day remind herself so much of that woman she swore she would never be.

“Dana! Dammit!”

“I’m coming, Lenny, I’m coming.”
Whistle Stop

The train sang through town like a choir of angels and Liza knew it was time to leave. Her heart felt the tug of locomotion, the chug-chug-chug of the engine, the steady hum of the steel wheels on steel tracks, final destination unknown.

Brad would be lost for awhile. He was slow to change his heart about anything, even when all the signs were there, staring at them both in the bathroom mirror each morning as they prepared for the day. They hardly looked at one another anymore, much less touched like lovers do. As he brushed his teeth in that funny way he had, flinging droplets all over the mirror, she explained that it wasn’t him, it was her. He cried, foamy toothpaste mingling with his beard. He’d begged her to stay, to give them one more chance, and she pretended to be upset like him.

As she packed her few things into the duffel bag that had lain forgotten under Brad’s bed for the last eight months, she felt her heart race with the adrenaline rush of standing on the station platform, the wind at her back, supplying whatever push she needed to leave this comfortable little cabin on the edge of what everyone else called wilderness, a sleepy little mountain town like any other along Oregon’s coast.

Liza knew better than to stay. Her own wilderness was the uncharted territories outside of the known, the unfamiliar cities, the blank faces that blend into a single composite of human features. Then, without any warning some commonality makes the eyes sparkle with living color, the voice lilt with sensuous rhythms that reverberate throughout her body. Liza craved that tingling sensation of fear and trepidation, the tight feeling in her chest when a stranger’s eyes traveled across her body, the never-knowing of a new man’s bed for the night.

Brad would forgive her, she told herself as the train whistle blew once more and the massive iron beast pounded across the tracks, slowly picking up speed, and taking her to New York this time, or maybe Chicago. A place with lights and noise and city streets she could call her own for a time.
Sweet Sundaes of Love

Mindy was hungrier than she had ever been. The diet was hard on her, eating only meat and cheese, forgoing the pastas and breads and starchy vegetables she had always loved, but to do without a cigarette or a beer or, at the very least, kisses, was asking too much of her middle-aged body that really didn’t care all that much about being thin, really, not that much.

She watched Ray eat his ice-cream sundae, the butterscotch sauce sticking to his moustache, the white mounds of luscious creamy vanilla ice cream leaving trails alongside his lips which he smacked with sticky pleasure.

She thought of the many women she knew who were not thin, not a single model in the crowd, and she considered how like an ice-cream sundae real women, whole women, full-bodied women, are.

We’re formed lovingly, just like the Creator forming Eve, Mindy imagined. First He makes us into sweet toffee-flavored hillocks with brown chocolate knolls of every hue. And then He adds other delectables, hidden deep within us, latent pleasures, a trail of syrup clinging to the scoops like caramel on tart green apples (or tears on young girls cheeks, Mindy considered). He tops us with nuts of every kind (not always our fault, sometimes genes, sometimes bad times), a cherry or two—lurking (not that anyone would guess), sweet Hershey’s kisses with their jutting nibs, tender morsels of broken sweethearts (smothered words. Valentine leftovers?), a taste so sweet and fresh, like peppermint at Christmas, with a texture soft and smooth as any might desire.

Mindy sighed as Ray scraped the Melmac bowl for any last hints of butterscotch he might have missed. She looked down at her body, her full belly the site of several surgical excavations, her thick legs dotted with cellulite, her floppy forearms that would never again be tight. She felt
the loose skin around her neck and considered her drooping breasts that no longer perked up even in a cold draft, and realized that while women might be like a perfect sundae, no connoisseur eats, no gourmet partakes, and even the average diner looks away.

“We fat chicks, we’re the invisible girls,” she said aloud although Ray was busy popping a package of microwave popcorn and didn’t hear her speak.
“Unusual name,” her clients always note. “Where does it come from?”

Griselda is tired of explaining her name, saying that she is Mexican-American, describing how she grew up—yes, right here—in East Los Angeles, in these broken city streets, among the barefoot children and chain link fences and broken glass, as if she needs to present credentials. She wants to belong to this community of chicanos, cholos, and mejicanos, and with the same ease as someone with dark skin and eyes the color of rich soil, but thanks to a German-Irish mother and a cruel God she is as pale as the tortillas her grandmother makes for breakfast each morning.

Griselda knows only that her heart races to the sounds of the rancheros that float up to her window from the street below, that her hips begin to sway against her will whenever mariachis play, that her dreams are sprinkled with Spanish words and phrases, and that the stories in her head are narrated by a deep and resonant voice she recognizes as her grandfather’s, thick with beer and sawdust and the staccato Spanish of old-time Zapata raids along the Santa Fe railroad lines.

Papa had been a blue-eyed blond boy, dressed in lacy white linen for the family portraits which his Spanish mother insisted on every year on the feast day of San Francisco de Assisi, her last remaining tie to Spain in the forsaken desert of Chihuahua where her husband chose to live.

It was Papa’s stem father, however, who had disowned him, cast him out of the family, cut him off without a peso, for bringing his dark-skinned bride back to Mexico from Albuquerque where he had learned the family business. Back they went, to the United States, to California, where promises of green fields and rolling rivers crossed the lips of everyone who came to Chihuahua’s drought-dry plains.
As a child growing up in her grandfather’s house, Griselda learned about dichotomies: each of her aunts and uncles had married *gringos*, white Americans, who neither spoke Spanish nor attempted to learn it during the 40 years they shared the old man’s house. Only the grandchildren will go to school, get college degrees, buy houses of their own, forget the family ways. The *abuelos* and *tios* remain behind, *juntos por siempre*, as if joined by invisible chains.

Mealtime was especially loud and boisterous as the men gathered around the dinner table, each of them arguing the fine points of American politics and Mexican history in his chosen language. Papa could travel back and forth at will, peppering his criticism with guttural rumblings only Mama understood. As the sun began to set, its dark orange clouds settling across the kitchen window, Papa’s sons and sons-in-law had to rely on Mama to interpret Papa’s most passionate speeches which grew steadily more Spanish and less English the longer he spoke.

Papa watched his son’s wives grow fat on Mama’s cooking which blended Papa’s Castillian roots with her own Navajo childhood. No one complained, especially Mama, as she stood by the stove for hours at a time, patting the little balls of *masa* into perfect moons of corn *tortillas*. Everyone ate as Mama cooked, but she never ate until everyone else had finished. Only then would she nibble on leftovers, the *carnitas* in the frying pan or a *tortilla* that got too brown, while she washed the dishes that were piled high next to the sink.

Even Griselda’s mother did her best to learn the culinary magic that Mama worked over that iron stove with its licking blue flames that danced around Mama’s fingers as she seared the long green chiles. But Freda Schmidt was a *gringa*, an educated one, no less, and would remain an outsider even as she sat among the women pulling beans, the women’s voices bubbling throughout the *cocina*, the single room designated for the women alone.

From the time she could remember, Griselda had longed to be a part of that circle of conversation, *chismiando* with the others. She learned Spanish quickly, hungrily, as if knowing the words would make her whole. No one knew that she understood the *llorando*, the weeping voices of Mama and her friends when Papa died. In his last moments, suffering a momentary fear of facing his God with lies between him and his wife of 70 years, he confessed that he didn’t love Mama, that he had loved another woman who lived three doors down in a house that Papa had bought for her. All the years Mama had believed were hers became paper-thin like the sticky leaves that cover *tomatillos*, sticking to your fingers even as you try to peel them away.

Mama forgave him that night, let him rest in peace with the belief that he was right to tell her. She kissed his purplish mustached lips goodbye as he lay in bed waiting for Dios to take him
away from the few worldly things that had accumulated in spite of the legacy of poverty his parents had given him all those years ago.

Bitter as her grandmother had never been, Griselda sits in a Mexican restaurant and prepares to order a meal only her grandmother could make right. As she waits for the waiter, she considers what is Mexican today, these 30 years later, and grimaces to see an Incan painting on the wall and a cactus in the corner. Her friends had told her that this was the most authentically Mexican restaurant in town and Griselda wonders what is authentic Mexican?

"¡Hola, señora! ¿Cómo está? Bienvenidos a nuestra casa. ¡Nuestra casa es su casa! ¿Qué quiere tomar?" The waiter rattles off this Spanish greeting, designed especially for the Americans to create an immediate sense of the Mexican community. The customers usually smile, embarrassed and confused, and then ask for a Coke or a Corona to start.

Griselda surveys the room of Americans, their pale skin and light eyes matching hers, before looking deep into the eyes of the waiter who is waiting for her to smile and stumble over her words. For a brief moment, Griselda considers ordering in Spanish, wanting desperately to surprise him with a string of Spanish phrases, imagining revealing not only her proficiency with the language but her oneness with him. She looks at him with longing, imagining his response, but sees only the bright smile of a well-trained waiter.

"I'll have a bottle of Budweiser and the number 22 combination plate, thank you," she says softly, finally acquiescing to the silenced hearts of women that began in Mama's kitchen.
Sara had gotten a notice from the post office that there was a package from her mother’s zip code. She went to the P.O. with the yellow slip of paper and waited in line, wondering what her mother might have sent. As the postal worker handed her the box, Sara remembered that last year’s Christmas present had been a second-hand sweatshirt at least two sizes too small. She guessed by the weight of the package that this package was not clothing, thank goodness. Her mother had been dropping hints about Sara’s weight gain for two years, and Sara often felt that the clothes her mother sent her were intentionally too small, but Sara had resolved not to diet, not to limit her one satisfaction in this highly unsatisfactory life. It was a lot of work being angry all the time, but the eating was good and she still had friends even if she didn’t have lovers.

Maybe Sara had put enough space between her and her mother, or maybe she had forgotten why she had been so determined to keep the layer of flesh that insulated her from the world, but one day she simply stopped eating. She started weighing herself in the morning. She started exercising at the gym, even though it pained her to see her bloated body in the mirrors that reflected young, hard, and beautiful bodies next to hers.

Her mother had been writing, asking how things were going, acting sincere and as if she really cared. Sara ignored several letters, deciding that her mother didn’t need to know she was feeling better these days. It would only result in another letter, the next saying something self-congratulatory like, “Oh, honey, I’m so glad! I just knew that someday you would find some peace of mind. If you would only have listened to me sooner you could have saved yourself all this unhappiness.”

Sara hadn’t found peace of mind. She knew better than to equate the absence of one thing with the presence of another. There was a middle ground that was neither and Sara was being sliced in two by the fence she was straddling between them.
Finally she relented. To let her mother off the hook was perhaps even better than the finely-crafted vendetta against her mother that Sara had always imagined. Sara was nearly 45, after all, and her mother lived several thousand miles away. What could she do? What could she say? Sara vowed to let the anger go and prove to herself that she was indeed a better and stronger woman than her mother had ever been.

She wrote, explaining that her life was better than it had ever been, that she was even dieting and had lost a total of 55 pounds in the last six months.

Sara waited for her mother’s response, expecting the worst but ready. There was no response until today and Sara allowed herself a happy release she hadn’t anticipated. She opened the box anxiously, too impatient to wait until she got home, and pulled out the stuffing that hid the contents from view with nervous scratching fingers-turned-claws.

She stared at the gallon container of chocolate-covered almond clusters for a long and thoughtful moment, fighting a sudden irrational urge to open the container and toss the chocolate candies around the post office like flower petals at a wedding.

Sara decided she would go see a movie and promised herself that if it didn’t make her laugh, then she would go back to the P.O. and decorate the desks with the little chocolate turds her mother had sent. It was the only rebellion she could imagine.
“Men and women bear their pain differently,” Heather tells Greg whose breathing tells her that he is nearly asleep. She sidles up close to him and whispers in his ear. “Women are like levies, letting the tears flow when it becomes too much to hold back—”

“When what is too much to hold back?” Greg murmurs.

“All the years of anticipation. And what do women get in return? Disappointing marriages and demanding families, empty sex lives and wrenching childbirths, the deaths of precious babies and old friends and romantic notions, lost mothers and wandering husbands.”

“Alright, alright,” Greg says, turning his back to Heather and sighing heavily. “Women have it bad. All I wanted to know was why women cry so easily. Now can we sleep?”

“No, Greg,” Heather answers, sitting up as if doing so will make her point stronger. “Women don’t have it so bad, at least no worse than men. It’s just that they let the pain out differently, that’s all. And when women’s pain flows, it’s with the force of a swollen river.”

“Oh,” Greg murmurs once more, his shoulders already rising and falling rhythmically. But men are dams, Heather tells herself as she considers each pore and freckle on Greg’s left shoulder, his back turned to her in a block of resolve she knows she can’t soften. He is still angry with her, angry with his life. She learned from her own father how men learn to hold back the tonnage of their disillusionment, insatiable ambitions, dissatisfied wives, children who are too much like their mothers, aging fathers whose expressions reveal distinct disappointment in who their sons have become, and attractive women who can’t see behind a man’s beer belly and stained neck tie to the sexual commando who lives within. When the dam breaks, as it must every now and then, internal construction crews go to work 24-7 to repair the damage, a busy press compiling the necessary public announcements to explain the momentary lapse in stability.
Heather settles back under the covers and takes a deep cleansing breath. She understands that the differences between men and women are slight at most but, when Greg is upset about something as he is now, she can see in his clenched jaw that he would sooner walk out the door forever than let her see him with tears in his eyes. So she lets him turn from her, keeping her knees curled up into the bend behind his knees, her pubic hair nestled up next to the cheeks of his buttocks. She gathers the sheets around her shoulders, holding him close to her, and considers her own unspent tears, the despair she never allowed herself when she was fat.

Heather hadn’t always been fat, but her father had made her believe she was, calling her a *cochina* if she asked for a second helping at dinner and by telling her that those weren’t breasts growing on her chest but fat pockets just like her full cheeks and round bottom. He kept his own dam strong, fortified against any leaks of humanity, with his rage. The way he lashed his leather belt, listening for just the right *whack* as it made contact with her bare buttocks, and the way he swung his right arm from across his chest, and the force with which the back of his large sinewy hand met with her tender jaw, these things gave him the release he needed when disappointment threatened the mammoth power of his solitary being. Men are always alone, incomprehensibly alone, Heather believed, and that is what makes them different from women.

Heather lies next to Greg, breathing ever so slowly so as to not create any more space between them than was already there, she imagined herself just two years earlier, a full 300 pounds of angry and lonely female flesh, every minute of her day a numb attempt to resist her insatiable hunger. Eating and masturbating were her only escape from the realities of her life, a routine of eating, working, drinking, smoking, and sleeping that only ended in order to begin again the next day.

“So what if I get fatter every day?” she would grumble as she dug deep into the sour cream dip with a tortilla chip, swallowing each mouthful with a deep pull on the brown bottled beer that had become her primary sustenance.

“So what if I am always alone?” she would tell the television as she memorized the tight thighs and pointed breasts of Baywatch. As if defying her longing for a Baywatch body, she would punch the number to the pizza joint down the street with a deliberate force as if it was the fault of the phone that she was dialing the number, using the eraser end of a pencil that read “I lost 50 pounds! Ask me how! 792-7433.”
The full moon outside creates a bright light in the bedroom Heather and Greg share every other weekend when she can get away for a day or two. She listens to his slow easy breathing and thinks of the many nights she spent alone, the years before she met Greg, when she had considered herself invisible.

Men had always ignored her and she was only comfortable with her students, high school kids with other things on their minds than the size and shape of the middle-aged parental figure who stands over them, droning in monotone for an hour a day. She prepared lessons with passion and enthusiasm for both her material and her dedication to opening their minds. She spoke of conspiracies against the common man, the worker ants she called them, and she appealed to their adolescent sense of right and wrong, sometimes actually reaching them—as she could see in epiphanic expressions which lit otherwise clouded eyes. On those days, Heather went home feeling the miracle of personal destiny, believing that she had indeed found her calling. She would eat lightly, a salad with julienned cheddar cheese and ham, with Roquefort dressing and bacon bits sprinkled liberally on top, feeling the resolve to get in shape and live again.

But most days were epiphany-free and the emptiness of her life sent her from the front door straight to the refrigerator where a wide variety of microbrewery beers awaited her, her friends for life. Heather’s brother-in-law had told her that you drink less when you drink the stronger-flavored beers, so she took to buying Bass ale and other dark chocolate-like beers whose creamy foam heads made her feel like she was dipping into an ice-cream sundae. And this somehow made her feel superior to other fat women who couldn’t drive by the Dairy Queen without stopping for a Butterfinger Blizzard. Heather’s consumption was private and elevated in a way that only she could define, but it brought her comfort to know that slim women and men weren’t watching her eat while thinking to themselves that she wouldn’t be so fat if she had some self-discipline.

Late at night, her head swimming with the buzz of carbohydrate binges and blood alcohol, Heather often stumbled to bed and imagined lying with a lover, one who would reach out in the darkness to cup her breasts in his strong and loving hands. She pinched her nipples, hard, between her thumb and forefinger and imagined his mouth on hers, sucking on her lips and dancing with her tongue before travelling down to her erect nipples, his fingers probing between her legs to that warm wetness that never went away, no matter how long she waited to touch herself. In those days, she didn’t even need the vibrator to get off.
But then things changed. She noticed the change first when the wetness was slower to come, when orgasms became more elusive, when the texture of her skin lost its fullness, when her breasts began to droop, and when lines began to shadow her features. She began to hate what she saw in her bedroom mirror, seeing only the rolls of thick skin that encased her arms and thighs and belly. Her hair turned gray and age spots appeared on her face where acne had stubbornly refused to leave gracefully. And it took the vibrator to get off, her imagination and fingers no longer enough to reach that deep dark place inside that would not let her sleep without some release. She was getting old, going into menopause, and she had spent her entire sexual prime alone and she was suddenly desperate to change her life.

After years of dieting, years of manic exercise and daily denial, years of Scotch and water no beer, years of lean chicken and vinegar salads, cottage cheese and dry flakes of tuna that stuck in her throat unless she swallowed mouthfuls with thirsty gulps of bottled water or Diet 7-Up, she was finally getting thin. And here she was, not entirely who she wanted to be yet but lying in bed with the lover she had dreamed of for so many years, a tall slim man with gentle eyes and strong hands that would never be raised against her even in frustration or confusion. A man whose dam was well-built and strong enough to bear not only his own pain but hers. He had listened to her, held her in his arms as she wept, the depths of her wounds going to earliest childhood where her father's words had left keloided scars in jagged Xs that she could not hide. But something was wrong, in spite of his willingness to hold her, something deep and dark she could not understand, something she could not help but believe was her fault.

Maybe it was his ideal of feminine beauty from the time he was a teenager—impossibly thin women, women whose breasts disappeared behind A-cup bras and whose hips jut in hard corners through skirts that hang like nothing Heather has ever worn. Heather had cried then, saying he had no idea how hard it had been for her to lose all that weight, that he had no idea how hard it would be for her to lose as much as he wanted her to lose.

"I will never be thin!" she had shouted at him, accusing him of being part of the problem, the meanness of a society that defined beauty by unreasonable standards, looking for pencil-thin women who starved themselves in order to be thin. And he had held her in his arms, her chest heaving with sobs that came from years of grief, a thousand rejections by men who could only see her bloated body and not the beautiful human being inside. She had recently slapped a man across the face, a friend who had always treated her kindly if only as "one of the guys," but who had made the mistake of saying, "Keep on losing weight and you'll have me knocking on your door!"
Or maybe it had started when Greg told her of his accordion teacher, the woman with large breasts who always wore dresses with plunging necklines, and how she was always putting those breasts in his face, close enough for him to smell the perfumed powder she sprinkled there, just like his mother did every morning.

“They reminded me of two fat buttocks pressed close together—like a plumber’s crack,” he had said. He found breasts revolting in a way that he could not explain. And Heather had scrambled to remember if she had ever worn anything that showed the cleavage between her breasts. They were still full, in spite of the weight loss and she wanted to tell him how much smaller they were than two years ago when the only place she could buy bras was in the misses foundation department at Sears, ugly cotton bras with as many as four or five snaps on the wide strap that held everything firmly in place. She sighed as she remembered telling herself in the mirror that her breasts were her best feature. There they were, full and round and begging for attention that he would never give.

But there were other things, the way he could not get an erection unless she followed a certain routine, a set of instructions to do this, do that, and then do this, no, more softly there, no, more firmly now, faster, harder now, come on, don’t stop! All the while, he lay flat on his back with his eyes closed tightly against any distractions. “Can you move away a little?” he might whisper, his breaths growing ragged. “Your breast is rubbing against my arm—distracts me.” And she would wonder if there was any part of her that turned him on, her voice or her smell if nothing else. And she imagined leaving her hand behind for him to enjoy in privacy.

After she brought him to orgasm, she would lie with him for awhile, waiting for him to want to satisfy her. She knew how to do it herself, after all, that is all she had for so many years, which is exactly why she wanted it to be him not her. So many times he would put his hand between her legs, rubbing distractedly, saying he was tired, couldn’t this wait for another time?

Last night, their first time together in two weeks, he had turned her away again and she was beginning to feel angry. She remembered the night before, the way she had been aching for him every mile of the drive between his house and hers, imagining how good it would feel to have his arms around her, to feel the hair of his chest on her bare breasts, to have him enter her slowly and with a hard-on she didn’t have to create. When she had arrived, it was some time after nine. He had hugged her tight and told her how much he missed her, that he had stopped masturbating when they were apart so that he would be able to give her more. He sensed her disappointment in their sex together, admitted that it was less than satisfactory for him as well.
although he reminded her often that she put too much pressure on him, that she shouldn’t insist on penetration. It just wasn’t something he needed, he said, and she said that it was okay.

It was only ten when they finally crawled into bed together but he had refused her advances, telling her to hold on, wait for the morning when he would have more energy, when he would be rested. “Let’s sleep, just be together for the night, okay?” he had pleaded with her in response to her quizzical expression when he had climbed into bed wearing not only boxers but a t-shirt, which she recognized immediately as a wall between them.

And after he turned over to sleep, she had cried. The tears began deep in her throat where she could feel them threatening to burst from her the way water spurts from cracks in a rubber hose—in every which direction. The tightness in her throat was strong and she swallowed hard to send the flood back, back into that deep well of loneliness she had drowned in for so many years. It wouldn’t do any good to let him see her crying, she told herself, imagining the hurt in his eyes as he realized he was causing her pain. It was just a postponement, just a few hours of sleep, she told herself, and then he would be there for her, for both of them. And so she kept the levies raised as high as they could go and let only a small stream slide over the edge, knowing any more than this would create a torrent of tears she could not control.

Heather had waited until she heard Greg’s familiar sleeping rhythm of breaths, waited until he was far away from her in a shadowed dreamland he loved but which she could not begin to imagine. Then she slipped out of bed, slowly moving her arm away from his body before sliding away from him, backing out of the bed with as little movement as possible. She felt her way in the thick darkness of the night to the bathroom, stepping gingerly, an Indian with all her senses turned on. The cool linoleum on her feet felt good and she considered sitting on the floor to cool the pulsing heat between her legs. Instead she sat on the toilet and let the stream of urine wash away the wetness between her legs.

She sat, considering the possibility of masturbating, telling herself she would still be ready for him in the morning, but she resisted as she imagined the ecstasy, the intensity of being with him after waiting so long. She sat awhile longer, staring at the delicate pattern in the linoleum, a strangely feminine design of soft pink flowers and blue lines, almost too small to see when standing up but somehow captivating at this distance from where she sat on the toilet.

Finally resigned to waiting for morning, Heather had returned to the bed and slipped in as quietly as she had left. Greg’s breathing continued without interruption and she sighed to think how safe he must feel with her. She closed her eyes and tried to imagine them in twenty years,
still together, making love in the morning because that is the way he likes it, and she wondered if she would be able to live without sex the way she had known it before Greg, back when she was young and still attractive to men.

The morning came with a harsh light, a bright Iowa sun that heated up the mobile home like a tin can left sitting on the sidewalk at noon. And as the light streamed through the cheap plastic blinds and into Heather’s eyes, she sensed a growing resentment that she could not understand. Still, she tried to put it out of her mind by reaching out to Greg’s morning erection. She turned towards him and massaged him the way he had taught her, felt him stir under her hand and moan softly in his sleep. He was responding to her but he didn’t know it and she wondered if she dared to climb up on top of him. As she was considering the possibilities, Greg opened his eyes and asked her if she could reach the baby oil.

“Yeah, but are you sure that’s where you want to go already? Can’t we play for awhile?” she had asked, knowing that the baby oil was for her to spread on her hands, making it easier for her to bring him to orgasm.

“Come on, Heather, you started this. Don’t you want to satisfy me?”

“Of course I do,” she had answered. And then, without thinking, she had added, “Don’t you want to satisfy me?”

Immediately she could see her mistake, the darkness that passed through his eyes as if he had suddenly retreated deep into a cave of personal despair. “Are you saying that I don’t satisfy you? Is that what you are saying? The truth is, you never give me a chance! Have you ever considered that you just might be insatiable? That you are so needy you drive everyone away from you?” His eyes were staring into hers, the intensity of his words hurting less than the coldness in his eyes.

“I do?” Heather had whispered, knowing in her heart that it was the truth, knowing that somehow she had driven away everyone who had ever loved her, her father, her husband, old boyfriends, knowing that there was some reason why she had always been alone and it wasn’t because she was fat. It was because she was insatiable, never satisfied with anything, even the love of this man who had taken her into his arms even before she had reached her goal weight, even though she was still fat. “I do, you’re right. I’m sorry,” she had gurgled, the tears flowing unimpeded now.

“Yes, you do. So stop crying. It won’t change anything.” He had clenched his jaw tightly, looking at her as if he had never seen her before, before he rolled over, turning his back to her and
pulling the covers under his arms and up to his chin, leaving only his shoulders and head in the shadows that fell across the bedspread.

"Why do you always do this?" he mumbled into his pillow.

As the morning light made its thin horizontal lines of shadow and light, the muted colors and bright reflections of the day spread out across Greg’s shoulders. Heather slid her arm under the covers and around his waist so she could lay her hand on his chest, a place where, if she was very quiet, she could feel his heart beating.

"I’m sorry," she whispered again.

And when the levy finally broke, the tears unstoppable, Heather considered her life, a half-life spent obsessing about filling a phantom emptiness neither food nor sex could satisfy. She let the tears soak into the pillow and he kept his back to her as she wept. When she finished, she sighed heavily and he moved his hand over hers in silent acknowledgement. Soon, his breathing told her that he was sleeping and she pulled away from him, sliding backwards out of the bed once more.

This time she would relieve herself, she thought to herself, considering the travel vibrator in her overnight bag, recognizing the futility of human desire. But this was the last time. She could learn to live without sex, just like she had learned to live without food. If she could only learn to be less demanding, then, maybe, she would finally be happy.
"Sex is never free, Rick. But you knew that, didn’t you?"

"Oh, Susan!" Rick answers, pulling the hairs on his arm one by one, trying to decide what the right thing is to say at a time like this.

"No, it’s true, though," she sighs as she wipes the spaghetti off the plate with soapy fingers. It slides into the wastebin with a wet thud. "Some men think they can sleep with a woman and then dismiss her like a good waitress at the coffee shop—with a pat on the butt and a small tip. But not me."

Earlier that day, when Rick had gotten out of bed feeling slightly battered and bruised but satisfied as well, he was surprised to see Susan in the kitchen moving methodically through the last week’s worth of Fiesta ware plates, now stacked high on one side of the double porcelain sink. The trademark aquas, tangerines, lemon yellows, and mint greens reflected the blinding morning sun straight into his aching eyes.

Rick watched her in dull wonder. "You know, you don’t need to do the dishes," he said, trying to bend his mouth into some kind of smile. In spite of his splitting headache, a well-deserved hangover, he enjoyed the thought of clean dishes and an empty sink. "I meant to get to them a couple of days ago," he continued, "but it just didn’t seem important enough yet. I mean, I still have three or four plates left in the cupboard."

Susan laughed. "Bachelors! The way you live!"

Under other circumstances, Rick might have felt embarrassed, but even the night before when she had invited herself to his place for a drink, he didn’t take her seriously. He had laughed, told his brother Craig so long, thanked Susan for her company, and then proceeded to walk home. He thought he was alone with the moon and the crickets when lights appeared behind him, the roar of an engine slowing next to him.
“Wouldn’t you rather sit in the car? I’ll take you home,” Susan’s voice called from the dark car. He shook his head, waved her off.

“I won’t bite!” she said a block later, her voice a little higher pitched than before.

“No, really, I’m almost home. The air is good for me,” he answered.

“You’re really being silly about this,” she said, her voice squeaking with tension.

“Look, I’m home,” he told her as he turned onto his own driveway. “Thanks for the escort, Susan. I’ll see you around.”

But that wasn’t the end. By the time he found his keys, she was standing next to him at the front door, saying, “You are inviting me in for a drink, Rick, aren’t you?”

Even then he only expected them to have one drink, laugh a little, maybe kiss goodnight. But it was many drinks, strong ones, all made by Susan who insisted she was the only one who could get the right blend of rum and Coke, which was all that Rick had in his cupboard. He was bleary-eyed, spinning slightly, nearly stumbling when Susan took him by the hand and led him to his bedroom. He remembered thinking that she seemed to know exactly where it was. He was drunk, but not too drunk to notice that his heart was suddenly pounding with a fear he hadn’t sensed since high school when Betty finally let him take her in the back seat of her dad’s Pontiac. Thinking of Betty made him think of Meg again and he had a momentary pang, a slice of guilt across his chest. Then he reminded himself that Meg had left him, divorced him because he wasn’t ambitious enough, left him alone again. After the wedding, she had suddenly lost interest in sex, instead spending all her time decorating the house and spending money they didn’t yet have. He missed making love with Meg, but he wondered if she had ever really wanted him the way he had wanted her.

Susan was irresistible in her own way. She touched him without shyness, climbed up on top of him and demanded everything he had. Rick reveled in the differences between Meg and Susan and again began to ask himself why she had even married him. If it hadn’t been for Craig, he would have spent tonight like every other night, alone, too depressed to even leave the house at night, much less to put himself “out there” as Craig had been telling him for weeks now. When Craig came by the office insisting that Rick buy him a drink at the Manhattan, it was hard to resist.
“Come on, Rick! It wasn’t too long ago you had me out on the town celebrating your promotion, remember? Now that I work for the city, too, you have to be there for me as I claw my way up the bureaucratic ladder.”

“Yeah, you’re right, sucker!” Rick laughed. They skipped dinner and walked from the office to the Manhattan across the street from City Hall. When the two men walked in, Craig surveyed the crowd but Rick headed straight for the bar to order a pitcher. Craig glanced at Susan, a smallish but shapely woman with flashing eyes and fast-moving hands that kept up with her words.

“What a dead place this is for a Friday night!” she said to her friends, but loud enough for Craig to hear. “Not to mention the lack of potential in the male community,” she added, giving Craig a sidelong look.

“Susan,” her friend fairly shouted, her voice drenched in alcohol. “Don’t be so quick to judge. There’s a couple of your types—attorneys! District attorneys, so probably not rich, but probably better off than anyone else in town.” Susan barely checked her makeup and hair before she made a beeline for the bar where Rick was already pouring foaming beer into their mugs. Craig saw the bartender’s eyes narrow as Susan approached the Formica slab bar.

“Hey, Plumb, right?” Rick said, extending his hand to Susan, embarrassed at not being able to remember her first name. They had met back a couple weeks earlier, so at least she was familiar.

“Susan! Susan!” she chided him. “Don’t you know better than to call a woman by her last name?” Susan smiled broadly at both men, showing a row of pretty little white teeth and flashing her sparkling fingers in front of their faces. *No wedding ring,* Rick noticed, wondering if Susan’s flourish was intentional.

When she put her hand into Rick’s, he started to give it the traditional squeeze until she tickled his palm with her middle finger. Her other arm moved smoothly behind him where she began to massage his shoulders. Startled, Rick pulled away and looked at Susan closely.

Susan laughed. “Oh, Rick! You are so funny! And so tense,” she added, lowering her voice and giving him a knowing look. “Isn’t he tense?” she said to Craig before returning to Rick’s confused expression.

“Here, let me loosen you up!” she said as she brought her other hand up behind him to begin a two-handed massage that went from his shoulders all the way down to his waist. He
shivered when her hands reached his kidneys, almost imperceptibly, but Susan noticed and laughed, giving him a harder squeeze.

Craig watched silently, grinning his practiced lawyer smile at Susan before speaking.

“My name is Craig,” he drawled. “And how do you know my weird brother?” Craig settled back into the barstool to enjoy the show, his fingers curled around the mug of beer in his hand.

“Nice to meet you Craig. I’m Susan Plumb, a member of the Board of Education here in town and I had the honor of interviewing Mr. Sizemore last week.”

“You applying for a job with the school district now, Rick? What’s up with that?”

“No, I—” Rick started to answer, but then Susan stepped in.

“No, it’s just that we needed to know a little bit about him before he could be allowed to advise the board on a very hush-hush issue.” At this point, she stopped massaging Rick’s shoulders so she could pull up another stool. She squeezed halfway in between the two friends, leaving part of the stool in the aisle. “And he did very well,” she murmured confidentially into his ear, but loud enough for Craig to hear.

“Did he?” Craig asked, getting into the game. “He’s always done very well when it comes to bullshitting, I have to admit. Couldn’t have gotten through law school without that skill... and his baby blues, of course.”

“Ooooooh, I just love blue eyes. Do you have blue eyes, Rick? I never noticed that before!” Susan was gushing and Rick was starting to come to life again.

“Well, you’ve only met me once before, Susan,” he said, stuttering slightly, but gaining strength with every word. “And it wasn’t even a personal conversation. Honestly, Craig, I don’t know this woman.”

“Sure you know me, Rick! I’m your new best friend. Why don’t you buy me a drink, old buddy?” Susan’s smile was relentless and even Craig found himself smiling back at her in spite of himself.

“Come on, Rick, buy the lady a drink. What are you drinking, ma’am?”

“First of all, you don’t call a woman ma’am unless you’re working for her or she’s as old as your mother,” Susan told Craig, looking him at him with without the slightest hint of a smile in her eyes or on her mouth. Then she smiled brightly again as if nothing had passed between them.
“I think I’ll have Bombay on the rocks,” she announced, as if ordering a drink was the unfolding of an adventure. “Yes, that’s what I’ll have. Yoo-hoo, bartender?” She waved to the bartender who had stopped watching Susan to chat with Susan’s abandoned friend.

When the bartender arrived, dog-faced and red-nosed, he looked expectantly at the three customers. “Yeah? What can I get you? Another pitcher?” Rick looked at Craig, Craig looked at Susan, and then they all looked at the bartender.

After a few seconds of silence, it was clear that Susan was not going to order her own drink. Rick finally spoke. “She’ll have a Bombay on the rocks. And sure, we’ll have another pitcher.”

Just as the man started to turn away, Susan stopped him. “No wait! Hold on to that order for just a minute, will you, Benny? Now, Rick, Craig, don’t tell me you’re going to make a lady drink alone? That isn’t polite.” She put one hand on Rick’s lap and the other on Craig’s before looking into Craig’s eyes with puppy dog eyes that were warm enough to make him forget the look she had just given him when he called her “ma’am.”

“We are drinking. We’re drinking beer,” Craig answered, his turn to be flustered.

“Ha! That’s not drinking! That’s teenage stuff. Have a real drink with me. You can handle a real drink, can’t you? Couple of grown men like you?” She squeezed each man’s thigh with her tiny hands, her jeweled fingers and painted nails reflecting in the dim light.

The next morning, Rick watched Susan dry the bachelor stack of dishes while he sat at the kitchen table munching on the buttered toast she put on a plate in front of him.

“You’ve got to eat something if you want to take aspirin for that headache,” she told him when he reached into the cupboard for the bottle of Bufferin. “Sit. I’ll get it for you.”

Wait ‘til Craig hears about this, he told himself as he sank gratefully into the padded chair. Craig would never believe the night he had just had. Craig could use a night of his own, but he always has an excuse—too busy working or complaining that women aren’t attracted to him because of his weight. So, instead, he stays home, rents movies, drinks gallons of Coke and orders pizza to be delivered every other night. He alternates with Chinese food, which he doesn’t like as much, but it’s the only other delivery food available. His first preference for dinner is steak—big fat juicy hunks of animal flesh, seared black on the outside and pulsing with red juices on the inside. But unless Rick is willing to go with him, he stays at home and does “the usual.”
with the sitcoms.

“Whatcha doin’, Craig?” Rick will ask each time he calls.

“The usual,” Craig always answers, meaning pizza or kung pao and *Friends*. Or *Seinfeld*. Or *Party of Five*. Craig pretends his only interest in television is to fill the hours between work and sleep, but Rick doesn’t believe it. He suspects that Craig watches television to imagine what his life will be like when he finally meets Ms. Right. The two of them, Craig and his Dream Woman, will have friends who come over to talk or argue politics and eat, because that is what Craig likes to do. And Rick hopes that Ms. Right does come along for Craig, even though he doesn’t think there’s much chance she’ll be able to find him if he refuses to leave the house after 6:00 pm when the *Seinfeld* reruns start.

“The truth is,” Rick had told his friends at work, “I enjoy hanging out with Craig. What’s wrong with a couple of guys who don’t chase women?” On a good night, they rented videos, ordered pizza from Straw Hat, and drank beer until one or the other passed out. On a bad night they just drank. But no one, not Craig and not one of Rick’s friends, thinks that Rick can be happy hanging out without a woman at his side.

“Jesus, your neighbors get started early on Saturday mornings! What if someone wanted to sleep in?” Susan shouted.

“I don’t know,” Rick answered, wondering if the question needed an answer.

“You know what you need, Rick?” Susan shouted again, raising her voice high enough to carry into the next town.

“I’m afraid to ask, Susan,” he answered, “What do I need?” A woman, he imagines her answering back, a job she seems willing to fill.

“A maid! Don’t you ever clean this place? I’ll do it this week, just to get you on track—I’ve got some free time so I’d be happy to help you out today. But then I want you to call a woman I know. She cleans houses for all the southwest neighborhood families, you know, the better families, so to speak. But if you give me your house key, I can let her in and tell her what she needs to do each week.”

“Uh, I don’t know, Susan. Let me think about it,” Rick answered, the toast suddenly sticking in his throat. *A housekeeper?* he thought to himself. *What do I need a housekeeper for? It’s only me here. She just wants a key.*

“Don’t think too long about it, Rick! What are you afraid of, living right?”
Rick shook his head, refusing to answer, rubbing his temples.

"You’ll see," Susan continued, as if he has already agreed. "It will make such a difference. There we are now, all done with the dishes! Now I can cook dinner here tonight—you’d like that, wouldn’t you? What would you like? I do a great lasagna and pretty much the best chicken Parmesan you’ve ever had. Or I could make a big pot of spaghetti—oh, yeah! That would be good, especially the day after a hangover. And you look like you have a bad one, too, poor baby."

Rick stared at Susan, his mouth full of toast but not moving, trying to process everything that had happened, everything that just poured out of Susan’s mouth, all the plans she was making for him. She dried her hands on the kitchen towel Meg embroidered for her trousseau and Rick suddenly wished he were anywhere else but in this kitchen with this woman.

"Well, uh, I, uh, I kind of planned to have dinner with my brother tonight and, uh—" he stammered, not sure what exactly was the right thing to say. After all, he said to himself, I just spent the night with this woman, a night of extremely exciting sex. And not just exciting, but very welcome after the last two years of Meg’s rejection.

"Okay, so you had plans with your brother. No problem. Just invite Craig over here! I can cook for three, you know! I’m talented that way. Just call him up and tell him you’ve met the woman of your dreams and she’s cooking for you both." She looked expectantly at Rick as she took a long swallow from a glass of orange juice that was sitting on the counter.

"Woman of my dreams," Rick muttered, feeling foolish and trapped, as if he were caught in a summer tornado that was taking him higher and higher into the sky where the only escape was a long hard fall straight down to the ground.

"That’s right, Sweetie, woman of your dreams. You don’t know how lucky you are to have met me. Tell me the truth. You know that finger thing I did to you last night?" Susan slid into Rick’s lap, nuzzled his neck, and then ran her index finger up and down Rick’s chest, swirling around his belly button through his thin t-shirt. She slipped her tongue into his ear for just a second, just quickly enough to startle Rick again, the same way she had startled him again and again.

Rick smiled, embarrassed to remember the pleasure she had given him. He smelled alcohol on her breath and knew she was already drinking.

"Don’t tell me you were too drunk, Rick. You do remember, don’t you?" She looked into his eyes with a directness that made him wonder if anything embarrassed her.
“Oh, yeah, I remember. I remember,” he answered, imagining the sensation all over again in his memory of the night’s acrobatics and innovations.

“So, tell me the truth, has anyone ever done that for you before?” Susan’s fingers were running between his shirt and his pants now and he had no doubt that she could unsnap his jeans faster than even he could with a bladder full of beer and a toilet waiting for the stream.

Rick sighed, letting go of his inhibitions and sliding down in the seat slightly.

“I didn’t think so,” Susan answered her own question with a smile. “Now, sweetie, it’s Saturday, a good day to relax. Can I make you a drink? Say a Bloody Mary?”

By the time dinner was ready to serve, Susan had spent the day dragging Rick all over town: to the post office to pick up a package she was expecting, to the Hy-Vee for ground hamburger and plum tomatoes and garlic, and to the Manhattan to see if she had left her sweater there the night before.

“But we might as well have a drink while we’re here,” she argued when Rick said he would wait outside in the car for her. He looked at her, ready to disagree, but she put out her lower lip in a pout he wasn’t ready to deal with, so he released the seat belt and climbed out of the car with what he hoped was obvious resignation.

Once inside the dim-lit bar, Susan was smiling happily again. She had introduced him to several people, including her “best friends” Andrea and Anita, who she had not even said goodbye to the night before and Rick got the distinct feeling that he was being shown off. He tried to distance himself from Susan’s wandering hands, hands she could not keep off of his back or arms or legs, depending on whether they were standing or sitting.

We’ll have dinner and then I’ll tell her that I am not ready for anything serious at this point, Rick thought to himself as he watched Susan flit from one group of afternoon drunks to another. Rick was sure he recognized a few of her friends from the courthouse. Probably 502 violations, he told himself. But she’ll understand. After all, Meg’s only been gone a month and a half.

Try as he might, Rick could not imagine Susan accepting any kind of rejection gracefully. He stared at the Budweiser sign on the wall, a bright light and snow scene showing the entire team of Budweiser Clydesdale horses, their massive muscles rippling under the moving light. Still, she’ll have to accept it. She won’t have a choice, will she? I don’t owe her anything, after all...do I?
Dinner had been great, Rick had to admit. Susan was an excellent cook and Rick hadn’t had a real home-cooked meal for a long time. He watched her as she finished washing the spaghetti dishes, her back to him just like this morning.

“Nope, nothing is ever free, including sex,” Susan repeated. Rick watched her dry her hands on Meg’s tea towel again and remembered the sound of Craig’s voice right after dinner as he put on his coat and searched for his car keys.

“Thanks for a great spaghetti dinner, Susan,” Craig had called out from the front door where he was pulling on his gloves. Susan had made herself and Rick another drink and was getting comfortable on the couch with the TV remote.

Then, leaning close to Rick as if to kiss him goodnight, Craig had muttered under his breath: “You didn’t sleep with her, did you?” He looked up, and seeing Rick’s expression, added, “Oh, well.”

And as Craig had walked away from the house and into the darkness, Rick tried to shake the unmistakable feeling that iron bars were sprouting up along the edge of the yard, just outside his view where the light from the front porch ended and the neighborhood began.
Fingering two torn ticket stubs, Rachel imagined once again that cold New York City night when the wind whipped her hair against her face, the long strands stinging her cheeks and tangling in her mouth as she shouted for a taxi. Her fingers were numb in their worn gloves and she felt the cold seeping up through her shoes where the icy sidewalks threatened to toss her from her low-heeled flats and onto her well padded behind with a single misstep. Finally, a cabby stopped and she crawled into its womb of warmth and Arabic tabla rhythms.

Her lover was waiting for her at the theater, his collar pulled up high around his face and his hands dug deep into his coat pockets. She laughed aloud when she saw him, a Californian not at all adapted to the fierceness of weather or city crowds, his nose red and dripping, his mustache sprinkled with frozen drops. His breath burst from his mouth between excited strings of words describing his ride on the subway and the homeless man who had followed him down a small side street.

Rachel could remember his hard kiss, the feel of his chapped lips on hers, the way her heart raced when he first reached out to hold her hand, and the way her knees wobbled under her much later when his hands traveled across her chest in search of her breasts under several layers of winter clothing, but she could not remember his name.

Rachel’s life had begun in darkness, born in the middle of a brown-out brought on by a summer storm of hot winds and pounding rains that shut down air-conditioners and swamp coolers across the state. The midwife shouted for flashlights, candles, lit matches, anything that would shed light on the mysterious river of blood that flowed from between Rachel’s mother’s legs. She would not live to see the magnificent lights of the city brighten once more and it was Rachel’s piteous cries alone that greeted the dawn.
Now aged just twice her mother's lifetimes, Rachel faced her own final moments on a deathbed littered with the scraps of paper and tattered photographs of her life, these faded reminders of pleasurable moments in her life her only company as she watched the sun set across the city.

She watched out the window as a car passed by, the sound of laughter carrying across the streets and yards to Rachel's ears, and she reached for an old pill bottle, the name and prescription long since worn away, a bottle filled with grains of sand. As she emptied the sand into her deeply-creased palm, she could almost hear the laughter of her girlfriends at the end of each song they sang on the school bus as they headed for the beach on an eighth-grade field trip.

The hot sand burned the tender places between her toes, and the California sun warmed her skin. Rachel remembered well her slim tanned adolescent body and the mixed emotions she'd had about revealing herself in front of the boys in her class. Her suit had been the end result of hours of trying on her girlfriends' bathing suits, searching for the one that would give her budding breasts the subtle attention they deserved after so many years of anticipation. Rachel could remember exactly the black and white stripes of that two-piece bathing suit, her first time wearing one, and how self-conscious she had felt when the boys gathered to talk to Rachel and her friends. One boy in particular stayed by her side all day, shyly asking her easy questions: what grade are you in? who do you listen to? what's your favorite color? And yet she could barely breathe, much less give him her answers, and she spent the afternoon following her friends. Still, he stayed by her side and she knew he wanted to kiss her when they all gathered together to say goodbye and exchange phone numbers.

The salty air had made her skin sticky and by the end of the day her feet were blackened with the charcoal that littered the beach. Her hair hung in straggly ropes about her face and her glasses were foggy with salt and sea moisture, but she had never been so sure of her beauty. She walked away from him knowing she would never see him again but certain that someday someone else would love her the same way. As the years passed, Rachel's nose craved that distinct aroma of saltwater and fish and beach fires that always evoked mixed memories of that heart-racing infatuation with stinging jellyfish, slimy seaweed, and the cold shock of the ocean waves on bare toes wriggling in the smooth sand. It was a shining moment in an otherwise uncertain adolescence.

The old family clock in the living room began chiming the hour and Rachel counted the hours just as she had done since childhood. At the ninth chime, she sighed and reached for the
lamp on the bed stand. Its soft light made the room glow pink, a dimmed light Rachel often kept burning all night as she slept. Just as she was about to close her eyes, an old postcard lying forgotten in the pile of old loverletters and birthday cards and autographed programs caught Rachel’s eye. It was a picture of the Iowa State Fair.

She had been young, in her twenties then, and could barely remember what had inspired her to move to the Midwest, but she had never forgotten the long country drives she took whenever her heart was heavy. Her favorite time of year had been the late summer when the corn had already grown taller than her head, fed by constant rains, and the thunderstorms that startled her out of deep sleep and kept her awake with lightning flashes that lit the sky in bright white and blue and purple.

She was in awe of the tall stalks, growing side by side in impossibly straight and narrow rows of mathematical proportion which matched exactly the space between blades of the combine which would later strip the kernels of corn from the ear and leave the stalks crushed and mutilated in its wake. On humid nights when sleep was impossible, she walked along the rows and listened to the stalks creaking under the weight of those firmly wrapped ears, their leaves sharp as razors to unwary fingers.

She had reveled every spring as the rapid growth reminded her of time-lapse photography showing a rose bud and bloom before one’s eyes. And she had relished the fall when the green lushness fell away to brown brittleness, the dried stalks and ears giving way to the bright yellow combine with its ripping, slicing, and separating actions working to shear the Iowa landscape of its once beautiful blanket of green.

Rachel had left the Midwest friendless, just as she had arrived, her misguided search for peace of mind in a physical locale doomed from the very start, but she had learned to love the land in a way she had never known before and, years later, she often dreamt of corn stalks waving in gentle formation across the plains.

As Rachel considered her final hours on this vast planet she had only begun to explore in her youth, she realized that there were so many moments in time that had allowed to her to get up each morning, to face the lonely years. More than the places she had been and the lovers she had known, Rachel had savored singular moments of joy whose memory could set her heart pounding once again. The sight of an infant suckling at the breast, adoring eyes looking deep into his mother’s eyes, tiny hands placed open-palmed on her face in silent communion. The sound of the wedding march and the blushing moment when the bride turns with her husband to face the
applauding guests. The first hint of green that glows softly from the tips of tree branches after months of winter’s barren claws scratching at the sky and the birds that suddenly reappeared to sing their spring songs. The smell of rain on summer nights in the desert when dry earth and the skies meet in a cinnamon marriage that permeates every room in the house, a sense of hope for greener grass and wildly blooming bougainvillea on the vine.

In the deep hours of the now blackened night, knowing that she would not see the dawn, Rachel smoothed the sheets with her bony hands and saw her father’s hands in her own. They weren’t wrinkled but rather defined, the bones and sinews standing out sharply like a topographical map of the human physiology just below the skin. Rachel looked at her hands and recalled a singular moment of pure happiness, a sunny day 40 years past when her father had called her to him and placed her gently on his lap.

_Daddy hadn’t spoken, just held his hand out to her, waited for her to take it in hers. There were tears in his eyes and Rachel had wiped them with her toddler’s chubby hands before rubbing her own cheeks against the sticky whiskers that poked out from all around his whiskey-stained mouth. As the tears streamed down his sallow face, he held her tight, tighter than she had ever been held, and she knew that he was leaving. She looked deep into his eyes, trying to see everything that was hidden behind them, trying to memorize the blue of his irises, the exact brown of his wavy hair, the crinkly sound of his ironed and starched shirt with its tiny little pearl-like buttons that she used to snip from the sleeves so that she could sew them to her dolls dresses. She leaned her face in close to his neck and breathed in his scent, a clean kind of man’s smell that she would remember years later as she kissed another man goodbye, one she had loved but not enough. And she snuggled in close to him, putting her arms around him and feeling his arms close around her, hearing his heart pounding in his chest next to her ear. The next day he was gone but Rachel had comforted herself with that moment of love and affection for the many hard years that followed._

Rachel knew that she would be alone when the sun began its ascent in the eastern sky, her cold body finally absent of life. It didn’t matter to her that no one would discover her until several days later when the acrid scent of her forgotten flesh might waft through the window she had propped open so she could watch the stars one last time. She was at peace here and now, in the shadowed theater of her life. Darkness had always been her time, a time often left to the lonely souls whose dreams play like Technicolor movies on the shadowed walls of the mind’s eye.
And an Asteroid Came Crashing Into the Earth

Jane was sick to death of stories that ended in near catastrophe. If it wasn’t nuclear blasts, it was pestilence, flood or giant crustaceans. The endings always showed man facing nearly unbeatable odds, either as a result of his own stupidity or by some fluke of Nature, as if he were doomed to extinguishing himself no matter what he did. Jane was in the mood for a simple story with a nice beginning and a happy ending, having recently arrived at the conclusion that life was difficult enough without constant reminders of the utter hopelessness of human life constantly cropping up in the stories people read to escape reality.

She scanned her living room, wall-to-wall books that had accumulated over the years, some in geometric columns rising several feet from the floor and most in floor-to-ceiling bookcases lining the walls of the large space she spent her days in. Others, lesser members of the community, were stuffed into dusty corners under tables and behind couches and next to the windows where their relative lack of value was marked by coffee rings and fallen ashes next to tar-stained ashtrays.

As Jane reviewed the great literature of her life and education, she considered that perhaps satisfying resolutions to human strife had never been as important to man as they were in these times. At least in the past everyone believed in a tomorrow, whereas relentless cynicism had become a part of the national character in present times.

Scratching her head distractedly, Jane smoothed her wild gray hairs into place in a practiced motion before settling down into the easy chair that had molded itself to her round hips and shoulders. Then, suddenly lurching from her chair, she began pacing across the room and back again like a swimmer making laps. As she paced, she chewed on her cuticles like chicken on the bone. Finally, she stopped mid-step and placed her hands on her hips with new determination.

“I will start a new genre,” she proclaimed to the great authors who stood silently listening, waiting for their pages to be opened once again. Kafka, Dostoevsky, and Waller shook their collective heads in pity as Jane sat once more in the easy chair. She pulled the typing table
toward her and the dusty Smith Corona whirred to life as Jane pushed the on switch. She reached for a fresh sheet of paper.

Aligning the paper on the platen and rolling the paper down into the machine, Jane paused for a moment in seeming homage to a stuffed raven mounted on the wall. “I know you would not understand this, Edgar, but it must be done. Mankind depends on me,” she muttered, her mind already writing the first words.

With a determined narrowing of her eyes matched exactly by the angling of her shoulders and elbows in their command of the blue two-tone electric typewriter, Jane assumed the supplicating posture of the penitent and began to type. She paused rarely, stopping only to look sharply around the room for the ghosts of her teachers who might be lurking in the shadowed corners, watching for the sentence fragments and subject-verb disagreements that often appeared unbidden on her pages.

“Will you never leave me in peace?” she demanded of the spirits that haunted her. “I have a higher purpose now! You must allow the spirit of my words to supersede the mechanical conventions of man’s linguistic inventions!” She returned to her typing once more, sighing as if having been released of at least those editing concerns.

“Yes,” she breathed some time later. “This one will have a happy ending! There will be no meteors showering the planet with radioactive debris, no acid rain burning the skin from innocent children’s bodies, not even one minor setback in mankind’s search for peace. Hope will reign! There will be no broken hearts left unmended, no tears left unsoothed. Surely, it is time.”

The walls reverberated with her voice before she set to clicking and clacking at the keyboard with her arthritic and bony fingers with a zeal she hadn’t felt in years.

“Yes!” she cried out, days later as she pulled the last page out of the machine, spinning the platen in a zipper-rip of ecstasy.

Just then, she heard a rumbling in the air and the ground beneath her began to vibrate. She walked to the window to see what kind of passing vehicle could shake the earth so. No cars, no trucks, not even any children were in the street. Jane looked up, wondering if a plane was passing overhead, and saw only a ball of flame growing larger and closer by the second. It looked as if it were coming straight at her.