From the desert

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From the Desert

by

Katherine Sichi

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
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I have been told that I have a distinctive style often enough to make me believe it. I don't think much about my style. I think a great deal about other writers' styles. There are strange contradictions in what I do and do not like. I enjoy Faulkner immensely. His long, dense sentences pull me along. I feel as though I am underwater, in a strong current, yet safe. I do not like Proust. I don't know why, but I begin to feel frustrated by all those words. "What is this junk?" I ask. "Let's go somewhere, for Christ's sake," I demand. And then I don't finish the novel. My style feels as though it is so much a part of putting the words on the paper, holding the pen and moving it along the line, that it is organic, automatic. Like digesting food. I do know, from others' comments, that it is lean prose. And I know that when I hear that comment I feel just fine.

These stories are all set in the Arizona-Sonora Desert. I grew up in the desert and have missed it terribly these past two years. The desert has always felt very clean to me. By "clean" I do not mean sanitary or tidy. I mean unused.
"Becoming a Granddaughter" is about a young girl learning how to love herself and her grandmother. It is about assessing the past in respect to the present. It is about physical and emotional abandonment. It is about the strange overlap of belief and knowledge. It is about connections between women. I like this story. Palmer and Montana are good people. I will do an entire book narrated by Palmer.

I think of myself entirely as a fiction writer, but about once every three years a poem happens to me. I am completely passive in the process, it never fails to startle me, and I am always so taken aback that I am unable to consider revision. "Before the Divorce" happened last spring. I tried to turn it into a short story and failed miserably. Any poems with my name attached to them are gifts from some strange source. And though I do sign my name to this poem, I think of it as to me, rather than from me. I honestly have no notion of the poem's quality as poetry. I like the subject, it seems to fit with the rest of the work, and so it is included.

I don't like the characters in "Glossy." I don't like their treadmill lives and I'm glad the story ended as soon as it did. Jane Smiley once suggested that I just keep going through the plot, through the night, through some
change in Juanita. I decided that I didn't like Juanita enough to stick it out for a change. This is not to say that I don't like the story. I do. I like its sharpness. "Glossy" feels like a cube with razor-sharp corners.

"Testimonial," like the other stories, is about some sort of abandonment. But this woman (she has never told me her name) left herself and, then, found herself. Some of my stories come from "visions." I don't like the word "visions" because its quasi-religious/metaphysical connotations irritate me. But "epiphany" is worse (despite Proust) and I have grudgingly come to call these experiences "visions." Sometimes they come as music, sometimes as dialogue, sometimes as a list of words, sometimes as a complete filmstrip running through my mind. They often come to me while I am in the middle of washing the dishes or reaching for my toothbrush. "Testimonial" began with the streetlight over the phone booth in the desert night.

"Bedtime Prayers" is taken directly from Lee Poague's character and Dennis Baeyen's second grade spelling bee. Lee and I talked about religion and he said, "After my babies were born, I found myself talking God-talk and believing it." And Dennis told me about the incongruity of winning a bottle of holy water as first prize in a spelling bee. My vision was in realizing that the two, Lee's faith and Dennis' skepticism, were the same.
The stories are ordered in this way because there seems to be some development in the characters; not in age, though the first two pieces are narrated by the youngest characters, but in understanding. Juanita and Thomas, in "Glossy," do not understand themselves or their relationship. And although they are unhappy, they are unwilling to change themselves or their world. The unnamed narrator of "Testimonial" does change. And David in "Bedtime Prayers" begins to ask questions of the world that he had not thought of asking before.

I am a feminist. By this I mean that I live as closely connected to a feminist philosophy as I can. I write stories. I teach Women's Studies. I often remind myself that writing is a form of activism and, therefore, that I am not immoral. After people tell me I have a distinctive style, they sometimes mumble something about a "moral vision." I do not feel just fine when I hear that comment. I'm not sure why. I hope that first, always, I tell a story well and that I respect my readers as intelligent, thoughtful people. Then, if there is some moral lesson (and I question that), that it is not insulting, or obvious, or unethical.
I believe that Montana and Henry, my grandparents, were painting the upstairs bathroom pale yellow the day he died. They'd found a hole in the plaster that, somehow, had been missed and Henry had gone downstairs to get the tin of spackle. She was absorbed in painting the trim around the door and it was some time before she realized that he had been gone far longer than necessary. She carried the paint brush in her search.

On the first floor she called, "Henry?" and then went to the basement stairs. The light was on, but even then, the room was dim. When she got halfway down the steps, she could, by stooping over, look around the basement. "Henry?"

She saw him, then, stretched out on the sofa. That sofa had been down there, against the west wall, for the better part of fifteen years and smelled of mold. Montana held onto the railing and peered through dim light at her husband.

She couldn't think of a word right then to describe the wrongness. Paint dripped onto her hand.

She loosened her grip on the railing, began her way down those last steps, and was afraid that in her search for Henry, she had daubed the house with paint.
Across the room, looking down at his white, but still thick hair, down his forehead, closed eyes, round cheeks, and to his blue lips, she knew, then, what the word was.

She has her first heart attack at our house. I am in the kitchen, making my breakfast. It is Saturday. Dan, my father, is down at the Red Sands. Montana is vacuuming the living room. She started running the vacuum because she wanted me to get out of bed. My sleeping late on weekends bothers her and she soothes the irritation by cleaning house as loudly as possible.

Since Montana came to live with us, she has almost completely taken over the housekeeping. She cleans house while I am in school and on Saturdays. She does not keep it as clean as I did.

My habit of leaving my school books on the floor beside the front door does not upset her. I don't bother to stack the books--it is just a jumbled pile. I expected her to suggest that I stack them or take them to my room.

The vacuum is roaring in the living room. We have one of those big uprights that motels use--they're indestructable.
The arrangements after Henry's death were surprisingly easy. Always thorough, he kept his will up-to-date and left, in their safety deposit box, a detailed list of Montana's rights, assets and options.

Montana had remained stubbornly ignorant of the family finances, refusing even to balance the checkbook. She was not a stupid woman. I think she was hoping that there would never be a reason for her to learn such things because she would die before Henry.

I believe everyone thought Montana would die before Henry. He seemed to be in fine health. Montana, though, walked with a cane out-of-doors, and her hip hurt more often than not.

After Henry's one and only heart attack, the house was put up for sale and the furnishings parcelled out to relatives. Montana moved to Arizona to live with her son and granddaughter. Me. I am her granddaughter. She was my father's mother.

I believe she decided on moving in with Dan, her son, my father, because she always felt badly about me: a young girl growing up without a mother. Also, the move to Arizona was high on Henry's list of her options. Always a fair man, he put down the other possibilities, but Arizona was first.
Montana took pride in being able, finally, to recognize those tiny bits of evidence he let drop.

Dan also wanted her to move in.

I finish making my sandwich to the vacuum's roar. It is a beauty: fried bologna with bar-b-que sauce, lettuce and a dill pickle. As I put the sandwich on a plate, I wonder if Coconino, my pet lizard, would like fried bologna.

Manson, Arizona was small, smaller than Montana's hometown, and the same age as her granddaughter, fifteen years.

Dan changed the house to accommodate his mother. He enclosed the patio and finished it into a large sun room. This room was for the furnishings that Montana had simply been unable to let go after selling her house.

Leaving me at home, Dan flew to Montana and then drove a U-Haul back to Arizona. His mother flew.

There was a china hutch, a rocker, an oak library table, a dining table with ladder-back chairs, photographs, quilts, doilies and embroidered work and a hope chest. Henry made the china hutch early in their marriage. The handwork had been done by Montana's mother and aunts and sisters and herself.
Dan kept the master bedroom with the private bathroom. My room was across the hallway from Montana's and we shared a bathroom.

In her own house, Montana had kept her partial in the bathroom. But here she kept it in a bowl on the bottom shelf of her nightstand. She was very careful, after putting fresh water in the bowl, not to spill it during the walk from the bathroom to the bedroom. Her legs seemed to have become shakier since Henry's death.

I turn away from the counter just as she walks into the kitchen. The vacuum cleaner is still on in the living room and I open my mouth to remind her to shut it off. She puts her left hand behind her, as though reaching for her bra hooks, and sinks to her knees. I drop my plate.

I lift her into a chair and run for the telephone.

In Manson, the police dispatcher also takes calls for the ambulance and the fire department. One of my earliest memories is of Dan drilling me on the number of the police station. He would, at odd times of the day, make me recite the police station telephone number, my name, my age, the house address and the Red Sands address. I have always suspected that he began the drills when I was three years old.
In my panic, I call the Red Sands. As soon as the desk clerk answers the ring, I hang up, take a deep breath and, dialing again, curse the vacuum cleaner. I turn away from the phone and look at Montana. She is bent over in the chair, her hands in her lap, very still. Her eyes are closed.

I tell the dispatcher my name, the house address and that I want the ambulance. "Montana is sick," I say. "I think it's her heart."

I know the dispatcher. She's a single woman who comes into the Red Sands and drinks White Russians.

After hanging up, I go to Montana and kneel on the floor. "The ambulance will be here in just a minute, Grandma. Okay?"

Montana moves her lips, but I can't hear anything. It occurs to me that with the vacuum running, I won't hear the ambulance siren. I run into the living room, grab the cord trailing across the carpeting and yank it out of the wall socket. Then, I open the front door.

Back in the kitchen, I ask Montana if she wants to lie down. She shakes her head and, her right hand up to her throat, reaches out with her left and takes my hand.

The ambulance comes, the attendants put her on a gurney and take her to the hospital.
Downtown, at the Red Sands, I leave the car running, go into the lobby and ask the clerk where Dan is.

"I don't know, honey, maybe up in the coffee shop."

"Call around, check with the laundry. Montana is in the hospital. It's an emergency."

One thing about working in a motel, if you do it long enough you become very good at handling emergencies. There isn't a motel in this country that hasn't had its suicides, its unruly drunks, its lovers' quarrels. I know the desk clerk will get ahold of my father. She is the same woman who watched me that day when I was three.

As I drive the five blocks to the hospital, I remember that I do not yet have my driver's license. My learner's permit, back at the house, only gives me the right to drive with an adult in the car. Montana and I have been going out every day right after school for a ride around town and out to the lake. I decide that if the police stop me, I will probably not get a ticket, considering the circumstances.

My name is Palmer, a name that Montana never liked or understood. She tried, for a while, to call me Pam, but I refused to answer to it. My mother named me.

Most people did not comment on Montana's name, because, to most people, she was known as Monta. She was named after
the state where she was born, reared, married and widowed. She never minded her name shortened.

Henry called Montana by her full name. He did more, though, than merely speak the name.

Montana said, "It was though he tasted my name."

I don't go into the emergency entrance. In the lobby of our twenty-bed hospital, I explain who I am to the woman behind the counter. She doesn't understand about Montana and I explain again. Dan walks in as I finish.

I did not walk into the new sun room except to go through to the backyard. I did not read in the rocker, nor did I watch Montana knit. I did not show any interest in the hope chest.

I did, though, complain to Dan about how shabby the rest of the house looked in comparison to the sun room. And it did. It needed paint, and carpeting, and new furniture. The house was clean, but Dan had furnished it with leftovers from the motel. After looking around, he agreed; the house needed re-decorating, but, he explained, we didn't have the money right then. Maybe next year.
Montana had the money and, being careful not to hurt her son's feelings, offered to "help out" with the re-decorating. Dan said no and frowned at me when I protested.

I reach out and touch my father.
"Palmer, what's wrong?"

I have grabbed hold of the front of his shirt. He makes me sit down and I tell him about Grandma reaching behind her back. The woman behind the counter listens and when I finish, she moves to the switchboard and makes some phone calls.

Dan stands up, and, as I haven't let go of his shirt, I stand up also. We walk out of the lobby and down a hallway.

I realize that Dan knows how to find the Emergency Room, that he knows the hospital and its methods. During that wild time, when the dam was being built, Dan was slashed in a barroom brawl at the Red Sands. He has, to this day, a scar running down his left arm from his shoulder to his elbow. Some of the women in town find that scar and the story behind it highly attractive.

We run into a nurse as she comes out of the Emergency Room. Dan seems to remember something and, quite suddenly, he pries my fingers from his shirt and leads me to a corner in the hallway where he makes me sit down on the floor. He says, "Put your head between your knees. Stay here."
I am angry with him for leaving me, but also relieved because I do not want to see what they did to Montana in that room.

Not that they did anything out of the ordinary. We learn later that after shouting a few questions at her while he took a reading of her blood pressure, Doc Rogers had her moved to a room.

I sit on the floor for a long time. My father has disappeared. The hallway is very quiet. There is none of the frenzy I always thought must be the atmosphere of an Emergency Room. No one walks down the hallway, there are no announcements over a P.A., no gurney crashes through swinging doors. I hear the clock ticking on the wall above my head.

I crane my neck, but cannot see the face of the clock. Glancing around to make sure I am alone, I get up from the floor, step away from the wall and check the time. It is 9:35. Montana began vacuuming at nine o'clock. I figure it was probably 9:20 when I dropped my sandwich.

I feel silly standing in the hallway, not knowing where Montana is. I go back to the lobby and ask the woman there what they've done to her. She tells me to sit down. I will hate that woman forever.
I leaf through four magazines before my father comes back. I look up and he is standing over me.

"Where's Grandma?"

"She's in a room. They're pretty sure it was a heart attack. She'll stay here for a little while."

"Is her heart okay now?"

"I don't know. They're going to run some tests. It'll be a while."

I do not know which questions to ask. I don't know how to get satisfactory answers.

"When can I see her?"

"I don't know. Not today. She's sleeping now."

"Did you see her?"

"No. I told you to stay back there."

"I'm okay now."

I believe that during the day, while I was in school and Dan worked, Montana cleaned house, read, watched TV, knit and, using her cane, paced. Leaning heavily, she moved from her bedroom, down the hallway, to the living room. Every now and again, she would stop as though blind, lift her arm, place her hand on the wall and run her fingertips back and forth. She talked to herself about her husband, and her sisters, and her son, and his daughter. She repeated, to herself, the names of common objects.
They let me see her after the second day.

Before going to school in the morning, I call her and we talk about what I had for breakfast. At noon, she tells me about her soap opera. After school, I walk down to the hospital for a visit.

Because Manson was a boom town, most of the houses were exactly alike. The colors varied and some had car ports rather than garages, but the floor plan was the same from house to house. Over the years, people added rooms, painted and re-modeled, but it didn't change the look of the town.

I believe that after straightening the house and before I came home for lunch, Montana went for walks. She used her cane and never left the neighborhood.

Montana leaned on her cane and looked out at mesas and buttes, across red sand to an always cloudless horizon. The weather was fine and her hip wasn't any worse, but this wasn't home.

Because I know all the local cops and they like me, I could drive to the hospital, but walking seems safer.

Dan and I never visit Montana together. He sees her during the day, whenever there is a break from work at the Red Sands.
I went to school dressed in dungarees and a boy's shirt and moccasins. Dan says I'd go to school barefoot.

I came home for lunch; the school was only a couple of blocks away. When she first arrived, Montana prepared lunches for me.

First, she made a sandwich and put a glass of milk beside the plate; a fresh batch of cookies cooled on the counter. I sniffed my way to the kitchen, then stopped short when I saw the sandwich and milk.

"You don't have to do that, Grandma. I can make my own."

"I don't mind. Do you like grilled ham and cheese?"

She did it for her granddaughter.

Every day Montana made lunch for her granddaughter and I said, "Don't. Please." This went on.

During the week, I go back to my old routine. The routine of life before Montana's arrival: shopping, cleaning, cooking and filling in at the Red Sands. One night the dishwasher doesn't show up and I work till eleven o'clock in the kitchen. Montana has her second heart attack.
After school I would dump my books beside the door and get a snack. Usually, I folded a slice of bologna into fourths, took a bite, unfolded it to look at the pattern of holes, then began again. Montana asked once if I wouldn't rather have a real sandwich. I went into my bedroom and closed the door.

She insists on coming home after one week. Dr. Rogers wants her to stay in the hospital and Dan tries to talk her into following Doc's orders, but she says she'll walk home if she has to. I don't say anything.

I am afraid that if I say Montana belongs at home, and then she dies at home, that I will be blamed. So I say nothing, but hope she will win her fight.

She does. A patient can't be kept in a hospital against her will.

I call her and she says, "I'm going home tomorrow."
"Good," I say. "What would you like for dinner?"
She laughs, "Pork roast. Is today Sunday?"
"Yes."
"I haven't gone to church in years. Got out of the habit somehow. Have you ever been to church, Palmer?"
"When I stay over with Debbie, I go to church with her family." Debbie is one of my high school friends. "You know Debbie."
"Yes, I know Deborah. Which church?"

"Methodist."

"We are Episcopalian. Have you been baptized?"

"I don't know. Daddy might know. Was my mother Episcopalian?"

"I don't know. They were married in St. David's. It was a very short engagement. Five days."

"St. David's is Episcopal?"

"Yes."

"Don't worry about church, Grandma."

"I'm not."

That first Saturday after Montana's arrival, without telling anyone, I went shopping. I took my red wagon out of the garage and stuffed the grocery list in one back pocket, the checkbook in the other. Then I walked downtown, pulling the empty wagon after me.

An hour later, I returned, the wagon filled with sacks of groceries. Montana wondered where I had gone.

"Honey, you should have said something. I'd have driven. We could could have shopped together."

"That's okay, Grandma. I've always done it." I put the canned goods away.

"How did you pay for all this?"
"With a check. Dad put my name on the checking account when I turned fifteen. And when the bank statement comes, he lets me balance it too."

I believe Montana was intimidated by me, but she invited me shopping anyway the very next day.

She said, "Palmer, would you like to come along?" and we drove downtown.

After slowly pushing our empty basket through the store, we bought a sack of flour. Montana had never seen "Navajo Maid" brand before. She was impressed with the picture of a young woman in traditional dress on the label.

I prepare for Montana's homecoming. I clean house by my standards, go grocery shopping, and stop by the Red Sands.

At the grocery store, I ask the butcher to help me choose the best pork roast. I have a shopping list for an entire week's meals.

I go to the department store and buy a breakfast tray, a bud vase and a heating pad. At home, I realize I have no flowers for the vase.

By the time I get to the Red Sands, it is late afternoon. Dan is in the coffee shop, sitting in a booth with a cup of coffee and the newspaper on the table. He is
talking local politics with Mr. Hardy, who is the mayor and owner of the Shell station. I wave to them and go to the office.

One entire wall of Dan's office is taken up with cupboards and a large closet.

I gave Montana a tour of the Red Sands and told her its history as I understood it.

Manson, Arizona came into being when the government decided to build a dam on the Colorado River. There wasn't even a dirt road through this desert. Then, quite suddenly, came a highway, a town, a dam, a lake, a tourist season, and the hatred of the Sierra Club.

As the Manager of the Red Sands Motel, Coffee Shop and Lounge, Dan brought his wife and me to the boom town. I was born in Phoenix, not Manson. Dan told me that in 1958 a lot of people in Manson were living in tents and cars.

I do know this: one day, at one o'clock in the afternoon, when I was three, my mother took me to the Red Sands. The desk clerk said Dan was in room 126 fixing the air conditioner. "Would you watch her?" my mother asked.

She parked the car down the street in front of Tammy's Beauty Shop and left the keys in the ignition. Tammy's doubled as the Continental Trailways bus stop. I know the bus was on time that day.
At 1:15, she pulled her suitcase out from the back seat of the car and handed her ticket to the driver. The bus headed north. We never saw her again.

My father did not tell me this.

I once asked Tammy whether my mother gave any reason for the trip, but she couldn't remember.

The desk clerk looked after me until she got bored and then called room 126 and told my father. The desk clerk has spoken about that day. More than once.

She still works at the Red Sands. My father, as nearly as I can tell, doesn't mind.

In Dan's office, I showed Montana my toys. There was an entire cupboard, the one closest to the floor, filled with dolls and stuffed animals, coloring books, crayons and matchbox cars.

There was a cot folded in the closet. My sleeping bag and pillow were on the shelf. On those nights when Dan had to tend bar, he would put me to bed in his office.

I remember lying on the cot listening to the sounds of the Red Sands at night: the waitresses closing up and going home, the cleaning man vacuuming the coffee shop, the band in the lounge and the night clerk's television. I remember getting up and telling the night clerk that I'd had a nightmare—a lie—and watching TV with him. I remember
sitting in the coffee shop after closing, in my pyjamas,
eating chocolate cream pie. I remember the strangeness of
going to sleep at the Red Sands, but waking up in my bed at
the house.

I learned how to run the switchboard at age seven. By
the time I was twelve, I had washed dishes, taken room
reservations, worked with the laundress, bussed tables,
inventoried the liquor stock and, in helping the maids,
accidentally walked in on more than one naked and surprised
motel guest. Also, because the Red Sands had the best pie
and coffee in Manson, I overheard every nasty bit of local
gossip going around.

At twelve years old, I had spent nine years at the Red
Sands, waiting.

I began to go to the house after school, instead of to
the motel. I went out into the desert and caught a lizard.
He became my pet. I learned how to read cookbooks and made
Dan feel guilty about eating out all the time. After some
resistance, he began to encourage these changes in our
lives. He came home for dinner on time and asked me if I
needed money for new clothes.

By this time, Dan was making payments on the Red Sands
and we had moved out of the trailer and into a house. The
motel prepared me for housekeeping: I went grocery shopping
and worried about the frayed spots on the living room couch.
During a business trip to Phoenix, Dan bought a book for teenagers on sex and left it on my bedroom desk one day after I'd gone to school. This pleased and embarrassed me. Pleased, because Dan now believed I was old enough to know such things. Embarrassed, because my years at the motel had taught me more truths about men and women than the author of that book had ever conceived.

The book did give me a more precise vocabulary.

I did not tell Montana all of this. We talked with the breakfast cook, played the juke box in the closed and dark bar, and looked in the motel rooms. After some coaching, Montana said, "Yah-te-he," which means "Hello," to the Navajo maids. They giggled and answered her in English. I taught her how to make an in-house call on the switchboard and she asked if Dan had taught me how to swim in the motel pool. I lied and said, "Yes."

This Sunday, the Sunday before Montana comes home from the hospital, I want just the cot. I take it, folded, out of the closet and put it in Dan's car. Unknowingly, he takes it home.
My father came home from work one night with a basket of apples. One of the regular guests at the Red Sands gave it to him. Dan had some very loyal customers. Montana wondered how we'd ever eat so many apples.

"Make apple sauce," Dan said. "You always made great apple sauce."

"I'll bet Palmer's never had homemade apple sauce. Have you?"

"No."

"Your granddad loved homemade apple sauce. While you two are gone tomorrow, I'll cook these up."

When I left for school the next morning, she reminded me. "We'll have apple sauce with dinner tonight. Your granddad loved pork roast with apple sauce."

When I came home for lunch, though, Montana was not in the house. I called, "Grandma?" Her cane was not in the coat closet, and I knew, then, she was out walking.

In the kitchen, in the sink, were apples, some whole, some peeled, some sliced--and a broken bowl. Shards of glass were mixed in with the apples. She must have held the bowl, gripping the rim on either side, and slammed it into the sink. A sliver, like a compass needle, balanced on one of the apples. I could feel the weight of the bowl and the power in my arms. I heard the crash, the shattering. I hear it now.
I scooped the apples and glass into a sack. I dumped the sack into the garbage can outside; then I bandaged my hand. Even with plenty of time in the lunch hour I didn't want to make a sandwich, so I went to the Red Sands and ordered the "Wednesday Special."

I drive to the hospital the next morning to get Montana. It is my first drive since she's gotten sick. On the way home she asks me to drive slowly, around the perimeter of the mesa. She looks out at the lake and I read the names of the streets as we pass them. Elm. Fir. Gum. Hemlock. She grumbles about city planners who name streets after trees that can't grow in the desert. When we get home, she goes to bed.

I had a pet lizard. Its name was Coconino. I kept it in the living room in an old aquarium that had a cracked glass. Two inches of sand lay on the bottom. I sifted the sand and it was fine and red. A small pile of rocks, a medicine bottle cap full of water, some shredded pieces of bread and lettuce and a tiny potted cactus were also in the aquarium. I explained to Montana that Coconino was a Sandy and that he was born with an escape mechanism. If caught by
the tail, it would simply pull free. Later, he would grow another. Often, pieces of my afternoon bologna were added to his lettuce and bread. I placed the lizard in Montana's hand and showed her how to pet him. She was surprised at how soft he was.

I go to school. Because I am two hours late, I go first to the principal's office and write myself an excuse explaining my tardiness. The school secretary is accustomed to my notes excusing my own absences.

At lunch time, I check on Montana. She is asleep and apparently hasn't moved since that morning. I don't wake her for lunch.

She does come to the table for dinner that evening and praises my pork roast. While I wash the dishes we talk about my day at school. Then, she goes back to bed.

The next few days are pretty much the same. I take a breakfast tray to her and lunch, if she is awake. For dinner, she insists on coming to the table. She sleeps a lot and is confused about the days of the week.

On Friday, she doesn't get out of bed at all. I make some phone calls and ask her if she wants to talk to the Methodist minister.
"The Episcopal Church is too small, Grandma. They don't have their own priest. A guy comes up about every six weeks for communion, but all the other Sundays there's just a lay reader."

She doesn't know what I am talking about and can't understand when I try to remind her. She does, though, explain what a lay reader is.

I go down to the drug store and buy a bed pan and a rubber sheet.

She doesn't get out of bed Saturday or Sunday and refuses to eat dinner. I ask her if she wants to go back to the hospital, but she says no.

Monday morning she calls me Sarah and tells me that my dyed hair looks terrible. I look at the family tree Montana drew for me six months earlier. Sarah is her sister. I call my father at the Red Sands.

"Is Sarah dead?"

"Sarah who?"

I look at the paper in my hand. "Montana's sister. Your aunt. Is she dead?"

"No, of course not. Aunt Sarah's only about fifty. She was born much later than the other sisters. She used to babysit me. Why?"
"Montana keeps calling me Sarah. She told me that I looked terrible with my hair dyed blonde. What are we going to do?"

Dan says that Sarah does indeed look terrible as a blonde and that he doesn’t know what to do.

There are no satisfactory answers and this evening Montana gets angry with my father and tells him not to mention the hospital again.

I know I am going to need the cot after all.

Somehow Coconino escaped from the aquarium. I very carefully took the living room apart, moving all the furniture, looking under the cushions and checking the drapes.

We left lettuce and bread in the corners of the kitchen and living room. Montana put her hand on my shoulder and said, "He'll come back. I need some books. Let's go down to the library and I'll get a card."

While she filled out the form for the card, I asked her if she would help me get my Learner's Permit.

"I already know how to drive, though. It's just so I'm legal."

"Who taught you to drive?"

"One of the busboys."
She was very nervous the first time we went for a drive. I think she was afraid that I might actually need a teacher rather than an adult companion. After we went out to the lake and looked out from the Park Service viewpoint, she was calmer for the trip back to town.

I believe Dan told Montana that in a couple of weeks I would go out into the desert, catch another lizard, and name it Coconino.

Grandma is sleeping as I set up the cot in her room. I put it right next to her bed. She does not sleep well, though, and wakes up later.

"Grandma, I'm right here."

"Tom Junior broke a window in the dining room. He was playing catch with Dan in the back yard."

Tom Junior is my father's cousin. "How old is he?" I want to know what time of her life Montana is re-living.

"Twelve. Dan is older than Tom. I gave them both a hiding. Tom, for breaking the window, and Dan, for not knowing any better than to play there.

"Did you make them pay for the window?"

"No. They don't have any money and I am feeling guilty about the hiding."
After dinner one evening, Dan put up shelves in Montana's room. While she arranged family photographs on the new shelves, he called me to come look at his handiwork. I sidled into Montana's bedroom. It was the first time since she had moved in.

"Looks good, Daddy." I walked around her rag rug and peered at the photographs.

"That's your great uncle Tom. He was your grandfather's brother."

"Is he dead?"

"Yes." Montana rushed her words. "This is your father's cousin, Tom Junior."

"How is Tom these days?" Dan was sitting at the desk.

"He and June have separated . . . again."

"Lord, why can't those two make up their minds?"

"Do they have kids?"

"Yes, Honey, they would be your second cousins. No, third. Dan, how is that figured?"

Montana talked for a long time and even drew a family tree for me. Her eyes shifted from mine to the floor and back again. Her words were slightly breathless. But she didn't stop.

Later, I brought out a box of photographs to show Montana. There were pictures of other young girls, 'and of
the desert, and of the lake, and of Dan. All my pictures are in color.

Late that night, after Dan and I fell asleep, I believe that Montana lay in her bed and looked across the room at the photographs on the shelves. The lights were out so she could just make out the shapes of the frames. Dark pictures of the house, of Dan as a boy, of family reunions, of me, and of Henry. She tried to recall how Henry said her name.

I call the school and tell the secretary I will be absent for a long time.

I can't move the TV because Manson has cable and there is no hook-up in the bedroom. So, when her soap opera comes on, I watch very carefully and tell Montana all about it. I sit on the bed beside her and read *Aesop's Fables* aloud. I feed her soup from one of her blue willow bowls. She tells me the story about the two lovers magically turning into doves. I change the bedding and run the washing machine once. Mostly, she sleeps. Sometimes, she calls me Sarah.

I move the rocker, the hope chest and one of the ladder-back chairs from the sun room to her bedroom. It is very crowded in there. I drape the handwork over the headboard of her bed. I wonder which pieces are hers.
When Dan comes home that night, he says he will talk to her when she wakes up, but she sleeps all evening.

I call my teachers and ask them about my homework assignments. They are very nice to me.

Late, maybe after midnight, I wake up and look at her bed. She is trying to sit up, pulling at the bedding and muttering.

"Grandma, I'm here. What do you want?"

"Where's Dan? Where's Dan?"

"He's asleep, Grandma. He's in bed."

"Asleep!" Montana is angry. "Asleep! Why he should be out looking for me!"

I am confused for a moment and then I think, Right, God damn right. And I get out of bed, cross the hallway and stand at the foot of my father's bed. "Wake up. Grandma's calling for you. Wake up."

Dan is startled. "What?"

"Grandma's calling for you. Get out of bed." I walk out.

Dressed in his robe, he comes to his mother's bed and looks down at her. "I'm here, Mom."

Montana does not answer. He turns to me. "What's that smell?"

"Sometimes she forgets to ask for the bedpan."
Dan stands still for a moment with his head bent. Then he walks out of the bedroom and calls the dispatcher. The ambulance comes, again, and takes her away.

She dies two days later. She's buried next to Henry, my grandfather, in her home state, her birthplace.

I believe more than I know about my grandmother. I know less than I should. There were daubs of yellow paint and trips to the store for just a bag of flour. There were pieces of embroidery. There were apples and glass, and a lizard, and a bus heading north. Her name was Montana. She looked for Henry. She searched for someone suddenly gone without a word. And we were both angry.
Before modular jacks,
my father had his business
phone in our house.

Sick of business and tired
of answering the ring,
he put the phone

in the refrigerator,
then played his guitar,
creating umbrellas of blues.

When even the silence
wasn't enough,
he put my mother's Boston Fern

in the vegetable crisper,
below the phone,
and closed the door.
Juanita is driving. She knows he is not drunk and could drive, but arguing with him is useless. When they'd gone half a block, he put on his seatbelt.

"You didn't look before making that turn." Thomas locks his door.

"It's after three; the streets are empty. Do you want to drive?"

"Hah. I've been drinking and she wants me to drive. Johnny, why is it that I'm a better driver drunk than you are sober?"

She hates being called Johnny.

Turning the car into the gravel driveway, she slows, then parks. The parking lot is lit, but their building, enclosed by trees, is in darkness.

The shrubbery has overgrown the front walk, so they always use the back door. The green stucco has cracked and fallen in patches from the walls.

Usually, Juanita is pleased when she compares their building to others. The spareness of the more modern structures puts her off. Here, there are trees, a large yard, lots of shade and a balcony across the front. Tonight, though, even in darkness, it looks shabby.
He gets out of the car and waits for her to come around to him. He takes the car keys from her and stuffs them into his pants' pocket. Taking his hand, she leads him towards the stairs. After two steps though, he pulls his hand away and wraps both arms over her shoulders, around her neck. He is slightly behind her, off to the side, leaning heavily.

"Stand up," she says. "You're too heavy."

He shifts his weight slightly and eases some of the burden. "You're not so strong." Then drops his weight on her so suddenly that she staggers.

"You're killing me."

Ducking his head, he nips her throat and whispers, "Be nice."

Thomas has a beautiful voice--deep, strong, musical. He sings when he is content.

His hands slide down her body from neck to hips, then back up to her neck. They stand for a moment. She rocks back on her heels towards him. "Let's go," he says.

They struggle up the stairs, he pulling on her neck, she straining towards the door. At the top, he continues to hang on her while she rummages through her purse for the key. She thinks about his keys in his pants' pocket.

Inside, he releases her and, in the dark, crosses the kitchen to the refrigerator. Juanita, turning to close the
door and flip the light switch, catches a glimpse of him in
the light from the refrigerator.

He is stooped over, his hands braced on his knees,
looking at the food. She admires the curve of his back, the
light on his forearms.

She goes to him and puts her hand on his shoulder.
"What do you want?" Her hand moves up to his neck and her
fingers tangle in his hair.

"I'm hungry, Johnny. Will you fix me something?"

"No. You're not really hungry. Just bored. Come to
bed."

"But I am hungry. If I fix it myself, think about what
a mess there'll be."

"There won't be a mess 'cause it's late and we're going
to bed." She turns on the light.

Thomas pulls out a jar of mayonnaise. He tucks it in
the crook of one arm, then pulls out the mustard. This goes
next to the mustard. He is picking up the lettuce when
Juanita says, "No, it's late and you've had too much to
drink. Let's go to bed."

He turns from the refrigerator, nearly dropping the
mustard. The refrigerator stands open. He takes the bread
out of the bread box, leaving the lid up. From the
cupboard, he pulls down peanut butter, jam, crackers, and a
box of spaghetti, then leaves the door open. He reaches towards the silverware drawer.

"All right. I will fix you something to eat. What do you want?"

"It's okay. You go on to bed. I'll do it."

"Thomas, I said I'd fix you something to eat. Now, what do you want?"

"A scrambled egg sandwich."

She drops her purse on the table. "Made with peanut butter, lettuce and spaghetti?"

"No, a plain scrambled egg sandwich will be fine."

Juanita goes to the refrigerator, takes out some eggs and closes the door. Thomas sits at the table. She puts everything back into the cupboard and closes the doors. Thomas puts his feet up on the chair opposite his.

She begins to scramble the eggs. She stands rigidly, turned away from him. From the stove, she can see down the hallway. The glossy finish shimmers beside the flat paint. She'd noticed the different finishes only after the painting was done. Now, Juanita sees the contrast when the lights in the kitchen are on, and the living room is dark.

"Johnny," Thomas sings, "Johnny, ya got one fine ass. You know that?"

"Lay off. I'm cooking."
"Ah, now, don't get mad. I told you I was really hungry."

"You're drunk."

Thomas chuckles. "That's right, I am. A scrambled egg sandwich with spaghetti. That was good. Don't you think that was good?"

"Brilliant."

"Ah, now, if you're going to get sarcastic" . . . .

She's scooping the eggs onto the bread. "I want lots of mayonnaise."

"There's plenty."

Thomas takes a bite and chews slowly. She wipes down the counter and puts the frying pan in the sink.

Sitting at the table, she scoots her chair forward until her knees press against his outstretched legs.

He swings his feet off the chair, his legs away from her, and leans over his plate. "A glass of milk to wash it down?"

"Get it yourself." She stands, leans over the table, and straightens the macrame owl hanging on the wall.

Pouring the milk, he asks, "Are you very mad, Johnny?"

She's watching him. "No, just dead tired."

He meets her eyes, then gently sets the milk carton on the counter.
"Guess I'll go on to bed. Put your dish in the sink. Please." She is quick and steps past him towards the doorway.

"Not yet. Stay up with me. Just while I eat. Please."

She has stopped. He slowly moves closer, takes her by the wrist and leads her back to the chair. "Just a few more bites."

He continues to hold her wrist and, in the circle of his grasp, she twists her hand so that her fingers press his palm. Sighing, he pulls away, opens up the two halves of the sandwich and reaches for the salt shaker.

"Hypertension," Juanita says.

The salt shaker moves over to the other half. He grins.

"Dizziness."

Thomas shakes harder, faster and longer.

"Blurred vision, headaches."

"I like salt." He looks at her, holding the shaker in the air above the sandwich. The grin is gone.

"Heart attack."

"That's enough."

"Death."

He slams the shaker down on the table.
She says, "You eat too much salt. I worry."

Thomas gets up and walks out of the kitchen. Juanita, her head tilted in expectation, puts the sandwich back together and takes a bite.

When the music booms out of the living room, she leaps up and runs towards it. She crosses the living room, shoves Thomas aside and turns down the stereo. The room is dark, except for the green glow of the dial.

"Hey. I just wanted a little dinner music."

She whispers, "You idiot, you're going to get us arrested."

"Dinner music is not against the law."

"Being a nuisance at four o'clock in the morning is."

Thomas steps back, stretches his neck and shouts, "It's time to get up."

Juanita claps one hand over his mouth and hits him on the arm with the other. "God damn you."

She tries to kick him, but he wraps his arms around her and pulls her against him. "Hush. Don't hit me. I want you to behave."

She struggles for a moment. "Me?" Her face is pressed against his shoulder. "You're the one yelling in the middle of the night."
Still holding her against him, he pushes her backwards towards the kitchen. "Yes, you."

He pushes her into a chair. "Consider it character building." Thomas sits and reaches for the sandwich.

She gets up.

"Where are you going?"

"To turn off the stereo and then to bed. I've had enough character building for one night."

The living room is quite dark. She knows there is a street lamp just in front of the building. She tugs on the shade, making certain the window is completely covered. In the darkness, she stretches out on the couch and closes her eyes.

"Juanita?" Thomas calls from the other room.

She crosses her ankles.

He's in the room. She can hear him breathing.

"Juanita? What are you doing?"

"I'm just resting here."

"Okay."

She knows he is sitting on the floor, beside the couch. Eyes closed, she reaches out and touches his hair. His head jerks under hand, but he says nothing. Juanita's fingers explore his face.
It had been assumed that I would spend the night, but it was nearly three o'clock and I hadn't fallen asleep. Richard was asleep. He slept very soundly, curled on his side of the bed, his back to me. I tried not to move too much, so as not to disturb him. My muscles felt stiff and I wondered why I was in Richard's bed.

I was tired of being left alone on one side of the bed. I tried, while lying there, to think clearly, to be fair. A person's position in sleep, I reasoned, is not intentional. It's not meant as a personal insult, nor as a comment on the other person in the bed. It wasn't Richard's fault that I was awake at three o'clock in the morning. I couldn't blame him for sleeping curled up on the other side of the bed.

Still, despite arguments with myself, I was angry with Richard. Angry that he slept so soundly, angry that he slept with his back to me, angry with the suspicion that he wouldn't wake even if I left. That's when I decided to leave.

The bed creaked when I shifted my weight onto the floor. Holding my breath, I waited, listening, for Richard's breathing rhythm to change, for him to awaken. He didn't move.
I found my panties on the foot of the bed, my jeans on the floor in front of the closet, my bra on the bedroom door knob, and my blouse on the living room couch. I put these on as I found them. My sandals were on the floor.

Near the front door, I picked up my purse and knew my keys were not in it. There was lots of empty space in that purse, and the keys always jingled. Swinging it back and forth, I heard nothing. I got down on my knees, stretched out my hands and began to brush my fingertips over the carpet, under the chair, under the curtains, along the baseboard, feeling for the keys.

I got tired of the search and thought about turning on a light. I thought that the light shining down the hallway and into his bedroom might wake Richard up. But that seemed unlikely.

Then I thought about going back to bed and looking for my keys in daylight, in the morning while Richard showered and before I turned on the coffeemaker. But I was already dressed.

Eventually, I did find the keys. They were tucked behind the chair leg, against the baseboard.

I stood, opened the door, and looked across the front yard. It had been raining earlier and the sidewalk in front of Richard's house sparkled under the street light.
I wanted very much for Richard to wake up, wonder where I'd gone and, in the dark, find me just as I was going out the door. I wanted very much for Richard to hold me and ask what was wrong and to comfort me, even if he couldn't understand why I needed comforting. I considered slamming the door.

I also felt very foolish. What was I going to accomplish by such a scene, such silly, emotional grandstanding? What, really, was the difference between sleeping on one side of Richard's bed and sleeping alone in my own bed? It seemed important, just the same.

But would that difference matter to Richard? He would never wonder if I'd been awake while he slept, if I'd left in the middle of the night, if he had spent a major portion of the night alone. And why should he?

The air was cool and smelled of rain. Just that afternoon the temperature had reached one hundred ten degrees. I hated what the desert brought. I did not enjoy the rain. I knew that the cactus were armed, that the gila monsters were poisonous, that the sand, blasted by the wind, would burn my skin. The rain was a gift, but it was so little. I leaned against the doorjamb, my purse hanging from my hand, and felt sad and foolish.
I closed Richard's door and made sure it was locked. My car was parked behind his. If, for some reason, I had pulled into the drive first, it would have been impossible for me to leave.

I stood beside my car, held my keys, and looked down at my toes. Unable to pull out of the drive, I would have merely gone back to Richard's house, undressed, and gone back to bed, being careful not to wake him. I supposed there was some significance in the fact that Richard had given me a key to his house.

I wondered what I thought I was accomplishing. Nothing, I decided, I am accomplishing nothing, but I'm going to do it anyway.

The street light in front of Richard's house was the only one on the block. Twice, I made sure my headlights were on. The bulb in the street light was amber. The city had been steadily replacing the white bulbs with amber because they gave off a softer light, almost a flush of yellow. The mayor said it was for Kitt Peak Observatory.

I wasn't in any hurry to get home. There was no desperation in my decision to leave. So I drove slowly, taking in the smells, the glow of Tucson at night. Driving carefully through dips and puddles, I tried not to jar my body at all.
There was no traffic. It was a week night and the bars had closed. I thought it ridiculous that a city the size of Tucson should have absolutely no traffic, even at three o'clock in the morning. On impulse, I turned onto a side street and then made several more unnecessary turns without thinking. Still no traffic. Was I the only person driving at night? Was I the only woman who left her lover in the middle of the night because he slept with his back to her?

I wasn't actually leaving Richard, though. First, he would never really understand when and why I had gone, or even that I had gone. Second, I was surely going to see him again. There was nothing definite, or permanent, or even comprehensible about my leaving.

I became fascinated by the street signs. I began turning corners to see what patterns would develop. Heading west, I crossed Second, Helen, Fifth and Sixth Streets, in that order. Making a sudden turn north, I came to the intersection of Third and Seventh. When I first came to Tucson, I didn't go anywhere without a map. I drove through an underpass.

There hadn't been enough rain to flood the underpasses or raise the Rillito River. How could a city in the middle of the desert also be in the middle of a flood plain? Driving after a rain storm could be dangerous. But the
water only filled the gutters and hid the dips in the asphalt. The streets reflected amber light.

By driving slowly and indirectly, I would eventually double the time it usually took to drive home.

Going down Grant Avenue, only a mile from my home, I passed the shopping center. It was typical of shopping centers in the West: a huge parking lot in front of a series of stores. It was not a mall; all the store fronts faced the same direction, and all the entrances were outside.

I'd never noticed the shopping center in the dark before. I was amazed at the size of the parking lot. From the street to the store fronts, a huge expanse of black pavement shimmered. And, except for a neon light over the greasy spoon cafe, the stores were dark.

I thought at first that the parking lot was empty, but saw then, at the far end, in the direction I was heading, the man in the phone booth. The booth was set away from the building, directly under a white street light, so that it stood out from the darkness. The brightest place in the world. Painfully bright.

The man had parked his car quite close to the booth, in the drive, actually. He hadn't paid any attention to the white lines in the lot or to the usual traffic pattern. He was inside, the door was open, and he was talking into the receiver of the pay phone.
Richard? But then the certainty that he was not Richard and that he would never be Richard.

I also knew that he was not talking, because people did not talk at three o'clock in the morning.

Why didn't he have a phone at home? And if he did, why did he have to leave his home to use a pay phone? Why that phone booth? And what was he demanding? . . . Or was he pleading?

When I got home, I turned off the ignition, and sat in my car, and cried. In the dark, a desert breeze blowing in the window, I gripped the steering wheel, slammed my feet against the floorboards, and smelled the orange groves in flower.
Bedtime Prayers

for Lee

His mother always came in to hear his prayers at bedtime. She sat on the bed while he kneeled and recited,

"Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep,
And if I die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take."

And then he asked Jesus to look after Mommy and Daddy and his little brother. Some nights he included his grandparents, on both sides. Then, on other nights, a list of relatives, friends and classmates.

"That's enough now, David. Just say 'everybody' and climb into bed."

And quickly, "Everybody. Amen."

That was not the end of the bedtime ritual, though. After he'd been tucked in and kissed, he and his mother would quietly sing one verse of "My bonnie lies over the ocean, my bonnie lies over the sea." They sang it as though it was a lullaby. And for him it was a lullaby and had been for as long as he could remember.
Although a Protestant, David attended a Catholic parochial school. His mother believed he'd get a better education. His father admired the discipline.

The children were not actually disciplined so much as they were organized into rigid and arbitrary groups. In the classroom, they sat in alphabetical order. When going anywhere outside the room, they lined up, the boys in one line, the girls in another, according to height. The smallest children led. In the cafeteria, they were organized by sex, height and lunch. School lunch boys, shortest to tallest; brown bag boys, shortest to tallest; school lunch girls, etc.

If a boy behaved badly in the morning, his punishment might be to sit with the girls at lunch-time. Slotted in according to height and lunch again, but in the wrong sex. This was a great humiliation.

When David was grown, married and the father of a baby girl, he suddenly realized that the punishment was never reversed. That is, a girl was never made to sit with the boys. He told Liz, his wife, "A girl wouldn't be safe amidst a bunch of sex-crazed second grade boys."

Being the father of a baby girl made David think a great deal about his childhood and the Catholic school. He
was, as he put it, "Even talking God-talk and believing it."
Liz seemed amused with him.

In the hospital, David said to his wife, "I don't know anything about girls. I never had a sister."
"I think they're pretty much the same as baby boys. Are you sad it wasn't a boy?"
"Lord no, it doesn't make any difference. I feel inadequate, though."
Liz said, "Everything's going to be fine."

In parochial school, the children did not receive gold stars. Prayer cards were a common reward. These had a picture of a saint on one side and a copy of a prayer on the other. Truly extraordinary work, though, was rewarded with a rosary. Only two or three rosaries were awarded a year.

David's second grade teacher was Sister Florell. She was a B.V.M. That is, she belonged to the order of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Liz enjoyed his stories about the school. Phrases like "B.V.M." and "virtuous pagan" made her laugh. She hadn't had any religious training.

Sister Florell told "nun's stories." These were parables such as Jesus carving birds out of an olive branch
which would then come to life and fly away. And then there were the "good-die-young-after-making-one-error" stories.

From his religion classes, David knew bits of church knowledge. He told Liz, "If a priest dies in the middle of mass, the service must later be completed from exactly the point where it was interrupted."

David was very good at spelling. He nearly always got hundreds on his tests. And he enjoyed phonics.

The children had work-sheets to complete for phonics. The covers of the booklets had been torn off, so that as each page was removed, it pulled free from the spine. And left on the paper a margin, a strip beyond the perforations.

Before beginning his worksheet, David would very carefully remove the margin at the perforations. Then, he would roll up this strip of paper and tuck it into a back corner of his desk.

All the boys saved those rolled strips. They never did anything with them. They didn't pass notes, or make spit balls, or shred them into confetti. It was simply the pleasure of carefully tearing off that strip, rolling it up and keeping it. David had more in his desk than anyone else.
"Why?" David asked his mother. "Why do we always sing about that girl?"

"What girl?"

"The bedtime song. Why do we always sing about Bonnie?"

"Oh, bonnie. Bonnie isn't a girl. Bonnie is an old-timey word for, oh, loved one, I guess. Sweetheart."

He supposed that all fathers felt overwhelmed when their wives and babies came home from the hospital. Babies are a possibility and then a probability and then, one day, they are actually in the world. Jenny was in the world, a presence, a wonder, a responsibility. David couldn't catch his breath.

In the second grade, he studied very hard for the last spelling bee before Christmas vacation. His mother helped. She had him spell a word, use it in a sentence and then name the part of speech. He had no idea what "noun" meant, or "verb," or "preposition," but, because it was required, these terms were memorized along with the spelling of each word.
Lying with Liz on the living room carpet, their baby between them, David said, "The nuns talked to us kids as though they were talking to other nuns. Sister Florell would say, 'Anything that causes arousal is a mortal sin.'"

"To seven year olds? Arousal?"

Yes, David thought, a good word.

He won the spelling bee. First prize was a rosary. Sister Florell, thinking he wouldn't have any use for a rosary, replaced it with a small bottle of holy water. Second prize was a holy medal and third and fourth were prayer cards.

David didn't know how to feel about his bottle of holy water. Everyone knew that a rosary was really the great prize. But he had come in first. It looked as though he would be the only child ever to receive a prize of holy water. His mother said it was a once in a lifetime prize.

He put the bottle on his bedroom dresser.

The boys and girls played separately during recess. There was an area between the two playgrounds where a loose ball could be recovered, but for the most part, this neutral zone between the boys and the girls remained empty.
were no actual lines, no markers for this frontier, but the
demarcation was clear in everyone's imagination. As an
adult, David wondered how the children knew about the
playground borders. He couldn't remember being told. It
was as though he'd been born knowing.

One night, some time after the spelling bee, David
realized what his bedtime prayer actually meant. He'd been
singing his lullaby to himself, thinking about Columbus
crossing the ocean for his sweetheart, when he thought, I
could die tonight. He got out of bed, knelt and, for the
first time made up his own prayer, asking Jesus not to let
him die that night.

Then he asked the Virgin Mary.

After praying, David went to the living room. His
parents were watching TV.

"What are you doing up?"

"I want a drink of water."

"For heaven's sake, David, you can get your own glass
of water in the bathroom."

"I had a bad dream."

His father said, "Well, you seem to have survived just
fine. It was only a dream. Go back to bed."
In his room, David remembered the holy water. He sprinkled the water, in the shape of a cross, onto his pillow. "I promise to be good. Don't make me die tonight."

Because he was liberal with the holy water, he began to run low after a few nights. He diluted it with tap water to make it last longer.

Liz asked, "What finally made you stop?"
"Stop?"
"When did you stop needing the holy water?"
"I don't know. I don't remember making a decision. I'm not even sure how long I kept it up."
"You probably just forgot one night, or a couple of nights. And when you didn't die, it wasn't necessary anymore."
"The nuns liked to push miracle stories."
"Miracle stories?"
"You know, like the loaves and the fishes. And turning water to wine. They also talked about guardian angels. Right up through the fourth grade." He took a deep breath and held it.
"Yes?"

David could tell that his wife didn't understand his point. "I would like to have Jenny baptized. It doesn't matter which religion."
He could see the amusement in her eyes. He didn't blame her. "It can't hurt, can it?"

"No, it can't hurt."