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Yours 'til you hear otherwise

Amy Catharine Rutledge

Iowa State University

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Yours 'til you hear otherwise

by

Amy Catharine Rutledge

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: Fern Kupfer

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Amy Catharine Rutledge

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

__________  __________
Major Professor

__________  __________
For the Major Program

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For the Graduate College
TABLE OF CONTENTS

READING, WRITING AND 'RITHMATIC 1
SWIRLING SKIRTS AND VIOLINS 11
YOURS 'TIL YOU HEAR OTHERWISE 25
ONCE IN LOVE WITH AMY 41
BARREN 48
DEDICATIONS 55
COME AWAY, COME AWAY 59
READING, WRITING AND 'RITHMATIC

I look dumb. It must have been during my formative years, my awkward, shy, formative years, that I developed my look of cow-like acceptance, a sort of bovine placidity that says, "No pebbles of intelligence ripple these waters."

My relationship with school started well. I liked school, teachers seemed to like me, I always scored high on the Iowa Basics, especially the reading and vocabulary. I came from a family that had a professional bent, lots of doctors and lawyers. Both my grandmothers had been professionally trained in their arts at a time when women weren't generally going on to higher education. Grandmother Crowell was a classically trained violinist. Kiki, my father's mother, had her degree in Theatre from Northwestern and she taught English and dramatics. Interest in my academic future should have been assured.

But in junior high, in spite of my As in English, I was not put in Honors English. Kim, the cute cheerleader who sat next me in the back of the room and, more importantly, cheated off my tests, was. Psychologically, that wasn't the best time for this particular rejection, as it coincided with the departure of my father from the family on a more or less permanent basis.

I remember being sure, positive, confident, that I would be put in Honors English. The humiliation of the subsequent rejection taught me two things: first, that I wasn't as smart as I thought; and second, that cute cheerleaders were always going to win out over tall, shy, awkward girls. It never occurred to me to fight the decision; my opinion of myself was formed completely by those around me, for good or for bad, deserved or undeserved.
Here should be the point where a caring adult intervenes and helps me find my inner strength and confidence, or where my own gumption and steely mettle rears up and I say, Scarlett O'Hara-like, "I'll show them!" and go on to become a graduate of Harvard with a degree in nuclear physics and, as I was preparing my Nobel Prize acceptance speech, the chambermaid in the hotel would turn out to be cute Kim, now a college drop-out with massive hips.

In reality, nothing happened. Because by this time my parents, well, the one that was left, had stopped looking at my report cards. So the following year, when I failed science, no one paid any attention. I went on academic cruise control, doing enough so that I could pass from year to year.

By the time I reached high school, it was a given that I would fail math. Both my grandmother, Kiki, and my mother assured me that math was beyond the ability of the women in our family. In fact, Kiki liked to relate her favorite math story of her senior year in high school. At the time she was dating a football player, back in the days when they performed academically as well as athletically, and he sat in front of her in math class. On the day of the final the teacher walked to the door, turned to the football player and said, "I'm leaving the room now. Make sure Kiki passes the test."

This "math anxiety," I was to discover years later, is common in women from all backgrounds. Books such as Schoolgirls and Reviving Ophelia are now being written about what happens academically to girls in early adolescence, both girls with stable intact families and girls like I was myself, with a family eroding away like a fragile beach during a hurricane. Reading these books during graduate school was almost a cathartic
experience. At fourteen I remember the feelings of complete isolation; the certainty that I was the only girl in my entire school who was stupid and failing. But here was Schoolgirls describing not only a whole community of girls afraid to raise their hands, desperate to fade into the woodwork, and uncertain of their intellect, but a cultural pressure to conform that came not just from my family, but also from society.

In what now seems an almost incomprehensible irony, by failing algebra in high school, I, a shy and plain teenager, was not jeopardizing my future, but validating my femininity. My grandmother, Kiki, and my mother, both strong, educated women, unconsciously passed on to me a legacy of American Womanhood: girls lack the mythical math gene. And, by failing math, I could identify with Kiki, my revered grandmother who never seemed to like me much. I was, in one respect at least, just like her. Although I didn't join the cute cheerleaders while they tittered about blowing math exam after math exam, I was still a part of that feminine group. It was not cool for girls to be smart.

In high school I wasn't even trying. I knew that no matter what it was, I wouldn't get it, wouldn't understand it, couldn't do it. And it didn't matter because no one anywhere was going to hold me accountable for my grades. Piles of homework went undone night after night, and I, excelling in denial instead of algebra, then blamed my own lack of intelligence when I failed a test.

Every once in a while I would do well. I remember scoring 98 out of a 100 on a Hamlet exam without ever reading the play. I just took notes in class. To this day I remember that it was Polonius who said, "Brevity is the soul of wit."
It was a curious freedom. Academically I was completely invisible, to my family and to the school. I managed to squeak through, I didn't cause any trouble. And nothing was expected of me. Once a year I had a five-minute required visit to the guidance counselors. They had no idea who I was. There were 2000 students at Hempfield High School: get 'em in, get 'em out, save what energy you have for the really smart ones and the really bad ones.

Three years of high school and my family rarely asked to see my grades. There were only two requirements made of me: that I graduate (I wanted to drop out and get my GED), and that I learn to type. It wasn't important for me to be smart. If my family needed someone to beam at approvingly, I had two brilliant brothers: my older one the electronics/computer genius (self-taught, of course) and my younger one, the general all around genius, who has made an academic career of rejecting the Ivy League (Harvard recruited him for undergrad, he turned down Yale for grad). Sandwiched between my two brothers, my teachers mainly noticed me to tell me how much they enjoyed having Charles in their class the year before, or how much they looked forward to having Dan in their class when he reached high school.

In school, instead of studying and doing my homework, I was writing, my own stories and one long soap opera with a friend. In one of my high school courses a teacher pulled me aside and said, "You know if you spent more time studying than writing your little stories you might do better." Yet my creative written work usually elicited the only positive feedback I received.
In one English class, a poetry class, I received my final project with the remarks, "You show a real skill with words and sensitivity to experience. You really need to take yourself more seriously." Another writing class, another remark: you have a talent, you just need to find your voice. (Voice? I was totally clueless. I was invisible. Invisibles don't have voices.)

Somehow, some way, I went off to college. A lot of them. Four of them, to be exact. I worked my way through, left, earned money, went back. My college career was also fairly lackluster. But by this time I was beginning to realize that perhaps my "skill with words" would come in handy. In my sophomore year I wrote in one night a paper entitled "Alienation and Isolation as Major Themes in the Work of Ingmar Bergman." At the time I was at a small liberal arts college in Pittsburgh, Point Park College, which has a nationally known musical theatre department. I was studying film, a life decision that it would take me ten years to undo. We took our classes at Pittsburgh Filmmakers, which had a reputation for producing quality independent films. Now I was screwing up at a much higher level. I did frantic research for the paper the night before it was due, wrote all night long, and then was called into a private conference with my professor.

The professor was one of those arty types: bearded and sandaled and clad in black. He had seemed to dismiss me early on, perhaps for lacking stylistically in my attire, as well as for my carefully cultivated cow look that said, don't worry about me, I won't be surprising anyone, I am exactly as I look.

Of course a one-on-one meeting with this trendy film professor in the low lit-screening room of the artfully decorated film studio was an
absolute nightmare for me. One on one contact with faculty at any level of my schooling past elementary school was something to be avoided, as only no good for could come of it.

The professor looked suitably concerned as he leaned forward, looking at me as if for the first time. Did anyone ever tell me, he asked, that it was not proper to copy directly from my sources? He tried to be gentle about it, not accusing me outright of plagiarism, giving me the benefit of ignorance. Was now the time to admit I had only three sources and most of the paper was, as instructors are fond of saying, "in my own words?"

Of course, now I was in a pickle. I had cavalierly disregarded the assignment for a month, scrambled to acquire one interview with Bergman and two critical essays and then spent the rest of the paper giving my own interpretations of his films. So, which should I admit to? A complete and total lack of preparation or word-for-word copying?

It was unusual for me to defend myself, and I don't remember exactly what I said, but I convinced the professor that the paper was indeed my work. I could live with being called dumb and unmotivated, but even I had some pride. I would not be called unethical.

Here should be the part where, seeing my untapped potential, I find a mentor in this bearded, black clad filmmaker, whom I would thank tearfully while accepting an Academy Award for writing my first screenplay. It didn't happen. But thereafter I felt a certain freedom in the assignments in his class, writing what I believed and thought rather than what seemed acceptable. I was called on to read my critiques. It is one of the few moments of liberation I felt while in school.
The trend continued. Getting a D in a philosophy class, I rebounded with a paper. I was the only student to pick Option C - Write a dialogue between yourself, Aristotle, Socrates and Achilles on the meaning of excellence. Twenty pages or so of debate between me, two dead guys, and a mythical half-god with atrocious table manners, led to the following conclusion: excellence was, the four of us decided at dinner, Bruce Springsteen, who was currently at the top of the charts with "Born in the USA." I received an A on that paper. Perhaps the professor was a fan.

My senior year, script-writing class, again a professor handing back my project, looking at me as if I had suddenly taken to tattooing geometric equations on my forehead, "You surprised me. You can really write."

The theme of my school career. Written off until I wrote. One semester I even planned my course load so that as many courses as possible would require only a final paper, so that I could goof off most of the semester and work for only a week or so.

Here should be the part where I narrow my eyes, a la Scarlett, and proclaim, "Why, I do have a talent," join a literary brat pack and proceed to write a meaningful book at a young age. I am proclaimed the "J.D. Salinger of her generation."

In reality, nothing happened. To remind me I was still dumb, I took Basic Algebra my last semester in order to graduate from my final college, American University, while my brother, the college junior, was whizzing through multi-dimensional calculus at Northwestern. I gave up writing upon graduation. I didn't need it anymore, there were no more final papers to write. I had a college degree, much to the surprise of myself and
everyone who knew me. I would enter the workforce, pay my taxes, live decently, save for my retirement.

There's nothing like an invigorating stint in the public sector to make you aware of your own brains. In high school and especially college, everyone had appeared so intelligent, so scholarly. But at work, the playing field seemed awfully level. After college, I managed to land a job at a cable network, putting my fluffy degree in Communications to work.

Working overnight in master control at a television station. I left behind the book I was reading, Colette's *The Ripening Seed*. When I came to work the next evening, the operator before me held it up like a noxious piece of overripe fruit, "Is this yours? You're reading this and you don't have to?"

When I learned how to check the technical specs to determine if a TV show was broadcast-ready, the engineer said to me, "You learned this much faster than the others."

Well, I figured, I was working in the Vast Wasteland after all. But I had other odd habits picked up from school. I plan my life according to five-year plans, "Like the Soviets," I would tell someone. "What??" would be the response. I can't say my plans are working noticeably better than the Soviets, but I cling to them.

I was working with people who actually weren't dumb. But what was truly amazing was that they considered me smart. Over the next few years I began to realize that maybe, sandwiched between two genuinely bright brothers, I might be comparatively lacking, but I wasn't nearly as dumb as I thought. It's a short leap from there to resentment.
I do not come from a family where female achievement is unprecedented. In fact, if anything, there was a tradition of schooling women, especially in the arts. So why, I wondered, was I ignored, unencouraged, left alone to sink or swim. One grandmother was a violinist, one a Northwestern grad and actress, my mother had gone to college with the goal of being a lawyer, a lofty goal for a woman in the 1940s. They should have been solidly behind me, giving me the opportunities they had or making sure I was able to achieve the goals they had to abandon.

If anything, the collective accomplishments of the women in my family increased my resentment. What if I wasn't dumb? What if, with a little push, a little interest, I had been able to perform almost as well as my brothers. I blamed my mother and grandmother.

I blamed myself. If I had any sort of backbone I would have triumphed anyway. Isn't the world full of people who overcame greater obstacles than my own with more to show for it? Isn't there always some highly placed professional who grew up the product of a poverty-stricken, broken home, who did homework while single-handedly raising twelve siblings, who got up at 4:00 am to do laundry and write prize winning essays? If I wasn't stupid, then certainly I was weak.

It was a long time before I realized that the pressure to fail, if that is the way one is perceived, is just as strong and takes just as much energy as the pressure to succeed. In my twenties, attempting to re-define myself, I went through all the usual existential crises with which we often annoy our friends. I began to think, not about how my grandmothers and mother betrayed me by allowing me to fail, but of how their own experiences might have influenced how they dealt with me.
Perhaps, unconsciously, they did what they thought was best. Perhaps it would be less painful, ultimately, for me to be brought up with no expectations than to have them cruelly compromised in my early adult life. Perhaps, after their own experiences, my mother and grandmother just couldn’t see more for me, or more painfully, didn’t want more for me, wanted to keep me beside them in the confines of disappointment. Perhaps my legacy was not to be encouraged to fly too close to the sun, but to be left alone, to find my own wings later in life when I was strong enough to keep myself aloft. I would be, as my mother often called me, “a late bloomer.”

And, now, finally, here is the part where I narrow my eyes and shake my clenched fist towards the heavens and say, "As God is my witness, I'll never be dumb again." Or so I thought.

"Your brothers got all the attention because they got all the brains." So said my father as we drove under the immense starry skies of the Northern Plains going from Winnipeg to his home near Fargo, North Dakota. It was definitively stated. It was true. A true optimist might even see it as an admission of sensitivity to my family experience from a man who once admitted that he only knew my birthday was "in the spring sometime."

However, we would need to work on Dad’s timing. It was not what I needed to hear right before I would be driving back to my new home in Ames, Iowa and my second week of graduate school.

I forgave him for the remark. A college degree was surprising enough, graduate school was a jaw dropper. Naturally Dad, who hadn't seen me for five years, would be having problems assimilating that into his reality. I am still the dumb one in my family.
In my dreams my maternal grandmother comes to me as a ghost, unshaped and wavering around the edges, without a clear definition of personality or form. It's a strain to see her, to begin to recognize her, but slowly she will materialize, taking shape to the strains of violin music, solidifying and resolving as the music grows louder and the focus sharpens and the background players take their places and the stage fills with potted palms and a crystal chandelier spreads its benevolent glow over the room and suddenly I'm in a ballroom, invisible against the wall, feeling the whish of air as couples twirl past and I see her there in the middle of the room, in the arms of a handsome stranger, her satiny skirts swirling in an effort to catch up to her dancing body and her long, dark, wavy hair swinging out as if it has caught the rhythm of the music too, and she is laughing and happy and young and carefree.

My brothers and I always called her, very formally, Grandmother, and perhaps that's one reason she seemed aloof and distant to me during the short years I knew her. When we moved to Pennsylvania she was already 70; soon she would begin to show the symptoms of Alzheimer's.

Another dream, I see Grandmother Crowell, only this time in a small, bare room, perhaps in a church basement or small-town dance studio above the five and dime, a Victrola scratching out "Cheek To Cheek" while she patiently takes a heavy-footed man through the basic steps: one,
two, three, one, two, three. There is nothing distinguished about her here, the black, bouncing hair is securely tied back. Somber clothing and sensible shoes have replaced satin and high heels. It wouldn't do to give these men, whose palms leave sweat stains on the backs of her blouses and who concentrate with such intensity on their feet, expectations that she was there to do anything more than give dancing lessons. It wouldn't do to lead them to think she didn't want to return to her small rented room by herself. It wouldn't do to have these men sense the homesickness that accompanies each step, each turn, each gentle word of encouragement.

"Don't worry," she would say gently, as the man misstepped and landed on her foot. "Just concentrate. Like this...."

"I get so confused," he would say, "I get mixed up." It's as if he has never before realized, until this moment when she positions their hands and begins the music and expects him to move - - one, two, three, one, two, three - - that he even possessed feet.

My grandmother, my mother says, once traveled the state giving ballroom dance lessons and performing ballroom dance. When I knew her she was an old woman who moved slowly because of cataracts.

Music

II

There is a photograph of my grandmother as a young girl; her dark, thick hair is tied back with a ribbon, she wears the white dress of innocent, girlish youth, her violin is tucked under her chin and she has a look of contentment and confidence. The photograph hangs in our living
room and it's easy to see from the couch, where I like to read with the cat on my lap. It's a compelling photograph; it's easy to let my book fall, to gaze at it, to wonder about the young girl who will be my grandmother and her music.

In 1917, at sixteen, she boards a train clutching her violin case. She is leaving behind her father and mother and sister to live and study in Pittsburgh with a violinist and his family. She has been working towards this for most of her life.

When she finds her seat and turns toward the window she is happy and excited. She is going because she believes she can be good, maybe the best, and in Pittsburgh she will learn, train, practice, and with hard work spread her wings and soar with her music until she is lifted to the very clouds to play with the angels themselves.

When she finds her seat and turns toward the window she sees her father. She is going, not because she wants to, but because there are no sons, and hopes and expectations for success rest on her shoulders. In her violin case is a Stradivarius, a gift from her father. When he purchased her violin did he imagine her playing upon the stage, dark hair curling against the stark white of her dress as she gracefully played to applause and "Bravos"? His ambition robs her violin of its pleasure. She doesn't hear her own music, only her mistakes. When she waves good-bye to her father, throws him a kiss, she is fervently hoping and praying to make him proud, because she loves him fiercely and his approval means the world. He cups his hands around his mouth, yells something at her window, but she can't hear him over the noise of the train. Is he saying, "I believe in you. I believe in your talent?" Or is he saying, "You must succeed because I have given
you every opportunity." She doesn't know how much of her training is his hope, and how much is her hope.

When she was a young girl Grandmother Crowell was a serious student of the violin. One of the few clear memories I do have is of Grandmother, already showing the symptoms of Alzheimer's, playing the violin for the last time at our church. My mother had to lead her up to the front of the church, guiding her by the elbow, and it was easy to see she was confused. However, once she positioned her violin under her chin, she closed her eyes and immediately seemed more comfortable in the world. She played Ava Maria with only a few stumbles. It was the only time I ever heard her play.

Now there is another train, this one speeding west under gray skies, and on it is my grandmother, still young, but much wiser, who will never reach the clouds, who has "Not Good Enough," branded on her hands - - the same hands that lovingly pull the bow across the strings - - and branded on her spirit, which might have once felt so free and weightless. When was the determination made that she was "Not Good Enough?"

Was it a dramatic scene? Was there a single competition, a final moment, where some distinguished gray-bearded gentleman took her aside and kindly said, "You not good enough, my dear." Did the fire die from her eyes, and her lip tremble, and did she look down to the floor, the violin hanging limply at her side, and say, "I understand."

Or did the knowledge come slowly, more insidiously, leaching into her mind like a slow-acting poison? Were there degrees to her realization?
Did she first experience denial and confusion? Listening to other students did she notice pieces played with more grace, more passion, more depth? Did she resolve to practice more, work harder, give herself over completely to the music? Did she spend long evenings practicing and ignoring her callused fingers, the ache of holding her violin hour after hour? Maybe it was only at night, in the honest dark hours, that she would succumb to that final moment of anguish when she realizes that dedication and love do not equal genius.

Her father is waiting when she comes home. He puts a fatherly arm around her and gives her assurances that it doesn't matter; he is just glad to have her home and to know that she tried her best. He carries her violin case for her.

Her father is waiting when she comes home. He meets her at the station with steely eyes, a grim mouth, an abrupt hug. She looks down at the ground and knows she has failed him. He walks ahead of her, his back erect, his manner remote. She shuffles behind him, banging the violin against her leg as she walks.

My Grandmother didn't have possession of the Stradivarius when she died. It remained with her father, and upon his death it went to her much younger half-brother. Grandmother never spoke of her violin or her desire to become a professional musician while I knew her. I often wonder how much pressure she was under to excel as a young girl.

Most artists wonder, "Am I good enough?" Many fear the answer. I often wonder what it meant to be not good enough when you are woman in 1916. Did it truly mean she was worse than every single man playing in
every single symphony in every city, large and small, in the world? As I study my own art I have to wonder: What legacy has Grandmother left me? A legacy of Not Good Enough? A genetic encoding dooming me to failure or worse, mediocrity? Or is her legacy that of a woman who did the best she could in a time when that would never be good enough, no matter how dedicated the student, no matter how supportive the family.

Divorce

III

My great-grandparents divorced. If my parents had decided to divorce, instead of conducting their marriage half a continent apart, I would have been from a third-generation broken home. Surely I could have qualified for some sort of special federal aid in grad school: The Federal Grant for Students of Multigenerational Family Dissolution, or something of that nature. My Grandmother had to testify in her parents' divorce. When I try to imagine that scene, it's suddenly no longer such a glib subject.

I see the courtroom, always like the one in the movie To Kill A Mockingbird, which in my head I know is remote from the actual location, the Greensburg, PA courthouse. The courthouse is a domed, marble structure, looking much like a miniature version of the U.S. Capitol. Inside it is cool and ornate, with gilt etchings and a shiny floor that catches the sound of each shoe that treads upon it. Sweeping marble staircases would have carried Grandmother up to the courtroom, which would be far more judicially forbidding than the folksy setting conjured for Mockingbird. She would know, as she took her seat and waited for her name to be called, that the whole town, all her neighbors, all her friends, and sundry shopkeepers
and store clerks would know the story of her parents' break-up. The
drowsy, tree lined streets of Greensburg, county seat and prosperous coal-
mining town, would be buzzing with news as the gossip flew up Main,
turned down Maple, whizzed up Otterman, coming to rest at her family's
front door.

She would be dressed in her best, white gloved hands held tightly
in her lap. It is her day to appear, to testify, to mount the one short step to
the stand and put her hand on the Bible and swear to tell the truth the
whole truth and nothing but the truth. The real truth is - - if there was
some lie in this world, even one that would consign her forever to the
Catholic hell her Irish father used to believe in before decamping for the
gentler afterlife of the Episcopalians, she would tell it and spit in the face of
the Devil himself if it would transport her back to her living room, parents
intact.

The whole situation would be almost incomprehensible to her, a
nightmare from which she cannot wake, a purgatory to which she has been
admitted without even being dead. Even by today standard's the divorce is
scandalous. Her father is a prominent physician. He has given his two
daughters everything, and carefully nurtured her musical ability. He does
not seem to be the sort of man who would find himself cuckolded.

Her mother has turned out to be an adulteress; she is caught in
bed with a neighbor. There is a nasty public divorce. Her daughter, my
Grandmother, is called to testify, and she is called to decide as a female
under twenty-one with whom she wishes to live: her mother, who has
caused shame to be brought down on them all, or her father, whom she
loves without question.
She is distraught. It is too big a decision, too hard a choice. She watches her parents, the exploding of her family, the scandal and maybe thinks, "It will never happen to me."

After the divorce her father, my great-grandfather, will marry his nurse, a woman forty years his junior. There will be a half-sister and brother born the same time as my Grandmother's own children.

For most of my life, my step-great-grandmother, Julia, lived about twenty miles from our family. My brothers, cousins and I never met her. The courts asked Grandmother and her sister to choose which parent they would like to live with. Her sister chose her father. Grandmother wanted to live with her father, but wouldn't leave her mother alone. Grandmother's mother lived with her until her death. Her father never really forgave her for that decision.

It happens to Grandmother when the man who will be my grandfather leaves her. She learns again about heartbreak -- which she discovers has a unique sound all its own, as if a thousand violins were wailing in her ear. The divided loyalties she herself felt in that long ago courtroom visit her own children now. The man who will be my grandfather, and who will die before I'm born, will never be spoken of by their children in anything but loving tones. But she has married a man with scars that run deep, inflicted by a harsh mother, who can't/won't -- and she would go back and forth on this, can't or won't? Can't or won't? -- it's an important distinction and to salve her heart she would settle on can't -- can't be faithful to a wife, even one he may really love. He is a man who
can't pay bills on time every month like other men, putting a little aside for a rainy day. Instead, there are runaway trips to Texas with floozies she doesn't want to think about, and her father, himself knowing the pain of infidelity, will travel there to haul him back while she walks the floors at home with her firstborn. He comes back, maybe repentant, probably truly sorry. He loves her, his beautiful, talented wife, but there are urges inside him he doesn't fight. Soon he is buying extravagant presents and big, can't-afford-it purchases and soon the money, which there seemed to be so much of, is gone in a blaze of generosity and alcohol. Her daughter must come home from college to earn money for the family as a secretary and the bank tries to take her son's land - - the bank officials obviously believe in visiting the sins of the fathers upon the sons - - and it happens to her when peace suddenly seems more important than appearances.

When my great-grandfather died, he left Grandmother a large sum of money, which, had it been carefully invested and tended, should have provided for all the family, even today. However, my grandfather spent it all in about twenty years. I sometimes wonder if he were still alive, would he have regrets for his spendthrift ways when sees how hard my mother has struggled? My mother contends he and Grandmother loved each other all their lives; I am old enough to know that love is not always enough, so I understand what she means. My Grandfather and Grandmother are buried together. I don't know how his second wife felt about that.
The marriage is secret, because the young husband is in law school on scholarship and the scholarship doesn't allow him to be married, and in those days schools could make those sorts of rules when giving out money. So what's a young wife, who no one knows is a young wife, to do when she becomes pregnant? I find the thought horrifying. Now, here in my day, there are pills and devices and no school could make a rule forbidding a scholarship student to marry. But even today, 80 years later, women shudder at the thought of even a sterile, medicinal still-legal abortion; how could I contemplate a back alley abortion? I remember my shock when my mother told me Grandmother had had an abortion and why. "She never really got over it," my mother said. A thousand questions, now buried with Grandmother, haunt me still. How did she find out where to have it done? Surely she didn't discuss babies and abortions with her pastel-clad friends on the church lawn after services. Did she have a "fast" friend her parents frowned upon who could give her guidance through this experience? Probably, I think, the young husband took care of this, for men the subject would be more practical than forbidden. Perhaps among well-heeled young men of the time there were names and numbers that were passed back and forth over drinks and in locker rooms. Perhaps the young husband received the information and even gave his informant a hearty slap on the back. Perhaps the informant said, "Don't worry, this guy did one for Sally just two months ago and her parents never knew," Maybe she even feels lucky because at least she's married and Sally wasn't.
When I was a teenager, around fifteen, I sometimes went over to stay with Grandmother when my aunt had to work. She couldn't be left alone because of her Alzheimer's. Somehow, and I don't remember how, the subject of sex came up. I remember being embarrassed, I certainly never felt comfortable enough with Grandmother to broach that subject. She said to me, with perfect lucidity, and with anger, "I was twenty when I married and I didn't know anything about sex or how babies were made." At the time all I wanted was to calm her, get her to take her nap. But that snippet of conversation always stayed with me and when my mother told me about the secret marriage and her abortion, I wondered, was this what she was remembering, this bitterness at her lack of knowledge?

Was she thinking, on the way to the practitioner, that this was too much for twenty years? That this on top of a failed musical career, an adulterous mother, divorced parents, a new step-mother her own age, and a wedding that had no pictures to display, that this didn't seem fair? What was the room like? Was it clean and cared for, or dirty and dim, with the blood of other women staining the sheets she lies down on? Does the young husband wait outside or come in and hold her hand? Is it performed by a man, with clumsy hands? One who made sure before beginning that they could pay? Or is it a woman, a former midwife, who is frightened of being caught, but dedicated to practicing a skill that has been passed from woman to woman for centuries?

Does the midwife lean forward as Grandmother is splayed on the table, robbed of dignity, and does the midwife look into her eyes, squeeze
her hand and say, "It'll be alright. It'll be alright. It will all be over in a minute."

What does she think while it is happening? Does it hurt? Does she sob quietly or stare stoically at the peeling paint of the ceiling? Does she feel faint when it's over? Does she cry on the way home or remain strong and look forward not back, leaving what would have been her firstborn behind in a pail on the floor?

I used to imagine Grandmother in the hands of a back-street abortionist, some drunken quack. Of course it was always a man. In the course of other research I learned that midwives were outlawed in the United States by 1910. Now it soothes me to think that maybe Grandmother had some caring, trained woman, driven by circumstances to abort babies instead of deliver them. I think Grandmother was lucky, because she went on to have three children, eight grandchildren. I know a woman, now probably sixty, who had an abortion in the fifties. Her doctor performed a hysterectomy as well as the abortion. He told her is was necessary and she believed him for years.

Alzheimer's

V

This is no dream. You are here and I am here and I don't like it and I don't understand why I always have to do this and my brothers never do. You talk gibberish and I have to make sure you don't leave your room and when you reach the diaper stage Mom doesn't make me go anymore. We have never bonded, to use that popular term of today. You are like the
smoke from the cigarettes you and Mom smoke together, slightly acrid, drifting over my head and dissipating in the air. It will be years before I realize that this isn't your fault, the Alzheimer's entered your mind and you lost your grounding, and maybe on those afternoons we were alone together you tried to communicate to me through your illness and I couldn't hear you.

I remember my mother coming home one day from the nursing home where Grandmother was and saying that the doctor said she had the "dwindles," which simply meant that over the next few years she would just dwindle away. My mother didn't make us go see her, Grandmother didn't know us, and my mother didn't feel she wanted us to remember her that way.

The Cottage
VI

When my mother was young she and her family lived during the summers in a cottage in the Laurel Mountains of Western Pennsylvania. The cottage was part of an enclave of about five or six families and they had no running water or electricity. This was long before Grandmother and Grandfather divorced; he commuted up from his law practice in town.

It's here that I can find the woman my mother knew. Here Grandmother is no longer the failed violinist, the injured party of a failing marriage, the broken-hearted daughter of divorcing parents. Here she is a woman who is unafraid of snakes and mice in the house, who marches confidently outside with shampoo and towel to shower under the pool runoff spout. The pool is little more than a crude cement-lined hole; in it live
turtles and snakes and children. At the cottage, cigarette in one hand, drink in the other, she is smiling and relaxed.

I don't have much of Grandmother to bring with me through life. But I do have one image of her that came to me through a story of my mother's. At the cottage, a black snake stuck his head out of a knothole in the ceiling as Grandmother was stomping through the living room, mad at my grandfather. Grandmother grabbed it, yanked it out of the ceiling and took it out back where she hacked it to death with an ax, all the while swearing lustily at my grandfather. This is the image I cherish: the lovely dancer and violinist, ax in hand, muttering invective at her husband, chopping away at a snake in the wilderness.

It's many years after her death that I start to think of her not as just an old woman, but as a full woman, a woman who made decisions, each one leading like stones in a path to my life today. What kind of woman were you and what can I learn from your life? Would you be insulted if I wanted to learn from you how not to do things? I don't think so. My mother tells me, "Don't focus on just the bad, just the tragic. My mother had a wonderful sense of humor. She was strong and brave and smart."
YOURS 'TIL YOU HEAR OTHERWISE

I have a picture of my paternal grandmother, my brothers and I called her Kiki, that was taken when she was in her twenties with bobbed hair and a sultry expression that is inscribed by her - Yours 'till you hear otherwise. It nicely sums up Kiki's personality: personal affection and closeness embedded in a threat. Implicit in her statement is the knowledge that while Kiki may say she's yours, she really belongs only to herself. She makes no promises to hang around.

There is no question that Kiki was one of the most influential people in my life. I was in awe of her as a child, slightly worshipful, slightly resentful, always aware of the power she wielded over me and others in her life. I saw her as being so powerful that after she died I developed the habit of praying directly to her instead of God. My mind and my experience tells me that only God could surpass Kiki in otherworldly influence.

As I would send up my little prayers and hopes and desires (to do well on a paper, get the job I wanted, not screw up my life), I could picture her with God as clearly as if she were sitting in front of me. Kiki would, of course, be enthroned at his right hand, perfectly coiffed, expertly made up, elegantly dressed in snowy robes of white threaded with gold. "Let's not carry this austere purity thing too far," she would command her celestial dressmakers. Kiki would demand vain adornment even in heaven: earrings, pearls, red lipstick, face powder, perfume and a full wardrobe of ethereal, floating gowns.

Once, when Kiki was suffering from a blood disease, my mother and I went to her apartment to drive her to the emergency room. In spite of my grandmother's weakness and an illness that would lead to a two-week
hospital stay, Mom and I waited for a full twenty minutes while Kiki dragged herself out of bed, selected an outfit, coordinated shoes and handbags, carefully chose jewelry, applied her face. She didn’t like to go by ambulance; the drama was offset by the speed of arrival. The local paramedics would not be so patient as she applied lipstick with a shaky hand.

When I prayed I figured that if God wasn’t listening, then maybe Kiki would be. I would offer up my silent prayer and wait for her to turn to God and demand it be answered. And I thought, hoped really, that since ascending to heaven, Kiki would have gained a little clarity of understanding toward me, her only granddaughter, that she lacked on earth. I was counting on this clarity of understanding to compel her to use her confidence and arrogance to sway God in my favor. After all, she was sitting right there, no doubt peeking over the clouds to earth and offering up acerbic comments about the doings below in her distinctive, theatrical voice.

My fear was that these acerbic little comments were directed at me and that God, instead of feeling favorably toward me, was shaking his head at my capricious waste of brain, body and free will. “There goes my granddaughter,” I could imagine Kiki saying, “I told her as a teenager to stand up straight and pull in her stomach and I see she didn’t listen. Just look at that posture!” or “I can’t believe she’s still wasting her time with that boy. Doesn’t she have any pride at all?” or “My goodness, what on earth has she done to her hair?!”

I had either an ally or a foe in heaven with a direct line to God. In death, as in life, when dealing with Kiki I was trying to maintain my balance on constantly shifting sand.
It is clear from pictures of Kiki when she was young that she was not a beautiful woman. Attractive, but not beautiful. However, people seldom noticed this as she was born with a tremendous personal charm that carried her through difficult times that would have felled lesser mortals. She had a flair for the dramatic that drew people to her. She burned brighter than most people. Her voice carried farther and was clearer, her carriage was graceful and erect, she had a way of moving her hands for expression that the Royal Family could only dream of perfecting. She was educated and witty and knew exciting people. She never baked cookies. She was, in a word, a thoroughbred.

I, on the other hand, was her mongrel granddaughter. And, without ever putting it into words, Kiki managed to convey to me that I was a crushing disappointment. Shy, awkward, lacking in personal style and with hair Kiki once called "adequate," I was a hand obviously dealt to the wrong grandmother. I have no doubt God heard about that when Kiki arrived in heaven.

Kiki's early life is only vaguely known to me. In our family we don't always trade stories of births, lives, deaths with the ease and familiarity of some families. We keep ourselves cloaked in shadows, jealously guarding the good, resolutely ignoring the bad. Kiki took this even further. A born storyteller, little details were added and subtracted from her life in order to fit the outline. Yes, everyone could know that she was a good friend of the Hemingway family. No, everyone could not know that she had been married twice, the first time to a bigamist.
For years my mother had commiserated with her poor orphaned mother-in-law. Kiki's father had died when she was eight. "My mother," Kiki would say, with a hint of a quaver in her voice, "died when I was a girl. I had to go live with the Jamisons." Even in her advanced years it was easy to imagine Kiki as an orphan along the lines of the Shirley Temple variety: huge eyes, curls done up in a bow, an angelically brave demeanor while lisping earnest prayers at night for God to look after "dear mother."

One day Mom found out that Kiki's mother had died when Kiki was twenty-one, well beyond the "girl" age even in the early half of the century. My mother felt had. Occasionally, when talking about Kiki, Mom will bring this up. "When she said my mother died when I was a girl, I thought she meant ten or eleven!"

In her young days Kiki had many boyfriends. Around Valentine's Day, or other gift-giving occasions, she would relate to me the stories of all the candy and flowers she had received from all her various beaus. She received fifteen boxes of candy one Valentine's Day. I, completely uncomfortable with my body and self in high school, looked upon romantic attachments with boys as a terrifying uncharted territory that should remain unexplored. Still dealing with the cavalier comings and goings of my largely absent father, Kiki's son, I saw boys as bringers of pain, not candy. There were no prom dresses for Kiki and me to bond over.

Kiki, I now realize, liked to dwell on her triumphant high school and college years, not to vividly contrast my own arid social life with hers, but because, later, there would be no good times with men. Now I understand this. At fifteen I thought she was needlessly cruel.
These are things I, in my ugly adolescent phase, did for Kiki when her guard was down, when she would be an aging human woman betrayed by her body and not the charming creature most knew: I stood at her kitchen sink and washed blood spots from her eczema out of her nightgowns after helping her dress in the mornings, I stayed with her when she was ailing, cooked her meals, washed her dishes, ran errands to the stores, helped her in and out of bed and to the bathroom when her balance was unsteady, changed the channels for her in the days before TV remotes, kept track of her medications, threw away used tissues. I was more her companion than her granddaughter, answering the phone when she napped, sitting quietly when friends came to visit. These were duties I shared with my mother, because Kiki's son, my father, only dropped in on his family once every four or five years.

I was ten when Kiki became part of my everyday life. Until then my family had lived in the Midwest and I only remember seeing her twice. Once, she had come to visit us in Duluth, MN. It was June and we lived only two blocks from Lake Superior. When she arrived the lake was still completely frozen over. Ships were still getting stuck and had to be cut out of the ice. This wintery presence in such a summery month completely traumatized Kiki and she never came back.

The other time was when she was sick in the hospital. My parents got the call to come back to Pennsylvania right away. They loaded three children, luggage and our dog into a Volkswagen Bug and drove eighteen hours from Minnesota to Pennsylvania. At the time hospitals didn't allow children under twelve to visit, but because Kiki's condition was so serious
my brothers and I were allowed into her room to say good-bye. I have only this one sharp, fragmentary vision: Kiki in a hospital bed, hooked up to tubes and machines and hoses, perfectly coiffed and with her face powdered. She asked me, I remember, if I was brushing my teeth regularly. Even then, at her final hour, I don't remember any displays of affection. There were no kisses or hugs or declarations of love.

This, it turned out, was the first of Kiki's many death scenes. After my family's pell-mell cross-country journey to bid her a touching farewell she managed to live another twenty-five years. She had many more trips to the hospital, and each trip necessitated the gathering of family and friends, the choosing of burial outfits, tears and possible farewells. Her favorite episode was the time she fainted at a party, waking up to find herself stretched out on a table, a candelabra at her head and one at her feet, surrounded by stunned and upset partygoers. All attention was on her, she was dressed in her finest, it was a grand and sumptuous setting. “That really is the way I always imagined it,” she said to me later. “It's a shame I didn't die then.”

If anyone belonged on the Broadway stage or immortalized on celluloid, it was Kiki. Dramatics, and drama, were her essence. Not only was she a born actress, she was a trained actress. Unlike many women of her generation, she was allowed to go to college and to study what she wished instead of what she should. She received her degree in Theatre from Northwestern University in the early 1920s.

Often, when I think back to my dismal school years, my complete wrongness of look, I like to contrast the cultural climate of the times. Did
Kiki, despairing over my awkward shyness, realize the disparity of our respective positions?

Kiki was born when women of compelling, but not necessarily beautiful, appearance could capture the attention of the nation. If she had followed her heart and talent into the theatre or film, she could have been one of the first of many distinctive actresses: Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, Barbara Stanwyck, Lauren Bacall. Her features, strong and striking, but not beautiful, would have only added to a kind of exotic allure that many famous women of the time possessed.

I, however, reached my teens at the beginning of the cult of the Supermodel. Cheryl Tiegs and Christie Brinkley were my role models. The specs for being a Supermodel are narrow. In fact, I can't tell any of them apart anymore. For awhile I identified all supermodels as Paulina; then someone told me Paulina no longer models very much and now I identify them all as Kate Moss. There are times when I strongly suspect there really is only one Supermodel: some poor undernourished girl who has turned a tragic diagnosis of multiple personalities disorder into a career. I truly can't tell them apart. But I do know I don't look like them. I don't look like them because I look like Kiki.

I don't look exactly like Kiki, I'm not some carbon copy genetic replica, but I do possess her round face and somewhat prominent nose, and as I get older my body has changed from the tall, thin, rangy angularity of my mother's side of the family, to the fuller, lusher, rounder body of Kiki.

Even in her old age, and when Kiki was in my life she was already past sixty, she still turned heads. She had lovely white hair with none of the yellowing that often accompanies aging hair. She had a beautiful,
almost wrinkle-free complexion until the day she died. "Moisturize everyday," she told me one night when I was staying with her, poised right outside her bathroom in case she fell. I was watching her at the sink as she went through her nightly beauty routine. "That's the secret, moisturize everyday." In spite of numerous aches and pains she still stood tall and straight and she still moved with grace.

Once, when I was taking classes at a local college and working in their theatre department, I ushered at the student play. Kiki came with a group of her female friends and as she was standing at the box office window in a natty black suit complete with hat and gloves, the other usher turned to me and exclaimed, "What a lovely old woman!"

"That's my grandmother," I replied, and the girl looked from Kiki to me in disbelief. Obviously, she also thought there had been some mix-up in the granddaughter department.

Everything Kiki did, she did with an eye for the dramatic. She told me once of staying at her friend Marcelline's home during school breaks. Now, Marcelline's younger brother, Ernest, would later become a famous writer, but at the time Kiki and Marcelline were at Northwestern, he was simply her friend's handsome brother, recently home from the war and romantically wounded.

One Thanksgiving, after dinner, Mrs. Hemingway stood up from the table and announced that she expected Kiki and Ernie to do the dishes. Kiki, as she told me, trailed him into the kitchen and promptly burst into tears. Never in her young and pampered life had she had to do her own
dishes, let alone somebody else's. Suddenly, here she was, expected to clean up after a large holiday family dinner. She sobbed.

"Don't worry, Kiki," Ernest said, putting his arm around her. "I'll teach you how to do dishes." Which he did.

But, really, I remember thinking, how much help were you? I could easily see her, eyes brimming over with tears, face carefully composed, because Kiki would be very aware that crying makes most women unattractive unless done very carefully, turning her eyes up at him with a teary look that said, "Oh, you're so big and wonderful."

I have no doubt that the man who would become one of America's most manly writers stood at that kitchen sink washing endless dishes while Kiki stood by, probably gingerly handing him dirty plates in a manner that would show off her hands to the best advantage. Occasionally, she might give a ladylike sniffle, all the while charming him with conversation and coquettish looks. Ernest Hemingway probably never noticed that my grandmother's hands hardly got wet.

Kiki had poor taste in men. With all the men buzzing around her as a young woman, you would think she would have had the brains to pick better husbands. But perhaps her poor judgment had more to do with her attraction to drama than her brains. Many women are book-smart and man-dumb.

When Kiki was alive I knew, because my mother told me in hushed tones, that Kiki had been married twice. The first time was to a man, name unknown, who turned out to be a bigamist. The story goes that when Kiki found out she threw all his things out the window of their second story
apartment to the street below. She never mentioned him to me, but why should she when she had much bigger things to hide, like my grandfather.

I grew up believing that both my grandfathers were dead; my mother's beloved, charming but ne'er do well father of lung cancer shortly before I was born and my father's father of a stroke at roughly the same time.

Then when I was twenty-one and living away from home my mother called me unexpectedly to announce my grandfather was dying. Was dying? Hadn't he died twenty one years ago? In fact, which one? It seemed my brother had taken a phone call at the house. The nursing home needed permission to disconnect the life support systems of Charles Rutledge. My brother looked around the corner into the living room where my father, whose name that was, was sitting during a rare visit home. "But he's sitting right here," Dan said into the phone.

There followed a flurry of activity. My mother spoke with the hospital, then spoke with my father and then with Kiki. They both refused to have anything to do with the situation. While my mother struggled to make the decision to disconnect the life support systems of a man she had never met, Kiki dealt with the situation in stony silence.

Kiki's husband, my grandfather, had always been a taboo topic. I knew that he left the family when my father was ten. I thought he had died of a stroke in the early '60s. He had the stroke, but he didn't die, except, obviously, in the minds of his family. I have never seen a picture of him, so I don't know what he looked like.

Kiki never said but one thing to me about my grandfather and it has always stayed with me. "Your grandfather," she told me fiercely one
afternoon during his final days, breaking her silence, "was a liar, a drunk, a womanizer and a cheat." Sixty years apart had not dimmed her fury.

In the end, my mother had the plug pulled and my grandfather was cremated. He was sent down to our family and buried in his hometown. Kiki went to the burial, not because she had any final regrets or remorse and not out of Christian charity. "Open it up," she commanded the shocked minister at the cemetery as he held the urn. "I want to make sure he's dead."

All my life it seemed, I ran into people who felt that I should be wildly enthusiastic at my extreme luck to have Kiki as my grandmother. After my grandfather's exit from the family, Kiki went back to college, earned a degree in English and taught high school English and Dramatics until she retired at 65. My town was brimming with former students, all with their own warm and fuzzy memories of my grandmother.

She followed me out of town. Living in Washington, D.C. I met a man from my town who asked my last name. Was I related to Kiki Rutledge?

"Yes," I told him, "She's my grandmother."

"Aunt Kiki is your grandmother," he exclaimed. "Aren't you lucky!" I had never heard of this man, a perfectly nice man, until that day. But he seemed to know my grandmother well enough to call her Aunt Kiki and to profess adoration for her.

Kiki kept my mother and me in a separate compartment in her life. We didn't know many of her friends; we didn't participate in any social activities with Kiki. We were not often subjected to the charming side of her
personality. We were reserved for duty, like work horses. I never went anywhere with Kiki, but often I would accompany my mother or father to pick her up at someone’s house. I was her escort, helping her down the sidewalk, into the car. I had female cousins, older than I was, prettier, brighter, livelier, more popular, whom Kiki preferred to be seen with in public.

It was blindingly obvious that there was something horribly, irreversibly wrong with me. All these people, a whole cast of thousands it seemed, felt loved, or at least greatly liked, by my grandmother. They knew her to be warm and funny. If she was rather distant and harsh to me, then it could only be because I deserved it. I was obviously so gawkily wrong that even Kiki’s legendary charm failed her in my presence. The end result was that I became paralyzed by her. I almost never spoke unless it was to ask a “Do you need...” question or answer a question put directly to me.

At the same time I, and my mother, maintained a fierce and tenacious loyalty to her. She had only to ask and we jumped. Kiki was not oblivious to us, she didn’t order us around like some southern plantation belle. Occasionally, she even displayed gratitude. She was hard on us. But even with her hardness, her sometimes rigid disapproval, there was something about her that drew me, took me beyond mere duty, made me want to be with her and do her bidding. If there was any quality of Kiki’s I wish I had inherited, it is this innate ability to weave silken threads around people and draw them to her, effortlessly binding them to her side.

It was clear that Kiki and I could not relate to each other. To be fair, which I can be now, many years later, it’s hard to relate to a
pathologically shy teen-age girl who never opens her mouth and who is quite sure everything she says or does is wrong, even one who is your one and only granddaughter. I could barely speak, much less sparkle in her presence and Kiki, it turned out, had jettisoned nurturing abilities in favor of a more worldly charm. She didn't hug or cuddle anyone. Within the family, she was an emotionally distant woman.

I remember my hurt when I found out that Kiki was giving dramatics lessons to a classmate of mine. I found out when I went over to her house and met Juliet there by accident.

"Oh, your grandmother is wonderful," Juliet gushed in her refined British accent.

"Juliet is such a lovely girl," Kiki said to me after she left. She launched into a small listing of Juliet's many charms, all of which I could see for myself. Yes, Juliet had lovely thick, curly hair while I had fine, thin, mousy hair, (hair I had gotten from my father, her son, thank you very much). Yes, Juliet was amazingly poised for someone her age while I had approximately as much poise and grace as a wildebeest. Yes, Juliet was a fine, upstanding student while I sat in the back of the class when I could, writing little stories and accumulating a collection of poor grades.

Years later it occurred to me that having a grandmother trained to project confidence and charm and present an appealing appearance should have been a huge plus to me in my adolescence. My mother, dealing with the eccentric comings and goings of my father, was working two jobs and had little, if no, time to deal with my issues personal worth. I lived only a mile from Kiki, I was there a lot so there was ample opportunity for us to interact, for her to mentor me through those difficult years. I had virtually
no personality of my own, no "voice." If ever there was a lump of clay
waiting to be molded, it was me as a teen-ager.

Kiki, however, had never been a warm and fuzzy grandmother. She smelled of perfume and talc, not cookies and fresh bread. She liked her people already formed and glazed, not lumpily waiting for transformation. Shortly before she died I came home to visit her after living in Washington, D.C. for year. I had finally begun to mold myself and evidently it showed.

I remember sitting in the big, comfy armchair in her room. She was reclining in bed. Bed had always been Kiki's favorite place. Whenever life got tough, such as when my grandfather resurfaced to die, Kiki took to her bed.

"It's so disturbing," she would say about whatever upsetting event was taking place, "I really feel I must take to my bed." Most of her greatest traumas were spent under the covers in a darkened room. As she got older she spent most of her days in bed. It was where she was the most comfortable.

As I sat in the big armchair, she looked across the room at me, tenting her hands in a way I've caught myself doing. "You know," she said, "you really are turning into a lovely young woman." She died of a stroke at age 87 soon after that. I've always felt glad we were able to end on a high note.

Kiki was very uncomfortable with emotion. Her charm and warmth were lovely surface accoutrements, but when it came time for the heavy duty emotional involvement of the kind you would give children or grandchildren, she couldn't pull it off. She was a lousy mother and she
knew it. She was a less lousy grandmother, but she still was far off the mark. Perhaps she had never been able to give of her self deeply to us because she was so busy giving so much to everyone else. It must be draining to charm a multitude. It earned her much love, respect and help from the community and her friends, but it left little for those she depended on most. We were tied by blood, so perhaps she figured we had to be there anyway.

In addition, I must have represented to her some of her losses in life. Her loss of freedom and career, whether by her choice or the choice of those around her. Why she didn't follow her desire onto the stage or out to Hollywood is something we never discussed, because we didn't discuss anything.

I was also a living legacy of a man she hated, I was yet another person turning to her with needs that perhaps she didn't want to fill. When my grandfather left in 1937, he left Kiki with no money and two small children to support. She became a working single mother. That is a difficult task today, sixty years ago it must have been almost impossibly daunting. I can only hope that as she gazes down from the heavenly firmament she is nodding approvingly at my unmarried state, ("I hope you have better judgment than I had," she once said to me), and at my somewhat Don Quixote-ish pursuing of writerly dreams.

Recently I sat in one of my graduate classes listening to the professor relate how some peoples believe cremation destroys a person's essence so that she is no longer able to visit their living loved ones in dreams. His wife, for instance, had never dreamed about her cremated
mother-in-law to whom she was close but always dreamed about other
buried relatives of less importance.

   All around me other students agreed. This one could dream of her
buried Grandma, but not her cremated Grandpa, that one could have
dreams of her buried aunt but not her cremated Grandma, etc. I could only
smile. I've always had an active dream life when I sleep. I have dreamed of
Kiki often and vividly. She was cremated. But I know that it would take
more than a mere burning of her physical body to dispel an essence as vital
and forceful as Kiki.
ONCE IN LOVE WITH AMY

My mother once said that she thought about spelling my name the French way - Aimee. I'm glad she didn't. I've know a few Aimees and they seemed to be thoughtful, personable women, but...deep in my subconscious lurks a certain name snobbishness and in spite of the fine Aimees I've come in contact with I remain secretly convinced that had I also been an Aimee, I would be forever destined to dot that 'i' with either a heart or smiley face.

The other problem with Aimee is that double e. I have trouble with that double e on the end of a name. I always want to drag that sound out, eeeeeee, as if a mouse had suddenly run across my foot.

It wasn't until I began to write semi-seriously that I gave my name any thought. Up until that time my crises of identity and sense of self were centered around other issues: am I smart or dumb? am I too fat, too plain, too tall, do I have style or am I a hopeless Glamour Don't? There were so many ways in which to fall short that I could easily brood on multiple failings in the space of an afternoon. My name - - the very bread and butter Amy - - was minor, almost insignificant for years.

Then, in my first creative writing workshop since college, our first assignment was to write the story of our names. I wrote about how I was named Amy Catharine, for Amy in Little Women and Catharine, my paternal grandmother, whom I called Kiki.

My mother named me after Amy because she wanted me to follow in the footsteps of the smart sister, the crafty blonde who calmly accepts her lack of artistic genius and marries a rich man. I would be no sentimental Beth, tragically dying young,
uncomplaining and noble. My fate would not be as the wife of a "good man," who works hard and lives honestly but is never really able to support his family. I would be no Meg. My literary legacy would be the snobbish sister, who brownnoses her way to Europe and spends her life in lavish luxury with a man who adores her.

It was a well-received little exercise and I've alluded to my literary namesake since then. The only small problem was that I wasn't named after Amy in *Little Women*. I was named after the song *Once in Love with Amy*, which Ray Bolger sang in the movie *Where's Charley*. Since most people have never seen that movie or heard the song, I felt that my *Little Women* story made better copy.

Many times I wonder how I would be different if I had been given a different name. What if I were Brandi (or worse, Brandee), instead of Amy? I see myself definitely dotting the 'i' with a heart while wearing a tight tee shirt and big hair. As Amy I've never been able to manage big hair, but I bet it would come naturally to a Brandi.

When I was in junior high, around confirmation age in my heavily Catholic little Western Pennsylvania town, the popular name that all the girls coveted was Courtney. Many of my friends took it as their confirmation name, which I'm sure caused much eye-rolling among the Catholic clergy of the area. I thought that confirmation names had to be saints, but my friend Lori assured me that the crafty Catholic schoolgirl could somehow get around this and so acquire the coveted Courtney. My family was not Catholic or religious; we had a church, Christ Episcopal, in much the same way.
way many people have a church, we attended only on the odd Easter or Christmas.

There weren't very many Amys while I was growing up in Western PA. There were multitudes of Kims and Judys, a sprinkling of Donnas and Kathys, a Joyce, a Tracy, a healthy population of Denises, but few Amys. It's more of a Midwestern name, seeming far more at home under wide, sunny skies than hidden in the valleys of gray clouded mountains.

*Once in Love with Amy* is a highly sentimental song. It should conjure up an image of a loving *Little Woman* -like daughter, Amy, looking tenderly down at her patient and understanding Mother (the model for whom could easily be Marmee from *Little Women*), as Mother tearily relates how the sentiments of the song - - *Once in love with Amy, always in love with Amy* - - will forever describe her feelings for her daughter. By the end of the touching scene both are weeping happy tears into lace handkerchiefs.

The plot for the movie *Where's Charley* has nothing to do with mothers and daughters. The film version of the stage play, *Charley's Aunt*, starred one of my mother's favorite actor-dancers, Ray Bolger. The movie is a period piece, set in the late 1800s, a comedy and musical. My mother saw it five times, loving it more each time she saw Ray sing and dance the song *Once in Love with Amy*. My mother decided then if she ever had a little girl, she would name her Amy.

Of course the problem with little girls is their annoying tendency to grow into sullen teenagers. *Where's Charley* came out in the early 50s, when my mother was in her early 20s. Probably at that time she had many hopes and dreams for the future. Marriage and little girls probably still
seemed like a good idea, although, by now, she was also most likely catching on to the fact that life can be hard.

My mother had two years of college, where she majored in political science, planning to go on to law school and be a lawyer like her father. She dropped out and returned home when her father had run through the family's money. He could no longer pay for college for her, couldn't keep up with the other bills. Soon after he left the family and my mother became a legal secretary instead of a lawyer.

Sometimes I forget what an ambitious career goal being a lawyer was for a woman in the early 50s. It seems out of character for my rather mild mother. But, back then, she was not the woman I grew up with, the exhausted, worried, over-worked woman who typed depositions at home in the morning before working eight hours a day at a law firm in order to meet the basic expenses of the family. Back then she was a young woman, planning names for her children, plotting her ambitious career path and swimming competitively.

Soon after she left college and began working as a secretary, my mother went to New York with a friend. At the time Ray Bolger, her favorite actor-dancer, was playing in the stage version of Where's Charley. But her friend wanted to see Top Banana with Phil Silvers. My mother acquiesced and has regretted it to this day.

But acquiescing was something my mother was becoming good at. She acquiesced to the wishes of her parents and left college when she might have stayed and found ways to pay for it herself. She acquiesced when she married my father, in spite of having severe doubts shortly before the
wedding. She acquiesced to my father and his radio career and moved with him twenty-six times in thirteen years.

And somewhere during all that giving in she had a little girl and named her, as she had planned, Amy. As in once in love with, always in love with. And from ages fourteen to seventeen this little girl, the one she would be forever and ever in love with, said approximately one sentence to her, over and over. "You just don't understand." To which she replied, over and over, "I don't like your attitude, young lady." It was hardly the imagined tender and teary scene between a loving Little Woman- like Amy and her understanding Marmee.

Oh, as the playwright said, what is in a name? Shortly after I wrote my piece about being named for Amy in Little Women I had the chilling realization that Amy was the character who gives up her artistic dreams due to lack of genius. Better I should have been Jo: homely, tall, awkward but succeeding as a writer. But, no, my mother had hung me with a name that I couldn't live up to in either literature or song.

Once in Love with Amy is a sweet song and it should be attached to a sweet and lovely girl. I was a mess. I was taller than most of the boys in my class because the ethnic mix in Western PA tends to produce short men. I read a lot in a cultural climate of working-class teens who for the most part rejected academic achievement. In spite of my reading, I was making lousy grades, ensuring my life-long ticket to nowhere. I had no clear picture of anything. I was at once a docile and helpful daughter, the child my mother would tell people was "the strong one, the one she counted on," and a seething cauldron of undirected resentment who subjected her mother, and only her mother, to tearful fits of melodramatic emotion. No
doubt there many moments during my adolescence when my mother heartily wished she had stuck to John Wayne movies.

It was also clear that once in love Amy, always in love with Amy, was a lie, because my father, whose favorite I was, left home when I was ten, only coming back during his more turbulent emotional crises. I even have the requisite movie-of-the-week memories of my ten-year-old self waiting and waiting and waiting for him to come home, of watching for him out windows and listening for his car. I couldn't understand why he would move us all the way from Duluth, MN to Greensburg, PA only to move back, alone, to Minnesota a few months later.

So I was a failure as an Amy. I used to daydream about what name I would choose when I was a rich-and-famous-I'll-show-them writer. I favored last names that started with St.: St. John, St. James, St. Paul. Then, for a while, I favored names that sounded like neighborhoods in London: Kensington, Barrington, Bloomsbury. For first names I favored the dramatic names of romance heroines: Victoria, Caroline, Alexandra. With my new name would come a new me: a smart, stylish, confident me. All I needed was the right name.

When I did seriously begin to think of changing my name for career purposes, I polled my friends. "It does sound young," my insignificant other said. He campaigned heavily for my middle name, Catharine. He thought Catharine Rutledge sounded regal. But Catharine Rutledge was, and always will be, Kiki. I couldn't be Catharine Rutledge; Kiki may be physically dead, but her presence still dominated my psyche. Anyway, if I were to publish under the name Catharine Rutledge it was highly likely a large number of
people would assume it was Kiki, no matter how improbable. I would be, as I always was when she was alive, dwarfed by her magnitude.

Another friend suggested Kate, saying that would sound especially good when coupled with my mother's maiden name, Crowell. Kate Crowell had an alliterative, snappy, modern sound. Kate even had meaning in my life, as a child I had been known as Amy Kate. Other friends were captivated with the vision of creating a whole new persona; they would suggest names they themselves had coveted when younger.

In the end I was unable to give up Amy. In spite of the fact that I came across other Amy Rutledges, including, now, my sister-in-law and a TV reporter in my former home of Duluth, I realized that Amy had powerful significance; in it were the implied hopes and dreams of a young mother for her daughter. I couldn't reject my name.

Of course, my mother wasn't that sappy. She didn't hang over my cradle crooning the song to me or clasp me to her bosom and proclaim, "You'll have a better life than I, my daughter, even if I have to give my own to ensure it!" Although, it would have been nice. But Amy was a name she liked, that reminded her of a movie and dancer that gave her pleasure. We share a love of movies. And my name reminded me that my mother was more than the tense and worried woman I knew most of my life. At one time she had been young and dreamy, as I was, and she had invested that part of herself in me.
There was a little girl, with big brown eyes and a shy, tentative almost-smile, that I spent a few weeks with one summer. Not playing or swimming or doing crafts at day camp, for I never met her and she had already died when I learned who she was. But I spent time with her anyway, imagining her life in the proprietary way people sometimes do with the tragically dead.

Heat-induced, no doubt, this unwavering devotion to her during those August weeks following her murder. It was over a hundred degrees daily in D.C., with humidity you could feel bathe your skin in a sticky sweat the consistency of egg-whites. In the afternoon a thunderstorm would come roiling through: lightening, high winds, crashing thunder, jackhammer rain, the end of the world came every day at three. I was packing to move a thousand miles away from my home of ten years in an non-air-conditioned apartment.

For company, for noise, for thoughts other than my own, I kept the television on all day long. Even my cat had deserted me for the dimmest, coolest corner he could find until the sun would go down and give some small relief from the heat. I was watching, my attention surging and ebbing depending on the story and my mood, an average of five hours of news a day. In Washington, D.C. the news begins at four and doesn't quit until seven, this in addition to the noon news and the morning news. I was horribly well-informed.

It was just another news story, another missing child, perhaps at another time it would have made a larger impact, demanded and received
more air-time, made the satellite feed to other, distant, affiliate newscasts. But the country was already in the grip of the Susan Smith case and her two missing little boys. How many missing, soon-to-be-found-dead children stories could be aired before viewers just didn't want to hear anymore?

I think it was her picture, the only one ever shown, the one with her big eyes and shy almost-smile, that first caught my attention. That picture seemed tragic in and of itself; a badly lit Polaroid taken at Christmas, already a few years old. Was there no school picture with a big, smile-for-the-camera grin? No home videos, like those I saw nightly of the Smith boys? Only this pathetic little photo of a small-for-her-age twelve year old girl?

As a murder mystery, it was a resounding failure. I knew as soon as I saw the mother's sobbing boyfriend on television that this poor little girl hadn't disappeared. The Boyfriend was dressed in thick flannel, his grammar was bad, his accent was thick Virginia backwoods. "We don't want no harm to come to our little angel, we jus' want her back. Please, whoever took her, we won't ask no questions, we jus' want her back."

He had a mustache that quivered as he spoke, the skin around his eyes crinkled in sorrow and despair, and his shoulders shook as if he were racked with great sobs, but no tears fell. He looked older than he was.

He needed a haircut and a shave and I knew with all the prejudice of my background and education that this overwrought man (too overwrought, as if a drama coach was just off camera yelling "More emotion! More!") was responsible. So, I wasn't surprised when they found the girl's nude body, weighing only 50 pounds, by the side of a Virginia highway and arrested the mother's boyfriend.
The facts are simple: this little girl, Valerie was her name, was kept chained up in the basement of her mother’s house by the Boyfriend. Valerie used a coffee can to relieve herself. She was bathed in a creek with a garden hose. One evening, when she was allowed up to empty the coffee can, she tripped and spilled the contents in the kitchen. The boyfriend punished her, beating her to death. The Boyfriend and the mother dumped Valerie’s body by a highway and reported her disappearance to the police as a stranger abduction, obviously hoping to be more successful than Susan Smith at the ruse.

I carried these images of Valerie around with me as I packed towels and wrapped dishes. I pictured that Virginia highway where her body had been found, jungly, insect-infested, green and suffocating, at the height of its humid, summer growth.

I took these images to bed with me at night. Lying awake, I would think about this dead girl. What was the basement like? Dirt, no doubt. This was no middle class rec room furnished with the old couch that was in the living room before it was redecorated. Infested probably, with mice and other vermin. Dark. Definitely dark, only one light, a naked bulb hanging from a dangling, exposed wire in the center of the room. It was kept turned off. Damp. Probably the basement flooded in the rain, never dried completely, it would smell musty and rank. Cold. Draughty and unheated, even in the hottest of weather it would have a chill that would raise goosebumps.

What would you listen for when you’re locked up in a basement and you’re only twelve? For water, definitely. The rush of water as the toilet was flushed. What sort of reverential magic would a toilet take on when
you're not allowed access to one? The toilet in my apartment was old and
often ran. I was always having to take off the tank top and jiggle the
innards around, cursing the landlords the whole time.

Running feet. If you're locked in a basement and you're only
twelve, would you listen for the running feet of your brothers and sisters on
the floor above you? Would that seem like the ultimate in freedom? To run
and pound on a floor so that those beneath you could hear each step? My
across the hall neighbor was locked in a ugly battle with the woman who
lived beneath her over her supposedly heavy walking.

Food. If you're twelve and locked in a basement you can probably
smell the food cooking and hear the "gimmes" for seconds and the dropped
forks hit the floor.

At night, hot and exhausted from packing, with the cicadas
droning and the car swishing by, I would think about this little girl listening
for dropped forks and the pop of bacon frying and I would pet my cat. My
cat, who was fed a can of cat food every morning and dry food in the
afternoon and milk when he meowed loud enough and who slept on the bed
at night and in a special basket during the day and I would try to reconcile
his life with Valerie's. Heady stuff for a nighttime reverie and not at all
conducive to sleep.

It was the very lovelessness of her life that touched me, more so
than the little Smith boys, who had looked as if they'd been hugged and
kissed up until that fateful night, and I wanted to make it better for Valerie.

When I had first moved to Washington I worked as a live-in nanny
for a couple with two children. I had always loved children, especially
toddlers. I was with the family for two years; the older girl was four when I
left, the younger, "my" baby, was two. I thought about these girls and the attention that their parents and I lavished on them. Bedtime stories, trips to the parks, songs and Sesame Street and extra long baths to play in the bubbles, and soft lullabies as they were rocked to sleep.

One of the most perfect things in the world are baby's feet. I used to love to tickle the girls' feet and hold them in my hands, and against my cheeks when I would change their diapers. The baby sometimes would offer hers up for kisses from her highchair. In the middle of my feeding her strained peas, the bare foot would extend and the finger would point and this was my cue to tickle and kiss. Now, she is only a few years younger than Valerie, and I haven't seen her for six years. I had a fleeting thought, is she alright? Has anyone hurt her?

When I was twenty-four, about a year after leaving the family I was working for, I was told by my doctor that I should think about having children before I was thirty. I had a multitude of problems, female problems, the kind women whisper about in the hallways at work. From my first period, when I stood at the doorway to my bedroom, in tears from the pain, pleading with my mother to do something, I had always had problems. Birth control pills to control the cramping, five different kinds until the right one was found. An operation to remove a benign tumor. Now, not only would I most likely have trouble conceiving, but they would have to sew me up to keep the baby in. I had a friend that used to say, "God created humans, Satan created the female reproductive system."

So now I was thirty, and moving far away, and obsessing about a little, dead girl that I couldn't bring back, that no one could bring back. I would daydream scenarios with happy endings. I could've adopted her. I
would go back to my job, get a two-bedroom apartment, adjust my hours to get home when school let out. My brother could teach Valerie to pitch a softball and my mother would sneak her ice cream, because that's what grandmothers do. We would get a dog to go with the cat.

I knew from my nanny days how fiercely you can come to love children who are not your own. And, through the unfairness of Valerie's life, I came to know the unfairness in my own. Why should that awful woman who was Valerie's mother have children, many children, while I was potentially unable to? I asked myself the same question Valerie probably did, "Why me? What did I do wrong?"

I know a woman who had her children because all her friends were having children. She doesn't like children. She told me about a time when her son was sick and wouldn't stop crying and she picked him up and held him in front of her face and screamed, "You're doing this on purpose." He was a year old. But, she honestly believed he was crying to annoy her.

In supermarkets I see women with children. These women slap their hands or drag them down the aisles by the arm or threaten to leave them behind. Once I saw a boy about eight lean against his father in a check-out lane. His father pushed him roughly away, "I told you, none of that faggy stuff!" When you begin to look for them, you see them everywhere, the joyless parents and sniffling children.

There's a word used to describe women who are unable to have children: Barren. As if you could equate fertility with land scorched by war; devoid of life, of color, of substance. As if the inability to have children meant an inability to love, as if infertility affected not just your ovaries, uterus, fallopian tubes, but your heart and soul and mind.
But barren is a place; a place where a small, twelve year old girl is abused and neglected. It has nothing to do with the ability to have children and everything to do with the ability to raise children.

There are, said one of my already successfully fertile friends, lots of children out there who need mommies. There’s no biological clock to adopting. My friend Stephanie, who suffers from secondary infertility, and her husband adopted a baby from Russia. A beautiful little girl with downy blonde hair that sticks up on her head. My maternal instincts are strong, in spite of my reproductive malfunctionings. Maybe I’ll adopt a little girl. One with brown eyes and a shy-almost smile.
DEDICATIONS

If you choose to include a dedication page, it appears immediately after the title page and is numbered as page iii. A heading on this page is optional.

Iowa State University Thesis Manual
Revised September 1996

My thesis is long enough. I worry as I thumb recent thesis copies in the library. Most contain some sort of dedication to family, friends, committee members. Certainly I am grateful to Fern Kupfer, my major professor, for her dedication to my thesis, for continuing to believe in it long after I lose hope and patience and grow so sick of it that I dream of throwing up slowly and carefully on each and every page. Naturally I'm grateful to my other committee members. I would thank Prof. Dunlop for her encouragement of my thoughts and academic pursuits; in her lit class I did some of my best academic work ever. I would thank Prof. McCormick for taking me on and being interested from the beginning and giving me confidence that her input would add greatly to my work. I was grateful for an opportunity to work with Diana Burgess, whose moving and beautiful writing inspired me to try to write at her level.

I would have to thank Carl, my insignificant other for more years and more fights than either of us cares to remember. I would like to remember my baby brother Daniel, who is always willing to step in and rescue his ditzy older sister, fulfilling what should have been my father's role. And I couldn't thank Dan without thanking his soulmate, Elise, my own personal Martha Stewart who refinishes our furniture and renovates our houses and whips up homemade blueberry muffins first thing in the
morning. And friends, like my evil twin Amy and my we-can-weather-any-crisis friend Kathy. And strong and noble Ed, and Charles and Amy and Aunt Gwen, and Uncle Dan, who loves me in spite of my support of gun control. It was like I was winning an Oscar.

Some of the dedications I read go on for more than a page. They are emotionally effusive and spiritual. Many thank God or some other sort of Eternal Spirit. Most writers movingly thank their families for love and support. I am baffled, embarrassed, confused. How do I thank my family? What should my dedication read? To my mother, father and grandmothers for love, support and for screwing up royally so I have something to write about. Somehow, I don't see my mother glowing with pride.

I am uncomfortable writing about myself and my family for many reasons. Sometimes I feel that I have no business airing my family's dirty laundry. Sometimes I feel that I have no business having a "voice" as a writer, that what I have to say is self-indulgent. I have a fear of victim lit, of parading my weaknesses in front of the world for no redeeming reason. "Feel sorry for me," I'm worried my writing says. In my very WASPily repressed family, feeling sorry for yourself is a sin second only to airing your dirty laundry in public. Lastly, I worry about rejection, about legions of derisive persons who look at me and say, "Just who do you think you are, wasting our time like this?" I think again that it's too bad no one offers scholarships for brooding.

I have always written. As a little girl I stapled together folded-in-half sheets of paper and wrote "books." Later, I kept journals, all of which embarrassed me when I re-read them years later. I threw them out. Later still, I wrote to escape my family life and school, neither of which was
working out the way I had hoped. I wrote because it gave me the same feeling as reading, because I was able to put aside my unacceptable outer body and lose myself in another world, create a community I felt comfortable in. In my twenties, when I began to write seriously, I came to appreciate the terroristic qualities of writing. "Someday," I once threatened a nasty co-worker, "you're going to appear thinly disguised in a book."

Now, I stand in the library chewing my lower lip, the nervous habit that has mostly, but not quite, replaced cracking my knuckles. How can I dedicate this thesis to my family when I've laid it all open for people to read? I've unmasked them, stripped them of the fictional personas they usually wear. Now people will be able to thumb through my fiction like some armchair Freud and nod sagely, saying, "Ah, look, the father leaves the family when the young girl is nine. Well, we all know where she got that idea from."

Many people appear in my fiction, disguised as someone other than themselves. In "Come Away, Come Away," I combine my mother and my best friend's mother to create Peg. I give Granny elements of Kiki, and my younger brother, moving silently through the family, taking care of himself, becomes Willie. I hope to re-create some of the effects of the real Bypass that destroyed my aunt and uncle's farm. All my small mountain towns are Greensburg. But who needs to know that besides me? I can be self-indulgent, work out my issues, under the guise of art.

I am thinking now about how far will I go to be a writer, to join that community. Awhile ago I wrote an essay about my long time, on-again, off-again relationship with the man my friend, Maureen, calls my "pseudo-boyfriend." I entered the essay in a contest where it won an honorable
mention. When I received my notice I knew in my heart that the winner was a victim of violence, that my gentle essay was lacking in shock value. I was right; the winning essay is by a beaten wife. Irate, I called my man. "If you really loved me," I snarled, "and cared about my career, you would've at least held me at gunpoint once or twice."

In fiction I can write about all my most painful moments, and gleefully appropriate those of others. In my non-fiction I must worry and fret: am I being too harsh, will this person hate me, will that person be angry? Mostly, I worry about betrayal. Creative non-fiction has a finer line, it can show a writer for her true colors. It also holds you, more or less, to the facts, and what fun are those? In fiction I can make people say what they should have said in life.

I haven't yet solved my problem. Now that I mixed my mother, my grandmothers, my father into this mess, how do I thank them? One part of me says, "Yeah, well, they deserve it. If they had paid more attention to me, done a better job of raising me, I would be an accountant instead of a writer and they'd be getting their taxes done free instead of being splashed all over the page." Another part of me knows that's true; if they hadn't screwed up, I wouldn't be writing this. Their mistakes are, in the end, my gain. They'll be appearing in my writing, in one form or another, for the rest of my life.

I reshelve the thesis I'm looking at, the one where the writer takes two paragraphs to thank her mother. I won't write a dedication. After all, I'm still speaking to my family and I figure that's dedication enough.
COME AWAY, COME AWAY
(Fiction)

From behind the gray house the mountains rise like tiers of an ancient temple, rippling ever higher, the foothills offer up their October colors in a red-orange appeasement to the gods, until the summit of the steepest, furthermost, highest mountain disappears in a blue mist. In the autumn and in the spring, with the new green washing its way upward as the days grow warm, the mountains provide a backdrop that overwhelms and humbles the gray house as it sits in the little valley that it shares with Old Route 99, the Marcus J. Turner Bypass and the beginnings of Lilley Valley Township. In front of the gray house the hills rise also, but in gentler gradations, wide enough to populate and it was here that the town settled itself, in small hollows and up and down the slopes.

The gray house sits alone now. Once it was one of many well-kept farms that dotted Old Route 99 as it rambled down through town and up into the mountains beyond, wedded to the topography, breathlessly twisting and turning up, curving steeply and violently down. Spectacular in spring, summer, fall, a deadly menace in winter, it connected the town with the state turnpike.

Three years ago the Turnpike Commission, spurred on by Judge Turner, under whose office window tractor trailers rumbled on their way through town, proposed, passed and implemented a bypass, named, appropriately, the Marcus J. Turner Bypass. The Bypass swung around town and plowed through the homes, farms, and fields of Lilley Valley Township, leaving displacement and an ugly gash in the blue mist mountain, where it plowed through instead of over, in its wake.
The Bypass cut the gray Shannahan house off from its neighbors to the west, and left it forlorn and forgotten at the new dead end that was Old Route 99. On the day the Commission blasted the new road through, all the windows of the gray house shook and there was no more traffic, no more cars and pick ups slowing down with a honk and an arm waving out an open window as they passed. On the day the earth movers came, Billy Shannahan, thirty-seven, took the recently paid off five-year-old Toyota and went to get beer and cigarettes and never came back. Billy never was very original.

Peg Shannahan was thirty-five on the Saturday Billy called out, "Peg, where's your purse? I need money for cigarettes." Was it a spur of the moment decision, she wondered? Did Billy, rooting for crumpled dollars from the tips she made Friday afternoon, see the turnpike money deposit slip in there, and act on the spur of the moment? Or did he plan carefully, not packing anything so he could leave unencumbered with memories and family photos?

Spur of the moment, Peg decided. The irony was, if the earth movers hadn't come and shaken the windows and made the gray house tremble, Billy would've slept on as usual and missed the bank's Saturday morning hours and Peg would've gotten cigarettes during her afternoon trip to the store and the turnpike money, which up until then Billy was had been aware of in an abstract way, would probably still be tucked in the account, waiting for its chance to carry the Shannahans to financial solvency.
Now Peg was a woman with three children, no husband, no money and no nylons that didn't have a run somewhere that was halted in its tracks by a splotch of bright pink nail polish. It was a lot to take, Billy's sudden disappearance, the Bypass, and pink splotched stockings.

Down the hall from Peg, in the gray house, Granny leaned heavily on her cane, disapproval in every line and curve of her body, face grim, mouth set in a firm line. She got ready for her day, wondering, as she did every morning, why her handsome son had let himself get trapped by that tight lipped little hussy.

Granny owned the gray house with Billy. The turnpike money was payment for the 34 acres of Granny's and Billy's land taken for the bypass. Before the Saturday Billy had disappeared, Peg sat in the parking lot of the bank and allowed herself to imagine Granny in the Lilley Valley Nursing Home. Granny had agreed to let Peg and Billy buy out her share of the house, but only Peg indulged in the fantasy of packing Granny off to the home. It seemed, that bright Wednesday in the bank parking lot, that she could actually do it. She could get Billy to agree they would be happier if Granny was safely settled on the other side of town, now that they no longer needed her social security to make ends meet.

Peg could ignore Granny's barbs about childrearing.

"If you give into Nancy each time she whines like that, Peg, you're going to spoil her, don't you think?" the subtle insults about spending money, "That new dress looks fine on you, Peg. It's difficult to go without and I'm sure Billy doesn't mind working nights at the filling station to pay for it."

But fourteen years, fourteen Thanksgivings and Christmases, spent locked in mortal combat with Granny over the stuffing, was too
thirteen years too many. Especially since Peg knew Granny herself had never, ever cooked a turkey.

"Those big chunks of onion and celery make the stuffing too crunchy, Peg. Especially since you always undercook the bird. Remember, last year, when Willie almost choked to death? Lord, it was lucky Billy was there, was able to get him to spit it up. What's that, Peg? What are you doing? Cutting the potatoes on the board the turkey was just on? You're spreading germs. I'm sure what Nancy had two years ago was salmonella poisoning and not the flu. That's how it spreads, you know."

Last night, Annie thought she heard them, gossamer wings gliding over the matted leaves and through the trees and the woods, heard them as they clustered around her window, still open to the cool autumn air, heard their voices rushing like water over the smooth stones of a stream, felt the words gently pervade her dreams, tumble softly into her ears, enshroud her in enchantment, "Come away," they called, "Come away."

Annie Shannahan was nine the Saturday her father left. She was awake, dressed, in the living room watching cartoons with Willie when she heard Billy call out, "Peg, where's your purse? I need money for cigarettes." She had wanted to go, running errands with Billy was one of her favorite things. But when she asked, looking up expectantly, he had been standing over Peg's open purse on the bed, studying a piece of paper with a frown. Suddenly he crumpled it up, looked at the digital bedside clock and said to her softly, "Not this time, pal."

When Annie was younger Granny had loved to tell Annie all about Ireland and the fairies.
"I'm a folklorist, you know," Granny told her in her rich, rolling accent.

"She's a phony," Peg told her in her flat Pennsylvania accent.

"They're God's angels," Granny told her. Granny would sit in her favorite chair, wrapped in her shawl, Annie perched on the ottoman at her feet, and tell her stories of her childhood, of Billy's childhood, of the legends of a land she had never seen.

Peg worried about Annie, even before Billy left. She worried about Nancy and Willie as well, but in different ways. Nancy mimicked Peg at fourteen so well it was eerie. The all consuming interest in clothes, make-up and boys and the hours spent in mindless conversation with friends on the telephone was familiar territory to Peg.

She knew what her duties were where Nancy was concerned. Mainly, it was to impress upon her that you didn't choose a man for the same reason you would chose a sweater: because it looked great and made your friends jealous, and that, should you happen to fall victim to your hormones, you definitely didn't believe "you can't get pregnant the first time." That had been Billy's line of reasoning, and Peg had believed him with disastrous results.

Annie was different. As a child she fell early under the spell of Granny Shannahan, who was especially pleased to see that physically she took after the Shannahans. From babyhood Granny poured all her lies into Annie's ears and encouraged her with games of pretend and make-believe. Granny liked to think herself a great lady of intelligence and experience and
the fraudulent resume she created for Annie of herself as a trained folklorist and poet made Peg's blood boil. Granny was the daughter of a barmaid, father unknown.

Billy had been born when Granny was almost past childbearing years. Upon finding out she was pregnant Granny began her great transformation. There was a hasty marriage to Gerald Shannahahan, who would die two years later of cirrhosis of the liver. She adopted a brogue from repeated viewings of "The Quiet Man," haphazardly researched Irish folklore at the library, and returned to Our Lady of Grace Church one day so suddenly that Father Joe lost his place in the sermon and never could find it again. By the Saturday that Billy left, Granny's transformation was complete and very few in town could remember when Agnes Shannahahan had carried on drunk in the cars of strange men in the courthouse parking lot.

That Annie was Billy's favorite was apparent early on. Nancy had been a fussy, demanding baby and Billy would flee out of the house to smoke cigarettes or go drinking with his friends when it looked like Nancy was winding up for a crying marathon. With Willie, Billy felt unaccountably jealous. Until his birth, all female attention had been solely his, suddenly there was his son, smiling and cute, possibly even cuter than he. Annie, however, was an easy baby, very pretty and happy and from the first she smiled brighter for Billy and waved her arms for him to pick her up. When Billy held her in his arms downtown, crowds would gather to coo and ahhh. Billy learned long before Madison Avenue the potent effect of a handsome man holding a happy baby.

Billy's pretty Peg, who flirted and laughed and loved old movies, had disappeared somehow during the labor pains and newborn colic and
was replaced by a hard-headed, sarcastic, drawn looking woman who no longer laughed at his jokes, made much over his looks and whose blue eyes now narrowed in anger and exasperation instead of jealousy over a perceived rival. Brought up solely by Granny Shannahan after the early death of his father, and blessed by nature with an easygoing nature and boyish good looks, Billy had known only female adoration. Billy, who half believed the tangled web of myths he had been weaned on, felt as if he had fallen victim to an evil witch who came to him in the guise of beautiful woman.

Peg felt she had fallen victim, period. Worse, even, was at some point shortly after her twenty-fifth birthday she looked in the mirror and realized she had become her mother: married young, with small children to a handsome, ineffectual man who drank too much, a high school drop out bound by small-town convention to "making it work."

Occasionally, late at night, a teasing thought of divorce and moving would cross her mind, but Peg was not an overly imaginative woman, and the shadowy dreams were quickly replaced by the counting of hours worked and then multiplied by wages earned that Peg did constantly, ceasing only on payday, when the answer was clear.

Billy's romance with his youngest daughter didn't end as Annie grew. "You're nothing like your mother," he would tell her after being driven out of the gray house by Peg's demands that he get a job, stop drinking, spend more time at home. "You understand me, and you understand Granny."

Peg understood the implicit danger of this odd triangle of Billy, Granny and Annie. Granny had been playing these games all her life, look
what she had done to Billy. For Billy, Peg had no sympathy. He was grown, married, a father, too old to be his mother's pet. He needed to be a man and care for his family. She didn't want to see Annie become trapped in her Granny's stories, life was hard and Annie should learn to face it head on.

Annie can't get the sound out of her mind. The light, musical voices calling to her, "Come away, come away."

They followed her onto the school bus, sat with her in math and science, tagged after her at recess. "Come away, come away," they call.

Why would they come for her now? She hadn't thought about fairies in years, except when Granny would repeat one of her stories. When she was four and Granny first told her the story, Billy had caught her outside late at night, down under the willows by the pond, waiting for them to come get her. Granny had told her that they stole children away at night and took them to live in the fairy rings. They hadn't come out then, but then it didn't matter because Billy had laughed and told her they wouldn't dare steal her from under his nose, no, if the fairies came for her, they would have to take him first.

This morning Annie made the mistake of telling her mother. She was disturbed by the memories of the voices, the tickling at her ear of the words, "Come away, come away."

"Anne Marie, you have got to stop this nonsense," Peg bit out each word like a bullet, spitting them at the window over the kitchen sink where she stood, from there they ricocheted off and found their target in Annie.
Peg turned slowly around from the sink, her face and hair damp from the steam of the dishwater. "I can't believe you're starting this up again. I thought we'd gotten this out of your system. What's next? Are you going to be in the backyard looking for E.T. again, too? For Christ's sake, you're not a baby anymore, you're old enough to know better."

Annie stirred her Cheerios, soggy and mushy from sitting too long in the milk. "I was just little then. And this is different." Annie had been looking for reassurance that this was not real, that she had dreamed it all, but Peg, as was her habit, had managed to embarrass her with those old stories of what she had done when she was little. A need to defend her honor, her beliefs, swamped her need to be reassured. "Granny said she saw them in Ireland, she says they're real. They like woods and trees and hills, why wouldn't they be here?"

Peg turned back to the sink. "How many times do I have to tell you Granny never lived in Ireland. She was born in Philadelphia and she has never set foot in Ireland. Ever. And I told you before, I don't want you repeating her crap." She scrubbed at a plate with more vigor than necessary. "Crazy old woman," she muttered, one eye on the door, for she heard Granny creaking down the stairs, thumping the cane Peg was pretty sure she didn't need.

"She's not crazy," also muttered.

"Annie, I don't have time to argue. Go brush your teeth or you're going to miss the bus. And tell Nancy to hurry, I can't drive you."

Annie slid off her chair and ducked around Granny as she thumped into the kitchen. "Peg, really. The children seem to be awfully noisy this morning. Nancy is singing at the top of her lungs upstairs to
some god awful song. Willie's gargling. Since when does a seven year old
gargle? Have you heard him? He sounds like he's choking some poor
animal to death. I have a headache," Granny put a hand to her forehead
and squeezed her eyes shut as if a malignant brain tumor had suddenly
formed. She sank weakly into a chair. "I can't find the aspirin. Where's the
aspirin?"

Peg slapped a cup into the drainer. "At the grocery store waiting
for people with money to buy it."

Granny eyes popped open and she straightened up her chair.
"Well," she said, drawing out the word with all the majesty she could
muster, "thank you, Mary Sunshine."

"Someone at school told him he had fish breath."

"Excuse me? Who has fish breath? Really," Granny continued,
rolling her R until Peg thought she would be seasick, "I'm finding it hard
these days to follow your thoughts."

"Willie," Peg said, impatiently, pulling the sink stopper and
watching the water swirl slowly down the drain. The sink was clogging up
again. The pipes in the gray house were almost ninety years old. "You said
he was gargling. Well, it's because someone at school told him had fish
breath. So, now he gargles every morning with that old bottle of Scope Billy
left behind."

"Oh."

"And the other day I found him shaving with Billy's old razor and
shave cream. The amount of hair junk, face junk, aftershave, Billy left
behind, it's no wonder we never had any money."
"That's very sweet, isn't it? Billy will be so proud of him when he returns from his trip." Granny smiled.

Peg stopped cleaning abruptly. "Billy isn't coming back. You know that, and I know that. And I told Willie that we didn't need anymore men in this house, Billy was enough."

Peg sat at the table for a cigarette. Granny had given up smoking when her great transformation occurred and one of Peg's few enjoyments was blowing smoke at her and watching her squirm. "A filthy habit," Granny would huff, her eyes fixed upon the glowing tip. "Really, Peg, it makes the whole house smell."

Upstairs Peg heard Annie entreating Nancy to please, please, please let her in the bathroom to brush her teeth. Willie clumped down in his sneakers and Steeler coat, books under his arm. Granny gestured him over. "Let me smell your breath, my boy."

Willie breathed hard in her face.

"Mmmm, smells good."

"Does it really? It doesn't smell like fish breath?"

"Oh, no. You smell like a man. Just like your father."

Willie's big smile stretched across his face.

Peg sat up, suddenly alert. "I hear the bus. Nancy! Annie! The bus."

Nancy and Annie clattered downstairs, Nancy, Peg noticed, with enough make-up on to shame a prostitute, and Annie looking grim with uncombed hair. Obviously, she hadn't gotten into the bathroom. "Nancy, you wipe some of that stuff off your face now." Peg got up and thrust a damp towel at her. "Do you hear me? Nancy?"
Nancy whipped by her mother and out the door with that newly developed smirk on her face, that smirk that had budded along with her breasts when she turned thirteen. Peg turned to her mother-in-law accusingly, "She got that eyeshadow from you."

Granny looked alarmed. "God, no! I have never in my life owned eyeshadow that vulgar. She's getting it from that trashy Delores you let her run around with."

Peg leaned her head into her hand. The clock said 8:10. She wasn't dressed and her shift at the Courthouse Diner started at 8:30. "Goddamn, Billy. Goddamn those kids." Through the kitchen window came the high-pitched beeping of trucks backing up. "Goddamned turnpike."

"Peg." Granny said suddenly, softly, sweetly, in her adopted "Quiet Man" brogue. Peg shivered. "Did you see Annie? I think she was crying? Did you say something to her, dear, before I came down."

"Annie's hearing fairies," Peg said abruptly. She faced Granny head on. "That's not my fault, that's yours."

The Courthouse Diner took its unimaginative name from the courthouse, a Greek Revival building that classed up the town so that you didn't notice right away that it was looking rather shabby these days. Peg worked the late breakfast, lunch shift there. She liked the job because she was able to both take flawless orders and worry incessantly about her situation at the same time.

At night she did alterations for the wives of the lawyers she waited on. When Billy left, Mr. Bomplani had asked if she was looking for extra work. Gilda, his wife's seamstress, had retired and everyone in town knew
Peg had a talent for sewing. Peg accepted and now spent about five hours each night hemming and shortening and lengthening clothing at home. She didn't know whether to feel grateful that her customers cared enough to be helpful or angry that they knew enough to feel pity.

Now, as Peg took orders for hash browns and coffee and served up scrambled eggs and orange juice, she fumed inside about Annie. These stories Granny told her, Granny who had never put so much as one little toe in the Old Country but spoke with a brogue so thick you could barely understand her and prattled on and on about the wonders of Ireland, were bad enough.

Now, Annie had said that fairies had come to her window. To be fair, she hadn't actually said she believed herself, but the desire to believe was there. There had been enough trouble with fairy tales when Annie was younger. For a period of about a year, Annie had held fast to the belief that Nancy was a changeling and that the fairies were hiding her real sister, her NICE, real sister, somewhere else.

And, now, just when Peg had begun to relax her guard about Annie, saw her toughening up, growing up and seeing the world as it really was, she comes up with this tale of hearing fairy voices at night. As if Peg didn't have enough problems and enough work and enough headaches, she now had a daughter who heard voices.

Peg was smoking in the darkened kitchen. It was becoming her favorite time, late at night, after her sewing was done and everyone was in bed, especially Granny. Peg was on her third cigarette, meditating tiredly about her middle child.
Peg can't understand why Annie can't understand what Billy did. He left without a word. It seemed easy to see. But now, now that he'd shown his true colors, who was the bad guy? Peg was. Peg was the one working night and day to put food on the table and clothes on her back and did Annie appreciate that? No. Annie, at nine, couldn't understand how much that hurt Peg. Peg, at thirty-five, couldn't see how important is was for Annie to cling to a myth: a myth that casts Peg as hateful and the absent Billy as wronged.

"I don't know what to do with any of them. Goddamn Catholics. No, no birth control for Billy. From the pope's mouth to his ear. Thank god I wasn't more fertile," and Peg blew an impatient puff of smoke into the darkened room.

Peg had a miscarriage between Nancy and Annie and another between Annie and Willie. When she found out she was pregnant with Willie, she called her older sister in tears. Billy was unemployed, Granny was impossible, they had no money, Nancy was becoming a problem. She sobbed into the phone and the only thing her sister had said was, "For God's sake, Peg, do you not know how babies are made?"

Peg drew long and deep on her cigarette. Outside she heard the wind blow through the trees left in the yard, rustling the leaves. She didn't hear the silvery whispers and sighing desires of Annie's nighttime voices. To her the breeze only sounded as lonely and tired as she was.

Annie sat her window at midnight. Her eyes searched the darkness. She saw the outlines of the bulldozers, the backhoes, the dump trucks, the cement mixers, the Turnpike army, resting tonight to being
again their assault on the hills tomorrow. Winter was coming and they were behind schedule.

Annie glanced over at the clock. Twelve oh five. Did fairies come out at midnight, like witches? Or just when it got dark? Maybe they were on the other side of the bypass, living in what used to be the west pasture. Maybe they wouldn't come because they were afraid of the equipment.

Annie bit her lower lip and leaned harder against the screen, pulling back when she felt it give slightly under the pressure. Had she heard them that night? Her mother was always accusing her of seeing only what she wanted to see. But when she closed her eyes she thought she could hear them again. *Come away, come away.*

From the window of her room, Annie could look across the back yard and over the fields to the steepest, furthermost, highest mountain, the one shrouded at the top in blue mist. Peg had said the blue was just there because they lived at the northernmost edge of the Blue Ridge. People paid plenty of money for a view like that from their windows, she said. Nancy had immediately advocated selling; she wanted a CD player and to live in town in a split level, like Kim Sanderson, the head cheerleader, did.

"Sorry, Nance," said Peg, who was truly sorry. "With the Bypass this close, nobody's going want to the rest of our land."

Annie wasn't sure what the Blue Ridge was, she thought vaguely it had something to do with the *Waltons*, but if she knelt on her bed and turned her head to the right, and didn't look too far down, she could still see the hills and the mountain and not see the bypass as it slashed across the landscape leaving a scar of clay, concrete and dirt.
Half remembered tales of fairies and little people and disappearing fathers filled her head. Lucy Bick's father had gone to heaven after collapsing on a basketball court. Billy going to fairyland in a Toyota seemed a little more farfetched.

The moon would follow her to the blue mist mountain, because of course that's where the fairies would be, where the blue mist would remind them of the curtains of heaven. And maybe that's where her father would be, handsome as ever, maybe one of those voices was his, and he would sing her a song like he used to, and there would be no Peg nagging about money and jobs and drinking and no Nancy calling her ugly and weird and no Willie, well, actually, Annie liked Willie, and Willie missed Billy. She might come back for Willie. And Granny, well, Granny had danced in the fairy rings herself as a girl. She would follow on her own.

Annie can't quite get her mind to encompass Billy's disappearance. He'd been unhappy she knew, long before he left. He and Peg would fight, their raised voices the lullaby Annie and Nancy and Willie would fall asleep to every night.

"Why can't you keep a job? Why do you have to drink so much? Who is she?"

"Why do you always have to nag me? Money, money, money, that's all you ever think about. Listen to you, you're a bitch, it's no wonder I'm getting it somewhere else."

And even if Billy wasn't there, wouldn't it be better, life lived in the hills and under the trees than life here in the gray house, with Peg so quick to anger and Nancy so mean and Willie so lost and all those big, loud men coming everyday to dig away at the ground, knowing the men knew that her
father was gone and they were all alone in the old gray house at the end of Old Route 99.

Of course it was these men, who worked past dark now while the weather still held, with floodlights and generators, and their big, thundering machines that kept them away. All they could do was call across the fields, across the hills, *Come away, come away,* and hope she would hear and follow.

If she went, she would have to wait until late. The men didn't leave for home until well after 11:00pm. If Annie found her father she hoped she remembered to ask him what double overtime was. It was all the men ever talked about and the words floated up into her room every night like a prayer, *double overtime, it's paying double overtime, I told my wife double overtime, double overtime.*

Annie fell asleep to the double overtime prayer. She was jolted awake later by the quiet. The floodlights were shut off, the equipment silent, the men gone. She squinted at the digital clock glowing red into the room. 2:15am. Nancy, her mother and Granny would be sound asleep.

Annie held her breath and listened. Nothing. Had she really thought there would be? She crept to the window and looked out. Perhaps the only way to know, to ever really know, was go out and look. She looked up at the moon and made up her mind.

She looked down at the Bypass construction and unmade it.

Her mother was right. She was too old for this. And, if her mother caught her, she would skin her alive.

But then, where was Billy? Gone just like that? That what's Peg said. But when Annie thought about that, when she listened to Peg say it,
her body went all funny, as if all her organs, the ones she'd learned about in health, were trying to collapse in on each other and hide away, and her skin got all tingly, as if she had been scalded all over and the slightest touch or word made her want to flinch away in pain.

And, really, was the idea of her Dad just leaving without a care, without a word, without an explanation any less fantastic than being stolen by fairies?

Dressing quickly, jeans, turtleneck, sweater, Annie retrieved her backpack from the closet. Earlier this evening, just in case, while Peg had been sewing and Willie watching TV and Nancy was in the bathroom, (she spent a great deal of time in the bathroom but Annie couldn't figure out why because she still always looked grungy), Annie had emptied out her bag. She wouldn't need math or science or social studies anymore. She packed a picture of her family, even though Nancy was in it, and one of her Granny, her teddy bear that father had given her when she was five, some shells from the Shannahans one and only family vacation to the beach and her toothbrush and toothpaste because she hated that filmy stuff on her teeth in the morning, and a clutch of wallet photos, school pictures of her friends that they gave away like trading cards each year. She had a little plastic baggie of peanut butter crackers and some graham cracker cookies. She had forgotten to ask Granny what fairies ate and hoped it wouldn't be bugs and twigs.

Outside, even with the moon, it was darker than she thought it would be. The leaves rustled gently and the weaker ones, the ones with the faded brown color, broke free and drifted the ground. Annie stepped across the lawn carefully, the dried leaves made noise and no one had raked at all
this fall. She wasn't afraid, she'd lived here all her life and knew each tree and bush. Before the construction, she had played "Starbright, Starlight" and "Murder" out here in the moonlight.

Annie started up the gravel embankment. The Bypass was being elevated above the gray house, to carry the cars and trucks up and beyond. It hemmed them in on the west side, and now the kitchen window looked out at a scraggly embankment instead of a field of grass.

At the top of the embankment the machines were hunkered down for the night, shadowy and familiar in the moonlight. Annie edged around them, she knew them well, and crossed to the other side of the wide cut of earth that was to be the four lane Marcus J. Turner Bypass. It was the first time she had seen the other side.

The wild grass field was completely gone, so were the walnut trees, and the pond had been filled in, and the willow trees were cut down and the Henderson's house and their old red barn were gone, and the Porter's and the Muir's and further down, old Mrs. Pryziak's house was gone, and Mrs. Pryziak was living in a condo in Florida. It looked alien and lonely and desolate and Annie, who had lived in the gray house all her life and unconsciously carried with her the pristine image of the land the way it had been, had a sudden feeling of homesickness that swamped her heart.

Originally, she had been going to cross the Bypass and walk over to Matthews Road, which she knew wound up into the hills beyond. But now, here in the moonlight, faced with new territory for which she had no map, she saw the easiest way would be to follow the Bypass up to where it plowed through the mountains.
There was no sound except for the wind in the trees and the barking of a dog. She heard the backfire of a car, coming from far away, but no gold and silver voices tumbling down from the mountain beyond, imploring her to come away.

She took a few steps forward. To the east, in its new, more constricted valley, was the gray house. To the east it still looked like home, with the fields racing away, and the Garvey's house in the distance, and the remaining two old willows in the back yard.

She took a few more steps. Suddenly, she didn't want to be out of sight of the gray house. Maybe if she went to the first bend in the Bypass, maybe then she would be close enough for them to find her. It was a considerable distance from the gray house.

Were they there? Again, she shut her eyes. There were no voices. Annie felt a chill. Maybe they wouldn't come for her. Maybe her mother was right, they weren't there. And Billy couldn't be with them because if he were, he would know to come get her.

Peg reflected that nothing made you feel like the worst, most horrible, most terrible mother on the face of the earth than having your kid surprise you by walking into the kitchen at 2:30am, fully dressed, with backpack, shivering, pale, and you realizing you didn't know she was gone.

"Anne Marie Shannahan!" had been the most she had been able to get out for several moments. "Close the door, you're letting the cold in," had been the next thing she thought of. "What the hell are doing out at this time of night, young lady?" That felt more natural. She yelled it at Nancy all the time.
"I wanted to see if they were real," came the shaky reply.

"Who?"

"The fairies. I thought I heard them. Calling me to come. They take children you know. Granny says. But I got scared and I didn't hear them. And it doesn't look like home anymore."

"What doesn't look like home?"

Annie slumped into a kitchen chair. "Where the Bypass is. I couldn't recognize anything. I didn't know where I was. I thought maybe Daddy was with them. I thought he would come get me. But, I didn't recognize anything."

Peg was stunned. "Your father? You were looking for your father? Is that what all this nonsense is about? If you wanted to know where your father was, why didn't you just ask?"

"But, you didn't know..."

"I never said I didn't know."

Annie didn't answer.

Peg knew she should have patience, that it was one of those important mothering moments they refer to in child psychology books, but she couldn't manage it. Only Annie would take the mundane, everyday abandonment Billy had pulled and romanticize it into some tale of otherworldly enchantment.

Peg began pacing the kitchen. "Now, look Annie, we're going to clear this up once and for all. Is that understood? Your Granny is a liar. She is not from Ireland, she has never been to Ireland and she doesn't know the first thing about fairies and elves and whatever. She makes up stories. Do you hear me? She makes up stories. Do you understand?"
Annie nodded mutely.

"And she raised a no-good, son-of-a-bitch son, whose father drank himself to death just like Billy's going to do. Do you understand that?"

There was no response.

"And your father is not out dancing with fairies or living with the man in the moon or whatever. He's in Wildwood, New Jersey drinking away the Turnpike money that is rightfully mine. Money I earned in fourteen years of supporting his goddamned drinking and taking care of his goddamned mother and raising his three children! Wildwood, New Jersey, got that? I can show you where it is in the atlas, if you want."

Annie stirred. "How do you know where he is? He never calls you."

"No, he never calls me. But he calls Granny. Every Sunday."

"Granny would have said..."

Peg sighed and the anger drained out of her. "No, she wouldn't. Granny only tells you what you want to hear. Billy doesn't want us, Annie. Don't waste your time missing him."

There was silence in the kitchen, only the rhythmic hum of the electric clock and the buzz of the refrigerator filled the room. With a feeling of nausea Annie was remembering Granny, every Sunday, behind her shut bedroom door with the cord of their old heavy, black rotary phone, the last in the town probably, disappearing under the door. "Nap time," she would say at 3 o'clock, picking up the old phone and carrying it with her. "I'm going to put it a drawer, so it won't wake me up if it rings."

Peg leaned toward Annie, tipping her face up with her finger. "Are you okay?" She is looking straight at Annie now, maybe for the first time in
months, recognizing Billy's mouth and chin, slightly gratified to see her eyes.

Annie sniffed, looked up at Peg with brave nine year old dignity. "I'm fine."

Behind the gray house the two, remaining willows sway gently in the breeze. A cloud moves across the moon, cloaking the blue mist mountain in darkness. Down the road a dog barks and pierces the early morning silence. It's the only time of day not filled with the sounds of construction. No gold and silver voices tumble down from the mountain tonight with whispered promises of a better life, and if they do in the future, the residents of the gray house won't be able to hear them over the rumble of the trucks on the Bypass.