Memorial Day observed

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Memorial Day observed

by

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For the Major Program

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For the Graduate College
To Mom and Dad, for their love and support,
and to all of those who never begrudged me my freedom.
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Memorial Day Observed

Some days I look out at the lake and think it’s rising. Some days I think it’s not.

If the water levels do not go down before Memorial Day weekend, the ban against motor boats will stay in effect during the most important weekend of the summer. It will be hard on the locals, who depend on the summer tourists to make a living. Right now the water looks cold and mean. The waves are like salty gray stones scraping the sides of my boat.

I am Sheriff Spike. I’ve been the sheriff of Yesterday County for 20 years. Your children probably went to school with my son. My deputy has probably arrested your uncle for DWI. I have probably testified against your brother, who shot his girlfriend and said it was a hunting accident. My wife probably baked cookies for your church fund-raiser. You have probably slept with my wife.

I am calling to tell you that your daughter has drowned. We found her body in the water early this morning, about 3 a.m. She was at a party at a house on the lake. She may have been drinking. She was wearing heavy winter boots. They weighed her down like a big, salty gray stone tied to her thin, fifteen-year-old ankles.

We’re not sure why she and the young boy decided to take the rowboat out. The water was very rough last night. There were no life jackets. We’re pretty sure it’s your daughter. We found her Learner’s Permit in her pocket. And a pack of Camel’s. Does your daughter smoke?

Her boots were heavy. She got one off, but there was a knot in the other one, the one on her right foot. It was a stony little knot that she could not loose.
The boy tried to save her. He said he was halfway to shore when she yelled that she couldn’t swim. He started to go back for her, but she had disappeared.

We have the boy here with us now for questioning. He is probably your nephew. He is probably my son.

You will have to come down and look at the body. We have almost reached the outlet, which you live not far from. We will be there in a few minutes. We have been trolling the waters since midnight, when we got the call about a boating accident. The water is awfully cold this time of year. It would not take long in water this cold. Perhaps you could come down to the outlet. Do you know the outlet? Do you know my wife? If you called my wife, she could drive you down to the outlet. You have probably slept with my wife.

Her boot was tied. One angry little knot in her right boot, like a tiny, salty gray stone which she scraped and clawed at but could not loose. It just weighed her down.

The lake was awfully rough last night. The water is terribly high. It will probably not go down before Memorial Day weekend, and you will not be able to take your boat out like you had planned.

Were you planning to take the boat out on Memorial Day weekend?

Does your daughter smoke?

Do you know my wife?
MISS THINGVOLL’S DATE WITH DESTINY

Miss Thingvoll has a date tonight. It is the proverbial date with destiny, that moment which comes around just once in a person’s life, a dance with fate. She feels almost whimsical thinking of this dance (a waltz maybe, or a minuet?) as she sifts through a closet crammed with full-sized, boat-necked shift dresses, each one a dark and oily print in shades of brown or olive or gray. There is one pink blouse which sticks out among the lot, pink with a lace collar and a small design embroidered over the breast pocket. It is this shirt she grabs, along with a dark gray pair of polyester slacks. She never wears slacks to the school where she has taught Basic Typing for the past ten years, not liking the way their waistbands constrict her full midriff and leave her with pinched and puckered skin where the elastic band binds.

But today is not an ordinary day. It is a day which requires special care and attention to dress. Today, a date with destiny has been scheduled for her. An occasion, to be sure, to which she will rise. Today, she will wear slacks to school. She slides them on, not without some struggle, but as she pops the elastic band into place, just above the soft folds of her waist, she begins to feel a little bit giddy. She brushes stray strands of watery brown hair from her face, feeling the stiff fabric, strange and foreign between her thighs, and she laughs a small, breathy laugh. She takes a small note from an envelope on her nightstand, folds it in fours, then places it in the pocket of her slacks.

In some respects, this day will not be different from others. She will go to school, she will teach, she will sit and eat her lunch in the staff cafeteria choking on second-hand cigarette smoke.
But it will not end like other days. This day will end differently. An end that could very well be a beginning.

Today, as she enters her classroom of thirty-two freshman students, she wonders if her pupils can see it on her face, the lingering lines of tension and excitement, the dark sparkle in her small, round eyes. Perhaps they notice the slacks that she is wearing first, their gazes then slowly sliding up onto her face to notice with lazy disinterest, and merely because there is little else to think about in typing class, what there is to notice there. Miss Thingvoll hopes her features do not give it away. She hopes her secret will hide quietly behind the thick frames of her glasses, which shift only slightly on her nose as she takes attendance.

During attendance, Miss Thingvoll avoids making eye contact with her students. She arranges her typing books on her desk and nestles her glasses more firmly into the nooks of her nose and ears. She is writing homework on the board, as well as the pages where today’s exercises can be found. And when this is done, she begins today’s class like every day, leading her pupils in a warm-up routine. Very soon the room is filled with the soft, rhythmic stroking of electric typewriter keys striking the crisp, white, albeit thin parchment.


Miss Thingvoll leads the warm-up exercise with verbal prompts, careful to enunciate each letter clearly. After ten years of teaching Beginning Typing to freshman, she has seen enough class work come across her desk to know that students will make any excuse they can for typing the wrong letter on their exercises, even citing her pronunciation as the cause of their error.

At various intervals, Miss Thingvoll changes up the characters which the students are warming up with, mixing up keys from both the right and left hands. Before and after each
careful explanation, and between each exercise, a short, breathy “okay” is uttered by Miss Thingvoll. This phrase peppers her speech much like an unconscious “um” and her students probably make a game of counting the number of times this word passes through her lips in a single class period.


“U-B-U space. U-B-U space... U-B-U space (okay)...”

Miss Thingvoll pulls out her stop watch, directs her students to page twenty-two of the manual, and leads them in a one-minute, timed exercise from the book. She holds the stop watch in her right hand while her left hand hangs at her side, looking to hide in the soft folds of a skirt which are not there, not today. She is standing between the second and third rows of typing stations, near the front of the room, the same position she always takes for this exercise. She is staring at Joshua Witherspoon, a slender, muscular boy who plays junior varsity football. He is a terrible typist, and despite being instructed in the proper form, insists on pecking each key with his index fingers. Miss Thingvoll looks on him as a slightly irritating nuisance to be endured for the semester, like an ingrown toe nail which must be allowed to grow out, for removal by any other means would be much more disagreeable. However, Joshua will certainly be among the handful of students to whom she assigned a final grade of “D” with little compunction.

As the room hums with the rapid, electric raps of the keys, Miss Thingvoll watches Joshua’s rounded, sloping shoulders, narrow but well-muscled, eyes his long, thin index fingers painfully slow in their movements across the keys, and for a moment she wonders vaguely what it would be like to fail a student -- something she has never done, though
certainly many have deserved to fail. But students generally do not fail her course, as a rule, for Miss Thingvoll is only conscious of the difficulty she would have in justifying the blight which such a grade would leave on a student’s record, and though she feels good typing skills would be a boon to any education, she is aware that for many of her lesser equipped students it serves no practical purpose to put them back in credits.

Yet it is with suspicion and, yes, even temptation that she eyes Joshua Witherspoon now. Hadn’t she overheard him in the hall just last week, surrounded by a small circle of friends, laughing loudly at his own joke, and hadn’t he then noticed her with guilty eyes, laughter dying out suddenly, circle of friends scattering like startled pigeons? Miss Thingvoll’s free hand reaches for the folded paper in her pocket as she thinks of this now.

But just as her fingers reach the small piece of paper, smoothing it against her thigh, young Joshua looks up at her. She is so startled by this sudden recognition, this eye to eye confrontation, that she does not at first notice Joshua is only one of many students staring at her, some peeking up quickly while their restless hands peck distractedly at the keys, some staring outright, their hands poised in anticipation before the typewriter, eyes turned expectantly toward her.

Miss Thingvoll glances at the stopwatch, which reads two minutes and thirty seconds. She clicks the stop and with as much normalcy as she can muster quietly mutters, “Stop.”

No one questions and Miss Thingvoll is too embarrassed to admit her mistake. Surely the students are unperturbed by the oversight, expecting to score very well on a one-minute drill which lasted two and a half minutes. Miss Thingvoll thinks hopefully that perhaps many of the students, intent on accuracy, may not even have noticed.
The rest of the hour is filled with work from the book and Miss Thingvoll is careful to avoid such a scenario in the other sections. And today she is as anxious as her students are with her frequent glances at the large wall clock above the door. “Your date with destiny is coming!” the clock cries. The time draws near like a tangible thing on the horizon, a speck looming larger and larger until it blots out the sun, and she waits with anxious, bated breath for each obnoxious tick of the clock.

Miss Thingvoll is thinking back to the first love note she ever received. She remembers a boy, when she was just ten years old, who had been quite smitten with her. He had sent her a note in which he requested her to respond to his overture by circling one of two special, predetermined answers – “yes” or “no.” Miss Thingvoll had carried that note around for several days, agonizing over her decision, a decision limited to just two possible options – an affirmation or negation of the existence of her feelings for the boy -- neither response seeming quite adequate to her. Miss Thingvoll remembers, in fact, that the boy sent another note shortly thereafter, identical to the first, impatient with her week of soul-searching. Oh, how she agonized over the cruelty of her fate, to have been given the attentions of a clever, handsome boy, the quietest in the class but certainly the smartest, she could tell, and to be limited to just one of two terribly insufficient and inadequate responses!

Too long she had considered in her mind this conundrum. Too long she carefully considered the consequences of each response. Too long. For a week after she found the second note in her coat pocket, she saw the young boy holding hands with Marlene Butler out on the playground at recess.
But this was long ago, and the printed message she had slipped in the pocket of her gray slacks this morning was nothing of the kind. This note had come in an envelope addressed to her and placed inside her own mailbox. *This note knew where she lived.* This note — only the third love note she has ever received in her life — this small, cryptic piece of paper had produced a change in her which she could hardly, even now, fathom. This note had truly set her date with destiny, set it firmly in stone. Today! (And the thought caused her heart to simply race out of control.) Today...she could only leave this thought unfinished for now, a wrapped gift, a locked box which would open only when she was ready to reveal its inner workings.

*Would you meet me in the staff parking lot tonight at eight?*

She would be there. And she had a special present. A special present nestled carefully inside her purse. An occasion such as this deserved something special. Something out of the ordinary. Extraordinary even! She laughed out loud as she thought this thought, students peeking up at her with curious disdain, but she didn't care. She didn't care!

It had been a hard decision, what to do with the small handful of hours that must be endured between the time school ended for the day and the time that had been arranged for her in the parking lot. She had made the reluctant decision to remain at school grading student work. She could not go home. That wouldn't do. What if the car broke down? What if she couldn't return? No, she would stay. It would be a long, excruciating wait, but she would stay. She could order take-out if she grew hungry, which she didn't, of course. Her
stomach was much too full of other things to give way to hunger. She simply endured the miserable bundle of hours until eight o’clock, her body sweating, her stomach quietly grumbling. A miserable bundle with each hour passing more slowly than the last.

At around seven thirty, Miss Thingvoll was certain she heard voices, footsteps even, down the corridor of the school. It was long past the hour when students were required to leave the building. The janitors had long since come and gone through her wing of the building. Still, it could be the janitors. It could. But somehow these voices did not sound right and she could not dismiss them. The footsteps were rapid and heavy. Instinctively she grabbed her purse from the left-hand drawer of her desk. She listened to the footsteps approach her door, a scuffling of soft-soled shoes, and she clutched her purse more tightly to her chest. But then the footsteps passed on, fading into a distant nothingness.

She considered calling up a janitor, sending someone to investigate. But it was so close to that time, so close to that meeting which would change everything. So she let it pass, choosing instead to stare out the darkening classroom windows with nervous apprehension.

There were only two cars, aside from her navy Taurus, in the staff parking lot at eight. Her car sat directly under a lamp, something she had intentionally arranged that morning. She half expected to see someone sitting in the passenger side, patiently waiting for her arrival.

But this was not the way it would be, Miss Thingvoll reminded herself. She stood in the darkened doorway of the school, hesitating, waiting, gazing out at her car, clutching her purse, thinking, assessing, her mind moving rapidly now, more rapidly than it had moved in
several days, weeks even. This was it, she knew. She could tell by the shallowness of her
breaths, the weakness in her thighs. Even her body knew. It knew.

Her eyes darted from one end of the parking lot to the other, searching. Where? This
was the question that had to be answered. Where was she to go? She would have to go out
there, make the move, or all might be lost. She would have to follow her instincts. Something
was waiting for her, and she would have to go and find out what.

She glanced quickly at her watch, careful not to move out of the shadows of the
doorway to the school. It was 8:05. She had been standing there for five minutes. It was time
to act, before she lost her moment, before someone else made the decision for her. “Now,
Maddy,” her mind goaded. “Now!”

She glanced about the parking lot again. To the west, a row of untrimmed bushes
shielding the staff lot from the street. To the north, a fence which blocked off the football
field. To the east, sidled up against the school itself, a large green dumpster. Miss Thingvoll
eyed each dark and mysterious location with apprehension.

It was the dumpster, she was certain.

She slid slowly along the shadows of the school, hiding her body as best she could
from the light which illuminated the lot. Slowly, she inched her way until she came upon the
dark blot which was the school dumping ground, bits of forgotten trash collecting at its base.

And, yes, there was noise. Upon reaching the dumpster, she heard the faint scuffling
of feet, the rustling of old leaves. Breathing.
I’m sorry I don’t have the courage to ask you in person, I really am shy. But would you please meet me in the staff parking lot tomorrow night at eight? There is something I have been wanting to tell you...

Miss Thingvoll rested a moment against the cold metal of the dumpster. As she listened to the quiet noises on the other side, she fished out the can of pepper spray from her purse.

The fact is, I have been thinking about you for a long time. I think we might have a lot in common...

She held the small vial in her right hand, lightly fingering the trigger mechanism.

Love,

Principal Krakowski

And here the student was, behind the dumpster, a student who thought her foolish enough to meet some man in a parking lot, pathetic enough to fall for such a juvenile stunt, thought her lonely enough to seek blindly the attentions and affections of a 65-year-old married man who routinely lost everything from his car keys to his coffee cup. Principal Crack Head, they called him, she knew. She knew.

And here was that student, here behind the dumpster, the student she had hated for the past two weeks, maybe longer.
There would be no questions. A student lurking around in the dark at night. A lone woman startled as she threw something into the trash before she made her way to her car. There would be no questions.

Miss Thingvoll aimed the can of pepper spray before her and quickly turned the corner of the dumpster.

Startled eyes greeted her as she finally faced her torment, faced the bane of her entire existence behind that hulking, green hunk of metal smelling of sour milk, glue, and rotten fish sticks. Startled eyes which stared curiously at the woman before them, the small, hard object in her hand. And Miss Thingvoll was startled, too, enough so that she became disoriented for a few moments, her grasp on the unleashed can of pepper spray slackening just a bit.

For it was not one pair of eyes which greeted her as she turned the corner of the dumpster. It was not a lone Joshua Witherspoon, deficient in basic intelligence, or any other such single person lacking in some fundamental way. Instead, there were several pairs of eyes gazing back at Miss Thingvoll. One, two, three... There were five pairs of eyes which blinked, startled, into hers when she came around the side of the dumpster. Five girls, crouching (giggling?), backs to her as they peeked around to Miss Thingvoll’s car, then turned suddenly, frightened, silent, to face Miss Thingvoll. Five girls whom Miss Thingvoll only vaguely recognized as quiet students, good students.

Five surprised girls, voiceless, motionless, eyes wide and staring.

The cold can of pepper spray, which Miss Thingvoll continued to aim stiffly before her, trembled slightly.
"Of course," Miss Thingvoll thought to herself. And it was as if all the world suddenly made sense to her. "Of course."
RUN DIARY

At first you have a million cylinders pumping in your brain, and thoughts come out all random and achy and you can’t seem to turn them off. Each thought comes with another right on its heels, and they come so fast that you don’t do anything with them. You just let them fly by because the next one is coming and you don’t have time to stop and introduce yourself. You don’t need to introduce yourself. They move so fast, you could never get to know each one really well anyway. But each one is familiar, so you just nod your head to them as they make an appearance and say hello to you. How are you doing?

It may be that you are thinking about taking out the trash that has not been emptied for the last week and a half. Or it may be that you are thinking about how you haven’t made love to your husband all week and you really need to get that in sometime. Or that your car needs to be washed, it’s coated with grimy, gray dust that makes it look much older than it really is. Or maybe you’re thinking that you haven’t talked to your mom in a month, or that the guy running in front of you has a cute ass, even though he’s only 19.

What you don’t think about is what you are going to be doing with your life or next year, or how next week is going to be different from this week. Or whether you fucked up the last major decision in your life and whether you’re going to fuck up the next two or three. There are too many other little thoughts crowding the track. The big trains are not going to pull through the station at times like these. These big thoughts suddenly don’t mean anything because there is no place for them among the clutter.
And it doesn’t matter. Your body is moving so fast that your thoughts don’t have time to mean anything. Just let it go, baby. That’s what your mind is doing. It’s trying to keep pace with your legs and arms pumping back and forth, pulling you around the track or down the street or sidewalk or wherever you have decided to run.

These thoughts, they don’t have to mean anything. Because this is just the beginning. And the best part is that eventually they don’t matter. If you run fast and hard enough, eventually these thoughts get played out and spent, and soon all you are thinking about is how bad your body hurts. You’re thinking about that little cramp in your side which starts out like a pinch but then grows into Moses and the burning bush. So automatically you start to think about your breathing. You know you’ve got to exorcise that lactic acid, reject that demon carbon dioxide, pull more oxygen out of the air even when there doesn’t seem to by any more there. So you start thinking about how you’re going to do this. You push more on the exhale, you keep your stomach tight when it should be expanding on the intake. And it takes all the concentration you have just to focus on that breathing pattern and keep that cramp from killing you.

You are also thinking about that sore left calf and how it might develop into a shin splint like you had in eighth grade during soccer. So you change your gait to compensate. You start running on your toes like your soccer coach said.

You’re thinking, can I make it two more laps? Can I make it one more mile? Am I going to make it back to my house, or am I going to have to walk the last hundred yards? Will Joe Schmoe who lives next door see me walking the last block and half?
And so it becomes a game called “Can I Finish?” And you’re keeping track of each step, taking inventory on each one, measuring the ones you have left in reserve against the number it will take you to get back home, doing the math.

Now there’s no more room for random thoughts that don’t mean anything. These are your only thoughts. They are thoughts of survival. Everything else shuts down, and you are left with the real battle.

I began running when I was fourteen.

It was the same time that my parents had granted me the freedom to transfer from a small, Bible-beating Christian school, in which they had enrolled me at the age of five, to the sinfully secular public school where all of my neighbors went. Running was part of my metamorphosis to public education because I tried out for the basketball team at the public school, a team which had made it to the state tournament for the last four years.

It was suicide.

I had been taught by my older brother what the proper shooting form was. We had a hoop out back and he was out there playing all the time. But I knew nothing outside of this. True, I felt I had nearly mastered that form. My stance and follow through were textbook, and my curling wrist at the end of the shot was a thing of beauty. Never mind that the ball didn’t go in the hole. That would come later, my brother told me.

What I learned was that your wrist could curl all it wants to, but you had to be able to get up and down the court in a hurry or you were toast.

We never made it to states when I was on the basketball team at the public high school, but that is another story altogether.
When tryouts began I had my first taste of serious running, the kind of running that can make your mind shut down so far that all you think about for forty minutes is how nice it will be to take a dump when you are through. The kind of running that makes your lungs burn like scorched bellows and makes your eyes water out the sides. I'm talking about the stuff that turns your bowels to water and your rib cage to Plexiglass. This was the kind of running you had to do to make the basketball team. The varsity coach had led his squad to the state tournament for four years straight on the philosophy that what his team lacked in talent they would make up for with hustle. I fell in love with this philosophy and with the coach. Mr. Church, he was always called by me – not coach. Never coach.

So I tried out for the junior varsity squad, where Mr. Church guided his girls in the worship of his team philosophy. And they were all hustlers, those girls I met for the first time during preseason, one month after I had transferred into their school, gone from creationism to evolution, from morning prayers to morning smokes. These public school basketball girls knew how to smoke pot and run a six and a half-minute mile. They'd had it all figured out for quite some time. They had been playing the game since they were six or seven years old, some of them, and I would have to hustle, too, if I wanted to catch up and keep the pace.

I was not very good at it at first, this running thing, and all of the other girls were very fast. My lungs were younger and pinker, but theirs were bigger, and I was dead last in every running drill.

But nobody gets cut from the junior varsity squad in a school with a hundred and fifty students.
God how I hated to run at first. It makes me laugh now, the way women laugh about their first impressions of their husbands. “I thought he was rather feminine,” or “He seemed a little too cocky to me.” But now, they love him and can laugh about it.

I hated running. After working through the stitch in my side and the general lack of oxygen, always I was assaulted with the burning in my shins and thighs, the watery feeling in my bowels, the fever on my face. And what’s worse is that this physical humiliation always came coupled with the knowledge that I was the only one in the gym who felt this way, a certainty beyond all certainty that my spastic gait stood out among the handful of freshmen and sophomores who had been born with Nike sneakers on their feet, who ran like deer, who had known each other since they were five and had their partners for the agility drills chosen before the whistle even blew, paired up and in position before I even had a chance to get rejected by them.

So I started running after school on the outdoor track after practice. After a grueling, two-hour session of drills and scrimmages, this was the hardest time to run. My mother was afraid I would catch cold. But I knew I would never make it through practice if I tried to run beforehand, so I bundled up in my scarf and mittens and double sweats and went to town.

The coaches saw me out on the track in the late afternoons and liked my initiative. In my mind, I was just trying to catch up, but long after I had earned my spot on the varsity squad the running continued.

The high school track coach hounded me in the spring to run for the team, but that would have taken the whole point out of it for me. Running for running’s sake. That’s stupid. But she timed me in the mile one day and began to salivate.
My coaches will forever call me to mind when phrases like, “good work ethic” and “tenacious” come up.

So I never ran track, but then I went to college and began playing ball there, too. It was the perfect excuse to go running, and I had grown to need excuses. For the same reason you can’t just call up a guy you have a crush on in junior high. You have to have a reason. So my reason was that nothing prepared me for two hours of wind sprints and scrimmages led by a shrill whistle and an overbearing coach like my six-mile daily jaunt.

I did not fall in love with my college coach. He was a dick who wore slick suits to games and recruited too many players for each position.

During summers off from college I lived with my parents and went running with a neighbor down the road. I told myself I was doing this to keep in shape for the season. My neighbor’s name was Betsy and she had red hair and freckles and big rosy cheeks and she would always tell me how skinny I was, how very skinny I was. I think that back then there was not much difference between the two of us in terms of size, but Betsy, who still works at the local grocery store, has put on a few unfortunate pounds since then and we could never share the same clothes now. She says she still runs twice a week, but I don’t believe her. That I just can’t believe.

When we ran together in the summers we had a six and a half-mile course set out that we did in about fifty minutes. We did it almost every day. She had trouble with it at first, which made me want to drop her as a running partner like I’d drop a busted out gym shoe in the can. But she begged me to be patient with her, to jog in place a few times while she doubled over to catch her breath, wheezing like an asthmatic horse. Please wait, she’d say.
Please. It took weeks for her to complete the course without stopping, longer still for her to finish it in a reasonable amount of time. This hurt my routine, to be sure, and this is why I no longer run with partners. However, I made up for it back then by doing the course twice each day, once with Betsy and once without. Then on the weekends I would make the run longer and go without her.

Despite the summer routine with Betsy, or maybe because of it, I was never in good enough shape when I came back to college and preseason conditioning began once again. I was first in the timed mile, first in every wind sprint, but let’s face it – I was working against women who had sat and watched “The Young and the Restless” all summer, who had spent their weekends at school swilling beer and screwing the men’s basketball team, and I knew this was not a true test of my abilities. I knew I would have to run harder next summer, would have to stay after practice and do more sprints. Schoolwork could wait a few hours. Gatorade and a few saltines could sustain me in between. It was hard, but this always paid off in the long run. There were not many things I did better than the others, but I would be first in the timed mile. Everyone knew this.

I would blow them away.

When I graduated from college and my basketball "career" ended, I thought -- I will have to find another reason to run. This turned out to be much more difficult than I had imagined it would be. I took an entire year off from running because of it. And taking this time off from running was frightening, not merely because I grew soft and slow, but because it was so easy to do. It is so easy to do things that are bad for you, and so it was easy to stop running.
And it took me a long time to think up a good reason to keep going with it. In the past, I had always had an excuse to go, excuses and reasons that could cover a lot of ground which I may or may not have been able to explain. Now, however, I had no excuses. I could not leave Aunt Rita’s house after Thanksgiving dinner and go down to the high school track without a few poorly disguised looks of hurt and suspicion. I could not eat like I used to and expect to stay thin. I felt strange and unwanted when I walked into sporting goods stores at the mall to buy sneakers. I stopped wearing my sports bras altogether.

I could not run because if someone were to see me outside running, what would I say? I would have to be some kind of health nut, some kind of exercise freak, some kind of body-conscious nobody trying to prove she was somebody after all. That is just not me.

Then, during alumni weekend at my college, I ran into one of the fathers of my old college roommates, Mr. DeWalter's. He had been a high school basketball coach for thirty years, and he’d come to all of our basketball games even after his daughter was cut from the team. At the time I spoke to him, he had just retired, and he told me that he was trying to learn a new way of exercise. He turned his wide, empty face to me and told me he was looking for the right balance. He couldn’t do as much as he’d done in the past, and he did not like doing anything half way. Now he was trying to find a new plan.

His wife, who was ten years younger than him, could not understand why he did not come to the gym with her anymore.

I told Mr. DeWalter's, who had taught Health to high school freshmen for thirty-five years, that I knew exactly how he felt.

And so after that I got back into my running routine, just like that. It was about the same time as when I started my first real job. I was a newspaper reporter, and all of the
paper’s employees got discounts to a dumpy little fitness center which had one perk -- it was open twenty-four hours. Members were issued keys which allowed them to use the facility at any hour. With the odd hours which came with reporting, I figured I could make time to go to the gym when it was nearly deserted. After seeing Mr. DeWalters, after working at my crummy job for three weeks, I started to understand that I needed to run again. I could find a way to run for running’s sake which wouldn’t kill me.

I was living alone. I had no money. But my time was my own and it was getting out of hand. It was time to go back. Before my clothes stopped fitting. Before my heart rate became as erratic as my mother’s was. Before I forgot where the closest FootLocke Athletic shoe store was.

It was time to put things back where they belonged.

The small, eighth-of-a-mile track at the fitness center was not well maintained, and it was hard to get back into my routine at first. I did four miles on the first day and it took me so long that I went into the women’s locker room and cried and cried. I stayed there until the a.m. workout crowds began to filter in. Then I threw on my sweatshirt and hid for an hour in my car, which was parked in the far corner of the lot under a tree. I remember I was so thirsty, and I was leaving a dark sweat stain on the driver’s seat of my car, but I just couldn’t move. I couldn’t even put the key into the ignition to start the car. The windows steamed up, and I stared at funny little distant shapes beyond the glass too long.

When I got home from the gym, it was very late and I called in sick to work. I needed groceries, I needed orange juice, I needed to sleep, I needed to walk on the walls of my apartment and leave tread marks across all of my posters. There wasn’t much in my
refrigerator, but I gulped down what I could - bread crusts, left over mac and cheese, half a jar of spaghetti sauce, a can of black olives – and after I was finished I said to myself, “Now that’s really not good for me,” and so I threw the rest of it away. I made it bare so I could start again.

It had all come crashing down that first day back. I had thought that I’d placed enough distance between me and my old routine so that I could return to it with a fresh perspective. I thought I could be like Mr. DeWalters and find a middle ground, a new way to do the old things. I thought maybe I could do the token, three-mile-a-day jog without feeling guilty.

But I couldn’t. I knew now that it had to be all or nothing.

So I pushed myself every day to get back into that groove that had pushed me for so long. I never went back to that gym where I had failed so miserably. Instead, I began running at night, usually after 10 p.m. It took a few weeks for me to get back to that peak at which I had performed before. Eventually, however, I surpassed even this, and I was running both mornings and evenings far beyond the distances I had once mapped out for myself.

You see, all relationships take work. They take effort. You have to be willing to try.

It wasn’t long until I stopped paying attention to the distances I was running. I think this is when I truly came into my own.

I enjoyed the evening runs most. At first I chose well-lit streets, figuring these to be the safest for a woman alone at night. But then it made me angry that I felt I had to make such accommodations for my sex. I had seen a young man in the neighborhood jogging at
night, and I had watched this man suddenly dart off the road and disappear into some dark and lonely path, alone and free, and I grew terribly jealous of him.

Gradually I began to choose more poorly lit streets for my nightly jaunts, letting my feet take me where they would, turning onto unknown avenues on a whim. Daring someone to just try and stop me.

As I ran I spent my time imagining worst case scenarios, what I'd do if an assailant jumped out of the bushes. I imagined myself saying, "You'll have to kill me first." I imagined myself screaming and running to the nearest house, punching my fist through the window as I banged on it yelling, "Police! Call the police!" I took careful note of all the darkened houses, wondering how long it would take the inhabitants to be roused from sleep at the sound of my cries.

Long enough for me to be stuffed into a van and disappear forever.

Running alone at night, it was like old home week as long as I was left alone. But one time I reached my apartment complex and dashed across the road just in time to step right in front of a police car going much too fast for the residential side street on which I lived. He turned his lights on immediately, pulled over, beckoned me to the car. The lecture was short and mean. He was on a mission to save my life even if it killed me. And I smiled a tight, guilty smile and used phrases like “not thinking” and “mental lapse.”

I tried not to laugh as I said these things. It was hard, because I knew he could never really save my life. He could only be there to pick up the pieces after someone else had smeared me across the pavement.
I had always been concerned with numbers before, how many miles in how much time, how many days a week. But as I did not pay attention to these numbers anymore, could not keep track of them, I found other things that made me almost proud. These were not the chiseled thigh muscles I had sported in college, but they were something to hold onto as my birthdays rolled by. They were small muscles, but certainly as strong as the solid, boulder-like thighs I had run up and down the court with in college while boxing out 200-pound women. Certainly these thighs were just as important.

I can remember being in college classes with skinny, forty-year-old women who talked about their running routines. Mostly they were divorced mothers, tan, attractive, always thin. They would run marathons and coach their daughters’ soccer and track teams. I knew I was going to be just like them some day.

That is why I stopped dating the guy from work who said he wanted to marry me. It started with that poster he gave me after our first month of dates. It had some terrible poem on it by a man named Ed Cunningham.

“Why do I run? Tain’t no mystery. Wanna have a good medical history!”

It went on verse after verse like that. The poster had a picture of an old man with a beard, and he wore a sweatband wrapped around his forehead and had long gray hair. This man also wore a tiny pair of running shorts which exposed the entire length of his wiry, age-spotted thighs.

“Beats bein’ sluggish, beats bein’ lazy – Why do I run? Maybe I’m crazy!”

I knew then that he would never understand, and so I did not feel guilty about screening my phone calls, keeping strange hours at work just to avoid him, not answering the
door when he came knocking one night and I saw him out of the peep hole, all small and round and distorted, his nose poking toward me like an inquisitive little bird.

But I was rarely home as it was. It would have been difficult for him to catch me.

I have learned that I do not gain weight when I stop running. In fact, I lose weight, but only because my muscles begin to deteriorate. This is an interesting fact that I had not been aware of before.

Let me describe my current routine for you. It begins with a few token stretches. (These were incorporated during high school when I pulled a calf muscle and had to sit out three games.) Always these stretches last no more than five minutes. However, they have become a part of the routine which I need very much. I spend this time thinking about in which direction I will start running and how far I will go. (It is always a debate on how far I will go because I think a part of me still hates running and that part is always sure to pick a short run on a level street.) I think I am also procrastinating during this time, wondering if I will even go at all. It has become an important part of the game.

Then I take off, not really conscious of having decided which way to go but my feet start going and for those first few steps I really feel like I might go for many, many miles, far away. Then the mind gets going, it is keeping pace with my Nike sneakers, it is matching each step I take, thought for thought. It is just pouring out of me like nobody’s business, like a fever-breaking sweat. But it can’t go anywhere. And so eventually it all sinks back into itself. These thoughts, they just pop up to say hello, and then I have bigger fish to fry, because suddenly my lungs hurt, and I think about how I am breathing, carefully considering
whether I will get a cramp or not and whether I should change my breathing pattern. If I am
running by buildings with plate glass windows I take care to catch my reflection in the glass
and check my form.

In the past, this was never a problem. But lately when this occurs, more often than not
the picture that I have in my mind of myself running does not compare well with this
reflection in the glass. Always I am bent over a little more than I would like to be, and my
legs always look heavier than they feel. They are like big bags of wet flour holding my knees
in place. Sometimes they start to feel heavy, too. I have begun to avoid those business areas
that have plate glass windows facing the street.

Sometimes in the morning, when the sun is at my back, I watch my shadow running.
There is a dark, faceless head sliding along the pavement beside me, gray feet moving fast,
fast, fast. I see the ends of my cropped hair throwing shadows on the ground, shadows which
flap back and forth like stunted little angel wings.

I watch that shadow pretty closely these days. I can see it there at night, too, if the
moon is shining bright, or I pass beneath a street lamp. When I see that hair flapping, those
feet flying back and forth like they are not even touching the ground, all gray and dark and
hard and perfect – I see that shape and I think – that could be any body.

That crazy shadow. That streamlined body. That faceless, shapeless outline down
there on the ground. She is some young girl, some marathon runner.

We are neck and neck, she and I. We are in a dead heat.
A CLEAN SWEEP

I’m almost the age my father was when my mother gave birth to me. He was thirty-five. I was his last born, the youngest of three.

He’s driving me to the airport now, he and mom. I have been home for two weeks to spend the holidays with them, and now I am back to my own life which takes place in a different city, a different state.

I am single. I live alone, but I have a job to go back to. And so they cannot keep me here, in their mini-van, at their dining room table, in their guest bedroom. We have enjoyed our two weeks together, and they were happy to have me around, but now it is time to go.

I am in the back seat of their mini-van, slightly chilled as they sit in the front seats before me, the panel vents blowing warm air on their faces and shoes. My mother’s coat is open and her face is flushed red. I don’t know if it is because of her heart medication or because she is warm.

My mother turns 60 in two days. I had asked her in church this morning how old she would be. “50?” I asked without really thinking, and though my mother chuckled, I wasn’t sure if she was flattered or amused by the fact that I hadn’t been paying attention to her age these past ten years.

I listen in on her front seat conversation now, feeling the eavesdropper as she talks to my father about work. She is telling my father how the county has increased the mileage reimbursement for her clients. She works for the county finding jobs for dislocated workers.

“Well, Kathy had a fit of course. She says the people in our county are now getting
more money than the Seneca County folks. And what galls me about it is that Kathy doesn’t seem to care that these are disadvantaged people we’re talking about, people who drive older cars that use more gas, and so they’re not making money off this or anything…”

Mom speaks often of work, and I have noticed that Dad is politely quiet, seemingly attentive. I wonder if he is paying attention at all, or if his mind has wandered, or if he can even hear her with his bad ears. It’s not that I would think poorly of him for playing along, feigning interest. I find it to be a sign of his infinite patience. But I also realize that I will never really know for sure what’s running through his mind at times like these.

I can remember the first time I wondered what was really in his head. I’m not talking about the time he taught me to drive, instructing me to stop at all railroad crossings, even when they weren’t flashing, as a safety precaution – advice I soon learned to be inappropriate and incorrect, and which caused the motor vehicle representative to fail me on my first driving test. No, I did not wonder what was going on in his head when he gave me this poor advice.

It was not something he said or did to me directly that made me wonder who he was. In fact, it had nothing to do with me really. And yet I’m talking about the first time I really considered him. The first time I looked upon him like the stranger that he is to me, can only ever be to me, no matter how much I love him or he loves me. How well do any of us know our fathers? We only know the man with graying or thinning hair, the father who works forty hours a week, the man who sits down to the dinner his wife and daughters have prepared, then dozes off in his easy-chair as the twilight descends outside upon the still warm engine of his four-door sedan. Most of us never learn much outside of this.
And one day I realized this fact. But I don’t know when I became resigned to the knowledge that my father had been many men, had many lives, and that the man I knew today had a history which I might never have the courage or ability to discover.

And in the way that so many other important moments in my life seem to come, this moment came second hand, after the fact, entering the world before I ever knew it existed, claiming a secure foothold in the backdrop of who I was before I even knew what that meant. This information came from my mother.

Carelessly, needlessly, almost thoughtlessly, from my mother. Scrubbing canning jars, standing over the sink, explaining to me for the millionth time why I couldn’t have money for an ice cream at school every day, it tumbled out of her mouth.

“You should be grateful for what you have, Meg.” Her voice shook in rhythm to her right hand’s merciless scrubbing of a soggy mayonnaise label. “There was a time before you were born – we were living in Clyde -- when we stood to lose everything we had. God has blessed this family.”

I asked her what she meant, of course, and the story proceeded to drain out of her mouth in a mere matter of seconds, the story about how my father had once been arrested, a suspect in the murder of a young female employee who worked in the store where my father was a night manager many years ago, before I was born. They had stood to lose everything, my mother said. God has blessed this family.

I was so young. I can remember little about the events surrounding my mother’s revelation of this information. But I think that the period of my life in which I began having strange dreams about my father coincided with the revelation of this information.
At the time of my adolescence, my parents were probably as strapped financially as they would ever be during any other phase of their lives. My father had recently sold a floor cleaning service which he had owned and operated, and was now working only at the Walbert grocery store in Peekskill, one of many branches in a grocery store chain which had employed my father for the last 10 years. Full time hours at Walbert’s followed by long nights of washing, waxing, and buffing the floors of other stores in the area were over, and Dad could now pull his van into the driveway in the evenings knowing it would rest there quietly until morning.

I did not realize it at the time, but when Dad quit his floor cleaning business we said good-bye as a family to an activity which had shaped and flavored our lives in many ways. I do not clearly remember when my father stopped cleaning floors. I only know that at one point in our lives it was an almost nightly activity, and then during another point it was not. The floor cleaning machines, mops, buffers, and buckets lay inactive in the garage for several months, and then even these reminders were gone when Dad finally sold the business to a former employee.

It was a small business, especially starting out, and in the very early years of its operation, when things were just getting started, Mom and Dad would go out together to clean store floors – grocery stores and mini-gas marts most often the businesses which employed their floor cleaning services. Later, the business grew and Dad hired four other men with two more vans which he sent out twice a week, in addition to the sites Dad serviced in his own van.

When we kids were quite young, however, Mom and Dad were the only floor cleaning team. Since most stores did not like to inconvenience customers or interfere with
peak business hours to have their floors cleaned, my parents would perform the service late at night, often leaving our house after 10 p.m. and arriving back home sometimes as late as 2 a.m. If the store wanted to have the floor not only cleaned, but also stripped and waxed, then the service could take most of the night.

Though it was not the usual practice, occasionally our parents would bring my brother, sister and me out late at night to the stores with them when babysitters were unavailable. When we were quite young, my sister and I would bring our sleeping bags and sleep on the checkout conveyor belts. My brother, the oldest, often helped with the work. As we grew older, my sister and I were invited to help as well, and Dad was always quite generous in the salary he paid us for the small contribution of following behind the floor cleaning machine with our hand-held mops, sopping up the excess water left behind by the imperfect squeegee action of the hulking, scrubbing machine.

Sometimes, when the store to be cleaned was local, my father would invite a friend of his along to work for him so my mother wouldn’t have to worry about working and finding a babysitter. On these occasions my mother would drop them and the supplies off at the store and return in a few hours to pick them up. We kids would have to pile into the van for both of these trips. But there were also nights when my father would go out and clean a floor by himself.

I remember one such night when my mother had one of her severe and increasingly frequent sinus headaches and she couldn’t help out. My father was also unable to find a friend who wanted to make a few bucks that night. At the time, my brother Seth was still too young for such work. We dropped Dad off at the Kwik-Fill gas mart in town twenty minutes away, helped him unload his supplies, then returned quite early the next morning to pick him up.
When we arrived, Dad opened the back of the van to begin loading the equipment. He used a long, splintering wooden ramp to roll the floor scrubbing machine, a box-like structure which stood about waist high and weighed a couple hundred pounds, up inside the vehicle. The ramp would be tied with thick pieces of rope to the inside of the van during travel, then it would be lowered halfway out of the van to load up the floor scrubber, which had a propulsion motor so it was not difficult to move up an incline. Bright yellow buckets which said "caution – wet floor" and long mops with maroon metal handles were then piled into the back as well. Always there were big multi-gallon buckets of floor cleaning solution and wax.

As usual, we kids tumbled into the extension seat behind the driver so Dad could hop into the front seat. When he got in, my mother commented on the well-lit interior of the store.

"Don't they want you to turn off some of the lights?"

My dad explained that there was a woman inside in the office working on the books.

"Well, did you hand her the bill so we don't have to mail it?"

"I haven't written it out yet," my dad sighed, obviously not wanting to go all the way back into the store again.

"Well, write it out real quick right now. It'll save us a stamp and you'll get your check all the sooner."

Dad sighed again. "All right," he breathed, then began rifling through the glove compartment for the bill pad and a pen. He scribbled a few things down, tore the sheet from the pad, then tossed it and the pen back into the still open glove compartment.

As he jerked open the van door, my mother stopped him by laying a hand on the inside of his elbow. "Take one of the kids with you," she said.

And a look passed between my parents just then. "I think it's best," my mother
And suddenly my father was grabbing my small hand and pulling me out of the utility seat. "Let's go Meg." I was only too eager for activity after sitting in the van for half an hour waiting for dad to finish and load the equipment.

As we stood on the large rubber mat entrance in front of the automatic doors, I glanced up at my Dad's salt and pepper head, then peered into the store through the glass doors, which were locked. His fist pounding against the glass startled me, and I jumped visibly. A short, curly-haired woman appeared from nowhere, twisting and twisting her key in the lock for what seemed like forever until finally the door swung open.

"Did you forget something?" She wore large, thick maroon frames and she smelled to me like vanilla wafers.

Dad grabbed my hand and we walked back into the store. She leaned against a big bin full of candy covered with colorful, translucent papers.

"I just wanted to give the bill to you, since you're here."

"Oh, well does Dick usually mail you a check? Oh, and you know, some time next month he was thinking about getting the floors stripped..."

I tuned out of their talk and glanced around the store. It was exciting to be there when it was closed. I glanced at the neatly stocked shelves of canned goods and boxes. Every other aisle was lit, making sections of the store seem shadowy and secret. I glanced back at the bin full of candy, wondering at the sheer magnitude of such a sweet stash. Then I looked again to the woman. She looked younger than my mother, but she seemed nice and friendly, and just then I tuned in to her conversation long enough to hear her say "...You can have it if you want..." and my eyes swung automatically to the bin of colorful candy around which we were standing, not believing my good fortune as I slipped my hand into the bin and quietly fished
out several pieces, certain that stores were a good place to be after closing.

On our way back out to the van, Dad grabbed my hand once again as we walked through the dark parking lot. But my fingers stayed quietly clenched around the candy.

My Dad stopped short. "What is that?" he asked, prying open my fingers. He looked at the colorful pieces in my hand and said my name with a note of surprise, and I wondered right away if there had been some mistake, if I had done something wrong.

"Meg, that is stealing." My father said, as if he was unsure if I knew the difference between right and wrong after all, for surely I would not commit the crime if I had considered the consequences. And then I knew that I had been wrong, that it had been too good to be true, that the woman in the store had not been speaking to me, but I was unable to tell my father this, to explain, unable to defend myself. It didn’t matter why – I had done something wrong, something very bad, because I didn’t pay close enough attention to what was going on. I did not know how to explain such a thing. Nor did I even want to. I simply watched my father pick the pieces of candy out of my hand and walk back to the store, stopping just long enough on the way to tell me to get into the van.

My brother opened the door for me, and as I climbed in my mother asked, "What’s your father doing?"

I simply shrugged my shoulders and clambered into the back seat, curling up against the carpeted sides of the van.

Now, of course, I know that the significance of that event had nothing to do with a few pieces of nickel candy. But it wasn’t until much later in my life that the real moment was revealed to me. Only long after my mother told me about the time they stood to lose everything they had, about the woman and the murder and the store in Clyde, did I put the
pieces together. I had been sent into that store as a potential alibi, as a precaution, as protection against words and rumors that could bring a man to ruin.

And I had committed my own small wrong in that process.

The words and rumors went like this. My dad was cleaning the floors at a small grocery store late one night. There was one night clerk on, a female cashier who worked the graveyard shift at the 24-hour mart. My dad finished at midnight, loaded up his supplies, then said good night to the cashier. The next morning the police were at the front door looking for dad. It turned out he was the last person to see the cashier alive. She was found murdered out in the parking lot early that same morning. Stabbed, mom said when she told me of the incident. And she didn’t say, but I could only wonder if the woman had been raped too.

“For a long time they suspected your dad,” Mom said as she revealed details to me, staring out the window as she stood scrubbing old jars so she could use them to can tomatoes. “We stood to lose everything we had. We were looking into hiring a lawyer.”

“What do you mean, ‘everything you had’?” I had asked, unable to comprehend what it would be like to lose everything, or what “everything” even was.

“Oh, you know. The house, the van. We would have had to start all over again. They never found the man who killed her. But eventually they found a man who had walked by the store after your father left and seen the woman in there. If they hadn’t found that man . . . .”

And as she scrubbed a little harder at a particularly stubborn label, she said, “You know, that was such a violent town we started out in. There were four murders that year in Clyde. I remember there was one woman who had run into the police station screaming that some man was trying to kill her, and sure enough, that man followed her right into the police
station and shot her...”

Never mind that a police station had always seemed to me to be that one bastion of safety from the things that frighten and threaten, that one barrier impenetrable by the evils of man. Never mind the fact that I now wondered if there were indeed no safe places in this world. It was the other stuff my mother told me that created a soft tear inside me, a tear so soft and gentle that I barely noticed it. It was like that gentle give you feel when a seam in your pants begins to bust out, or a button on your blouse comes loose. I didn’t know what or where or how, but the fabric had changed, moved. And though nothing had changed about my life, I began to have new thoughts.

And all of this I found out because I was sick of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for lunch at school. “Why can’t I just buy my lunches like Seth and Lisa always did?”

The floor cleaning business had been long sold at this point, and both Mom and Dad were working, but I was not very sympathetic to the situation. I did not understand weekly or yearly incomes, taxable earnings, and how these could fall far short of yearly expenditures. I only knew that there was a dollar in my mother’s purse and she would not let me take it and buy lunch with it that day. So I spent a great deal of time feeling cheated, a great deal of time whining and complaining.

And so this lecture began, a lecture not just about the cost of a school lunch, but a lecture about words and rumors, and how they can hurt people, how they can cause people to lose those things they cherish most, those things which give them peace of mind.

My Dad is going to retire this year. After thirty-five years at Walbert grocery stores, he is going to call it quits, step down to permanent customer status. Become the served,
rather than the serving. He offers to come help me move in August. I am getting a bigger place. He and my mother see me off at the airport now, and I see it in his eyes when he releases me from a big bear hug. He thinks he will not see me again for another year, until next Christmas. I am thinking he is wrong, but of course I really don’t know that for sure.

My fellow passengers begin to shuffle toward our gate. Soon I will follow them. But right now, my mother is squeezing my hand. She looks at me pressingly, reminding me to call when I safely arrive at my destination, to send them an email message when I return from a trip I plan to make next month, to remember to develop my spiritual life.

And my father, he is nodding in quiet, perfect agreement.
KINDRED LAKE

Clumps of grass, like large, tufted sand animals waiting in the dead heat for a sign that the waters will move finally within reach, that the sun will finally fall and bring relief from the dull day, encircled the small beach front where Dana sat, her ten-year-old behind wedged firmly into a large black inner tube which rested on the sand at the water’s edge. Behind Dana, Mrs. Fowler’s gusty sighs were the only winds which stirred this day. They intruded upon Dana from behind, each sigh a reminder that she was being watched, being measured, her moods monitored. She knew a slight indication of fatigue could elicit a pressing invitation to move into the shade. Heavy, blinking eyes may be greeted with instructions to go inside the cottage and take a nap. Her hand pressed gingerly but mindlessly against slightly pink shoulders might bring about a fresh slathering of SPF 30 sunblock. And a gesture even slightly indicative of boredom might bring one of the suggestions that Dana feared most – a swim in the lake.

Dana peered about her intently, registering what she hoped was the right degree of interest and contentment on her features. She was, after all, perfectly content to sit right where she was. It was by far the least taxing of options available to her at the moment.

Careful to turn so that the back of her head was toward Mrs. Fowler, Dana shut her eyes momentarily against the glittery blue glare of the lake. Beads of sweat worked their way out of her scalp and trickled down her neck below her ponytail. The dark rubber tube was growing hot. She opened her eyes again, watching the shoreline lick and tease the small pebbles and stones on the beach, hearing the gentle lap, lap, lapping as the water nipped at the cringing shoreline.
If she really stretched, she could just dip her toe into the very edge of the water, so she did this now, a nervous breath held deep in the cavern of her stomach. It was cooler than she had expected, and a shiver raced up her spine as she jerked her toe back like a finger retreating from a hot iron, but more so because of the shock which not seeing her toe anymore had produced in her. The sun had reflected sharply off the surface of the lake’s edge in just such a way that she could not see exactly where her toe had gone. The toe had simply disappeared when she placed it in the water.

“Oh look, Dana.” The sound of Mrs. Fowler’s voice after such a long stretch of silence produced a small shock in Dana. “Look, dear, it’s a duck!” The woman pointed in the general direction of the lake, and Dana spied the small brown solitary foul trolling closely to shore several yards down. It eventually wiggled its way back out to deeper water to preen its green-brown feathers, and she watched the bird for several more minutes. Occasionally it would dip it’s bill beneath the surface of the water, head disappearing into nowhere, it’s webbed feet continuing to paddle, although the headless body above the surface of the lake made no progress.

Her hot skin shivering under the incessant sunlight, Dana wondered what the duck saw under there.

A young boy with shocking green eyes and a sprinkling of freckles looks up above him, rolls slowly onto his back to see a small brown head appearing from nowhere, from above, poking down from some other surface, some other realm, a small brown head with an orange bill, button eyes peering down at his dark white skin, at his short locks of orange hair floating above his head, and as he continues to roll over on his stomach again, returning to
his rest, the small brown head disappears. Tiny orange feet appear above him, working furiously now to carry something away, spinning and spinning over his head.

As Dana watched the bird swim out of sight beyond the next bend, she could hear Mrs. Fowler behind her, shifting in her rickety lawn chair, settling her weight back into the overburdened apparatus. Where the weaves were missing, Mrs. Fowler’s thighs dripped through like oozing bread dough.

Dana decided it might be time to remove herself from the hot tube before Mrs. Fowler asked her if she were bored, but as she wiggled forward another girl, slightly older, wearing a bright pink bikini with ties at the hip, came running out from the row of mobile homes which stood about a hundred yards off the beach. Mrs. Fowler’s daughter Elizabeth was just shy of three years older than Dana, a strong, aggressive swimmer who took to the water like a bear attacking his breakfast, and she sprinted down the path to the lake, brushing by her mother. Though the girl had grown up vacationing at the lake each summer, this year was very different from the others for she had been told that she could not go in the water when her father was not around, that she must wear a life jacket in such a situation. Mrs. Fowler had insisted, her special concern over water safety growing particularly fierce after the tragic start to this summer.

And at this moment, with Dana sitting in tube at water’s edge, Mrs. Fowler in her lawn chair just a few feet behind, and Mr. Fowler in town picking up hot dogs buns for their dinner, Elizabeth seemed to have a very poor memory of this new rule in her life. She bounded down the path, past her mother, into the lake, without a life jacket, creating a splash that smacked Dana across the face and almost reached her mother. It was the way she had
always done it since she was five years old, hurtling out of the cottage, bounding down to the lake, attacking the waters, fearless.

Feathery sprays continued to douse Dana as Elizabeth worked her way into the water.

Mrs. Fowler sprang awake from her light doze at the sound of the water, glancing first at Dana, then seeing her tow-headed daughter up to her waist in the lake without a life jacket.

"Where's your life jacket, Lizzy?" The woman's voice held a note of disbelief overshadowed by alarm. Lizzy did not respond, but instead continued her smooth, unsteady progress toward the center of the lake. Tentatively, she dipped her skinny, sunburned arms into the still chilly waters of June, squealed, then pulled them back above the surface. Her limbs then hovered at her sides, turning the girl into a silent, stealthy predator, sneaking up on the lake, ready to claim it's depth as long as her feet touched its bottom.

When the water reached Lizzy's shoulders, Mrs. Fowler became truly panicked. Her face washed violently from white to red, and her voice came out in a screeching rasp.

"Where's your father, Lizzy," Mrs. Fowler cried. Then, without waiting for a response:

"Carl! Carl?" She heaved herself up out of the chair, toppling the flimsy apparatus over in the process.

Finally, her daughter mustered an impatient response. "He went to town! He'll be back in a minute!"

But Mrs. Fowler did not appear to hear. "Carl!" She cried again.

All at once, Dana gathered herself up out of the inner tube, standing with her feet a mere inches from the biting water. "Lizzy, come back to shore," Dana shouted.
At the sound of Dana’s voice, Mrs. Fowler glanced at her momentarily, seemingly forgetting for an instant their guest, the big-boned girl from Buffalo, their Fresh Air child who was here to get a healthy dose of country living, who was staying with them for two weeks this summer, and who had stayed with them for the past two summers. Mrs. Fowler’s face seemed to say, *Who is she?* But then a bolt of something solid and strong flashed across Mrs. Fowler, and she turned herself resolutely back to the lake.

“Yes, Lizzy. You come back to shore this instant. You come back and put a life jacket on right this very minute or you will not be allowed in the water for the rest of the summer.”

Lizzy took one more tentative step toward the center of the lake, and suddenly she was just a small ball of blond hair jerking and jiggling along the surface of the water. And at the sight of the small head bobbing along the lake, a small blond bodiless head floating in the silvery blue mass of liquid, Mrs. Fowler’s moment of resolve shattered and she was panicked anew.

“Lizzy. Lizzy, please!” She screamed, and a sob burst out of her quite unexpectedly, so much so that she caught her hand up to her mouth, making a fist and stuffing it in there like the apple in a pig’s mouth.

When Mr. Fowler came home almost two hours later, he found his wife asleep in bed, wads of light blue tissues littered about her. Elizabeth was playing with a girl whose parents rented one of the other cottages in the camp. Mr. Fowler found Dana playing near a creek
which ran long the back length of the cottages and emptied into the lake, and he called her into their cottage to help him get lunch together.

Only her third day with the Fowlers, and already Dana was sick of bologna sandwiches. It appeared the Fowler’s could eat them all day every day. It had been the lunch of choice for the past two summers in a row when Dana had again been their guest for two weeks. She wondered if they served something different for lunch after she left.

“Looks like Mrs. Fowler is feeling poorly today,” Mr. Fowler commented, handing Dana a set of rattan plate holders which she knew she should line with paper plates. She shrugged her shoulders at his query, which he had said more for himself really, to confirm the idea in his mind, and then perhaps register Dana’s reaction as an afterthought.

“What happened when I was gone?” He continued. She shrugged her shoulders again, but felt him watching her the same way her mother eyed her sometimes. A kind of stark, fearless assessment, monitoring her gestures, her progress. The way her mother eyed her suddenly one day and measured her physical development with gravity and suspicion, commenting crudely on the number of outfits Dana had outgrown. Mr. Fowler wanted to know what Dana had done to cause all of this.

As he grabbed the mayonnaise and bologna from the refrigerator, Dana grabbed one of the tin cans of pork and beans which they also always served at lunchtime, in addition to the handfuls of potato chip crumbles. She opened the can slowly, then emptied the contents into a bowl, scraping the sides with a metal spoon. The clash of aluminum made her teeth clench.
Mr. Fowler was not paying much attention to her now, carefully layering bread, bologna, and mayonnaise until he had a neat pile of sandwiches on a plate in the middle of the table.

But then he finished the task and turned to her deliberately.

“You know, I’m guessing you haven’t really had a lot of fun yet this year.” His salt and pepper mustache curled around his mouth as he grimaced in an almost apologetic smile. “You know what I think? I think this afternoon we should all go for a little boat ride. Would you like that? A little ride in the canoe. That sounds fun, doesn’t it?”

Dana felt all of the blood rush away from her, out into the sink and down the drain where she was rinsing the pork and beans guts off the spoon she had just used.

You did not refuse things when you were someone else’s responsibility, someone else’s guest. Dana learned this her first summer with the Fowlers when she complained about eating bologna sandwiches every day and Mrs. Fowler stopped speaking to her for the rest of the week. The director of the summer program came to Dana’s house after she had been home for a week and told her that the Fowler’s weren’t sure they wanted her back next summer. But her mother called them and told them how much the summers meant to Dana, how she’d cry if she didn’t get to go next year. And since then Dana realized what a terrible humiliation it would be to have the director come and tell her mom next year, “She was not invited back.” There would be two more weeks out of the summer when her mother had to find someone to take care of Dana during the day — god knows her brothers were not responsible enough. To not be invited back meant she had rocked the boat somehow. It did
not occur to Dana that she might not want to come back, only that her mother would never forgive her if she failed to.

And so she took the boat ride. A boat ride that frightened her perhaps even more than the thought of swimming in the lake, a lake where another guest of the Fowlers had drowned at the end of last summer, after Dana had left. A young boy from Belfast, her brother had told her after reading it in a newspaper that their mother brought home from the coffee shop some days.

So Dana had learned about the boy from Belfast first from her brother, but the more important details she learned later, the next year, upon her return to the Fowler’s cottage, from Elizabeth.

Mrs. Fowler told her immediately that she wasn’t allowed to go in the water at all during her visit, so on her first day, the two girls played down by the water making miniature villages in the sand out of bark, twigs, wild berries, and stones.

They had been playing for nearly an hour when Elizabeth, growing bored with their pastime, finally spilled over. “You know the real reason you’re not allowed to go in the water, don’t you Dana?”

Dana was trying to make a miniature pond for their miniature park, but she couldn’t keep the water from draining into the small hole she had dug in the sand. Perhaps if she lined it with leaves. “I know,” Dana said. “I’m not a good swimmer. I can’t swim.”

“Well, yeah, that’s why they don’t want you to go in the water but they’re also afraid you’ll find him.” Elizabeth, squatting on her haunches, continued to fiddle nonchalantly with a park bench made out of small pieces of bark, two short pieces stuck in the sand and a longer piece laid across them.
“Find who?”

“The boy. The boy who drowned last month.”

“Oh.” It made perfect sense to Dana even before Elizabeth tried to explain.

“You see, he’s still in there, that boy,” and both girls glanced out at the water as Elizabeth said the words. “He’s still in there and they don’t want you to find him down on the bottom some where. You’ll drown just like Paul did if you go in the water anyway.”

Dana remained quiet, but Elizabeth continued to sniff her out, looking for the open gash like a dog that smells blood and gives it a curious lick.

“Actually, my dad was in the water last week, in the power boat, and he thinks he saw him. He thinks he saw him floating in the middle of the lake, and he accidentally hit him with the boat. I was in the boat, too. I saw him too.”

Dana turned her large eyes on the small blond girl, a girl three years older than Dana but nearly four inches shorter. Standing next to her, Dana always felt big and strong, the way her brothers must feel when they shove her onto the couch and sit on her until she agrees to make them a sandwich. But right now Dana was feeling large and dark and dull, a big dark shadow slinking along underneath Elizabeth’s feet.

Elizabeth ripped the rest of the berries from the twig and tossed them into the lake. They made little plopping noises. “He was all white and swollen. His eyes were open. They were green.”

The lake water shimmered and swallowed up the berries whole. Dana watched them disappear below the shimmery surface. They were in a dark and secret place now, and Dana wondered if fish that didn’t know better would try to eat them.
“But he’s still in there.” Elizabeth stood and stared at Dana for a moment. Then moved closer to her, stepping squarely onto the pond which Dana had just lined with a big, waxy maple leaf. The pond disappeared beneath the girl’s foot and lumpy, watery sand rose up on either side of her sole. “He’s still in there Dana.”

“He is not.” Dana remained in her squatting position, staring at Elizabeth’s bony shin, so close she could put her mouth on it if she wanted too.

Elizabeth made a small gagging noise of disgust. “Oh what do you know, Dana. You’re just a big baby who can’t go in the water.” The girl bent and quickly grabbed some of the small red, poisonous berries they had used to mark out a path through their miniature park. She tossed a couple out into the lake, then she took one and pressed it against Dana’s shoulder. “Look, Dana,” the girl giggled. “Blood.”

Dana hoped the distraction of tracking down Elizabeth and getting her to eat lunch with her parents and their guest would cause the canoe ride idea to slip away unnoticed like a retreating enemy who never attacked. But Mrs. Fowler, sure that Dana had pouted just a bit that day, pulled the idea out of thin air before Mr. Fowler even had a chance to suggest it to her.

“Oh, Frank,” she said, “remember Racquet Lake in the summer? I haven’t canoed since we used to go up there to Old Forge in the summers. I bet Dana would like a canoe ride, wouldn’t you Dana?”

Mrs. Fowler did not wait for her response, but turned immediately to their daughter, who was picking at her pork and beans with a plastic fork. “What do you say, Elizabeth? Would you like to go for a canoe ride – all four of us?”
“I don’t want to go for a canoe ride,” she whined. “I’m too tired.”

“All you have to do is sit on the bottom of the boat, Elizabeth.” Mr. Fowler’s mustache began to twitch slightly.

“That’s, Ok, Frank,” Mrs. Fowler chimed in. “We can still take Dana. I bet Dana’s never been on a canoe ride. We didn’t have the canoe last summer when she came.”

And so it was decided, that the three of them would slip away from shore that very afternoon on a banana shaped, sliver of a boat the color of dark, crusty mustard with just a pair of wooden paddles to guide them.

To Dana, it was better than swimming, but she still felt her chest growing small and tight as Mr. Fowler snapped together the clasps on the orange and yellow children’s life vest. She just barely fit into it, the straps adjusted to their maximum length. Mr. and Mrs. Fowler wore dark green, adult life vests.

Mr. Fowler righted the canoe while Mrs. Fowler and Dana stood on shore watching. “It’s a perfect day for canoeing,” Mrs. Fowler said to Dana. “Have you ever seen the waters so still, Frank?”

He glanced at the glassy waters, surrounded by maples and evergreens, silent and still, towering over their own reflections. He slid the boat down to the water and three quarters of the way off of the beach. “Yep, it’s perfect.” They were comments made less for each other and more for their captive audience, who stood staring at the ugly mustard vessel that would hold them hovering above the surface of the water.

Mrs. Fowler got in first, the first step of her large, white, wide feet grounding the canoe, but as she stepped her bare feet slowly along the center of the canoe out toward the lake, her hands grasping the low sides, the water began to take her weight.
“Now, do just like Mrs. Fowler and try and keep your weight low when you step into the canoe. Bend right over,” Mr. Fowler directed. “I’ll keep it steady for you.”

Mr. Fowler stepped behind the canoe. He placed a hand on each side of the boat as Dana lifted one leg and placed her foot directly on the spine of the canoe. But as she pulled her weight up from the shallow waters onto the canoe-bound foot, the boat tipped crazily. Her stomach folded suddenly on top of itself. Mr. Fowler kept the canoe from cap-sizing by halting its movement with a sudden jerk in the other direction, but Dana ended up in a small pile on the floor of the vessel, her left shin bruised as it caught the edge of the boat when she fell into it.

“You OK?” Mr. Fowler asked. “Don’t worry, you’ll get the hang of this eventually.” His deep, round chuckle and Mrs. Fowler’s nervous twitter echoed out over the waters.

Once Dana was settled, Mr. Fowler pushed the canoe deeper into the water, the bottom scraping along the sand and stones until suddenly the boat was free and floating. At that exact moment Mr. Fowler swung his body from the shore onto the end of the canoe, like a cowboy mounting a horse from the back, his legs straddling the vessel. He swung his legs around into the boat, then settling into the seat, grabbed the paddle which lay along the bottom of the canoe. Dana sat on the floor on the boat, her back resting gingerly against the center brace. She watched the Fowlers silently work the paddles, neither of them speaking as they ushered the canoe further and further from the shore, pulling the boat along as the bottom of the lake dropped away slowly from them like an old trap door. Dana watched the black-blue surface of the water skid by in silent, jagged dips and crests of sunlight. Every wobble of the boat made her breathing stop, every shifting of weight caused her muscles to bunch and scurry up her bones.
She peered over the edge of the canoe.

A young boy slides alongside the boat, propelling himself like a dolphin, wiggling and jerking his body as he cruises along on his back, looking up through the shattered black waters, peering up at the large round face, the pair of skittish brown eyes that blindly probe him, seeing only a reflection, small eyes skidding and bouncing along the surface of the black water, gazing down, glaring up.

That night Dana woke up from a bad dream which she could not remember. She did not know for sure where she was when she woke. She cried out several times, and thought for a moment that Mrs. Fowler, stumbling out of the back bedroom through semi-darkness into the guest bedroom, was her mother crashing through the hallway, knocking pictures off the wall, smelling of smoke, bending over her as she slept on the living room couch. She felt a strange sense of relief at these sounds, but then the large looming shadow of Mrs. Fowler, who was standing suddenly in the doorway of the guest bedroom, crying, “What’s the matter, dear? What’s the matter?” gave her a cold start, and she felt a strong and very urgent need to pee.

“I have to go to the bathroom.”

Mrs. Fowler sighed in relief. “Well that’s fine, dear, just go. I’ll turn the light on for you.”

But it was too late. Mrs. Fowler’s appearance had produced an overwhelming urgency that Dana couldn’t control. She sat in a wet spot while Mrs. Fowler, seeing that
Dana had made no motion to move from the bed, came to her and placed a hand on her warm, damp forehead. “Are you sick, dear?”

Dana shook her head.

“Well, don’t you want to use the bathroom?”

She shook her head again.

“How about a glass of water?” Mrs. Fowler’s shoulders were sagging. The skin around her eyes puckered forward as she leaned over Dana. “I’ll get you a glass of water, and then let’s try to get some more sleep.”

The woman returned with a large plastic blue tumbler of water. She set it on the nightstand. “OK?” She queried. Dana nodded.

“All right, now get some sleep, dear.”

When she had gone, Dana got up and took off her pajamas. She didn’t have another pair, so she slid on a pair of shorts and a T-shirt, and stuffed the wet nightgown in her duffel bag. Carefully, she made the bed, covering the wet sheets with the pink plaid comforter, then she sat down in the chair by the door to wait for morning.

No mention was made of the bed, even though later the next day Mrs. Fowler came to change the linen. Dana wondered if it could have gone unnoticed, but then at dinnertime, while Mr. and Mrs. Fowler were outside standing beside the grill as Mr. Fowler cooked hot dogs, Elizabeth sat down at the kitchen table beside her. She took a potato chip from Dana’s plate and chomped it noisily. “Mind if I have a chip, baby?”

“T’m not a baby.”
“Well, that’s not what I heard. Mom said you wet the bed. Sounds to me like something a baby does.”

Elizabeth continued to eat chips from Dana’s plate, and Dana watched as they disappeared, one by one, into the face of the small blond girl. She watched the pink lips close over them as they vanished forever into the soft dark folds of her mouth – gone.

“You’re a baby,” the girl repeated. And as she said the words, Dana watched the large pink gap open up just enough to reveal the mash of grease, potato and salt rolling around on the girl’s tongue. She saw it for just a second, the lumpy mush you weren’t supposed to see, the magic trick revealed. The inside exposed.

“You’re a pig,” Dana muttered. Elizabeth’s jaw stopped chewing. “What?” she asked incredulously, ready to rise out of her seat and find her parents.

Dana grabbed the last handful of chips from her plate and thrust them at the girl beside her, smashing them into her face with a noisy crunch. “You’re a pig!” she shouted again. “You’re a pig! You’re a pig! You’re a pig!”

The decision was made that night. Dana would go home. It had been a mistake, the Fowlers were now certain, to bring Dana here this year, with all of the recent, tragic events. She was going home, three and a half hours back to the city. They said things like, “We enjoyed your visit,” and “We’ll see you next summer,” but this was the last summer, Dana knew. She would not be back.

And so, Mrs. Fowler eagerly deposited Dana at the door of her mother’s apartment in the early evening. Mr. Fowler was waiting in the car outside, double-parked, anxious to
leave before it got dark. “Are you sure someone’s home, Dana?” Mrs. Fowler asked, already stepping back, thinking of the elevator.

“Don is probably home.” She replied.

“Oh, yes.” Mrs. Fowler squeezed her shoulders in good-bye, not asking who Don was, certain that she had met Don before. “Oh yes, Don.” And she retreated into the gaping elevator, calling, “See you next summer, dear.”

As Dana stepped through the door of her mother’s apartment alone, dragging her duffel bag behind her, she found a long, skinny, sweaty man with an old face and a colorless ponytail sitting on the couch.

He took a deep drag on a cigarette, then flicked some ash on the floor. He reached across himself to pick up a can of beer. A tangle of snakes and women crawled up his arm and partially hid themselves under the sleeve of his dirty T-shirt.

The apartment was quiet, and Dana could hear the beer swishing down his body, gushing out of the can and into the slack cheeks, his tongue slicing through the liquid as it disappeared forever down the drain of his throat.

“You Dana?” he drawled, pulling the can slowly away from his mouth.

And a glittery trickle of liquid escaped from his lower lip.
A TOKEN EXPRESSION

No one was choking back angry sobs or bitter, useless tears. There were no eyebrows pinched up and squeezed together into that futile look of hurt and wonder, short hairs bunched and perched over the nose, over the mouth which wants to ask that question that no one can answer.

There was none of this.

But there was homemade white bread on the kitchen table, and there were metal pitchers of lemonade almost too tart to drink. There were children underfoot, and horses in the yard hitched up to simple, boxy black buggies.

And there was a plain pine box resting in the middle of the living room, open, inviting all to come and look at the cave of flesh and bone that once held Mervin Zimmerman.

But every brow in that house which had come to say good-bye to Mervin was smooth and plain, cool as the sweet-sour citrus liquid they sipped out of small white paper cups held in callused, stub-nailed hands.

“He is in a far, far better place,” Mervin’s widow said to my mother and me as we moved past her in the receiving line. “A far, far better place.”

I glanced around at the quiet figures clad in dark bonnets and black suspenders, at the somber, stoic faces, deeply lined but still, silent, and I was ashamed because I was crying.

When I saw Mervin hit the windshield of that car, he was like a rag doll. That’s what I told the police when they arrived. He just flew through the air and landed in the cornfield like a doll someone had tossed aside, like the cat my neighbor Buddy Jensen had once taken
by the tail and flung into the cornfield next to my parents’ house. Limbs all splayed out and loose, no resistance. Mervin’s bike flew, too, only it didn’t fly as far as he did. It made a small leap into the ditch at the side of the road. His bike just crumpled up and died right away, really. But not Mervin. He had one last moment, one soaring second of clarity which will last into infinity, a final flight of triumph over earth and gravity just before the lights went out.

With his matchbox cars and mini-motorcycles, my brother used to choreograph accidents like the one that Mervin was in. My brother would ram them into each other and the vehicles would instantly rise up into the air upon impact, guided by his hands, the toys suspended up above his head for several seconds. He liked to suspend and prolong that moment of freedom from gravity, let the toys twist and hover for several seconds until he finally decided to release them and they dropped instantly, clattering to the wood floors of our dining room in an almost pathetic little clatter.

I never played with my toys like that. The greatest physical impact Ballerina Barbie endured was being tossed around slightly in my book bag in the first grade when I took her with me to school one day for “Show and Tell”

My Barbie got her hair combed and her clothes buttoned and smoothed. I never wondered what she’d look like soaring through the air and crashing into my Ken doll.

But I know what rag dolls look like when they soar.

When my mother and I had made our way across the road to our neighbor’s house to attend calling hours for Mervin, the early evening sun was racing toward the horizon,
washing the white clapboards of Ruth and Mervin’s house with a trail of dark orange light. The bed of pastel flowers under their kitchen window had become a box of fluorescent tulips heads, eating up the dusky shadows in the fading glow. I thought about the day that Ruth and Mervin had moved here to this plain, two-story box house of chipped-paint clapboards with overgrown weeds for a yard, and how quickly those flowers had appeared in that box. Ruth and Mervin came to a house that had been empty for as long as I could remember, and suddenly there were women in printed calico dresses, dark stockings, and fitted bonnets bustling about the yard, painting, potting, pulling at weeds. The transformation took less than a week and soon the house looked even more inviting than my own parents’ home did.

Although Ruth and Mervin had lived across the street for almost nine years now, I did not know them well and had agreed to come to calling hours at my mother’s request. I had never been to an open-casket calling hours, but I had been to funerals before and thought I was prepared. Funerals were a time to cry. People would weep and say a prayer and hug the surviving relatives and take a program home with them as a momento, fold it carefully and slide it into their purses between the checkbook and the cell phone.

I remember little about that evening, except that I left feeling ashamed because I had been the only one in that whole house who cried at the sight of Mervin’s lifeless body. Here my mother and I were, on a mission to provide our unfortunate Mennonite neighbor Ruth and her two small children with our token love and support, but instead it was I who had needed consoling.

“He is in a far, far better place,” Ruth had told me when she saw me crying. I wasn’t sure if I believed that, but I knew she did. She really did.
When she said this, my head was down and my eyes were suctioned on the black, soft-soled shoes which poked out from underneath the dark, simple dresses in front of me belonging to Ruth and her relatives. I did not look to see who touched my hand when these words were said but someone did. Then afterwards, after my mother and I had moved quickly through the line, shuffled back into the kitchen and out the front door, back into the strange orange lights outside, and after the soft buzz of their strange language was finally sealed off by the closing door behind us, I felt a vague sense of recognition, a hint of a dream that I knew those fingers that had wrapped around mine just now for barely an instant.

Then mother said, “Did you see Louise in there. I almost didn’t recognize her, she has just grown up so wonderfully beautiful. What an attractive girl!”

Louise’s fingers were still small and warm and insistent, just as they had been when we were small children and she had used them to pull me into whatever reckless adventure she had planned for that day. And as my mother and I walked back to our house the sudden recognition of those fingers sent a small shock through my body.

Louise, at the age of nine, had been sent up to Central New York with Mervin and Ruth when they moved from Pennsylvania to the house across the street from us. Ruth and Louise’s parents thought it was a good idea for Louise to come and stay the summer, help get Ruth settled. Louise was old enough to be a help to Ruth with the many small chores that come with settling a new home.

It took no time at all for the two of us to meet. No one else lived on our road, and I was eager to make myself available to a potential new playmate. I hung out in our front yard most days, playing on my bike in the driveway or in my tree fort, until one day Louise finally
strolled across the road to challenge me to a spitting contest. And so I grew to know my new playmate Louise, a full two years older than I, as a small blond girl full of spit, literally. This surprised me about her, because when my mother had told me that the people across the road were Mennonites, I could only picture silent and stoic people clad in black, strange church deacons with high collars and spotless white robes, people who never sinned or thought a bad thought about anyone.

But Louise beat the pants off of me at spitting, and she also assured me right away that her older cousin Jacob from Pennsylvania swore frequently when not in the presence of his elders. I began to realize that Louise was more of a “Little House on the Prairie”-type than a Mennonite. She dressed strangely, but she was much like the characters of my favorite TV show. She was a spunky Laura Ingalls, spitting and fighting and laughing, combined with a beautiful Nellie Olsen, blonde, petite, pretty. She said and did all the things I continually talked myself out of doing, and she did them without thinking, on instinct.

Within her first week at Ruth and Mervin’s, I heard Louise get scolded for not feeding the chickens that wandered around her sister’s front yard. Ruth was outside pointing and waving at Louise, speaking a strange, guttural, rounded language I did not understand, but I knew that what she was saying was not good, for Louise slumped down on the ground in an angry huff, after which Ruth grabbed her thin arm and dragged her over to the chicken feed bag. I felt an immediate sense of kinship with her for I had been grounded that same day for not cleaning the pile of clothes off of the middle of my bedroom floor. Soon after this episode in her front yard, Louise marched into my parents' front yard to find me dangling from my tree house. It was a small platform constructed out of gray and rotting scrap wood, but strong enough to hold the weight of a couple of pre-pubescent bodies.
“It’s time to go exploring,” Louise said, peering up at me though the leaves and branches, her hands on her hips. "Come down here."

I made my way down to the ground and she grabbed my fingers. We were standing on the edge of my parents’ property, next to the neighbor’s cornfield and in clear view of both my parents’ and her sister’s house.

She dragged me to a line of trees between my parent’s property and the cornfield beside it, then she signaled for a stop.

“Get ready to run,” she whispered.

“OK,” I said.

We were ready to make a mad dash somewhere. Then I realized she intended to sprint across the small expanse of cornfield to reach the backside of my other neighbor’s barn. There, we would be hidden from view again.

Ruth gathered her skirts and apron in her hands, preparing to pounce.

“Go!” She cried.

We sprinted across the muddy field to the back of the barn, flicking brown slop onto the backside of our calves and coating the soles of our shoes with a dark brown, slimy, goo.

Then we leaned against the sad structure to catch our breaths, out of sight. Our clothes picked up blood red flecks of rotten wood from the barn. The boards were so weathered that they had shrunk like an old set of teeth. You could see clear through the gaps to the other side of the barn where there was sunlight pouring through the cracks.

I was not supposed to go in my neighbor’s barn. It was old, dilapidated, nearly falling down upon itself, its rusty red paint turned to a fine gray powder.
"I don’t know why they don’t tear that thing down," my father would often say at the dinner table. "With all of the kids around here."

There were only three “kids” living on our road at the time -- me, my brother, and a sixteen-year-old named Buddy who was too old to play with either of us. Louise made four. My first “neighborhood” playmate besides my brother, and the first person who would ever convince me to completely cross the threshold into the barn we now leaned against. I had peered inside the doors at the back many times, even ventured to step a foot or two inside, but never had I been brave enough to ignore my mother’s warning about collapsing buildings and explore it until today.

Louise looked to me, her blue eyes growing dark and wide, and she grabbed my hand and dragged me inside the sagging doorway, creeping across old hay and dust, sunlight streaming through the cracked, warped structure, striping her plain gray dress and my red tank top and shorts. She led me to a creaky set of stairs that descended to the base of the structure. We went slowly down and found ourselves in a large, dusty, open area which housed old farm equipment.

Upon seeing these strange machines, I was beginning to swallow my fears and sense the adventure of the moment. Suddenly, I wanted to find lost treasure and secret passageways.

We ventured up to the top story. A large, open, sunny space with more hay and little else. To the north there was a broad doorway which opened onto a small vineyard of wine grapes. We were two stories up. I walked over to the edge, peering down at the ground.


"No way," I said, taking two steps back from the opening.
"It's not so far," Louise said.

"You're crazy," I answered. Through the opening I could see the fields across the roads and the line of trees behind them in the distance. To the left, Ruth and Mervin's property and their house could just be seen. Things looked strange and new from up here at this angle.

I turned from the opening and began poking around in the hay. Ruth was already descending the steps, bored with the empty loft and eager to find more to look at.

Alone, I found myself overcome with the reality of this large, empty space that I wasn't supposed to see. So much space and so much structure, exposing all at once how big and how small I was.

Gradually, I explored the different corners of the hayloft. Peering down at the floorboards and the scattered hay. Then I froze for a moment. There nestled in the straw was a small, gray-white form, the size of a doll's head. It was an animal's skull. It had a long narrow nose, a pair of empty slits where eyes had been, and two rows of sharply angled teeth still neatly packed into the narrow jawbone. My skin prickled at the sight, and the sound of a needle dropping in the hay at that moment would have sent me scurrying out of the building. But the room remained empty of sound.

I had never seen the remains of any living thing before -- not anything larger than a bug, at least -- and I was suddenly very much in awe of this old structure, this old barn. The hay loft, long deserted and unused, was apparently a place where animals came and animals died. Scary animals. Animals with long, sharp teeth and slanted eyes. Animals which would no doubt have scared me when living, but whose remains evoked an even more powerful rush of reverent fear within me. I had found my lost treasure.
Quickly, I hunted Louise down to show her the skull. Louise flicked a blond braid over the shoulder of her simple dress and demanded I take her to it. When she saw it, she kicked it with the toe of her soft, black-soled shoe and it scattered to pieces amongst the hay. I cringed, a small gasp escaping from me as I watched the jawbone detach from the rest of the skull and shimmy across the warped floorboards, disappearing underneath a mound of hay.

We left the barn shortly after that and I would not go back there again. I told Louise it was because of the dog. The owner of the barn had tied up a dog near the back door of the structure shortly after our adventure, and it looked very mean.

I was not afraid of dogs though, not really. They were alive and could not hurt me. But after telling Louise this lie I began to have bad dreams about a big, black, German shepherd chasing me up the hill to my parents’ house.

Louise inspired me to do many crazy things that first summer she was there. Within a week, she had me convinced I had learned Pennsylvania Dutch from her, and when I went to visit her at her sister’s house I greeted Ruth proudly with my gibberish.

“Oopen fra, Ruth. Gloopy och och och.”

Ruth always played along. “Why yes, it is a wonderful day. And what did you two do this morning?”

“Licky okten okten.”

The week my cat died, Louise had convinced me that cats had nine lives and all you had to do was dig a dead cat back up after you buried it so it could start its next life.
Cars were often barreling down our road, which was a cross-lots way between parallel routes 13 and 7, and one day a truck from the county landfill nicked Chester just enough to send him crawling into a ditch to die.

"He doesn’t have to be dead," Louise said softly, resting her hand lightly on my shoulder as I sat crying in my tree fort. "If we dig him up, he won’t be dead. He has eight more lives. You just have to dig him up is all."

I refused her plan, part of me knowing what she said was not true, though I wanted to believe. But that night I missed Chester’s warm, lumpy presence at the foot of my bed, so I got up shortly after midnight and snuck out back to my parents’ small apple orchard where Dad had buried my cat. I stumbled out there cautiously, half considering whether I should try to wake up Louise, but didn't dare to. Guided by the glow of the mercury lamp attached to our garden supply shed, I grabbed a shovel and headed for the plain, gray stone, about the size of a melon, which my father had used to mark the grave. It took six or seven swipes at the dirt before a fuzzy yellow leg appeared. It seemed to rise up from the ground of it’s own volition, dirty and covered with crumbles of earth, just the leg and nothing else. I dropped the shovel at the sight of it and ran back into the house. I did not tell my parents’ what I had done, but the next day my father was cursing Buddy Jensen, calling him an evil vandal, a class A juvenile delinquent.

And I didn't tell Louise what I had done. I was uncertain if she’d care, or if she’d be impressed. I began to wonder if she really did believe cats had nine lives, and if I would upset her terribly by telling her I had proven this to be false. What I had done, what I had discovered, it just might horrify her.
Then in the fall school started. There was a small, one-room schoolhouse which had been built several miles outside of town a few years prior to Louise’s arrival for the growing Mennonite population in the area. Louise would attend school there until she was sent back to Pennsylvania. We secretly hoped that they would forget about ever sending her back, and that she would stay on with her sister indefinitely.

Local Mennonite children used the public school transportation system to get to school, picked up along with the public school children then shuttled off to their own school in the country after the public school kids were dropped off. That first morning of school, my brother and I were outside standing by our mailbox waiting for our ride, and I was waiting anxiously for Louise to appear. I didn’t want her to miss her first day.

Before long, I could see the big orange school vehicle crest the knoll about a quarter mile before our houses and come barreling toward us. There was still no Louise as it stopped before us, gasping, its double door gaping wide as I lumbered up the big black steps behind my brother. Our houses were the last stop on the morning run before the bus made a beeline for town and deposited its contents on the front steps of Sherman-Milburn Academy. My brother took the last seat which didn’t already have one other occupant. Because he had made it clear in the past that I was not, under any circumstances whatsoever, to attempt to sit with him on the public school bus, I parked myself in a seat across from him with Cheryl Kemp, a girl who lived on a farm about three miles away from us and with whom I had shared a first grade class.

I glanced out the window past Cheryl in time to see Louise come barreling out of her sister’s house, bags in tow, and streak across the street without looking first to board the full bus.
“Almost missed ya,” Sandy, our big, round bus driver who always wore cowboy boots and a big, silver belt buckle the size of a saucer, said to Louise as her head appeared at the top of the stairs.

She wore a dark, gray dress, smooth and high-necked with a long skirt, and there was a square print scarf tied around her braided head. Beneath her skirt were those spindly shins covered in black stockings, and she wore her black sneaker-like shoes. An ashy blond braid rested on either side of her thin face, which was almost blue it was so pale. A timid pink I had never seen before spilled into her cheeks as she felt the attention of the bus turn toward her. She flicked a braid tentatively over one shoulder and made her way down the aisle in search of a seat. As she approached me, a smile broke out across her face. I smelled a faint whiff of homemade bread mixed with hay as she sat down with my brother across the aisle from me. Randy did not protest, but I saw his ears grow red and he kept his eyes fixed on the back of the green seat in front of him.

“Who is that,” Cheryl was elbowing me and whispering in my ear none too discreetly. I looked to Louise. She sat turned towards me, her feet out in the aisle. On her knees rested a few books hooked together with a belt and a red metal lunch box, dented and chipped.

“Who’s that girl?” Cheryl elbowed me again, peering around me to get a better look. Other pairs of eyes in the seats surrounding us began to turn in Louise’s direction

“She’s staying with the neighbors,” I said. And as the bus lurched forward, heading once again for the school, I slowly turned my back to Louise.

“Your neighbor?” Cheryl’s eyes grew wide. “She’s your neighbor?”

“She’s not my neighbor,” I protested weakly, my voice several decibels quieter than Cheryl’s. “She’s staying with our neighbors.”
“Your Mennonite neighbors?”

I sighed in irritation, ready to tell Cheryl how whiny and fat and stupid and loud she was.

“Cheryl, move over,” I complained loudly. “You’re hogging the whole seat.”

Cheryl let out an offended little gasp.

Then, from behind me somewhere, I could feel someone standing up and peering over the backs of our seats. It was Buddy, sitting directly behind my brother and Louise, but close enough to Cheryl and me that I could smell his bad aftershave.

“Hey,” he piped. “It’s a Mennonite I smell in front of me. I knew I smelled horse shit on this bus.”

My face grew hot as I kept my back to Louise and stared out the window past Cheryl.

“Hey, Randy,” Buddy poked my brother in the forehead. “Is that Minniewheat your girlfriend?”

Randy swatted Buddy’s hand away with an irritated “No!”

“Hey, Minniewheat,” Randy cooed. “You wanna be a frosted Minniewheat?”

Two beats of silence, my back to Louise, Louise frozen and silent with her feet in the aisle, my brother glued to the window, and then Sandy’s voice floated back to us from the front of the bus.

“Park your rear in that seat, young man,” he called. “I’ll have you written up again, if you don’t watch it.” And, Buddy, who had already taken a beating from his Dad for being suspended from the bus for two weeks during the past spring, slunk quickly back down into his seat, where he began cooing the Kellogg’s Frosted Minniewheats jingle from television.
I closed my eyes and sighed and kept them closed until the bus pulled into the school property. “Wake up,” Cheryl chimed. Buddy had stopped singing. Everybody was filing out of the vehicle, leaving Louise alone on the bus to be shuttled back out of town to the Mennonite school after we were all deposited at the public school. I glanced back at her before I descended the steps, but I couldn’t see her through the mash of bodies and book bags jockeying to be first off the bus.

We arrived home from school at different hours. The Mennonite school let its students out earlier so children were home in the afternoons to do chores. Louise was out chasing the brown speckled chickens in the front yard of her sister’s house when my brother and I lumbered off the bus. Randy made a beeline for the house. I stood at the side of the road watching Louise. I stood there until she looked at me. It seemed like she was smiling, and I dumped my book bag in the driveway and walked across the road.

She was standing over a bag of chicken feed, ready to scoop some out and scatter it around the lawn. “Hi, Louise,” I said.

She grabbed a handful of feed and threw it at my face. The small seeds stung my cheeks, bounced off my forehead, and some slipped through my lips.

“Freckle-face!” She cried, and she ran into her sister’s house.

Two weeks later, Louise was sent back to Pennsylvania. She had broken her ankle playing in the neighbor’s barn. Standing at the gaping window of the second story loft, she had decided the distance to the ground was not so far, and that if she hung from her hands first, she could jump it. So she did, and her left ankle cracked.
Ruth decided it would be best if her sister was home with their mother while she nursed it back to health.

Then, as now, I did not see Louise after the trauma. I did not see her after she broke her ankle, and I did not see her after Mervin's funeral - not until it was too late, until it didn't matter.

After Mervin's funeral, at the end of the following week - I was waiting for the senior high school bus on a Friday morning, standing by my parent’s mailbox, and I saw her, across the road, coming out of the house, carrying bags. She didn’t see me at first.

She had her bags, and I knew she was leaving

She walked out into the yard. She had a big black bag in one hand and a paper sack in the other. She strode purposefully, deliberately, her eyes straight ahead, making her way across the yard toward the horse and buggy. I now noticed that someone was inside the buggy, waiting for her, the still horses waiting for a crack of the reigns. She tossed her things inside, then stepped back, preparing to mount the short step. She gathered her skirts in hand, took a deep breath, placed one small foot on the short step, then stopped. She looked to me, across the road, me standing waiting for the bus, my senior year of high school, decked out in my designer denims and my eighty-dollar shoes, backpack slung over my shoulder, standing between my parents' mailbox and Ford Ranger.

I watched her watching me, and I knew what she was seeing. I wished suddenly that I could speak to her. To ask her questions I never bothered to ask when we were children, when we didn't bother to ask questions. I was ready to run across the road, to grab her hand and pull her aside and ask her all of the questions that no one else wanted to answer for me. I wanted to ask her how Mervin had died exactly. He was hit by a car, but what happened
inside him? What made his heart stop beating? I wanted to know if they’d found the woman who drifted off the side of the road and hit him. I wanted to ask her what it was like to be a Mennonite and if she minded it much. I wanted to know what made her mad. I wanted to tell her not to hate me.

I wanted us to laugh at ourselves like wise old women, to laugh at the world.

In the distance, I could hear the muffled rumble of the school bus as it approached the knoll in the road before my house.

Louise glanced at the knoll. She heard it too. But she remained in her precarious position, skirts gathered in one hand, the other resting on the carriage door, one foot on the short step, her small body half in the boxy black structure and half out. She stayed there for quite some time, eyes watching me intently, waiting for a signal.
SLEEPING DOGS

“Why is Emily crying?”

The thin walls of the house cannot conceal their young daughter’s moaning. Her
whimpers wind their way downstairs, muted and dulled.

“Who knows,” Bonnie says, and she can barely stand to say this to her husband
without tacking a wad of spit to the end of it and flinging it against his plain, wide, blank
forehead. She is disgusted with him and she is tired from a long night of work. It’s because of
you, you make everyone cry, Bonnie is thinking, but she cannot say this and, in fact, she
believes that Emily is crying because of the dog that is staying with them for two days. Emily
must feel some type of wretched, misplaced, sentimental attachment to that damn dog.
Bonnie glances over at it now as it stands with its head in the corner, just stands there
wheezing and croaking. The dog belongs to Emily’s grandparents – Bonnie’s parents. It has
been stumbling around their house all day, standing guard over its last few hours of life. It
will be put to sleep on Monday. Bonnie cannot help but think how ridiculous it is for her
eight-year-old daughter to have such a melodramatic reaction to the news that the dog will be
put to sleep, a dog which doesn’t even belong to them really. But Emily always finds
something to cry about. Last month the doctor had to prescribe an ointment for her skin
because her eyelids began to chafe from all the sobbing. She’s just a sensitive child, doctor,
Bonnie told him, I don’t know what to do with her sometimes.

“Well, can you get her to cut it out?” It is Glea complaining again. He is whiney and
sore because he was supposed to go to the stock car races today, but his friends never showed
up to get him. He’s been moping around the house all morning, ever since 8 a.m. came and went and no car in the driveway.

“Maybe you were supposed to meet them at their house,” Bonnie says. She said this about two hours earlier, too, but all it got from Glea was a scowl.

“Nah, nah,” he growls. “They said ‘Pick you up on Saturday.’ That’s what they said.”

Glea has never been to the NASCAR races at Watkins Glen which is hard to understand. Bonnie is not sure why he’s never gone to the Bud at the Glen races before. Having lived no more than forty minutes from Watkins Glen his entire life, it seems strange that he would not ever in his thirty-eight years of life have made the effort to see this local spectacle that everybody’s father, brother, and uncle in the entire town of Prattsburg has been to.

Glea is not an avid fan of any particular crew, but he watches races occasionally on TV. That is not the point of Bud at the Glen, however, he would inform Bonnie. You did not have to be an avid race fan to witness this event and all of the hype surrounding it. Each year Glea would come home from work after Bud at the Glen weekend talking about his co-workers who had gone and spent the weekend there. The carnival atmosphere, the beer consumed, the football games played in the muddy camping grounds between heats. Long nights of card playing and camping out and story telling. Legends like Dick Trickle, Jeff Gordon, Dale Earnhardt, live and in person with their high powered engines revving so loud can’t hear a thing for days after, especially not your wife telling you to take out the garbage. And of course there were always those rumors that Paul Newman or Tom Cruise were in town to witness the races, and people spent time star searching in local bars and restaurants, or spreading rumors about where they were last seen. Bonnie had listened to Glea carry on
and on about all of this stuff like it was some grand secret society to which he aspired to gain entrance. Why he never just packed up his truck and went down to the races on his own she could not understand.

She said as much when he was tromping around the house after his ride had failed to show. “Just put your gear in your truck and go,” she’d said. “Why do you have to have Beverly and Frank take you. Just find them when you get there.”

But Glea did not see this as a workable solution. “No, no, no,” he’d said, scowling as if she had just suggested he use his power saw to cut his steak because they were out of clean knives. He offered no explanation beyond this and Bonnie sighed in exasperation as he began putting his gear away.

Have it your way, she thinks. He can have his hissy fit.

She watches him slowly unpack his cooler full of Pabst Blue Ribbon, a smirk pulling at the corners of her mouth.

“What is her problem!” Glea slams the refrigerator shut looking up at the ceiling. Emily is upstairs in her room, but they can still hear the wailing downstairs in the kitchen, moaning like the poor bastard in the emergency room that Bonnie had seen this morning at work. He had lopped off the tip of his index finger when he was chopping up wood to add to his store for the winter.

And as if he’s read her mind, Glea walks promptly out to back yard, pulls the ax out of the stump, and begins chopping wood.

That leaves Bonnie alone in the downstairs of the house. Their boys Mike and Joel are out running around with their friends and Emily is upstairs bawling. It is just Bonnie and the dog - her parents’ dog - which is shuffling around the living room, wheezing in futility
like a pair of busted out bellows. He will be put to sleep in two days. Bonnie remembers when they bought the dog. Her parents brought it home from the animal shelter as a puppy shortly after Bonnie had left for nursing school. That was 15 years ago. Yesterday, Bonnie’s parents left on vacation and had asked Bonnie to take care of things while they were away. Couldn’t be a part of it, they said, couldn’t be the ones to take him. Too hard. So they left the dog with Bonnie because Glea’s uncle is a veterinarian, and Glea said he would take the dog up to his uncle’s clinic on Monday when it opens up.

Meanwhile, it is scuffling around the house, barely able to walk but not able to sit still either. Monday was none too soon. Her parents had put it off far too long. The dog was miserable, anyone could see that. Almost selfish really, Bonnie thinks, to keep him around so long. And she would not be able to tolerate the dog in her house for much longer. She had never allowed her children to have pets and hated having an animal in her house now. Especially this one, the way it stumbles around the living room all day and night, sticking its head between things, its jaw down, just standing there with its muzzle nudged into different corners of the room, breathing heavy like it is ready to cough up a giant squeeze toy.

Glea’s parents had left the care of the dog up to him. It was always Glea with these kinds of things. Bring all of your paralyzed mutts to Glea because he takes care of those kinds of things for you, Bonnie thinks in disgust, wondering if he’s ever said “no” to an unpleasant task in his life — aside from making love to her.

She slips one of Glea’s Pabst Blue Ribbons out of the fridge, not liking beer, much less Glea’s beer, but she is tired and thirsty and needs a little something. She has worked all night at the hospital and hasn’t been to bed yet. She stretches out on the couch, taking tiny sips from the can, which tastes a little like the wood Glea is chopping outside.
Sleep will not come. With Emily bawling upstairs and the dog shuffling around the room like the senile old men at the hospital there is no way. And the clunk of Glea’s ax as it strikes the stubborn wood comes echoing through the open windows of the house like gunfire at deer season.

And just as her eyelids grow heavy, Bonnie feels a wet nose in the palm of her hand. The dog has nuzzled its nose up inside her curled fingers. Bonnie jerks up in surprise. The dog stares at her, silent for a moment, and then the wheezing begins again. His rib cage begins pumping in and out, his jowls flapping loosely as he struggles to cough up god knows what.

“Oh that’s disgusting,” Bonnie cringes, then decidedly stands up and stomps outside.

“Glea, do you have to do that now?”

He makes a few more strokes with the ax before answering. “Got time now. Won’t have time later. Best do it now.”

“Winter is still three months away, Glea,” she cries as if he is making her end her life three months early. “My god, the wood by the barn is already stacked up to the windows!”

But he keeps chopping, so Bonnie makes a grunt of disgust and stomps back into the living room. She has to go back into work tonight and if she doesn’t get some sleep the hospital will be an even darker version of hell than it was last night. She flops back down on the couch, thinking about dealing with Mrs. O’Malley again for another eight hours. Mrs. O’Malley is one of their CRS patients, the nurses’ clinical term for Can’t Remember Shit. Mrs. O’Malley was forever pissing in her slippers and wandering off down the halls into other people’s rooms. She had gallstones and would be having an operation on Monday, but it was none too soon for the third floor nursing staff. Mrs. O’Malley would never leave the
hospital, but if they could at least get her shipped back over to the nursing home that would be an accomplishment.

All week Glea had been planning for this weekend, getting all of his "work" done ahead of time so he could just take off and be done with it all. And now that he's not going he has to go and mess around with all this other stuff that absolutely did not need to be done, Bonnie thinks. He always has to be doing something. He comes home from work during the week and goes straight for the lawn mower. And he is doing it now. If he can't party at the Glen, then he'll make everybody else miserable. All week he's acted like he is going to some big party of a lifetime that he's been missing out on for years. A couple of people from work casually offer to pick him up in their van this morning, and suddenly Glea is "party man," heading off to the races with the boys.

Bonnie says it aloud, "Party man," then takes another sip of beer, wondering why in the world Glea has never attempted to go before this year. Clearly he has always wanted to go.

Before Bonnie can think about this too long, she hears heavy rapid footsteps on the front porch and the sound of the front door whacking the telephone stand behind it because it was opened too hard.

The boys tromp into the living room bringing the end of all hopes for any sleep.

"What's dad doin' here?"

"Yeah, what's he doin'?"

The kids were up early in the morning helping Glea pack, then when Glea ran to the store to grab a few last minute things he dropped the boys off at the high school football field
where they were meeting several other boys their age. When Glea returned, he sat in the
kitchen reading the newspaper as the time for his ride came and went. That was how Bonnie
found him when she got home shortly after nine this morning. Two hours after that Glea was
watching the start of the races on television. He watched for about five minutes, then flipped
the set off and began puttering around the house as if there were a million things that had to
be done before lunch, if there was even time for lunch.

“How did you get home?” Bonnie snaps. She sounds angry and suspicious, but it is
her usual tone with the boys and they take no special notice.

“Chuckie’s dad gave us a ride,” Mike says.

“Yeah, Chuckie’s dad,” Joel mimics.

It is always this way with the boys. Mike, the oldest, saying whatever has to be said
and Joel, two years younger, forever parroting his older brother.

“Ma, can we take our bikes down to the pond?” They are both in the kitchen now,
leaving a trail of small dirt chunks and a few blades of grass. Bonnie has noticed that their
jeans are severely grass-stained.

“I hope those aren’t your good school jeans” Bonnie cries from the couch, listening to
them opening and slamming cupboard doors, rummaging around in the refrigerator. “And
don’t eat that turkey! It’s for supper,”

“So can we?” Mike appears again in the doorway between the living room and the
kitchen. He has a sandwich in his hand with a bite taken out of it and his mouth is full.

“Yeah. Huh, mom?” Joel appears beside him, a younger but stockier version of his
older brother, also holding a sandwich but considerably larger than the one Mike holds.
“What pond are you talking about?” Bonnie has not moved from the couch since the boys arrived, and she does not want to get up now to get the key to their bike locks. Bonnie and Glea have had to keep their bikes locked up ever since they rode them to town one night after dark without permission.

“You know, Jerod Jensen’s pond. Jerod Jensen.”

“What in the world do you need your bikes for?” Bonnie does not particularly care about the answer to this question. And she knows she will let them use the bikes. But there is never an easy path of permission with Bonnie, never a simple yes to any question.

“Ma-a.” Mike and Joel are decidedly impatient with this routine. “C’mon. Can we?”

“Go get my purse.”

“Go get her purse, Joel,” Mike directs, and after fetching it from her bedroom Joel returns, purse in hand, breathless.

Bonnie fishes the key out of a side pocket and hands it to Mike. “Here.”

“See ya.” They turn instantly for the door, Joel pausing for two seconds to say “See ya, General,” to the dog and pat it on the head. The dog, which is finally resting in the corner by the doorway, does not even open its eyes. Then the boys are gone, so fast that Bonnie can barely get her instructions out of her mouth before they disappear.

“You better be home in time for supper! Leave the key in the lock so you can lock them back up when you get back! Finish eating those sandwiches before you start riding!” She knows they will disregard this last bit of instruction but feels compelled to say it anyway.

And the house seems almost quiet after they leave, comparatively, but for Glea’s rhythmic, echoing strokes.
Bonnie looks outside at his hunched form and the sight of him working washes her with irritation anew, and she wants very much to tell him how ridiculous he is. She contemplates the action, but it is too much effort right now when she is so sleepy and unable to sleep.

Acting like a child who’s trip to the circus has been canceled, she thinks, or like the kid who’s had a birthday party that no one showed up to. Pouting. That’s what he is doing, with all his wood chopping and lawn mowing and house fixing. She thinks how supremely satisfying it would be to tie him up in a chair and force him to do nothing for a little while. Just for one day, force him to sit down and not clean or fix a thing, but just sit there and do nothing. She could truly imagine him exploding with his pent-up urge to fix and fuss unappeased. She could almost see the purple face, the convulsing body.

Glea comes back into the house with an armful of wood.

“What are you doing?” Bonnie snaps.

“I’m gonna clean out the chimney.”

“It’s eighty degree’s out, Glea. You are not going to burn that stove today!”

“Just open a couple more windows. It’ll only take a couple of hours.”

“Glea!” She wants to take one of the sticks of wood in his arms and beat him over the head with it. “No! Now I’ve got to get some sleep here and I’m not going to do it in a house that’s a hundred and ten degrees!”

But he bends over the wood stove, opens the doors, and begins scooping out the ashes from last winter.

“God damn it!” Suddenly, it is too much for Bonnie and she marches upstairs to their bedroom and slams the door. A frustrated wail bursts from her lips.
“Stop that bawling,” she screams down the hall to Emily’s room, then a fit of angry tears erupts from inside her.

I’ll drag him to the races myself, she thinks angrily.

Two hours later she is downstairs again. The house is stifling. The heat has slicked her skin and pressed her clothes to her body until she feels like a vacuum-sealed pouch of moist flesh. She struggles with the kitchen window over the sink until if finally pops open, then she stumbles over the dog as she makes her way to the kitchen door.

“God damn it,” she mumbles, then again more loudly as she whacks her hip hard on one of the corners of the counter trying to get around the dog. The dog, startled, skids on the linoleum as it tries to move out of her way, it’s toenails clicking and scraping on the floor as it attempts to regain it’s balance. But it succeeds only in wetting the floor, it’s bladder bursting forth in a surprisingly powerful stream.

“Oh my God! Get out! Get out!” Bonnie opens the kitchen door and uses her foot to shove the slow-footed dog out onto the porch. “Go! Go!”

The dog is miserably slow in trying to maneuver the steps down onto the ground, but it doesn’t matter. The worst of his transgression is in a puddle on the kitchen floor.

Bonnie wipes the sweat from her forehead and stares at the puddle, ready to bawl again. But the urge dies quickly and she grabs a thick wad of paper towels instead. She drops them onto the wet spot and mops them up with the sole of her slipper. Her head feels heavy with the sleep she has been unable to conjure up in the bedroom for the past two hours, and if it weren’t so hot in the house she might be able to tell if she has a fever. Glancing out the
kitchen window, she can see Glea staring up at the top of the house, no doubt watching a plume of black smoke jetting out of the chimney.

"Your dog made a mess!" She cries out to him, but he does not respond. He has his hand up to his head. He is scratching his forehead, squinting just above the window where Bonnie has yelled to him from, peering up at some part of the house that does not appear to be the roof exactly. Somewhere in between. Some middle spot that has no relevance to the task at hand.

Bonnie is dropping the damp towels into the trash when she hears a howl that prickles her hot skin and jerks her bowels up into her stomach.

It is the dog. Bonnie doesn't need to hear the brakes that come to a wailing stop shortly after the howl to know this. The dog is dead. She thinks maybe she knew this even before she kicked him outside, knew this would be the end for him. She knew it when she saw him quivering there in his own urine, trembling under her gaze. This dog is dead.

She walks over to the kitchen door and glances outside just long enough to tell herself she is right, then she turns away.

In that one quick glance she had seen Glea running down to the road, seen the driver of the car sitting rigidly in his seat, both hands clamped on the steering wheel. And she had seen bits of dog and fur all over the road. Blood streaks under the tires. A leg? Had that been a leg she'd seen in her flowerbed under their mailbox?

She has never seen anything like this before, has never seen the effects of what must have been such a tremendous impact, such a terrible hit. She had not known it was possible for a car to do all that, so fast.
And then Emily is downstairs, saying, “What was that? Where is dad?” -- her face an angry red, her eyelids swollen and doughy, ringed with sleep. She is standing there inappropriately dressed in her pink flannel night gown, her arms hanging at her sides, two thin legs jutting from the lace hem, bare feet on the linoleum floor. Her bangs are all sweaty and matted down against her forehead. Her skin is flushed red, bright red like a crab apple. But she has stopped crying, finally stopped her bawling, and Bonnie doesn’t want to be the one to tell her about the dog, to tell her not to look outside where the dog is all over the road and a car grill is smeared with bits of blood and dog pieces.

“Don’t go outside, Emily,” Bonnie sighs finally.

“What?” The color drains quickly from Emily, her face becoming a small, colorless rubber mask. She is motionless.

“The dog, Em.”

With these words the color slowly returns. She lets out a deep breath, stares for a minute, and then mutters, “Oh.” Then she sits down slowly at the kitchen table, sprawling her arms across it and staring at her hands, her chin resting on one of the blue placemats.

“How could they do it, Mom?” she asks after a moment.

And Bonnie wants to keep her quiet like this but doesn’t know what to say. She simply stares at her daughter, listening to her husband’s voice drift inside from the road. She can barely hear him.

“Why would they do it? I don’t understand, Mom,” Emily looks up at Bonnie now. Her eyes threaten at every moment to fill again. She is not done, Bonnie is sure. In a matter of seconds she will be back upstairs and locked in her room for another several hours.

“What’s to understand,” Bonnie responds.
"How could they forget about Dad?" Emily asks.

"What?" Bonnie says sharply, not understanding her question.

"It’s such an awful thing to do, you know? Why would they tell Dad they’d pick him up this morning and then not pick him up? He wanted to go. He really wanted to go."

"Oh, I don’t know, Em. I’m sure they just forgot." Bonnie realizes she is hungry and wonders how difficult it will be to eat a sandwich after all this.

"If I ever see Bev and Frank someplace I’ll kill ’em, I’ll kill ’em for doing this to Dad." Emily’s voice is suddenly forceful, hard and serious and angry like it is when she has found one of her dolls mutilated by her brothers. Her face is screwed up into a hard, red knot.

"Is this what you’ve been crying about all day? For god sakes, they just forgot!"

Bonnie cannot keep the disgust out of her voice. She stares hard at Emily. She is suddenly very angry, and she is afraid she might yell something crazy at her daughter, something ridiculous that will get them both crying again, maybe to a point where they can never stop.

But then Glea is in the kitchen, all at once, traces of blood smeared on his hands and fingers, his hair a little mussed. “Better call the highway department,” he says. “It’s a real mess out there.” His body and voice fill the room. The smell of wood and blood mixes in Bonnie’s nose and she is not sure if she’s going to be sick or if she’s just very, very hungry.

Glea’s face is pinched and tight, as if there are small wires drawing his skin back up into his scalp. The picture outside has made his lips purse into a thin, angry white line. And he looks tired.

He looks like the walking dead.

Slowly, Emily winds her arms around her head and buries her eyes in the blue placemat, a slow moan spilling from her lips.
“Stupid, stupid dog,” she blurts.

And she is crying again.
I knew a woman once who could turn greeting cards into gift boxes, turn old socks into rugs, and make wreaths out of rusty wire and pine cones.

I knew a girl with long blond strands of hair tied up in pink ribbon. I knew her for thirty seconds. She screwed up her pretty little nose and threw sand in my face as I played in the sandbox at the park. She called me “freckle face” and ran away.

I knew a woman whose thirteen-year-old daughter had died in a car accident. I knew this woman for two years, when she was forty but looked fifty-two. She went to bed early each night after too much wine with dinner. She went to bed alone while her husband sat up in the attic making flies for fishing, and her surviving son made out with me under a blanket in her darkened living room. At two in the morning she would stumble halfway down the stairs, her gray hairs catching the blue light from the television. She would ask who was there, then stumble quietly back into the darkness of her bedroom.

I knew a woman who once dreamed of becoming a professional soccer player. Her father was the principal of her high school and often boasted of his daughter’s athletic prowess, of the soccer skills that she had worked on since she was five. He followed her college career vigilantly, traveled to each match, sat through hours of rain and snow and cold. Now his daughter is twenty-five, working, still single, and she has hung up the cleats for good, or so she says. Each year she says she is done with it.
She is worried now, you can tell by the tone of her voice over the phone, a thousand miles away. She has never had a boyfriend for more than two months. She is coaching soccer all the time and working at the university and still she is single. There is a high-pitched strain to her laugh as she jokes about her love life. She speaks of the friends who have become engaged, and once again tells the story of how her parents met. They were both 25 and were married within a year of their first introduction.

She has always wanted to be just like her father.

I knew a woman once who could not eat anything but boiled vegetables. Everything else made her sick to her stomach. Her daughters were both married to ministers by the time they were 20, and her husband had lost his job following a sexual harassment suit.

I knew a woman’s son once. He was warm and kind, a little bit lonely. She never knew me. She died of breast cancer, but I knew her son for two years.

*I knew a woman who loved her family and her job. She is alive, she is working, and she is happy.*

I knew a woman who came from Poland to start a new life in America. She lived in Pennsylvania when she was young, and she was courted by coal miners from her community when she was older. Eventually she married a coal miner, and they had a daughter named Mary and son named Alec. They spent their life savings and moved with Mary and Alec to a dairy farm in Western New York. Mary married the son of a wealthy family, a son who
wanted to become a minister. Mary and her new husband traveled around Western New York preaching the gospel and setting up church ministries. Often her husband went away alone to set up church missions, and Mary, the daughter of a Polish woman who married a coal miner, stayed home in their two-room apartment in a small town south of Buffalo. Every night Mary would write in her journal -- “Miss Charles terribly,” or some times -- “Letter from Charles today!” She would also write down how many people had attended prayer meeting at her church that evening and what the weather was like. Almost always it was cold and snowy, and she kept careful note of this.

Eventually they had children – two daughters – and those two daughters had children.

*She was my grandmother.*

I knew a girl in high school who took speed to lose weight. She dropped twenty pounds, and the soccer coach looked at her center midfielder with pride. “Runs like a deer now,” she’d say, amazed.

*She was not my friend.*

I knew a girl who was kicked off of the basketball team for smoking. This same girl had sex with an old boyfriend of mine in the middle of the football field on a dark night in the summer. I hated her. I was scared of her.

*She was my friend.*
I knew a woman who slept with an entire fraternity. They called her “The Mattress.”
The stories about her were not as bad as the reality of what she admitted to doing every night.
Men urinated on her and bragged about it to their friends while another friend was off with
her somewhere doing the same later that same evening.

She claimed to know why she did it. She said it was because she lacked a strong
male figure in her life, and that she was constantly looking for male attention to replace the
attention she had never gotten from her dead beat dad.

She was a friend of a friend.

I knew a woman with an alcoholic husband. She had five sons, all in good health,
except for Tommy, who is also an alcoholic. Some of her sons have moved away, but some
of them still come over for Sunday dinner. They all have red hair.

“I don’t know what I did wrong,” She said to her youngest boy who is 26. “None of
my sons can stay married or keep a woman.”

I knew a woman in college who had kind words to say about everyone.

I knew a woman who said she was a born-again Christian. She worked for social
services. She has been married for thirty-five years. She likes gardening and reading mystery
novels. She loves her husband and her dog. Her children call her once a month.

She is my mother.
I knew a woman who cheated on her fiancé the week before they were married. “Sowing a wild oat” she called it.

She is my friend.

I knew a woman who hated her kids. When I was little, I saw her yell and scream at them, listened to her tell them how worthless they were. She had a beautiful house with a pool out back. I swam in this pool every summer. It had a diving board and a slide. Her children were violent and simple, but I played with her oldest daughter who had more toys than I did and often told interesting stories about kissing boys.

When I was much older, I saw this woman who hated her children. I saw her again and she cried when she told me that she thought I had died. Had read in the paper that I had died.

Some woman with my name had died.

I didn’t know her.

I knew a woman who cheated on her husband.

She is my sister.

I knew a woman who died of breast cancer.
She is not my sister.

I knew a girl who slept with an entire fraternity.

She is not my mother.

I knew a woman who said Christ is her personal savior.

She is my mother.

I knew a woman who had her stomach stapled when she was thirty-eight years old. She was my mother’s friend and had three children of her own, all girls. She melted down more and more each time I saw her until one day she was wearing the same designer jeans which her daughters wore.

I asked her what size she was now.

She said she was a size nine, and that she would be smaller if it weren’t for all of the extra skin. I didn’t know what she was talking about and she began to pull something out of her pants. When she was done pulling there was a large skirt of flesh hanging over the waist of her jeans and halfway down her thighs.

I knew a woman whose mother died.

She was my mother.

She was my grandmother.
I knew a woman who slapped and clawed her sister’s face, who told her mother she hated her, who called her grandmother once a month, who slept with other mothers’ sons, who tied knots with other mothers’ rags and made rugs. I knew this woman.

I knew her.

And she knows me.