Hysterics

Kristen Anne Gullicks
Iowa State University

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Hysterics

Kristen Anne Gullicks

Major Professor: Stephen W. Pett
Iowa State University

*Hysterics* is an eclectic collection of women named and un-named, who find their voices in eleven short stories and six pieces of flash fiction. *Hysterics* is a fit of fiction, an investigation into the experiences of women, more so the experiences of being a woman. It is the result of “pressing on the forehead,” of thoughts emerging from forbidden places.
Hysterics

by

Kristen Anne Gullicks

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

Major: English (Creative Writing)
Major Professor: Stephen W. Pett

Iowa State University
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Kristen Anne Gullicks

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Major Professor

For the Major Program

For the Graduate College
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Armed with her glue-gun and sequins, Martha attacks an unsuspecting milk carton. Her motto, said through a sneer: It's a good thing. The milk carton whimpers, cowers, begs her to spare him. Only a few short minutes later, the carton is glue-gunned into a lovely, decorative planter fit for any sitting or sunroom. She's a real bitch, that one.

***

"If I had time to sit around and figure out what to do with all the empty peanut butter jars sitting out in my garage--turn them into freakin' Ming vases--I'd be rich too. But some of us have to work, have to put clothes on our kids. Some of us don't have time to stencil the shitter for a pleasant springtime effect.” Betty is bitter, jealous really. It all looks so simple—a pipe cleaner here, some glitter there and everything is happily ever after.

Eyes glazed over, in a pretty, plaid apron, Linda worships Martha from her living room. “What a goddess! No, really, I think she is one. I mean, look at her. Everything is perfect, just perfect. Every little space has something unique, something absolutely fabulous, and she made it all herself. She's beautiful; everything she touches is beautiful. I wouldn't miss her show if all my craft supplies were on fire.” In her kitchen, Linda chants and dances, and with a solid whack of the knife, ceremoniously sacrifices a pineapple to her goddess.

***

Martha’s lawyer is slick. “Her? Yes, I'd say she's a fairly decent businesswoman. She certainly hasn't done too shabbily. Her own show, her own magazine, her own line at K-mart, her stock—not too bad. It's amazing what making doilies from your ex-husband's underwear can do for a person, financially. She’s ruthless, a real barracuda, when it comes to business.
Underneath that flowered apron, America’s perfect hostess has balls.” Too bad the balls she has are his.

***

After the cameras are off and the crew has gone home, Martha sits in her refinished antique rocker, peeling glue from her fingers. She’s just surviving the best she knows how. Isn’t that what everyone is trying to do? So she does it with empty toilet paper tubes and pink tissue paper—so sue her.
MATERNAL INSTINCT

The ringing wouldn't stop no matter how many times Gwen slammed the snooze button. She rolled over and smacked her husband on the back.

"What the...?"

"Wake up, Charles, there's something wrong with this damn snooze button-- it's broken or stuck or something."

Charles sighed. He was used to this sort of thing. This was one of the reasons she had bought him, to fix broken appliances--well, that and to look good at parties, which he did, quite well in fact. He sat up, rubbed his eyes and realized, not all that surprised, that the alarm wasn't going off.

"Gwen, darling, the alarm isn't going off."

"What are you talking about? Of course it is. I'm not insane." Gwen smoothed the sheets around her perfectly sculpted knees and continued, a bit annoyed, "You know, Charles, I really hate it when you argue with me. I didn't pay $99.95 to have some man argue with me. Just check the damn thing, O.k.?"

Charles stood up, scratching along the way. Walking around to the bedside table, he began to fiddle with the clock to pacify his wife.

Hands plastered firmly over her sparkle-studded ears, Gwen remembered fondly the day she purchased Charles. He had been a fabulous steal at $99.95-- a fifty-dollar reduction. Husbands weren't cheap these days, at least not the good ones. She had had her eye on him for quite some time. A "helpful handyman" and one of the more handsome varieties, she
knew he'd be a perfect accessory for any occasion. And he was. She smiled, remembering all the compliments he had brought her and would undoubtedly continue to bring.

It wasn't just Charles though. Unlike most women, Gwen knew how to wear a husband. She possessed a certain flair, more of a gift really, for accessorizing; and, it didn't hurt that she was devastatingly beautiful— a thought which always delighted her.

Gwen looked over at Charles who had the clock pressed against his left ear, eyes tightly closed, listening intently to nothing. Her usually flawless brow furrowed.

"Charles, you are absolutely worthless."

"Darling, I promise, there's nothing wrong with the alarm clock." Charles paused and then continued, "Do you think, and I'm just throwing this out there, that maybe, and just maybe, the ringing might be in your head?"

Opening her mouth, Gwen prepared to defend her sanity and degrade Charles all in one breath when she quickly shut her mouth, realizing that the possibility was indeed a possibility. Her eyes widened and her jaw dropped.

"Oh my God! Charles, what if I have a tumor?" and with this certainty, Gwen began to sob uncontrollably. Tears clung to her perfectly curled lashes and slid down her cheeks, leaving unsightly splotches on her silk nightgown. Charles rushed to her side, tissue in hand.

"Oh no darling, I don't think it's anything as serious as that. Most certainly not. You're much too beautiful to have a tumor."

His consolation duty complete, Charles dabbed gently at the spots, wondering if club soda did anything for salt.
Gwen sniffled delicately, "Yes, of course you're right. Only homely people have tumors. But still, this ringing, I swear it's driving me crazy. I can't live like this, I just can't. I'm going to call Dr. Alda."

And with that, she picked up the phone, hitting the well-worn speed dial button with the tip of her red, manicured nail.

***

The heels of Gwen's black pumps clicked against the pavement as she made her way to the neighborhood convenience store. She hoped it had what she was looking for. Her appointment with Dr. Alda had been quick and relatively painless. It was an easy diagnosis—one Dr. Alda, he reassured her, had been making quite a bit—and Dr. Alda was rarely ever wrong. His diagnosis was usually right on the money, his hypochondriac clientele winning him many pseudo-prestigious awards, which he promptly framed and hung proudly on the walls of his office along with the pictures of his favorite cocker spaniel, Dingo. However, unlike most of his daily chit-chats with his neurotic clientele, Dr. Alda had recognized, much to his excitement, a true medical condition in Gwen, or at least what he assumed to be one, it'd been so long. The ringing she was experiencing in her ears was an undeniable symptom; and, fortunately, not of anything deadly.

He patted her shoulder saying that there had been a lot of this going around, that there was nothing to really worry about and that everything would be just fine.

"Yes, a typical sort of thing for women your age. Pretty much unavoidable, but easily remedied." He had then proceeded to consult the nearest picture of his dog, Dingo, for a second opinion while Gwen quietly left his office and went back home.
Opening the store's door, Gwen flipped her long, blonde hair back over her shoulder and walked through. Against the ringing bells of her entrance and the ringing in her head, Gwen thought for a moment, and only a moment, about what the doctor's orders had been. It was certainly not the solution she and Charles had come up with. Quite overjoyed, Gwen walked up to the counter knowing she at least would not be needing a lobotomy any time soon.

Her fingers drumming on the display case, Gwen looked over the various catalogs beneath the glass, waiting to be helped. An old man, looking mildly useful in a useless sort of way, shuffled, as fast as his Velcro, orthopedic shoes would carry him, over to Gwen. It wasn't everyday he got to help a fine, blonde young-thing who still had the teeth and pert breasts God gave her. Ah yes, he was quite the admirer of young, firm breasts, not so much of the teeth, though they were nice too.

"And what can I do for you today?"

"I'm sorry. What was that?" Gwen asked looking confused.

The old man repeated his question a bit louder than the first time, feeling the need to move closer over the counter. Gwen smiled, a bit distracted from the ringing, but lovely as ever. "Oh, yes, you'll have to forgive me; I have this ringing in my ears." Looking into the display case, she continued, pointing to the catalogs, "Um, yes, I need to buy one of those."

"I see. Did you have anything particular in mind?" he wheezed, staring intently at her chest.

"Well, I'm not exactly sure. I've never bought a baby before. I've bought husbands and friends--you know, the usual--but never a baby. It's all rather new, this baby buying
business." The cashier nodded, picturing her naked, sprawled across his remote-control bed, Lawrence Welk playing softly in the background.

"This ringing was so distracting I could barely put my eye-liner on, so I immediately went to see my doctor. He said that it was just my biological clock going off and not to worry. Can you believe it?" Nodding again, he smiled, imagining himself seductively slipping out his dentures in preparation of his soon to be fantasized ravishment of her eagerly awaiting nakedness.

"Here I thought it was something silly like a brain tumor. I'm sure you can imagine my relief when I found out all I needed was a baby. I figured I'd just pop in, see what you have and maybe buy one. I'm sure it will look lovely on the coffee table." Gwen looked at the cashier whose eyes were curiously glazed over. "So, what would you recommend?"

The cashier licked his lips, put his mental ravishing of Gwen on hold and attempted to control his panting, "Hmmm... let me see..." He removed one of the catalogs and began paging through it. "Ah, yes, here we go. I think this will be perfect for you."

He handed Gwen the opened catalog and wandered off to think some more about her being naked. Gwen skimmed the marked page, and found that it was an advertisement for the same $19.95 babies she had seen at home, after her appointment with Dr. Alda, on an infomercial.

From the glossy page, Gwen recognized the gleaming teeth of Vick and his spunky co-host Darla, who earlier that day, on channel 25, had entranced Gwen with their well-rehearsed and highly convincing baby spiel:

"Darla, this delightful tike is the modern woman's dream. For a reasonable price and not a lot of fuss, you can bring home a bundle of joy that will make you the hit of not only
the party but also the PTA. Choose from our Bouncing Baby Boy model or our Sugar and Spice--either one is sure to please. Very little maintenance makes our babies ideal for the woman on the go that doesn't have a lot of time but needs something quick and easy to get rid of that bothersome ticking."

The women in the audience had nodded their heads in eager agreement, ooooing and ahhhhing over the look-alike actresses who demonstrated the easy totability of the babies by slipping them into stylish attaches.

"That's right ladies, our babies are guaranteed to stop that biological clock! For only $19.95 you too can have the latest in the baby rage, the same quality of those designer babies, but for a lot less than what the other gal paid." Vick had smiled, winking at his audience and receiving thunderous applause from the grinning, bobbing heads for his unquestionable good looks and charm.

"Not only are our babies just as good, if not better, than the other more expensive brands, our babies come with a fully refundable guarantee--something you won't find with those other folks. If you're not completely, and I mean completely, satisfied with your baby, just return it with your receipt of purchase and we'll give you your money back--no questions asked!"

Sitting on her bed, Gwen had found herself clapping enthusiastically along with the TV audience, wanting to offer tissues to the women who had obviously, from the stream of tears running down their faces, found a deal too good to be true.

"Vick, these babies really are ideal for the home or the office. They're cute, cuddly and ladies, these babies are there when that urge to nurture strikes."
"That's right, Darla. Ladies, I want you to let me know, how many of you have gotten that sudden urge to rock and coo, feed and diaper a helpless human being? Let me see those hands."

As expected, every hand in the audience shot up, including Gwen's, even though the thought had never crossed her mind.

"Vick, I know I used to get those pesky urges at the most inconvenient times. I'd be in a meeting and all of a sudden this unexplainable need to hold and care for a miniature little person, completely dependent on me, would suddenly erupt from the deepest core of my being. I wanted to coo like a dove, to smell the sweet scent of wetnaps and spit-up formula. I'd go home depressed, not knowing what I could do, how I could fulfill this desperate need without sacrificing my career--a dilemma so many of us women face today. If we're lucky enough to make it past all the stereotypes, and there are a lot, aren't there ladies? and we've maybe earned just a smidgen of respect so that our bra sizes are almost of no importance and we are maybe, finally, being taken seriously in our workplaces, heaven forbid we should want children! One or the other, career or baby, never both--we can't be good at both, right ladies? We're really only good at one of those, right Vick? Well, as potential mothers and established career women, I'm here to say that we don't care what Freud thinks; we don't give a damn about your dick, Vick. Now tell me ladies, how many of you out there are feeling the way that I did and are just plain sick of it?"

The audience raised their hands again, but Gwen found that she was more confused than agreeable. It was all rather unusual, this biological need for a baby, and Gwen found Darla's emotionally charged speech intriguing, but not inspiring. Gwen couldn't remember consciously needing anything, much less a baby. Whatever she wanted never made it to the
needing stage, she always promptly went out and bought it--like Charles. But now, she needed a baby--doctor's orders--but she certainly didn't want one. Gwen couldn't imagine why any sane woman would, except maybe as an accessory, something to complement a husband.

"Well, Darla, I'm telling you, our offer is the easiest way to take care of that pesky maternal instinct without compromising your accomplishment in the office. In fact, our babies are proven to complement any work environment and I've heard they're great leverage in a tactical situation."

Vick had flashed the audience his winning porn-star smile, sending the women into convulsions of applause and nods.

"Vick, now, I know what the ladies must be thinking, 'How can they sell these beautiful babies for only $19.95?' because, I have to admit, that's what I was thinking when you first told me about this amazing deal. Well, ladies, I'm a believer now and let me tell you, because we not only value you as our customers, but also as self-sufficient career women, we're willing to give you this special offer--an offer you won't find anywhere else. In fact, if you find a better price, we'll give you two babies and a certifiable Puerto Rican nanny for--Are you ready for this ladies?--Only $69.95! Ladies, that's like getting the second baby free--if you find a better deal!"

"That's right, Darla. If you find a better price, we'll give you two babies, that's right, two," Vick waved two fingers with meticulously buffed nails at the audience, slipping his other arm around a plump, smiling, gray-haired and presumably Puerto Rican woman who had walked onto the stage next to him. Giving her a squeeze, he continued, "plus a certifiable Puerto Rican nanny for only $69.95. But you know, Darla, I'm looking at these ladies and I'm
thinking to myself, 'This is a really fine audience we have here today.' You know what? Hell, even if you ladies don't find a better deal, because I seriously doubt that you will, I'm going to open this offer up to everyone--better deal or not!"

"Vick! Can we do that?"

"We can now! That's two babies and a certifiable Puerto Rican nanny for the amazing price of $69.95. Be sure to tell your friends!"

Gwen shut the TV off just as the audience erupted into its final wave of applause and decided to check the convenience store a couple blocks down before she placed an order. But here it was at the store, "As seen on TV," and Gwen decided that $19.95 sounded like a fairly good price. She called to the old man who was in a corner, evidently arranging fly swatters.

"I'll take one Sugar and Spice, but I don't think I'll be needing the nanny."

Handing him the catalog, Gwen fished out her checkbook. The man put on his reading glasses and checked the item number before disappearing into the back of the store. Returning with a baby wrapped tightly in a pink blanket, he quietly thanked God for sending him the blonde goddess that would fuel his long nights for at least a month.

"Will that be paper or plastic?"

"Oh, whatever's easiest."

The old man reached under the counter and shook open a paper bag. He stuck the baby inside, along with a couple sheets of paper, and rolled the bag closed, placing it on the counter.

"The instructions are in the bag. Be sure to keep the receipt, we don't accept returns without it. Oh, and would you perhaps be interested in joining our 'Baby of the Month' club?"

He handed Gwen a brochure and continued, "For a one time fee of $29.95, once a month
you'd be issued a fresh baby, upon return of the old one. We find a lot of women enjoy the fresh baby smell that the old ones tend to lose after thirty days or so. You'll be given, in your case, a pink card and every month you come in, we'll give you a punch. After you get twelve punches, you receive a free toaster oven."

Gwen looked over the brochure for a moment. "All right, that sounds like a good idea." She filled out the check for the designated amount while he punched the first hole in her pink card. After exchanging the check for the card, Gwen turned around to leave, only to be stopped by, "Excuse me, miss, don't forget your baby."

***

Purple feather duster in hand, Charles, wearing his favorite apron, walked around the apartment dusting Gwen's awkwardly placed, discounted sculptures. She told him that to create the correct impression, they needed to be surrounded by a nice arrangement of art. Gwen undoubtedly had phenomenal fashion sense, which she falsely, and unfortunately, assumed carried over into her skills as an interior decorator. Charles didn't really think these reduced rejects counted as art, but he had learned long ago not to argue with her--especially not about her choices in decor.

He finished brushing the top of the abstract, little ceramic troll by the door and set the duster down on the glass coffee table. Charles could smell the roast he had prepared earlier that afternoon cooking in the oven, and decided it was about time to scrub the new baby potatoes waiting on the counter.

Just as he had delicately placed the freshly washed potatoes around the simmering roast, Charles heard Gwen come in. He wiped his hands on his apron and left the kitchen to meet her, hoping his hair looked all right. Gwen liked him presentable at all times.
"Charles, look what I've bought!"

Gwen's excitement over the baby had grown considerably on the way home. After many mental attempts as to which outfits a baby would go best with, and not finding many—though she did have some earrings that might work—she realized it would go perfectly with the apartment, a realization that made the new necessity tolerable.

"What is it?" Charles asked, eyeing the paper bag on the coffee table. He assumed it was another sculpture, something else that would collect dust and look hideous.

Gwen opened the bag and removed the pink bundle, arranging it on the table until it was centered to her satisfaction. "I've bought a baby. Isn't it lovely?"

Charles wasn't sure what to think, though he had to admit, this was one of Gwen's better purchases. "Why yes, it does look nice. You said it was a baby, didn't you?"

"Yes. It's a baby--a girl, I think. I got it for $19.95. That's less than what I paid for you. You know that ringing I had this morning? When I went to the doctor he immediately prescribed a baby--He said that it was just my biological clock going off. Isn't that funny? I could have gotten two babies and a certified Puerto Rican nanny, but I didn't think we needed all that. Besides, the doctor didn't say anything about Puerto Rican nannies, just babies, and only one of those, thank God."

Charles was somewhat relieved to hear Gwen wouldn't be needing a lobotomy, like they originally thought. He couldn't imagine what she'd be like with only part of her brain functioning.

"Really, all you needed was a baby? Isn't that convenient?"

"I wasn't quite sure if I should get a boy or a girl. I figured the girl would probably fit the decor better than a boy would." Gwen continued to arrange the pink object on the table,
trying it in various positions to see which she liked better. "Notice how it brings out the hint of mauve in the carpet?"

"You're right," but something in Charles didn't like the way Gwen was arranging the baby. It wasn't that he didn't like where she put it--surprisingly, she was being more creative than she had been with the troll--but it was more than that; but what, he wasn't sure.

"I've heard babies tend to stir in people their otherwise dead, and even seemingly nonexistent, emotions, usually making them feel complete, or something similar to that. I never knew an accessory could be so moving. I've had scarves that almost brought me to tears and there was that one belt."

It was then, during Gwen's recollection of her favorite accessories, that Charles caught a glimpse of what was bothering him. That pink bundle on the coffee table wasn't a belt, or one of Gwen's sculptures. It was a baby, but what that meant sent Charles back into uncertainty.

"...but complete, that's something I've never thought about before," Gwen continued. "Yes. I think that I am. Why shouldn't I be? Let's eat."

Gwen walked into the kitchen, leaving Charles alone with the pink bundle. He stared at it for a moment and then called out to Gwen, "What do we do with the baby? Do we just leave it here?"

"I don't see why not--Unless you'd rather have it above the fireplace."

"Well, no, I think it looks fine here. I was just wondering if we were supposed to, I don't know, maybe do something with it."
Walking back into the living room, Gwen looked for the instructions inside the paper bag. She glanced at them quickly and shrugged, "I don't think so. I'll have to read these during supper," and went back into the kitchen, expecting Charles behind her.

Once Gwen was out of sight, Charles picked up the feather duster from the table. Feeling compelled to do something with the baby, Charles affectionately dusted it, wondering if babies liked that sort of thing.

***

The baby had been with them almost two weeks. After the first couple of days, Gwen decided it would be best to keep it under a glass case so Charles didn't have to dust it quite so much-- a task Gwen noticed he had taken to doing more than was necessary. She didn't like all the time Charles spent making sure it was spotless. The cover had more than helped, but she still caught Charles hovering around it every now and then with a bottle of Windex. But she wasn't going to worry about it now, not tonight.

Gwen walked out of the bedroom fastening her earring, about to ask Charles if the hors' d'oeuvres were ready. The sight she met left her less than pleased. Instead of arranging trays of cheese and crackers, Charles was sitting on the couch, staring intently at the baby, one finger pressed to the glass.

"Charles, how many times do I have to tell you not to touch the baby?"

Charles quickly withdrew his hand, and looked at his shoes. Gwen picked up a nearby napkin and briskly wiped the fingerprint away. "Your fingers are always leaving greasy marks on the glass. I don't know why you insist on touching the damn thing--it's just a baby for God's sake."
"I'm sorry, I just..." Charles shrugged his shoulders and got up. He couldn't explain it to her. He couldn't even explain it to himself. He just needed to be near it and he didn't know why.

"I know, I know, you can't help it." Gwen went to check her lipstick in the mirror hanging above the troll. She pressed her lips together and ran her fingers around the edges. Pulling back her lips in a kind of grimace, she rubbed a finger across her perfectly straight teeth, wiping away the faint streaks of red.

Gwen looked stunning, and she knew it, but this was nothing new--she always looked beautiful. Tonight, she was more concerned with Charles. Not only did he have to look good, almost edible, he had to be on his absolute best behavior. Much to her irritation, he was not off to a good start.

"Why don't you go get the champagne ready? People will be here any minute. I want everything to be perfect, including you. This is my first baby shower, you know. Any one who is someone is going to be here. You don't need to be such an ass."

Charles stood there helplessly for a moment, not knowing what to do. He didn't want to leave the baby, but he knew that Gwen was in no mood to humor him. Sighing, he looked one last time at the baby before going into the kitchen to do what he was told.

Gwen watched him leave, annoyed with the glance but satisfied with the obedience. She ran around the apartment straightening things that were already straight. She stopped in front of the coffee table; and, putting aside the arranged plate of cheese and crackers and lifting the glass case off the baby, Gwen went to straighten it too. Case in hand, Gwen smelled something she hadn't smelled before. She sniffed. She sniffed again, this time looking at the baby.
"Charles! Charles! The damn thing doesn't smell fresh anymore. It smelt fresh yesterday. The man at the store said it'd stay fresh for thirty days--it's only been a couple of weeks. What am I going to do? I can't flaunt this thing smelling, smelling non-fresh! Charles, do something! They'll be here any minute."

Charles rushed out of the kitchen when he realized Gwen was yelling about the baby. He cringed, remembering what he had forgotten to do earlier during the day. Usually, when Gwen was out or wasn't looking, Charles had taken to sprinkling baby powder in the case to keep up the illusion that the baby still had that brand-new fresh smell. In actuality, the baby stopped smelling fresh about two hours after Gwen brought it home. Not knowing quite what to do, Charles had needed to consult the instructions, where he found not only that a simple diaper changing usually did the trick, but that regular feedings, surprisingly, were necessary.

"Gwen, relax. All we need to do is find some baby powder. We'll sprinkle a little here, a little there--everything will be just fine. Nobody will know." Charles couldn't very well tell Gwen that baby's diaper needed to be changed, she was much too beautiful for something that unpleasant.

"Are you sure? I couldn't stand the snide looks if people found out I had been suckered into buying a less than fresh baby. Women like me just don't do that."

"Absolutely. I've heard a little baby powder does the trick--she'll be smelling fresh in no time."

Gwen's head snapped up and her brilliant blue eyes turned to ice, "Dammit, Charles! I thought I told you not to call it 'she'. You know I hate that. It's like calling a belt a 'he', it's creepy."
Charles immediately regretted his slip, but tried to explain anyway, "But the baby's not a belt. It's a person. It's..."

"You know what? Not now Charles. I am not going to have this stupid conversation with you now. I'm just not going to. I have people coming here any minute, I'm flustered and you know what, Charles? I'm not smelling that fresh baby smell. Are you going to fix that, or do I have to do it myself?"

Charles quickly picked up the baby, leaving the living room in search of a hidden changing place, away from Gwen's delicate nostrils. Gwen began to mutter to herself, finishing up her pointless straightening. "Pay close to a hundred dollars and what do you get? A worthless man who tries to turn your accessories into pets, that's what," when the doorbell rang.

"Oh my God! They're here. Charles, you have to answer the door so I can make my entrance. Try not to say anything stupid, and don't touch the baby until I tell you to."

Gwen ran into the bedroom as Charles placed the baby back on the coffee table and gently put the case over it. Trying to decide if he should leave the tray of cheese and crackers next to it or on top, he opted for the side and went to answer the door.

***

"Gwen, what a charming baby you have. I was just noticing the way it brings out the mauve in your carpet!" Gwen's elegantly dressed guest declared, sipping her champagne.

Gwen smiled, her lips glistening and her teeth sparkling. "Why thank you. It was quite a steal."

Overhearing the exchange of pleasantries in his circulating within the sequined-studded, champagne-drinking women, Charles dropped the tray of cheese and crackers he
had been carrying. Gwen shot him a nasty look, but quickly turned back to the woman sitting next to her on the couch, her hostess-smile plastered beautifully across her face. Charles bent over to pick up the spilled hors d'oeuvre, trying to ignore the whispers of women who were making it quite clear they were appreciating the excellent fit of his pants. When he finished cleaning up, he disappeared, red-faced, into the kitchen.

"There have been some really fantastic sales, well, on the generic market anyway," Gwen's guest continued. "Just the other day, I saw something where they were selling two babies and a Puerto Rican nanny for just $69.95. Can you believe that? I couldn't believe it. I mean, I would never buy a baby from a sales pitch, but it's rather nice that the average working woman, the poor soul, can finally experience motherhood now. Society is really making some strides, don't you think? Opening up the baby market to the lower and middle classes. I just couldn't imagine not having the money to buy children--wouldn't that be awful?" Gwen nodded, still smiling, though her face had grown considerably tighter. "Thank God I have the two I do and Conchita. I've found that motherhood really suits me. It seems to bring out my eyes."

Behind her smile, Gwen wondered if the woman sitting next to her somehow knew that this thing on her coffee table, the thing that went so well with the carpet, had only been $19.95. She smiled harder and hoped not.

"Have you thought about getting a nanny, Gwen?" the impertinent, but incredibly stylish and not to mention influential, woman continued. "I've heard the latest rage is Guatemalan. I'm thinking of maybe taking Conchita back and exchanging her--I mean, she is rather out-dated, and I've begun to feel a bit self-conscious when I have to be seen with her and the babies in public. Being Puerto Rican, she's just not right for my image. I'll miss her, I
suppose. She's really rather sweet, even though I can't understand a damn thing she says. Oh well. You and I both know how important it is to keep up with fashion--no matter what the third world language." The woman laughed lightly, patted the back of her hair and took a delicate sip from her champagne glass.

"I was going to get a nanny, but I didn't think I really needed one since I have Charles. He's quite a versatile husband." Gwen smoothed her dress over her knees and began to look around, "Speaking of Charles, I wonder where he is?" Her red lips smiled again, "Charles? Charles! Get in here."

Charles sighed and poked his head out of the kitchen, "Yes, darling, what is it?"

"I want you to show this woman how good you are with the baby."

"What?"

Gwen laughed a sort of hiccup and continued through clenched teeth. "Show her how good you are with the baby."

"I don't know what you mean, darling."

Looking over at her guest, Gwen giggled nervously, trying to keep calm. "Charles don't be silly. Get over here and do that thing you do with the baby. You know, that one thing you do." Gwen gestured obscurely.

Charles watched helplessly for a few minutes trying to figure out the meaning of Gwen's flailing arms--and then he thought he understood.

"Oh, you want me to hold the baby?"

"Yes, darling. How very smart of you for guessing." She turned toward the woman sitting quietly, studying her manicure, "Charles and I always play these little games--it keeps
things exciting." The woman looked up and smiled politely, disappointed she wasn't drunk yet.

Charles walked over to Gwen's side. "Well, darling, I don't know if that would be very wise, considering the circumstances." Attempting to give her a knowing look, he nodded ever so slightly in the direction of the baby.

"Would you excuse us?" Gwen asked, and turned herself so she could address Charles fully.

"This is not the time to be an argumentative asshole, Charles," she hissed quickly. "Just do it. I didn't pay one hundred dollars for you to argue with me. Can't you see I'm trying to impress this woman? All you have to do is hold the damn thing and then go get some more of those hot dog wienies. O.K.?"

Gwen swung her knees around and situated herself again, smiling at the woman who was now picking at the fibers in Gwen's couch.

"Please, Charles, darling, show this lovely woman how marvelous you are at holding the baby."

Charles stood there for a moment, uncertain. He flashed the two women a small, nervous smile and bent over towards the glass case, gingerly lifting it off. Gwen beamed, happy to have gotten her way. The prim woman watched Charles intently; and, like the other women, thoroughly appreciated the tight fit of his pants.

Pink bundle in his arms, Charles smiled down at the small little person, running a gentle finger across the two, fine eyebrows and feather of lashes. He brought the baby close to his face and rubbed the tiny nose with the tip of his own. Rocking back and forth, arms swaying, Charles began to hum a soft lullaby.
Intrigued, Gwen watched, not sure what to make of this strange display. She thought it very peculiar he would treat this thing she kept on the coffee table better than her china—the china had been significantly more expensive. Making a mental note, she would have to talk to him about that. For now, though, the whole scene looked good, and that was all that mattered. Reinforcing her smile, Gwen ran her fingers through her hair, quite confident her guest was more than impressed with Charles' nanny-ing abilities.

Lost in the smallness he held in his arms, Charles failed to notice the wave of wrinkling noses that passed through the women in the living room. On the couch, Gwen's pristine guest coughed, brought her fingers up under her nose and wondered whether she should be mildly offended or outright appalled. She decided to drink some more champagne and think about it.

One by one, more coughs, followed by a series of less than subtle sniffs, erupted within the room. Conversation stopped, all eyes were on Charles and his nicely wrapped package—this time, the one sleeping in his arms. Noticing the sudden silence, Gwen looked around slowly, the smile on her face gradually disappearing with each covered nose and disdainfully raised eyebrow. Her blue eyes snapped back to the oblivious, bouncing Charles. She sniffed and, nose wrinkled, her perfect features froze in mortification.

Gwen glared at the still cooing Charles, "Don't you think you should take that thing into the other room or something, darling?"

A confused Charles looked up from the perfect little face to meet Gwen's frigid eyes. His bouncing slowed, eventually stopping mid-bounce, along with his soft litany of baby talk. His questioning eyes left Gwen's to peruse the room, wondering what he had done
wrong. He saw the covered noses and looked back at Gwen, then down at the baby, feeling
his heart sink into the bottom of his Italian leather shoes.

Holding the baby tightly to his chest, Charles ran into the kitchen.

***

Arms crossed, forehead wrinkled in irritation, Gwen paced in front of the coffee table.
She couldn't believe it, she just couldn't. Everything was supposed to have been perfect-- and
it would have been, if that crusty old man hadn't lied to her. That thing, and she snorted in the
direction of the glass case, was supposed to stay fresh for thirty days. It had only been a
couple of weeks. Her social life was ruined beyond repair. She wanted her money back.

"I don't care how you feel about that damn baby, I'm taking it back. It smells."

Charles, sitting forlornly on the couch, stared at the pink bundle beneath the glass. He
had memorized the downy curve of the baby's cheek, the way the small lips turned up ever so
slightly at the corners when he touched her fingers. He looked up at Gwen and asked quietly,
"Did you ever bother to read the instructions, Gwen?"

"What are you talking about? The instructions? I glanced at them. They were pretty
much like plant instructions--Keep in a well-lit area, water when necessary. What else could
you possibly need to do? It's a baby."

Sighing, Charles looked down at his hands.

"And don't you dare mope about this either, or I'll return you too," Gwen threatened,
opening a paper bag, "God knows you're more trouble than you're worth." She lifted the glass
case off and, with evident disgust, slipped the pink bundle into the bag, promptly rolling it
closed with a shudder. After checking for the receipt, Gwen swung the strap of her purse over
her shoulder, and walked towards the door.
"I'm serious, Charles. No moping. I want you bright and cheerful when I get back. And do something with your hair."

Charles heard the door slam. He sat on the couch for a moment, staring at the empty glass case. He smoothed his pants with his hands and stood up. Purple feather duster in hand, Charles began to dust the apartment, starting with the hideous troll by the door. Half-heartedly, he brushed at the awkward ceramic statue. He worked his way around the living room until the only thing left was the coffee table. Removing the case, he put it away in the hall closet and walked back to face the empty table.
GIVE AND TAKE

She never had that feeling, the feeling mothers are supposed to have towards their children. That feeling of complete love and devotion she understood mothers to fill with at the first touch of small, pink hands wrapped around a finger.

He had wanted them, not her. He had wanted sons, and that's what she gave him--two of them. For nine months each, they had grown inside her, feeding off of her. Her body widened and swelled, pain in her back, her knees unbearable at times. For nine months, she carried each of his sons until the day they came out screaming for more attention. When the time came, she took each squealing thing to her breast, hoping to shut it up. Those sleepless nights of rocking, feeding, changing while he slept peacefully. They grew up strong, made him proud. Her hips were never the same. All this for him.

Two sons, though the apples of his eyes, weren't enough.

***

Before long, he wasn't coming home at night. Supper sat on the table until it cemented to the plates. She had seen him with her, a young thing still free from the sags and bags of motherhood, but not for long. This woman wanted to marry him.

The town talked of divorce. At home, they argued. She screamed, "After all I've done for you, how dare you?"

"You should be thankful. You'll have the children. What more do you want?" he asked.

"Yes, I have the children," and she understood what it was she wanted.

It wasn't hard. Had she loved them, the story might have been different.
A GOOD GIRL’S GUIDE TO A POLITE SUICIDE

My mother is chained to the stove. I’m used to it and so is she. She’s always reaching for bowls, opening the refrigerator, licking beaters. I like it when she wears an apron, and so she almost always does—the orange one, with the red flowers. I like the yellow one with thin blue stripes better, but I usually don’t say this. I’m not too picky about these things.

My mother is always busy, even though my father doesn’t think so. She always has potatoes boiling, roasts cooking, pies baking, peas thawing, chicken frying. She doesn’t do real work, so he tells her, only he does. When he says this, which is every other day in case she might forget, she just shrugs and sticks her head in the freezer. I always feel like kicking him, but instead I unload the dishwasher.

The dishes never end, because my mother is always cooking, like her mother, and her mother before that and her mother before that whose dishes I think I must be doing, I’ve been doing dishes for so long. This is my role. I do the dishes.

Our kitchen is not very large. My mother once asked my father to make it bigger, but he said it would be a waste of space—space should be reserved for important things, like mounted dead fish and deer heads. Everyday, she complains about how small, how cramped it is, shuffling back and forth from the counter to the microwave, to the refrigerator to the stove, to the sink to the cupboard, all the time her chain clanging. It only takes her about two shuffles in either direction. Long enough to reach the corners of the house, there are times when her chain gets in the way, but not very often—she’s gotten used to it. Those few times when it does, she just brushes it aside, like a loose hair stuck in the lipstick she doesn’t wear anymore.
Sometimes my mother talks of when she was a girl, like me, at the sink doing dishes in her mother's kitchen. I don't believe that she was ever young, but I listen anyway, because that's what I've been taught to do.

She often stops cutting the shortening into the flour or measuring small teaspoons of vanilla, puts her hands on her hips and looks at me saying, "Oh, yes. I remember being your age." Her eyebrows scrunch, just a bit, and then she sighs. This is all she will say. She straightens her apron and continues doing whatever it was she was doing--beating eggs, mashing potatoes. I run some more hot water into the sink.

Dinnertime is the only time I see my mother leave the kitchen. At precisely five-thirty--the time my father has decreed is the proper time to eat--we all sit in our places. My father is at the head of the table, my mother across from him. I sit to the right of my mother, my brother across from me.

We fold our hands and at the same time bow our heads, drooling out a monotonous litany: Come Lord Jesus be our guest and let these gifts to us be blessed Amen. My father reaches for the potatoes and my mother, dragging her chain behind her, shuffles to the kitchen for the steaming bowl of peas she forgot. My brother kicks me under the table and smiles. Just as my mother is about to sit, my father looks up, over the table, asking if she remembered the salt and pepper. My brother kicks me again and crosses his eyes. This goes on for about five minutes while my father finds things that he needs--a steak knife, some bread, what about the butter? is there any jam left? another carton of milk.
Once everything is on the table and my father is halfway through his meal, my mother, after a careful bite of peas, asks him how his day was. He is watching the news from the table and doesn't hear her. This is my cue.

"She was talking to you."

My father finishes chewing, blinks and looks at me. "What?"

"She was talking to you."

He looks confused, but not concerned, and asks, "Was she? About what?"

"She wanted to know how your day was."

"Oh. Is that all?"

Every day, my father goes to his job. He wears pressed dress pants, an ironed button down shirt with a tie and scuffed, black cowboy boots. He never talks about work, only this asshole or that asshole on the way there.

My father puts another piece of meat in his mouth, starts to chew and says, "Fine. There was this asshole though..." He continues for approximately three minutes before he turns back to the news and asks, "How was yours?"

My mother is intently spreading butter and jam on slices of bread to be handed down to my father. My brother snickers and kicks me, showing me the food he's chewed up in his mouth. No matter what he eats, it always looks the same--a mass of brownish-gray nothing, because he won't eat his vegetables. I stare at my plate.

"Oh, it was fine..." my mother begins. In the middle of her recitation about teaspoons, measuring cups and sticks of butter, my father takes advantage of a commercial break to interrupt her and ask if the gasman checked the meter.
My mother is flustered by his question and I hear the clang of her chain against leg of the table. She is quiet a moment, and then answers, "Yes, he came by at two today." The commercial break is over though, so my father hasn't heard her.

"She said yes, he came at two."

My father's head shifts slightly in my direction. "What?"

"She said he came at two."

"Oh. Good."

Kicking me again, my brother pushes potatoes snake-like through his teeth at me. Quiet, my mother is intently stabbing at her peas. The anchorman in our living room is the only one talking, telling America, “Good night,” that he'll see us tomorrow, same time same place, over tonight’s leftovers. My father clears his throat, gets up from the table saying, "The meat was a little dry." My mother forces a smile as he kisses her quickly on the cheek before he goes into the living room. The chain hits the floor. She turns her attention to my brother, tells him to quit playing with his food and finish his peas.

***

My mother is chipping ice when she tells me that the first time she saw my father was through the frosted glass of an office door. She saw his silhouette, that was all.

Stopping her story, my mother brushes a flowery hand across her forehead, leaving a streak of white from eyebrow to eyebrow. Their first date was a basketball game, she continues. “You’re father’s never been one for romance,” she tells me, slamming her fists into a ball of dough. Eight months later, a bag of burnt peanuts on Valentine’s day and they were engaged.
My mother snorts, runs a sleeve under her nose, tells me my father wanted to play basketball instead of being fitted for his tux. She was only twenty, he twenty-one. The wedding day was forty below.

My mother sticks her head in the freezer.

***

Today my mother is cooking something new, something outside the usual neutrals of mashed potatoes and pork roast with gravy. She is chopping red, green and yellow peppers, singing a song I’ve never heard. I wonder why and part white suds with my hands, plunging them into the burning hot water underneath.

***

My mother hums as she sets the table, shuffling back and forth, her chain sliding across the linoleum.

I watch her without moving, without breathing.

My mother stops, just for a moment, looks at me and smiles. She tells me it's not so bad and waves good-bye to the gasman.
ONE DAY

Today, at lunch, Edy sounds like her mother. In the diner, her lips part and Edy’s mother comes pouring out in a hot stream of pursed lips and arched eyebrows, all over Edy’s tuna on rye—it was supposed to be wheat. Eyes wide, the waitress who isn’t used to this sort of thing, slaps the bill on the table and snaps her gum before she turns to leave—she doesn’t need to take this. Mortified, Edy looks down at the linoleum, at her feet, where her mother, acidic and foamy, sloshes against her huarachis.

Wiping her mouth with a pale pink sleeve, Edy runs her fingers against the insides of her cheeks, over her teeth, her gums, hoping to scrape out the clinging, filmy taste of metallic, bitter years. Still, deep in the back of her throat, making everything smell and taste like a penny, is Edy’s inheritance and she tries not to swallow.

Edy takes off her sandals and leaves them on the floor of the diner, in the puddle of her mother, heads barefoot for home.

***

At home, Edy shares the melodrama, the horror of the diner, with herself because Bob is watching football out on the black-and-white TV in the screened-in porch. In silence, Edy slowly and deliberately plucks single hairs out of her eyebrows. She does this when she’s thinking. At half time, Bob, on his way to the kitchen for another beer, asks Edy what’s wrong.

Edy opens her mouth.

"Nothing," she hears her mother’s voice say.

***
Walking around the small house Bob inherited from his parents, Edy is naked. While Bob is shouting at the TV and watching replays, Edy notices the way her breasts sag and sway with the rhythm of her heels hitting the floor. When did that happen, Edy wonders, this sagging, slipping in life?

On the couch, Edy notices her legs have dandruff—that's how hairy they are. Legs so dry she can scratch the word on them. She runs her hand up and down, feeling the little forest of hairs first brush against her palm and then flatten under its weight.

The TV screen in front of her is full of lush green trees with brown vines, drops of water glistening on broad, waxy leaves. Edy watches as sinewy natives with pieces of bone through their noses, ears, cheeks run between massive trunks, staffs in hand, leaping from tree root to rock to moss covered path. Calls of orange, red, yellow, and blue birds and screams of monkeys bouncing against the thick canopy above fill the living room.

Rock to root to rock, Edy is running with the natives, naked, her sweat mixing with the thick humidity beading on her now bronzed body. The sting of branches leaves streaks of red across Edy's thighs, calves, arms, breasts.

Edy is running and running towards the roar of rushing water. Heart pounding, lungs bursting, the curtain of leaves and vines opens. The natives stop. Edy feels the cool mist on her hot body, hears the thunder of water slamming against itself. Root to rock—

Edy looks down, realizes her breasts are not her own, are merely family hand-me-downs from generations of tired, sagging women. Searching for the receipt, Edy wants to take this body back, exchange it for a new one, or something that isn't so worn out.
Edy, still barefoot and naked, walks to the bedroom, remembers that in the painted, wooden first drawer of her dresser, nestled under the neatly folded stacks of “everyday” underwear where Bob won’t find them, secure in a black box with pretty pink and red flowers on it, are her eyes. A stunning shade of green with flecks of gold, they look lovely, she’s told, against the crushed red velvet interior of the little black box. Edy kept them there, in the drawer, for safekeeping.

When she was younger and the house was empty, Edy would close the door to her bedroom, slide open the drawer and take out the little black box ever so gently. Setting it on her bed, on the pink and white gingham comforter, Edy would sit beside it, hands in her lap. Maybe once a month (never more) she would lift the lid to the little black box. Her eyes would peek out from beneath the trim of black, the gold flecks catching and reflecting fragments of light; only for a second or two though—Edy didn’t want to ruin them.

Now, reaching for the little black box in front of her, Edy hesitates just a bit, opens the lid anyway. She must wear them, if only for a moment. Edy puts them on and blinks. Closing her eyes, Edy twirls and laughs, blushing and fanning, imagining herself the belle of the ball in the stories she’s heard. In the corner of a marble dance floor she has witty conversations with dashing young men, stealing their hearts in between delicate sips of fizzy pink punch that tickles her nose. Cheeks rosy, the men tell Edy how beautiful she is in her crushed red velvet gown, how engaging the green of her eyes is against it.

***

Edy blinks, remembers Bob’s question, "Is it too much to ask?" when she told him she was late.

“Yes, it is.”
Edy looks in the mirror, now wonders if the question was really for her.

***

Edy had a turtle once--a Red-eared Slider named Timmy. He wasn't a particularly pleasant turtle. Edy understood that most turtles are introverts by nature, but Timmy was particularly misanthropic. His distaste for the human race, and especially for Edy's mother, was evident in everything he did. In the middle of the night, when her mother would sneak in to tuck in the covers around Edy, Timmy would bang his shell against the glass of the aquarium--on purpose of course, he was that surly. He also did a lot hissing and lunging, he wasn't one for cuddling.

In addition to his trying personality, Timmy was a very stinky turtle. Edy's mother always took this personally, just another way Timmy was letting her know what he thought of her. It's silly, Edy knows, to think a turtle could consciously dislike someone, but she wasn't the only one who noticed. Other people commented on his lack of social skills and grace in the presence of her mother. Edy didn't care though; he was her turtle all the same.

After a difficult year with Timmy, when Edy was in school, her mother gave him to a friend. A month later, the friend called to say that he was dead.

***

Earlier that morning, in Bob's rusted-out Buick, Edy, skin and bones--her mother's words--covered in spandex leggings and a baggy, white T-shirt, drove to her favorite spot. Edy goes there every morning, ready to do battle with her non-existent body fat. At the gym place, various means of torture are at her disposal--weights, bikes, rowing machines; but her favorite seems to be the Stair Master. It fits the desperateness in her, the determination that she will conquer her body, be mistress of it, it will respect her authority, as though it hasn't in
the past, threatens to disobey in the future. Beads of sweat rolling down her cheeks, Edy thought it must be genetic, her addiction to the monotonous, grueling hopelessness of it all.

From the corner of her eye, that morning, Edy had noticed her mother on a treadmill, offering her a slice of banana cream pie. For the first time in years, the offer was tempting.

***

The problem, Edy realized, staring out the window at the weeds along the driveway, was that she wasn't like other girls, whatever other girls were like. She didn't wear pink, she didn't wear purple, she didn't even wear blue. Nobody knew what color she wore. She sat in the back with her soft, pink erasers and slices of orange singing quietly to herself. She didn't get stickers for jobs well done. She didn't play the triangle during music time. She never got the red crayon. The other children would have called her stupid, but they didn't think to call her anything, not even her name. She liked to rock and rock, making her orange slices talk in soft whispers.

Edy didn't paint, or play with clay. Sometimes she drew orange slices with the brown crayon, slice after slice, in a neat little row. The teacher never put up her pictures.

On quiet days, she would press an orange slice against the aquarium glass. Edy did this until the teacher told her to stop. She didn't drink milk or eat graham crackers, only orange slices, one at a time. She'd peel off the thin, waxy veins and then the thin, clear skin until only the small, orange capsules were left. She'd eat them one by one, feeling the brilliant burst of orange on her tongue.

Edy remembers how she's always been a little sad.

***
Edy goes to the refrigerator, peels an orange. The sadness for Edy is that oranges only last so long.

***

When she was little, Edy's mother used to read her a story that both fascinated and terrified Edy. A red-haired girl flew in a horse-drawn chariot too close to the sun. She melted from the heat into an iridescent puddle. Her companion, the bear, put her in a box and took her to the desert, where a dusty medicine man with a bone through his nose danced and chanted around her. The puddle of girl moved, congealed and turned into a seed, which the medicine man planted and watered.

Sprouting red hair, the girl burst from the ground, weak but smiling, into the waiting arms of her companion. It wasn't the melting or the burying that scared Edy—it was the bear who leaves last night's dishes in the sink.

***

That morning, when she woke up, there in the sink, dried and crusty, fork stuck to plate stuck to bowl—all one heavy blob of coated, ceramic life chained to Edy's ankle, were Bob's dishes. Edy, at the kitchen sink, remembers waking up that morning, putting on her terry bathrobe with the holes along the hem and the orange grease stains on the faded pink binding of the sleeves. She can still hear the coffee machine in the corner spit, finally drip brown into a pot.

Watching the coffee pot fill, Edy had tucked her legs up under her, careful to cover her knees, and waited that morning on the cracked vinyl seat—waited for what she felt to be inevitable. Soon the refrigerator door would be covered with primary colored, alphabet
magnets and crayon drawings of three stick figures held up by a magnetic letter “I” that slips down the face of the refrigerator, slowly losing its place.

***

In the bathroom, Edy reaches for the can of Bob’s Colgate shaving cream--the one with the orange stripe that reminds her of blaze-orange, hunting season, rifles, beer cans; and, most of all, reminds her of quiet weekends alone. The can, cold and smooth in her hand, feels solid, singular, rational. Edy sets the can on the sink, turns on the hot, then cold faucets. She runs a hand under the running water--warm enough, like a baby’s bath--and stops the sink, watching the porcelain bowl fill.

In a drawer to her left are some of Bob’s old, orange Bic razors. Edy takes one out, snaps the protective covering off the shiny, thin blade. Cheap but effective—it will do the job. Edy slips off her jeans and remembers she’s wearing her "everyday" pair of underwear. They look like a circus tent—faded red and white stripes with the occasional inappropriate hole. Edy takes them off and rubberband-slings them into the corner of the bathroom.

Naked from the waist down, Edy looks into the mirror, sees her mother reflected back. She’s wearing her royal blue bathing suit, the one with the worn-thin spots stretched tight across her fleshy behind.

Edy feels the bind of spandex, looks down, sees her mother’s tufts of black hair framing the shiny blue edges of bathing suit between Edy’s legs. Embarrassed, Edy does what she’s always wanted to do, picks up a pair of scissors. She begins to snip, dropping fingerfuls of her mother’s wiry hair into the garbage.

***
The date says: *Expires January 1, 2001.* Win $25,000 and find out you're pregnant all in one day--offer valid only in cases of legitimate pregnancy. Edy holds the stick, wrapped like a fruit roll-up, in her hand. The possibility of eighteen years of servitude compensated by fifty cents a day in winnings doesn't seem like much to her. Edy unwraps the stick, notices the ridged thumb grip. She certainly doesn't want to drop $8.99 or her possible sigh of relief down the toilet.

*Lay flat, three minutes*--two lines means she's screwed, one line means run around, clap her hands and thank the god who sends red rain. *Shades of pink may not match.* One one-thousand, two one-thousand, three one-thousand. . .

***

Edy waits like all the married women in her family whose white dresses are yellow, whose top half of the wedding cake has freezer burn, and whose silky lingerie has long since been replaced by flannel nightgowns and farts in the dark.

"Whatever you do, don't get married. The minute you're married, the fun's over and you're as good as dead." The hand slammed on the table, followed by a knowing sort of snort.

Edy's grandmother, her aunts, even Edy's mother, said this under their breath over coffee, over the phone, over the bathroom stalls, over and over. Wide hips, saggy breasts, the turtlenecks with appliquéd sunflowers on sweatshirts—"Men and children are what pull and stretch you into middle age, you know."

Men and children are the reason Edy's hair will gradually shorten, turn grey and curl close to her head and she'll start going to all the craft shows, buying ugly wooden skunks to stick in the lawn and twigs with glued on pipe-cleaners. She'll start calling everyone dear,
her husband an asshole and her ungrateful children once a week. Her shoes will be beige, her pants polyester, her hips plastic and her hat will be a rain bonnet covering the "hair do" she’ll have done twice a week by a blonde named Peggy who burns her neck with the curling iron.

Edy wonders if she can go back, answer Bob’s question differently.

***

Three minutes later, Edy stares.

"One for you, and one for you and two for you," Ophelia counts her flowers, hands Edy the stick. Edy’s mother winks at her from the bathroom mirror, says, “I told you so.”

The football game is over and Bob is out weed-whacking the driveway. Edy stares at the body in front of her. Her own, her mother’s—it doesn’t matter anymore whose body it is.
PERFECT

She's smelling his coffee. She likes the way the cup feels warm in her hands. Not asking if she's going to try some, he's taken to simply handing her the cup to sniff and watches her, amused.

They sit on the campus bench, barely touching, discussing the wonders of Scotland, of England, of being the infamous American. The cup passes between them.

She's not sure what to say, if there is anything to be said.

Seven days ago, in London, he ripped a piece of paper from her journal. In silence, their hands touching as they exchanged the pen, the two of them wrote what was undeniable. When they were finished, she watched as he tore up their words, threw them away and stood there awkwardly. Their hearts pounding, he shook her hand and went to bed.

The next morning, at breakfast, she straightened his tie.

He shifts the empty cup in his hands. Looking at her, his forehead wrinkled in that way she loves, he reaches over to touch her cheek.

She asks him how his girlfriend is.
A MIDWESTERN ELEGY

What’s wrong is seventeen isn’t very old, especially if you’re pregnant living with your mother-in-law who thinks you seduced her youngest son—the son who’s thirty-five—into marriage. Seventeen isn’t very old at all, but he’s a good Christian man who doesn’t drink, and this is what you tell your girlfriends in Home Ec when they ask what you’re going to do.

“We’re going to get married,” you say, what else is there to do? So you marry him and you live with the mother-in-law who thinks you’re the devil while your husband is off in the Army and a baby grows inside you. She calls you horrible things, you feel like a horrible thing and you can’t wait for him to take you away from this horrible place.

He does and you live on a farm, scrimping and saving, saving and scrimping. You have three more sons, eleven grandchildren and after forty-seven years of marriage, the only thing you can think to say is, “Where are his glasses? He always wore his glasses. Where are his glasses?”

***

My grandmother is high-pitched, frantic. In a black pantsuit, she’s twisting the soggy tissue she holds in her hand. The funeral director glares at his assistant, apologizes, asks in hushed, velvet tones, “Perhaps they are still at home?”

“No they are not at home. He died with them on.”

She turns to her eldest son, my father, “Ronnie, Dad was wearing his glasses, wasn’t he? I’m sure he was. He always wore his glasses.”
The funeral director pats my grandmother’s arm. “It’s all right Ruth. I’ll send Carl downstairs to look for them.”

***

In our blue Eagle Summit, my brother and I go to visit our grandparents. The hour in our small car passes in sheet after sheet of white, flat North Dakota land. My feet starting to burn from the cold, we finally pull onto the gravel road that leads up to the old white and red farmhouse just outside of town.

Grandma opens the door and waits for us to crunch across the snow.

“Yah, you kids made good time there. Weren’t any slick spots on the roads? Said the ice was pretty bad up there around Thompson.”

“Nope, the roads were fine.”

“Yah, well that’s good then. Come in, come in. I made an apple pie and there are some bars and cookies out in the deepfreeze there if you want. Do you kids want a doughnut? I made about twelve dozen doughnuts the other day. I brought some down to the courthouse too, but only a couple dozen.

“Earl was so thrilled, you know, he says to me, ‘Ruth, you make the best doughnuts, it’s a shame you retired’ and I just laughed. Here,” Grandma winks and starts handing us doughnuts. “You want? Here, sit down there. There’s some pop down in the basement.

“Yah, it’s so nice you kids could come. Grandpa’s out in the living room, there, resting. His feet have been giving him some trouble, circulation isn’t so good, and the laxatives haven’t been working—his stomach is solid as a rock. We’re supposed to go to Fargo tomorrow if the roads aren’t bad.” Grandma looks outside at the glaze of snow in the
yard. “Do you kids want something more to eat? Eileen, Kenny’s wife you know, brought over a hotdish the other day—tatertot, I think. It’s in the fridge there help yourselves.”

In the kitchen, we hear some movement from the recliner out in the living room, followed by, “Ma! It’s too hot out here. Turn the thermostat down.”

***

Carl has returned with my grandfather’s glasses. Removing a wadded up Kleenex from her sleeve, Grandma dabs at her nose saying, “There now, Dad looks right,” and starts to cry.

***

At the hospital in Fargo, the doctor said Grandpa’s insides “look like swiss cheese and there’s nothing we can do.” My father and I sit in my grandfather’s recovery room while he sleeps. My father tries to talk to me about school, about how my classes are going. Our conversation lasts about a minute, before we lapse back into the weather.

***

Grandma asks my cousin Kelsey to come over by her, next to the casket. She bends over close to Kelsey’s head. “That isn’t really Grandpa, Kelsey. Grandpa’s up in heaven. Do you understand?” Kelsey, who is seven going on eight, is staring at the floor, nodding her head while Grandma cries into the top of her white-blonde hair.

Three women in jeans and rhinestone T-shirts, walk over towards me.

“Oh, yah, you must be Ronnie’s kid, then?”

“Yes,” I say.

“So sorry about your Grandpa.”

“Thank you.”
“Don’t suppose you remember us? You were pretty little, I suppose. Well, anyway, we’re your dad’s third cousins—we’re related to Roy’s brother Gulick.”

“Oh.”

“Yah, so sorry. Such a shame, that cancer,” and they wander off.

***

About four hours after surgery, my grandfather is awake and feeling restless. Grandma, back from her nap at the hotel across the street, is fussing with Grandpa’s blankets, his pillows, his beeping machines.

“Are you hungry, Dad? Maybe you want some water? Ronnie, get Dad some water. Here, Dad, have some of this cracker.”

“I don’t want a cracker.”

“Well, here, have some of this water then.” Grandpa takes a sip, tells her to take it away, that he doesn’t want any more water, Ma.

***

The wake is over and we’re crammed into the farmhouse eating pork’n beans, pasta salad and little sandwiches spread with CheezeWhiz and sliced, green olives with the pimento stuffed in the middle. The church ladies said they’d be back with bars and cookies later in the afternoon. Grandma is running around, making sure everyone has something to eat.

“Yah, well, I haven’t had time to do much cooking. This will have to do, I suppose. There’s some leftover barbecue in the fridge there, if you want.”

Someone tells Grandma to sit down and relax, that we can take care of ourselves.
“Oh sure, oh sure. Let me get some doughnuts out of the deepfreeze,” and I see a tear slip off her chin.

***

My brother and I go to the farmhouse to say good-bye. Grandpa can’t walk by himself anymore, so he stays in the living room most of the time. We go into the living room and give Grandpa a hug. He’s all skin and bones now.

“How are you feeling, Grandpa?”

“Yah, well, I’ve been better, I guess.”

“Yeah? Grandma said your feet aren’t bothering you so much.”

“Yah, those new socks--they’re a little better.”

“That’s good.”

“Yah.”

We go back into the kitchen where Grandma has poured some milk and rolled some lefse.

“Yah, the minister and his wife were just here. Such nice people. I think Grandpa’s ready to go. We’ve had a good life, you know. Can’t complain. Things aren’t so good, but he won’t go to the hospital. He wants to die at home. It’ll be soon. He’s still stubborn, that Grandpa of yours,” and she smiles through her tears.

We stay for an hour or so while Grandma tells us how they picked out the headstone and made their peace with God. Before we leave, Grandma has my brother help lift Grandpa into his wheelchair.

In the kitchen, I wrap my arms around Grandpa’s shoulders, kiss his cheek and tell him how much I love him.
“Yah, I love you too.”

Grandma is crying while my brother says his good-byes. On the way out the door, she shoves some doughnuts into our hands. We turn one last time. “Good-bye, Grandpa. See you later.”

“Yah.”

Grandpa is waving from the window, Grandma right behind him.

***

The small church is hot, packed with bodies and mid-May heat. The back of my dress sticks to the pew. Everyone is looking at us.

The pastor goes on and on about what a successful and full life Roy had and how fortunate he was to be able to die in the home that he loved. My uncle Harv gets up, reads a poem he’s written about his father’s life as a farmer. When he’s finished, he thanks his Ma for being so strong, for taking care of Dad so he could have his one dying wish.

Cousin Kjellog sings a song in Norwegian and it is over. I watch as my grandfather is carried out of the church by his four sons.

***

The drive to the cemetery is a quarter mile down the road. I stand by the pastor who says some things I don’t hear.

People are hugging us, patting us, squeezing us, saying, “We’ll see you back at the church, then,” and leave to go eat the church ladies’ dry bars and drink coffee.

I’m thinking about my grandmother, about how after everyone is gone, how after forty-seven years, the table will be set for one.
THE VIKING MOTEL: NEAT, NICE AND NOT EXPENSIVE

On both sides, in big, black letters, the sign reads "Viking Motel." Below it in smaller black letters: "Stay With Us and Enjoy the Lake Walk. Rooms Start at $19.95." The cement planter beneath is filled with perennials. Every spring the manager plants orange marigolds and pink and yellow and red snapdragons, even though you can't see them from the street.

The old building used to be a celery green, in the days before I worked there; now it's blue and grey. A cement walkway on the second floor connects the older "L"-shaped section, where the mildew in the showers is permanent, to the straight block section facing the lake. Five rooms on top, four on the bottom-- the last room is the office. These are the rooms that cost more, the rooms that have a box of blue Kleenex on the sink.

***

There are thirty rooms to rent, on a good day. Sometimes though, a chunk of ceiling will fall down or a toilet will overflow-- it seems like there's almost always something falling apart or spilling over. I think this motel wants to die, is dying, but the manager won't let it. He repairs everything himself; and, if it takes days, he won't shave.

***

We housekeepers do the best we can. We make hospital corners, fold the generic toilet paper in an impressive "V," straighten the cracked shower curtain, smooth the pilled bedspreads and offer the guests little bars of pink soap in hopes they won't look too closely and see the peeling wallpaper or the stain on the carpet.

***
Senior citizens usually stay here. Their rooms are neat, they make their beds and leave the wet towels folded under the sink. Their slippers are placed neatly beside the bed and two glasses of water, each sitting on a tissue, are on the shelf with the Bible and phone book.

It's the discount that brings them in, that and the free coffee and the satisfaction of staying in a place that's "nothing fancy" but reasonably priced. They rarely leave tips.

Pretty much no one leaves us a tip--it's not something anyone really thinks about, I guess--except for the occasional leather-clad biker. When he and his girlfriend leave, their towels are everywhere; but there's a beer on the ledge below the bathroom mirror where "Here, have a cold one on us! Thanks for the extra TP!" is scrawled in soap.

***

One night, two women paid for their room in ones, so the desk clerk told me, whispering, "They're dancers at the Club Saratoga." As I looked at her she nodded, and I began to imagine what they would look like, these women who worked in a building filled with men but no windows, and where ID's were checked at the door.

They were staying for a week or so and the housekeepers weren't allowed in their room. One day, I saw one of them while I was dragging the garbage to the dumpster. She was short and had dyed hair. Very skinny. She didn't look like what I imagined she would that day she paid for her room in dollar bills. She looked ordinary.

She was kissing a very tall man in the middle of the parking lot. She kissed him the way I hoped my mom kissed my dad when I wasn't looking.

***
People who have stayed here sometimes send us ugly postcards from Bermuda and Alaska, and other places I’ve never seen. They’re stuck to a bulletin board above the free coffee and doughnuts that the housekeepers aren’t allowed to eat unless it’s Sunday, when they’re stale.

On the side wall behind the desk, next to the bulletin board, is a plastic, gray Viking hat with white horns and two yellow braids. Every morning I see that hat and I always wonder what it would be like to take it down off the wall and put it on my head.

If I ever did, I’d wear it all day, attacking my toilets and anything else that got in my way, feeling invincible in my white latex gloves with the flocked lining and red strawberries on the sleeve. I think I would sing.

***

I show up at nine, sometimes in shorts, more often in the same pants I’ve been wearing every morning. I walk up the crumbling cement stairs past 201, 202, 203, 204, 205, 206, and 207, all with the curtains drawn and the doors locked. I get to the laundry room and say "hi" to my boyfriend who wears his hat backwards. I begin to fill the two blue buckets. A capful of lemon cleanser and two squirts of something that smells like bubble gum, two rags in each and a scrub brush in one, hot water. I grab the buckets, he carries the vacuum and the cracked blue carrier that has everything we need: generic cleanser, sanitary strips for the toilet, extra toilet paper, cups, garbage bags and soap.

We make all the beds first, going from room to room. I carry the keys and unlock all the doors. Fitted sheet first, we sometimes cry when we talk about things we've never told anyone and as we fold the top sheet over the blanket, I tell him how much I love him. He snaps the bedspread at me and we're both laughing, folding the pillows over, tucking the
extra bedspread under. Before we go to the next room, I redo his corners because I'm the perfectionist. He says it doesn't bother him, but I think it does.

When we get to the front rooms, where you can see the lake with its ore boats anchored in the blue, I drag him into the bathroom and kiss him, listening for footsteps.

***

The manager lives next door with his daughter. On sunny days, when the No Vacancy sign hangs in the window, he sings Italian arias while he works on the plumbing in 215.

I think that this motel is his life and that's why he fights it so hard. That's why he has me ShopVac the sidewalk for three hours and wash down the white plastic chairs and sweep up the cigarette butts. Because, when it's empty, he's silent, and none of us say how glad we are we only have six rooms to clean.
She's at the foot of our bed, taking notes with a fat, yellow pencil on a pad of pink paper. Every now and then she barks out an order:

"No, not there, you idiot. There!" Disgusted, she gestures with the thick pencil grasped in her small hand and we continue.

She's a short little woman, almost impish you could say. She likes to wear suits, but the cuts are always bad, make her look dumpy, though she doesn't seem to mind. Perhaps she doesn't notice. Tonight she wears skylark blue, a distracting kind of blue, makes it hard to concentrate with her there, floating in the corner of my eye.

Neither one of us remembers whose idea it was. I think it was his, with his performance anxiety; but he says it was me because I'm so reserved. It really doesn't matter. She's here and we're both miserable.

She's yelling at me now, pencil stabbing the air, "Don't just lie there! Do something. Anything. Nobody likes a lump."

"You know, she's right," he says, mid thrust.

I glare at him.

"That's it!" she screams, throws the pencil and the pink paper on the floor. "Get out of the way. Yes, get up. Get out of the bed," and she drags me out by the arm. "As a professional, I shall demonstrate the proper response. Gordon, from the top."
THE EXAM

On a white-and-red checked blanket, in the middle of daisies, sunshine and champagne, the doctor, using two fingers, probes between my legs.

"Ah, yes," he says with his usual anticipation and snaps his white latex gloves--for the desired effect more than purpose. Beginning to arrange the various necessary instruments, the doctor, dressed in the formality of tails, happily sing-songs to himself, "Speculum here, lubricant here, flashlight here," enjoying with each neatly placed item his own sense of order.

I think that he is twelve, the doctor, that or eighty-two--it's so hard to tell these days. In either case, his glasses are large, too large for his face, so large they make his head look small. The lenses reflect the branches and leaves of the trees, the people walking by. When he smiles from between my legs, his eyes get lost in the creases that seem to come down from the limitless expanse of his glistening forehead. He is not particularly attractive, but I hear he is thorough.

Knees bent, bare feet resting on sweet-smelling cantaloupes, I wait, playing with blades of grass, ripping them up, rolling them between my fingers, dropping them to the ground. I notice his precise placements, his checkerboard approach, and wonder where I fit in the game. All around me birds are chirping, children are laughing, and dogs lift their legs on nearby trees. The paper of my white gown rustles in the breeze and I am distracted by the dancing shape of a mashed potato dragon across the thin stretch of blue above me.

"Almost ready, dear, just try to relax," he pats my thigh with a sanitary hand, offers me some crackers with cheese.
Crunching on the cracked wheat with sharp cheddar, my thoughts boil back to potatoes. Floating, bobbing in a big silver pot--this is how I remember them--floating and bobbing in a sea of explosion. Always white, always mashed, mixed with milk, butter and cream. A hot, two-finger scoop when no one is looking. Potatoes were my escape. But now my potatoes are dragons, dancing dragons, swirling and twirling and exploding in the blue sea just out of reach.

I feel the tickle of the doctor's sleeve against my inner thigh. I snort an involuntary cracker-laugh. Wheat is up my nose, the rough, round cantaloupes are rolling towards a romantic couple groping and sucking each other next to a lilac bush.

"Now, now, my dear, these kind of things are rarely laughing matters. Let's try to be serious, shall we?" The doctor is stern, annoyed by my full-body snort. With a sniff, he takes away my plate of crackers and retrieves the cantaloupes with a brusque, "Excuse me."

Gently, but firmly, the doctor, sweating and grunting with the difficulty of bondage, ties my feet with saran-wrap to the rough rinds. "Be a good girl now, and stay still. I'll be ready in a moment." The doctor smoothes his cummerbund and again begins his painstaking arrangement, "Speculum here, lubricant here," etc. I am bored.

Sighing, I pick crackers out of my teeth, sucking wheat-mush, bits of dirt and grass from my fingernails. In between picking and sucking, I try to take awkward sips of champagne which dribble down my cheeks, my chin, into my ears. Up above me, neck curved back to tail, the potato dragon is eating itself in huge gulps.

I find it disturbing, the gluttony of beasts.
Children run by, short legs and fat arms pumping. One stops by my knee, takes a quick peek under the paper gown and giggles. Her mother yells at her to, "Get back here and leave the nice lady alone."

I pick a daisy by my side, and begin to pull soft white petals from its yellow center. Out loud I say, "She loves me, she loves me not," and I am thinking of my mother. Wire, metal masher. She is sweating and swearing, exploding inside the big silver pot, slamming herself into the soft warm starch.

"Would you care for some watermelon?" The doctor is smiling, handing me a thick red slice. Shading my eyes from the glare of his head, I smile and take the slice, slippery in my hand. The little girl is screaming, she wants some watermelon too. On the way to my mouth, a pale pink drop of watermelon juice lands, spreads a circular rose across the white paper of my gown. I bury my teeth in the loose, grainy flesh, and more juice runs down my cheeks, my chin, mixing with the champagne. I swallow my mouthful of small, black seeds and hope the little girl is watching.

"Almost ready, dear. Did you enjoy the watermelon?" the doctor asks me, his smiling, shiny, creased head popping up from between my legs. I nod, throw the rind in the direction of the moaning, groaning couple, reach up and wipe my red, sticky hands all over the glare of his head.

Glasses slide down to the tip of his nose, the doctor sputters, blinks rapidly, a single blade of grass stuck to his forehead. "Well, well, this is certainly not ladylike behavior. Certainly not. Didn't your mother teach you how to behave properly?" He is frowning, scratching his head. Up in the sky, the dragon has swallowed itself and I see my mashed-potato mother, drenched in butter, cream, frothy.
"Let's see, let's see," muttering, the doctor is rummaging through the wicker basket by his side, the blade of grass on his forehead bobbing up and down. He pulls out a croquet mallet and two wire wickets saying, "Yes, this will do," leans between my legs and stakes each arm down with two solid taps. "Yes, this should do the trick," and the doctor, satisfied with himself, flips back his long, black tails, retreats between my legs. Above my head, the steaming heap of potato mother shapes and re-shapes itself, always a comfortable variation of bland.

"All right, I think we're ready to begin," the doctor excitedly claps his hands, adjusts his huge frames. "You're going to want to relax--that will make things much more pleasant. Here, have a strawberry." He picks a large, ripe berry from the bowl, sticks it in my mouth. From the corner of my eye, I catch the hot-white glint of midday sun off of the metal speculum gleaming in the doctor's hand.

Clearing his throat then straightening his bow-tie, the doctor begins, "What I'm going to do now is insert this metal object--," his hand reaches up, illustrating the object in question, "something we like to call a speculum-- into your body. Once inside, I'm going to crank--pardon me--carefully open it, so I can have a peek. You may feel some minor discomfort--discomfort is normal." The speculum disappears between my legs, replaced by the doctor's sounds of careful investigation.

All around me are the sounds of summer, or maybe it's spring--it's so hard to tell these days. Over by the lilac bush, the romantic couple is arguing, slapping each other with, "You never," this and "Why don't you," that. The children are screaming, throwing temper tantrums, beating the ground with fat little fists.
From under the white paper hem I hear, "Uh huh. Uh huh. Hmmm. . . .yes, well, my
dear, you have a lovely pink cervix, just lovely," and the doctor gives me two latex thumb's
up. Up above, my potato mother is flinging bits and pieces of herself against the explosion of
blue. A monarch butterfly flits by, lands on the blade of grass stuck to the doctor's forehead.
Both peer between my knees, the doctor reaches for the flashlight.

I hear, "What's this?" the doctor clucks his tongue, the butterfly flaps its wings and
moves closer. Two joggers, wearing sweat-bands, tight spandex pants and beer bellies, have
stopped, watch interestedly as the doctor reaches in a cold, lubricated hand. "Watermelon
seeds?" he questions and wipes the small, black bits on my stomach. "Interesting." The
joggers whisper to each other, look more closely beneath my gown.

"I'm going to need a closer look. Try to relax. Remember, discomfort is normal." The
butterfly flits to the paper gown hem hanging across my knees, looks down, over the edge. I
notice the doctor is in up to his shoulders, his observations muffled. The joggers pat my knee
and continue on their way.

Bored again, I remember the strawberry in my mouth and begin to chew the sweet tip,
watching my mashed potato mother scream steam into the sky. Churning and heaving, she is
scraping the white bits and pieces of herself off the thin stretch of blue, mashing them back
into her thighs, her hips, her stomach.

The strawberry is gone when the doctor emerges, glasses fogged, holding a fruit
basket. "I have never in all my years. . . ." he trails off, sampling a slice of kiwi, some banana,
chunks of mango, bits of apple, plums, apricots until the basket is empty. The butterfly clings
to the paper hem between my knees, slowly opening and closing its wings.
I smell lilacs, notice the voices of the romantic couple no longer slap, instead smooth, caress in slathered on apologies. Soon they are groping and sucking again. The children are quiet, tying each other to trees, poking each other with sticks.

Juice dripping down his chin, the doctor, wrinkled and flushed, licks his latex fingers. The front of his shirt is stained the colors of the rainbow. In the sky, my mashed potato mother, bleached and creamy, climbs into her big silver pot, eating herself with two-finger scoops. Orange and black, the monarch sighs, kisses the tip of my nose and flies away.

On a white-and-red checked blanket, in the middle of daisies, sunshine and champagne, I think to myself, "It's disturbing, the gluttony of beasts," and tell the doctor to turn his head and cough.
SAVING MYSELF FROM THE VOLCANO

It wasn't until my first year of junior high that I learned virgins were used as sacrifices, a means of appeasing the heathen gods of years ago. In the seventies re-enactment films of our social studies class, I watched the pious, raven-haired eighteen-year-old woman of some presumably ancient tribe be groomed and pampered, smiling serenely during the preparation of what she understood and accepted to be her necessary death. My teacher explained that the virgin sacrifice was a great honor, that the heathens thought the fortunate woman would be granted a place next to the gods. My thirteen-year-old mind didn’t think that “a place next to the gods” was much of a reward for a woman willfully plunging into molten lava.

In the cramped church dressing room, I’m sweating while my mother buttons the last little, white button, adjusts the chapel length train behind me.

“Beautiful, sweetie, just beautiful.”

***

Dressed all in white, flowers in her hair, Tina (the village virgin), more than a little irritated, stands with her back to the edge of the belching, red abyss. From the smiling throng of people gathered around the earth’s angry opening, Tina’s mother excitedly mouths the words, ”I’m so happy for you,” wipes a tear from the corner of her eye with an embroidered handkerchief and blows her daughter a kiss.

***
I had the stomach flu the day my mother, with the help of our Lord, Jesus Christ, decided to sit me down with the illustrated book from church to explain the sordid, but necessary, act of sexual intercourse. I was in third grade.

Eating lemon yogurt, because lemon yogurt is what a person eats in my house if you're sick, I sat on the orange and yellow floral couch watching Mr. Rogers and his land of Make Believe where the trolley was talking in whistles and bells. My mother, walking into the living room, flipped off the TV and sat beside me, pressed her lips to my forehead, "Hmmm, still a little warm," and proceeded to look uncomfortable. She was holding a book, a book I had never seen before, so I wasn't all that upset that she had turned off the television. Opening the book to the first page where Jesus was looking a little sad, my mother began quietly, "A man and a woman love each other very much. A man and a woman who are married," she added for important purposes of clarification, "and who love each other very much, sometimes choose to express that love in a very special way. Did I mention they were married, sweetie?" While my mother's hand smoothed and re-smoothed the glossy page, I nodded, licking lemon yogurt from my spoon, thinking that the Jesus book wasn't as interesting as I thought it would be.

"Okay, good, because it's very important that the man and the woman are married--like me and your father. That's the way Jesus likes it; and, we always want to make Jesus happy, don't we, sweetie?" My mother looked at me, eyes wide, hands fidgeting. Jesus, wearing nothing but a white cloth over what my mother referred to as His "privacy," was smiling sadly from the page in her lap.

"O.K., a man and a woman. . ." My mother quickly skimmed the page beginning again. "Oh, O.K., yes here we go. To express that love, a man and a woman, well, they, well,
they kiss and hug a lot and then . . . " At this point she trailed off, staring hard at the picture of Jesus, who was still smiling, even though He was mostly naked and looked a little cold--I figured this was why He was sad in the book and probably all the other times I ever saw Him, that and because He was tired.

I knew that Jesus was tired, tired like my dad is tired after working at the plant, after being on his feet all day in bad shoes (Jesus did a lot of walking in sandals and the rocks probably poked his feet all day long). But Jesus couldn't have a beer like my dad, or sit around with his pants unbuttoned, because Jesus only drank wine and didn't wear pants, only some wrap-around thing that looked like the hospital gown I had to wear when I had my tonsils out. Besides, nobody I knew really sat around drinking wine. So, I understood why Jesus was always tired, never getting to relax, let His hair down, put His feet up.

What was interesting was no matter how tired or sad He might be, Jesus always found time to talk to my mother. She was always having "special time" with Jesus, where we couldn't bother her without risking having our little souls sent to hell.

I thought He was talking to her now--Jesus in the book--telling her what to say. It made perfect sense because Jesus was always telling my mother what he liked and didn't like and she was always telling me: "Jesus just told me, He doesn't like it when we don't flush the toilet--pieces of pooh make Jesus sad. Jesus likes clean fingernails--dirty fingers soil our prayers to the Lord. Jesus doesn't like it when we pick our noses, He thinks it's disgusting. Jesus told me that little children who continue to pick their noses never go to Heaven," etc.

Every Sunday, the pastor told us how Jesus was always doing amazing things, like turning water into wine, feeding lots of people, walking on water, banishing demons, never squishing bugs. I didn't think Jesus' talking to my mother was as amazing as all that.
My mother turned the page and before I knew it, Jesus had told my mother to start throwing around words like penis and vagina and intercourse. Her face got very red and she made me repeat them—the words—and point to the corresponding picture. The pictures were peculiar in an interesting sort of way, some of them even vaguely familiar. The penis picture—a bigger version, but recognizable all the same—went with what the neighbor boy had shown me one summer afternoon.

It was a sunny, outside day when the neighbor boy had made the I'll-show-you-mine-if-you-show-me-yours deal with me. I remember thinking what a funny looking sort of thing he had dangling there between his legs. I wanted to yank on it, to see if it would come off, but I didn't. My mother had always told me that Jesus says it's bad to touch a person's privacy, even your own.

I understood there were certain advantages to having that funny-looking thing, like how the neighbor boy could pee anywhere he wanted, which he liked to demonstrate on my mother's petunias, justifying himself with, "I'm watering the flowers." As convenient and fun as that would be, I was still very glad I didn't have one—I thought that what I had was much better, not as ugly and didn't get in the way, like I was sure his funny-looking thing did all the time.

After tucking his privacy away behind the green monster face of The Incredible Hulk, he told me it was my turn. I cheated, showing him—through the unzipped fly of my yellow jean-shorts—one of the small, red strawberries on my underwear and ran away laughing.

Once I finally got the right words matched up with the right pictures, the penis word was being put into the vagina word and the rest was a frantic, whirling blur of strange technical words like testicles, erection, sperm, ovaries, uterus, labia, clitoris, ejaculation,
orgasm, all eventually ending in what my mother called the miraculous culmination of babies.

Supposedly, and much to my mother's dismay and Jesus' (I assume, because Jesus never directly talked to me), the blur was moderately enjoyable to both the man and the woman, though mostly the man. However, once I was married, and therefore in a position to be expressing myself in this sort of way, I should make sure not to enjoy it too much because then Jesus would know I wasn't doing it for the right reason—the right reason being a new baby for Jesus to love—and that would make Jesus cry.

Sweat beading on her upper lip, the book now closed in her lap, my mother told me that this special expression of love between a married man and a woman was something Jesus had whispered to her, which she was whispering to me, and was, "Something that good girls don't talk about." If I wanted to be a good girl, a good girl who goes to Heaven, did I understand that?

My head was spinning from the ups and downs, twists and turns of marital intercourse. Lemon yogurt taste in the back of my throat, I nodded and vomited over the side of the couch into the waiting ice cream pail, wondering if Jesus had ever shown anybody His privacy.

***

It all began up above the earth, beyond the last feathery wisps of the atmosphere, where the gods, bored, demanded a sacrifice.

They sent a beer can down from the heavens, let it lodge itself deep in the core of the earth. Filled with the gas of the gods, it expanded, contracted, finally exploded open, shifting and grinding the land against itself.
The air reeked of sulfur and the gods laughed and snorted, pulled each other's fingers.

***

Later that week, in the coat room at school, I quickly found out, through whispers and giggles, that all the surrounding neighborhood moms had explained the mystery of life that passeth all third grade understanding to their daughters. Since all of us had been told not to talk about it, not surprisingly, it was the only thing we talked about--already understanding that we were all going straight to hell anyway, for picking our noses in secret.

Not completely sure about the logistics of what went where and what happened once it got there, for the next couple of months, Barbie and Ken were loving each other a lot, making babies which miraculously resulted from the chanting of, "I love you," three times, excessive kissing (at least five in a row) and lying in bed next to each other for approximately nine months--seven minutes, Barbie time.

***

The earth rumbled, the growing pressure from below exploded in a hot, ash-filled stream towards the sky. A lick of red escaped the new opening in the crust. Singed and terrified, the people of Tina's village ran, screamed, tore their hair, their clothes, their eyes. They pleaded to the gods to have mercy.

***

It wasn't until I celebrated my tenth birthday--a slumber party--that it occurred to me, mostly because I couldn't sleep, to venture a tentative, exploratory finger in the direction of my privacy. The other girls quietly snoring in sleeping bags on my living room floor, it was
to be a solitary expedition into the strange, forbidden and unquestionably sacred land between my legs.

I tried to put the image of Jesus weeping up in Heaven out of my mind as I hitched my pink nightgown up around my waist. Taking a deep breath, I spread my legs, slid my hand into my Pretty Kitty underwear and began to carefully poke around in the warm, damp mysterious place of my privacy. In between the fleshy parts--there were two of them that came together, making a sort of secret opening to my privacy--my finger found the little bump Jesus called a clitoris and stopped there to investigate.

Heart racing from the danger of being naughty, from knowing Jesus was up there watching me with disappointed eyes, I found that if I moved my finger a certain way, back and forth, across the little bump, the very ends of my toes started to tingle. Of course, I continued to move my finger in that certain way until my toes curled and I was gasping for air, feeling like the sunfish which often times flopped at the end of my fishing pole. Quiet, lying there on my back, eyes wide open, heart still pounding, I assumed I had experienced the hot, explosive eruption of a married couple's love for each other--what Jesus on the church-book page, with tears in His eyes, called an orgasm.

At this point, I figured Jesus was probably sobbing, a big, soggy pile of used tissues by His sandals, drowning in His own tears and snot because of my sinful violation of my privacy. Since there was no undoing of Jesus' snotty tissues, and my hand was already there, I continued my exploration.

My finger was moving along the flexible ridges of yet another secret passage when I felt it sink into a soft, wet opening. I hadn't been expecting that, though I suppose I knew it was down there somewhere. Bravely forging ahead, my finger poked around my insides,
stretching and feeling the spongy walls bounce back from the push of my finger. It felt like
two when I poked my finger inside my mouth, but different--there weren't any teeth to get in the
way for one thing and poking around in my mouth didn't make my toes zing.

Feeling a little sleepy, I took my finger out, pruny like the tips of my fingers were
after being in the bathtub too long, and smelled it. It wasn't necessarily bad--kind of tangy,
like barbecue sauce, but not so sweet and a little bit fishy, like thawed smelt. I wiped my
finger on my nightgown and scooted the bunch of fabric around my waist back down around
my knees.

Drifting off to sleep, I thought about how the whole thing had left me slightly
confused. Since I wasn't married--not really married anyway, the ceremony on the swings
with the neighbor boy didn't count since it wasn't in a church--I wondered how it was
possible to have experienced that special expression of love with only myself. The closest
thing that I could relate it to was the Virgin Mary (even though God's angel hadn't appeared
to me). I would be having a baby. It was the only logical explanation.

***

The opening in the earth grew hotter by the day, the rumblings continued and huge,
molten bubbles of rock began to burst in fiery splats at the surface. The people, sure of their
approaching doom, were desperate, not knowing why the great gods were angry, only that
they must be appeased. But how? The people rushed to the edge of the earth with bits of gold,
loaves of bread, little brothers, their neighbor's cat—all flung with the best of intentions into
the abyss. Peering over the steaming edge, they waited. And waited. And waited.

Up above the solemn scene, the gods gasping with laughter, held their sides, slapped
their knees.
The sea of red still boiled and the people shrugged their shoulders. After a few minutes of serious contemplation and quiet discussion, the people decided that Tina, the village virgin, should do the trick.

***

I did a good job of not telling my mother my secret; but I spent a great deal of time convincing the girls on my block that I was like the Virgin Mary, soon to be the mother of Jesus' baby brother because I had experienced the special expression of love with just myself. Most of them believed me once I explained, in great detail, the explosion and helped me pick out baby names, like Ralph and Mike.

The day eventually came, after many nights of loving myself, when I decided I didn't really want to be like the Virgin Mary--having a baby who would grow up to be another Son of God, another Holy Being who would make everyone feel bad for inspecting and getting to know their privacy and who would cry all the time when people did it anyway--so I started chasing boys instead.

***

At home, Tina, stirring a kettle of beans, was pondering the intriguing details of volcanic phenomena when her mother rushed in with the good news.

"Tina, dear, we've decided to offer you to the gods. Aren't you excited? Oh my! What will you wear?" Tina's mother disappeared into the next room.

Still stirring the beans, Tina sighed and cursed the gods.

***

There was an older, red-haired boy who lived on another street, one street up from ours. Even though he was older, and always telling us what babies we were, every day in the
summer he came down the block to play with us because nobody his age liked him. He always had dirt on his face and yellow snot dripped out his nose, which he wiped on his sleeve. His clothes always had holes in them--the knees, the elbows--and when it got really hot he wore pitted-out Hooters T-shirts, T-shirts he said he had gotten from his uncle Milo in Texas.

"Hooters," he told us, "is another word for boobies," and he snickered, pointing at my chest, the other boys nervously snickering too. If they didn't, he would sometimes beat them up.

Since I didn't have any real hooters yet, I didn't much care. I could still tuck the bottom of my red T-shirt into the neck, halter-style, and Jesus wouldn't have to cover His eyes, like He did when the other girls tried to do it, or so my mother said He did. But why the red-haired boy had pointed at me and not at any of the other girls who were actually starting to grow some hooters, or as my mother explained more tactfully, who were beginning to "bud," was a mystery.

The discussion of hooters made me think of my privacy and I wondered if the red-haired boy had ever seen a girl's privacy. Since he was so much older, I assumed he had, but maybe he hadn't. I was sure lots of people had seen his privacy, because he was always showing it to us, like we had never seen anything like it before. Obviously, his mother didn't have the church book with the talking Jesus and illustrated privacy pictures.

I sometimes felt kind of sorry for him. That is, until the red-haired boy decided he was the boss of us--which he did a lot. He made us play whatever games he wanted to play, which was usually war or something stupid like that, where the girls had to be nurses,
pretending to sew on blown off arms and legs. If we didn't play his games, he threatened to wipe his boogers in our hair instead of on his sleeve.

One day, while we were playing surgery--the red-haired boy was the mad doctor and the girls, of course, were his nurses in charge of handing him the sticks and rocks--his necessary surgical instruments, along with the rotten brain (some red clay from the back yard mixed with grass), while he performed his evil surgery on the neighbor boy--I put down my rocks and told the red-haired boy I wasn't going to play his stupid game anymore, that I was tired of always being a stupid nurse.

Everyone was quiet, including the red-haired boy who had put down his bark-covered scalpel and was scratching his armpit.

"O.K.," he said, smiling, wiping the snot on his sleeve, "we can play house then. You can be my wife," he grabbed my face and kissed me hard on the lips.

When I opened my eyes, he was on the ground in a ball, screaming and crying, the snot running down his face like squished caterpillar guts. I wiped my lips with the bottom of my T-shirt and watched the red-haired boy rock on the grass, warning me, in between gasps, that he was going tell his mom.

I stood over him and laughed, told him to go ahead and be a baby, tell his mom he got beat up by a girl, I didn't care. I turned around and the neighborhood girls giggled and whispered in my ear, "How did you know to knee him in his privacy?"

I didn't know. It was instinct.

***

And now, Tina standing at the edge of the angry volcano, the fateful moment has arrived. The sacred men of the village brush Tina with branches, chant dark, impressive
words over her, and mutter under their breath, in between prayers offered up to the gods,
"Sure hope this works."

Tina turns to face the sea of fire. The crowd holds its breath, grows anxiously quiet, the only sound is Tina's mother's happy sniffles and the occasional lava belch. Toes hanging over the edge, feeling her skin flush then burn, Tina watches the orange-red waves of liquid rock, the blowing strands of her hair beginning to curl and stink from the heat.

"All right," Tina says to herself, taking a deep breath, "here goes."

***

At the back of the sanctuary, my father beside me, I'm thinking about my mother's precious ceramic angel figurines--reminders of what celestial examples I should aspire to in my thoughts and deeds--floating above the fireplace. Angels to nuns, I'm thinking about the women who marry themselves to Jesus, the man Who never showed His privacy to anyone, probably not even Himself.

The nuns have probably never really seen their own privacy, much less gotten to know it, for fear of making their Holy husband, Jesus Christ, cry. I'm sure those who do dare venture their own tentative finger in their privacy's direction, never make it to Heaven because of it. Having loved myself quite regularly over the years, I can't help but feel sorry for them.

I take a deep breath, look down the aisle, at Jesus on the cross, my family, my friends, my future husband. I'm contemplating the fate of the ancient virgin, hoping at the very least that before the plunge, she had a chance to love herself first.

***
Tina lifts her eyes to the sky. The gods are quiet, waiting and watching along with the crowd. Tina winks, sidesteps this shove from behind.
THE COLD SHOULDER AND OTHER TREATMENTS

Elise is currently not speaking to her clit. Elise realizes that her passive aggressive use of the silent treatment is childish. This bothers her until she chooses not to worry about it. Instead, she crosses her legs very tightly thinking, "Take that, bitch," and smiles from her receptionist's desk.

***

Elise's friend Joan, who is not really her friend, is always reading *Cosmo*. She sits at the desk across from Elise. Once a month Joan interrogates her about the inadequacies of her past, present and future relationships with men. Elise's most recent endeavor was a fish-lipped man named Phil:

SWM, 38ish, "stocky," balding, manager-type who enjoys moonlit walks and candlelight dinners, romantic evenings on the beach and the occasional slap on the ass SEEKS SWF, young(er), slim, attractive, blonde (brunette if shiny), blue-eyed (will negotiate green), tall (but not taller than), employed (doesn't make more than), intelligent (but not smarter than) for fucking and possible friendship. Personality a plus.

There were three things Elise did not like about Phil: the way he picked his nose in public, his refusal to perform oral sex because of the smell, and his disinterest in bringing her to orgasm. The rest of his flaws she tolerated, finding them almost (but not quite) endearing. They dated for five and a half months before Phil flashed her the "it's not you, it's me" finger. Elise blames her clit but sometimes wonders what she could have done differently.

Last month, Elise was a masochistic enabler. This month, Joan likes to point out that according to *Cosmo*, Elise might be a lesbian.

***
Elise likes to lose herself in mirrors, her eyes, her nose, her mouth. She is fascinated by the reflections of reflections of reflections. Elise never knows what it is she sees, only what *Cosmo* tells her she is supposed to see. Her nose that is too long, but with the proper shading technique can be shadowed into submission. Her forehead that is too wide, but with the proper hair style can be hidden under a starchy wave. Her eyes that are too small, but with deftly applied eye-liner—the outside of the rim, not the inside—can intrigue any man with their defined mystery. And then her lips that are too thin, but with just the right color and a dab of gloss, can produce a pout that will have the men drooling—and Elise sighing for something more.

Once and only once, did Elise look at her clit in the mirror (a *Cosmo* suggestion). It was rather uneventful, uninspiring and quite disappointing, so she didn't do it again.

***

Elise likes men to carry heavy things for her. She's not sure how that fits into the whole feminist scheme of things. Elise acknowledges that she really should be self-sufficient, but she doesn't understand why her having ovaries and a uterus means she should carry heavy things when a) she doesn't want to and b) men will carry them for her. She's sure her clit has something to do with the conspiracy.

***

Elise remembers putting on nylons for Church (The time is BC—Before *Cosmo*):

She hates them, the way they scratch and ride her crotch, but Elise wants to look nice, and nice girls wear nylons. The thought of hot synthetic mesh slowly suffocating her clit upsets Elise (and her clit) but propriety and the Bible (Elise assumes, though she's not sure) require it.
Scrunching each leg of nylon into a ring, one after the other, Elise wonders if God would be offended if she sat naked on a pew. The words naked and pew make her laugh. The thought of rubbing her naked body over the smooth wood surface of the bench does not. It intrigues Elise.

Elise considers nakedness in church:

Elise would wash herself in the baptismal font, spread herself on the altar, press her body against the huge stained-glass apostles and roll around in the Communion wafers—the ones that feel and taste like Styrofoam, welding to the roof of a mouth because the thimble-full of wine (one finger for grape juice)—the blood of Christ—isn't enough to dislodge it. All of this would be done in biblical nakedness, like Eve before Adam, the apple, the curse, before everyone was busy trying to know everyone else.

Elise thinks of herself as Joan of Arc, but then decides Joan—both of Arc and of 51st and Maple—wouldn't dare be naked in Church. Then again, Elise wouldn't normally either. However, Elise concludes she would not be truly naked. Her clit would still be covered (as always) due to the discreet (and discerning?) nature of female genitalia. This being the case, the eyes of Baby Jesus would remain pure, the old men would not blush and Elise is quite sure the pastor would still bless her because he's Protestant. Elise finds that Protestants (as opposed to Catholics) tend to be more relaxed about these sorts of things—rolling around naked on top of the figurative body of Christ.

Elise hikes the nylons up over her hips and adjusts the crotch. She has a hard time believing Jesus died on the cross to save herself from her clit.
Elise smiles at all the men (Kevin, Rob, Sam, etc.) who pass by her receptionist's desk--she's been told it's company policy to do so (smile that is). They wink, wave, offer her pats on the ass and quickies in the Xerox room. Elise continues to smile, laughs, thanks them for the offer and silently curses her clit, the cause of the attention. Later, when their wives call the office, she suggests they read Cosmo, hoping they'll take the "Is He a Cheater?" quiz.

The wives assume Elise is a lesbian because her hair and her nails are rather short. Unaware that lesbians have access to Cosmo, they are somewhat surprised by her recommendation. However, since they already have lifetime subscriptions, they thank Elise for her thoughtful suggestion.

***

Elise is still not speaking to her clit. Her clit is still not speaking to her, or anyone for that matter. Resisting the temptation to confront her clit, Elise calls Joan to discuss a re-occurring dream:

"I'm standing in the middle of the street, like in a Western. From out of nowhere, a man saunters up--and I say saunters because he didn't walk, it was more of a John Wayne waddle. When he finally manages to Duke his way up to me I start to feel like Clint Eastwood with tits. He jerks his head in this slow, cowboy way and says,

"'Hey you, I called you a bitch. What are you gonna do about it, bitch?' I lower my lashes and grind the heel of my stiletto and say,

"'Bitch, huh?'

"So he says, 'Yeah, that's right.'

"Before I know it, I'm beating the shit out of him--elbowing him in the ribs, kneeing him in the balls. When he finally falls to the ground moaning and stuff, I place my shoe, heel
first, on his chest. I reach down and rip the tie from his neck, wrapping it around my head Rambo style. Then, with my red lipstick, I write BITCH across his forehead."

"Yeah, Elise, that's really weird. I gotta go."

Elise decides to have a chicken potpie for dinner. Between bites of tasty, flaky crust, Elise discusses with her cat, Fido, Joan's inability to fulfill a man. Elise speculates (according to rumors in the office) it is due to the intense frigidity of Joan's crotch, a common side-effect of *Cosmo*. Elise purposely leaves her clit out of the conversation.

***

Elise has just bought new moisturizer. *Cosmo* promises it will have her radiating, illuminating, gyrating, gravitating, deviating and manipulating in less than a week. Elise is surprised it is only for her face. She smoothes it on and waits for results.

***

Inspired by her dream, Elise decides to send the wives--Karen, Rita, Sharon (etc.)--anonymous letters:

Dear beloved wife of (fill in the blank with coordinating bastard),

Your husband is a pig. Thought you should know. Enclosed is a Xerox of his dick.

Sincerely,

Mary Magdalene

Elise reconsiders the closing. She's not sure she likes the reformed prostitute reference. She resents the implication that it is the prostitute who needs reforming and not the man who pays her. Elise decides on: Sincerely, A Concerned Clit.
She folds the letters and slips them into envelopes along with black and white copies of Phil's dick (a framed Christmas present). Elise assumes one Xeroxed dick must look like another and licks the glue.

***

Elise has successfully ignored her clit for a month and now wonders if maybe she was being too harsh, too unreasonable, expecting too much from something so small. She still has yet to radiate, illuminate, gyrate, gravitate, deviate or manipulate like *Cosmo* promised. Elise considers rubbing some moisturizer on her clit, thinking maybe she misread the label. She thinks about it for a moment, but then decides against it, not sure she really wants those kind of results.

Elise sighs and opens the small, blue metal door in front of her. Looking at the letters, Elise whispers, "Truce," and drops them in one at a time.
THE AFFLICTION AND THE CURE

Inside, she was beautiful, but it wasn't the inside that mattered. It was the outside that stopped men dead in their tracks, made them freeze with desire.

It was her hair, they said, a beautiful, thick, shiny head of hair. "Beautiful, just beautiful," the people murmured as she walked by, fingertips trembling for a touch. Men licked their lips, proposals of marriage on the tips of their tongues. She would have none of them.

The whispers said it would take a god. And that's what it took.

Swept away, it was the sea that seduced her. Submerged in an ocean of flowers, he came crashing into her, thunderous. Her hair rippled and waved, wrapped itself around them. From this moment on, she swore she would have none other.

Lifted up by feathered wings, he left her smiling and stretching on a bed of green. In her hair was the scent of the sea. She buried her nose in handfuls of silky strands, breathing deeply the salty smell. Thunder rumbled in her ears.

In the field, furious, his daughter had seen it all.

It started out as whispers of disbelief. Then the whispers turned ugly, flicking their forked tongues from ear to ear until all she heard was hissing. Trapped in the pit, her fingers worked a thousand coils around her head, letting them slither from her shoulders, down her back, across her neck, between her breasts, until finally the hissing was hers.
Inside, she was beautiful, but it wasn't the inside that mattered. It was the outside that stopped men stonecold in their tracks. Brave men licked their lips, prayers to the gods on the tips of their tongues. One look at her and she would have them all.

They claim a man was the end of her. Others know better.
Rhonda keeps her uterus in a ziploc bag—the kind where blue and yellow make green for a seal she can trust. She likes to lift up the corners of the bottom of the bag and shake it up and down, sloshing her uterus around, back and forth, letting it slide against the slick plastic sides. "Not too bad," she thinks to herself and throws the baggie on the couch.

It hadn't always been there, her uterus, in a ziploc bag. It had always been there of course, Rhonda wasn't Rhonda without her uterus, but it hadn't always been emancipated. Freedom, for both Rhonda and her uterus, seemed only a dream, a dream where Rhonda had balls and flowing blonde hair and a Ph.D. in Physics. "Ah, the physics of it all," Rhonda sighs, not quite sure what that exactly means.

***

It was a Saturday, when she (Rhonda) realized that her uterus (her uterus) was her (Uterus = Rhonda). Up until this point, Rhonda knew about her uterus, about its existence in the strange and vast universe of her internal workings. She always pictured it floating around somewhere in the middle, banging into things, a free spirit of sorts, always going with the flow.

Since Rhonda had never needed her uterus to solve algebraic equations or pick out ripe mangoes at the supermarket, it was quite easy for Rhonda to think of her uterus as something other than herself, something outside herself, being that it didn't really serve any internal purpose for Rhonda, save the occasional mood swing. Her uterus was just there, it existed—relatively useless, but tolerable all the same—a lazy roommate of sorts. Needless to say, Rhonda rarely gave her uterus a second thought.
It started out as a twinge, really more of a pang, nothing out of what Rhonda thought to be the ovulatory ordinary. In the supermarket checkout, two mangoes in hand, her brain trying to make change, Rhonda felt another pang, more of a tweak. A peek at her pocket calendar and Rhonda knew her uterus was trying to make contact.

Skeptical at first, as all good thinkers are, since Rhonda had never seen her uterus, only been told at the tender age of five that she did indeed have one and that's where babies grew (her five-year-old mind then wondered if maybe trees, cheese and brothers could grow there too), she wasn't willing, with this first questionable connection, to accept with open arms her uterus as herself—not quite yet.

If she did have a uterus, and Rhonda had to believe that the twinge, pang, tweak in the supermarket was more than coincidence—her uterus was rarely that disruptive in public, or anywhere for that matter—it must be true: Her uterus was trying to communicate. The question now was why?

Rhonda had heard rumors, rumors that implied a uterus was more than a uterus, that a uterus was something more, something much, much more; but, Rhonda had never believed them. Nothing in Rhonda’s experience had proven that her uterus was capable of being more than a uterus, nor had her uterus given any inclination or desire (as far as Rhonda could tell) to be more than just a uterus. The physics of it all—the tweak, the pang in the supermarket—left Rhonda wondering.

At home, seated at the kitchen table with paper and pencil, Rhonda had worked out the mathematics:
If Rhonda (a woman) and her uterus (a female organ) were the same thing, simply because one goes with the other, a package deal of sorts (the essence of the rumor) then Rhonda (by deduction) cannot be Rhonda (a woman) without her uterus (a female organ). [Rhonda assumes her uterus is still a uterus, with or without her, given the essential qualities of a uterus—a uterus, is a uterus, no matter where or with whom it resides.] The answer had to be:

Rhonda = Uterus

Rhonda (who has never been good at math), scratched her head, looked at the paper, realized something didn’t quite make sense, but wasn’t sure what exactly.

Given the rumor, the supermarket, and the acquiescence that math never lies, Rhonda assumed that she had arrived at what seemed to be a logical conclusion. Since no one told her otherwise, she went around feeling very enlightened, though slightly suppressed. For Rhonda to consider herself complete, she must also consider herself a uterus, and that would take some getting used to.

***

It was a shock, the realization, the understanding that her uterus, yes, her uterus was her. They were interchangeable, one and the same, one was the other, Rhonda = Uterus, etc. No more comfortable separation, they had never been separate. Rhonda's mind dove, doggy-paddled, breaststroked, butterflied around her uterus until she was exhausted, pruny. Rhonda shook her head. All this time she had neglected what everyone already understood to be who she was, the essence of her being—the truth of a rumor.

***
After a few years of, "I am my uterus, my uterus is me," Rhonda began to wonder if maybe that wasn't a little too conveniently definitive. She thought about this, about her being her uterus, and re-evaluated the formula. According to the formula, Rhonda could never be more than her uterus and her uterus could never be more than her. But time had proven that this wasn't the case. Rhonda (having arms and legs, the ability to buy mangoes) was undoubtedly more than her uterus and her uterus (a muscular organ with the desire to travel to faraway places) was certainly more than her.

Inextricably bound to one another, Rhonda began to think of her uterus like a man—she couldn't live with it and she couldn't (or so she believed) live without it. This was something her mother's friends were always saying. Rhonda didn't actually know from first hand experience, what to do with or without a man. She had little patience or inclination to find out, so she took their word for it, that that's what one did with a man--live somewhere near it but not next to it.

Needing to break free from the increasingly illogical equation, Rhonda investigated means of liberating herself from her uterus and her uterus from herself.

***

It was a dark and stormy night when Rhonda bravely decided to disentangle herself from her uterus and her uterus from her. Being rather attached to her uterus, Rhonda didn't want to do completely away with it (you just don't throw a perfectly good uterus away, no matter how tired of it you are); she just needed a little space. But first, she needed to find a space for her uterus.

The stickiness, if you will, came in finding the proper receptacle. It ended up being a process of elimination. A shoe was not secure enough, a box--well that would get soggy, a
drawer was too dark, a jar too stuffy, a cooler too awkward etc., etc. Pacing around the apartment, Rhonda, in need of a snack, noticed the ziploc-clad chicken breasts in her fridge. She picked one up, weighing it in her hand, appreciating the glove-like fit of the baggie, its transparency, its versatility. They had to be about the same size, a chicken breast and a uterus. Rhonda didn't recall ever hearing how big a uterus, hers in particular, was in relation to anything, much less a chicken breast, so she thought that this must be fairly close. Also having never touched her uterus (besides the random poke in what she thought to be its general direction), Rhonda assumed they were much the same consistency. There could be no other choice. The decision was made.

***

Rhonda let out a sigh of relief tinged with sadness the moment she held her uterus, warm through the plastic, in her hands. It wasn't what she expected, though she wasn't sure what she had expected in the first place. Her uterus was kind of like the chicken breast, as much like a chicken breast as a uterus can be, but still uniquely a uterus, her uterus, BUT--and this was an important "but"--it was no longer herself. Her uterus was a uterus and Rhonda was Rhonda, and Rhonda was happy.

***

At first, Rhonda wasn't sure how comfortable she was with the idea of her uterus wrapped in plastic; but the practicality of the situation eventually won her over. If she wanted, she could leave her uterus at home (for those days she just wanted to be by herself), or she could take it with her wherever she went--that was the beauty of the bag. Just slip it into her purse, backpack, sweatshirt pocket and her uterus was on the go, sporty and fun. For those special occasions, the bag was sleek and sophisticated; black pumps, red lips and a
stylish uterus—the height of glamour. Looking in the mirror, Rhonda never knew her uterus could be so complex, so versatile, so much more than just a uterus.

***

Now that she wasn't so very attached to her uterus (but attached just enough), the geometric symmetry of their relationship being broken or solved as the case may be, Rhonda enjoyed taking her uterus places: the opera, the mall, the grocery store. She particularly liked riding the subway with it.

"Oh, excuse me, would you mind holding my uterus for me?" Rhonda asks the attractive, Italian-looking man next to her.

"My, you're kinda feisty," wink, wink, sexy white-teeth smile. "Your uterus? Of course," look of surprise, followed by confusion, ending in disgust in the direction of his lap. Two fingers holding the green seal, "What the fuck? What the hell is this?"

"A uterus. What did you think it was?"

The man on the subway was like all the other men on the subway, in the grocery store, at the opera, He (the man) never quite got it—the uterus, the bag, the uterus in the bag in his lap—it was always at its best bumpy, but rarely a successful transition to full understanding.

Rhonda wasn't sure what there was to "get," why everyone thought it was so absurd that she and her uterus should be separate, not the same, not each other. It seemed rather sensible to her. It did eventually occur to her that this liberal concept might not be the problem, rather more the unexpected confrontation with a girl and her uterus at the opera, the supermarket, the seat next to you. Rhonda figured it was probably the shock of a roaming
uterus, since uteri are rarely seen in public. But, what Rhonda couldn’t understand, the shock aside, was what was so absurd about an independent uterus?

The Italian man with the sexy white-teeth smile flung her uterus back at her along with some not so sexy last words and left his seat. Rhonda, not the least bit surprised (men were always flinging her uterus back in her face), placed it next to her in the slowly filling impression of his ass. Humming a little ditty to herself, Rhonda thought, because that’s what she sometimes did.

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Rhonda thought about a lot of things, mostly though about how she would feel if she were to somehow lose her uterus. Rhonda enjoyed the separation, now that she and her uterus were no longer interchangeable, were their own equations, but there was a certain danger to their situation. A uterus isn’t used to being out in the open, out on its own, out at all, really, and Rhonda wasn’t used to having her uterus out in the open, out on its own, out at all, really.

Before, her uterus had always been with her, inevitably there, an intangible understanding in the back of her mind, so going places together was rather convenient—if one got lost, so did the other. Even in the middle of the bad part of town, the part she tried to avoid, Rhonda always had her uterus and that was a certain, useless sort of comfort, sharing the same uneasiness. But now, it was a comfort she could no longer depend on.

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Rhonda likes to torture herself with "lost uterus" scenarios: in a roller coaster, the green seal clasped in her sweaty hand, the drop, the screams, THE SCREAM—her uterus flies through the air, turning end over end over end, arcing, and then falling, falling, falling where it lands in the hands of some grubby little boy with cotton candy stuck on his face, his
fingers, his fat belly, who promptly gobbles it up and smiles a fat smile at her. The TV talk show, *When good uteri go bad*. Rhonda up front, tissue in hand, "All I wanted was for my uterus to be happy," sniffle, sniffle, sob.

"Rhonda, let's bring out your uterus." Boos and hisses, Rhonda's uterus cops an attitude, has pierced its bag in four different places and is dating Rick, a forty-year-old.

Scenarios aside, Rhonda's not sure what she would do if her uterus was indeed missing. She'd probably put up flyers: Have you seen this uterus?, plead on the local news for her uterus' safe return, put pictures of her uterus on the backs of milk cartons, offer rewards and promises about how she'll treat her uterus better, and God, please God, give me back my uterus and other cries of desperation. Chances are, though, she'd never see it again--once a uterus is gone, it usually stays gone for good. Rhonda's heard that mistreated uteri tend to roam the earth in disgruntled packs.

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Wanting to know her uterus better, Rhonda consults a reliable source. According to the dictionary: Uterus \\yu-te(upside down)-re(upside down again)\\n, *pl* uteri \\yu-te(upside down)-ri(line on top)\\ also uteruses: the muscular organ of a female mammal in which the young develop before birth. Slime covered helpless things--"the young"-- growing, developing, stretching, banging, kicking, bursting forth. Glad her uterus can't read, isn't able to know its own limitations, Rhonda picks up her uterus from the couch, holds it close and shudders.

All indications lead to the same, dismal conclusion: it's inevitable. Holding the weight, the feel of her uterus in her hands, Rhonda decides that this will not be the case, that there will be more for her uterus than a life of servitude.
Rhonda walks to the open window, thinks of all the wonderful places her uterus has yet to see—Greece, Italy, the Congo. Looking at her uterus one last time, secure in its airtight, protective coat, she knows she is doing the right thing.

With a kiss and a wish for safe travel, Rhonda finally sets herself free.
All she wanted was a little respect. It's all any woman really wants. If only she had had someone, anyone to talk to, but it was so long ago, there was no one but herself. So she left.

She didn't have much, she didn't have anything. She left him and went far, far away, where even he couldn't find her. Not that he would have tried, it never occurred to him to look. Something like this, this leaving, it just wasn't done. But she did it, she left him.

On her own, she was much, much happier. The sky was bluer, the birds sang sweeter and the ground was softer beneath her feet. Out in the air, the breeze blew gently against her skin. She walked in the flowers beneath the trees, loving herself and her new life. Then the angels came.

It took three of them, three angels to warn her, as if one would not be sufficient. She stared at the ground as they each took their turn, "You must go back, you must. It's the way things should be, are meant to be. Go back." And off they flew on righteous wings toward the sun. She sighed.

The days passed by in clouds of butterflies and fields of daisies before the angels came back. Grim, they wrung their hands, they tore their hair. On their knees they begged her to return, "If you don't, if you don't, such horrible things. . ." and they wept at her feet.

"I cannot," she said softly and kissed them good-bye.

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They say she eats little children, the children of Eve, by the handful, sucking them down like goldfish. Stolen from small, warm beds late at night, wiggling and squirming, she holds them with two fingers by the toe.

In the dark, her mouth open wide, the moon flashes bright off the white of her fangs. So many children, so little time, she swallows them whole. At the first sign of sun, crawling back into the shadows, she wipes a tear from her eye and quickly licks her fingers.
Possessed

Low and guttural, in the back of my throat, the lesbian in me is growling. She doesn’t like this man with the slick hair and the shiny, white smile, doesn’t like the way he’s rubbing my thigh with an over-confident hand. I wink at him, take a swig of beer, swallow hard and wash her back down.

In the dimly lit room, I twitter tee-hees, ha-has into the smoky haze floating above his jokes. I even laugh at the one about women and how many it takes to screw in a light bulb. He’s laughing, loud and long, slaps his thigh, gives me a wink. I twirl my hair, bat my stiff eyelashes, throw back my head to expose the slim, pulsing line of my throat. Without words, I am ladylike, offer him the first bite.

Boiling beneath the blush of my skin, the lesbian rages, gnashes her teeth. I raise three fingers, cover my mouth and burp, pretend she’s a gassy upset.

The man smiles, runs a finger over my throat. With quick flicks of his tongue against my earlobe, he tells me what he wants, something to do with a light bulb back at my place. I giggle on cue, grab his crotch under the table.

Tired of this old game, the lesbian roars, kicks me hard in the ribs—pain from the inside out. I vomit on the flickering candle in the center of the small table.

I can feel her there, warm and snug within my ribs, her hot cheek pressed hard against my heart, waiting. When I’m asleep, she whispers to me, mouths love me, soft and wet against my lips. Her fingers are gentle, insistent against my spine, pulling up and out, the stretch of alignment—she is making me tall and strong, making me right for her world. On
the swings—her legs pumping hard and fast inside mine—I can feel her blink, feel her watching from behind my eyes. She whispers into the wind rushing past my ear, *You will be our myrmidon*. On the downward swing, I tell her I would rather be Miss America.

After the beer and vomit, we’re in my bed and she’s watching him. She watches the way his eyes follow my curves, dip into my hollow places. His mouth moves, shaping and re-shaping the all-too-familiar words. The drop of the jaw, tongue against teeth, his lips come together, pucker and part—the sour-sweet movement of body to language—“I love you,” he says.

The lesbian snorts. I feel her move, feel her hand reach down, touch the soft, inner part of my thigh. Her finger follows the slow curve of his words: *I love you, I love you.*

When the words stop, his lips continue fast and feverish on my neck, behind my ears, the insides of my elbows—lips making clear his meaning. Language back to body—“I want this.”

In the midst of translation, I feel the clench, gasp for breath. Her fingers are wrapped tight around my throat. In my ear, she’s quiet, matter-of-fact; *You are more than this.*

“I’m not your warrior,” I hiss.

“That’s right,” he moans, “you’re my Miss America.”

Lately at night when I can’t sleep, it’s because she’s having long conversations with women. She invites them in, offers them tea, a place to rest inside my mind. They enter with sad, little smiles, pat my cheek, and settle into the empty spaces, unpack their bags—setting up pictures, shaking out quilts. *Give it time,* they reassure her, one another, me. They
continue to arrange their pillows, sip their tea, smile at me with squinted eyes from the sights of their crossbows.

On the street, as I pass by, he whistles at me, lets me know he likes what he sees. I feel like Miss America, so I start the Vaseline smile when the lesbian lets out a high-pitched war cry.

In mid-sway, I’m turning around, she pulls my lips back in a snarl. When she opens my mouth, they come pouring out—the army of women inside me. In unison, the crossbows are loaded, aimed at the spot right between his eyes.

I’m speaking in tongues, screaming at the man in the simple language of women who love themselves. I ask for his last request.

He doesn’t understand me, calls me a crazy bitch. I don’t understand myself, agree with him and pull the trigger.
THE STORY OF EVE

Eve walks around naked, she does it because she likes it. She likes the feel of *everything* against her— even the quick pinch of the cracked vinyl chairs against the soft squishiness of her ass. "It's airing out," her body, at least that's the way she thinks of it, letting the dusty, musty locked up smell out, letting the sunshine in, "Yeah, yeah," this walking around naked.

Before, "All that," she laughs and nods her head, "Yes, before all that," being naked was just being naked, but now, "It's being *naked.*" There's something delicious, something juicy about being naked, like strawberry juice down a chin. Eve can't get enough and licks her lips. She sits down on the chair, ready for the pinch.

"Before *all that,* there wasn't much, you know," Eve picks at her toes, pushing the cuticles back, rubbing between the stunted fingers of her feet, "Wasn't much at all," and rubs her nose, sniffs, "This is much, *much,* better," legs stretched out in front, suction sound against the seat. Eve inspect her knees, the little bumps, scabby scratches, "Oh yes, much better." Straddling the chair, "*Much* better."

Flat, white refrigerator door in front of her, Eve opens it— blast of cold, muscles tense, nipples pucker, "Ah, exhilaration." Reaching in, "Red, Green, Yellow," it doesn't matter. Cool, smooth, waxy ball, Eve smiles and sinks her canines in, juice dribbling down her chin, sweet flesh on her tongue. Chew, chew, chew some more. Damn, "Worth every bite."

The TV's on, loud. "You're mine, I want you, you're mine," she hears in between bites. Adam on the couch hates her, doesn't hate her, wishes Eve would wear knee-highs and a Catholic schoolgirl uniform.
He hears the crisp crack, "Can I have some?"

Now he always wants some--it, her, whatever she has, he wants it all. In the background, "You're mine," loud and clear. Taking a final bite, a final tear into the white body, red is in the air, falls, lands hard on Adam's balls.

***

Clack, clack, clackety clack, the one wheel, always the one wheel, is wobbling back and forth while the others stay steady, stay true. Eve pushes the cart, toes the line, Adam reluctantly by her side grumbles, grabs her ass. People stop and stare, point and snicker, jars of peanut butter, pickles, whiny children in their hands--someone else's flesh is always a scandal.

Eve is smiling, pinching fat baby cheeks in the cart next to her when she reaches for the plastic bags. Smack--plastic parachute hits the air, bare feet slap the linoleum. She shakes it out, shakes it, "All out," body vibrating, bag ballooning. Adam, by the bananas, farts, wishes Eve would wear tight leather pants and a studded bra.

Bending, leaning, spreading-- for the fun of it, Eve picks out Yellow, Green, Red, it doesn't matter, she likes them all. Feeling the cool mist fall on naked skin, thinking of mountains and jungles in the morning, Eve rolls each color, solid in her hand, against her face, over her breasts, her stomach, down her thighs, "Nothing like before," she sighs. Eyes close, lips smile, nearby parents cover wide little eyes.

By the cart, scratching his ass, Adam needs to pee and tells Eve to, "Hurry the hell up," shoots her a look that says loud and clear, "You're mine."

Thrown from the hip, hit square in the crotch, Adam doubles over.

***
Grass between her toes, her fingers, Eve listens to the birds, the sound of shoes and the whir of wheels on pavement, barking dogs. Sounds of disapproval drip drop on Eve from the sideways shift of eyes. On her back, arms and legs spread wide, "Airing out sweaty places," Eve feels the tickle, the lick of green, "Lovely," on the backs of her knees.

The sun, through the trees, is warm on all the right places. Arching, stretching, curving, "So much better, better than before," sprinkles of grass on her belly, Eve is green, green all over and she can't get enough.

Beside Eve's tanning, naked breasts, Adam kills ants and other bugs with a stick, wishes she'd wear whipped cream and sprinkles. Between scratches, sniffs and snorts, Adam grinds ant after ant into the ground, mumbling to himself.

Eve sits up, grass slipping over the curve of her sides, shivers, peers at Adam. She sighs, "Part of the deal," shakes her head, tries to smile, waits for the pinch. Hands on her breasts say, "I want you, you're mine," and feeling like an ant, Eve looks up at the sky, thinking, "Before, before, before."

***

Slow and sure, fingers touching, checking moisture, Eve waters her plants. Sun shines in on silky green leaves, on slim green stems spread on the window sill. Eve slides a finger along the curve, across the smooth, flat surface, "Amazing," she whispers, aching like a kiss, "Amazing."

A confident, "I know," swells, slaps her from the couch where Adam, wishing Eve would wear crotchless panties, thinks the ache is for him.
Toes curl first, body follows, tightens, twists, "Not you, not you, not you," Eve screams. Arm stretches out, fingers tense, reach for the bowl of Red, Yellow, Green on the kitchen table-- "Not you."