The meaning of velvet

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The meaning of velvet

by

Jennifer Jean Wright

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 Pett

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2000

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that's the girl that he takes around town.  
she appears composed,  
so she is I suppose,  
who can really tell?  
she shows no emotion at all  
stares into space like a dead china doll.

--Elliot Smith, *waltz #2*

The ashtray says  
you were up all night  
when you went to bed  
with your darkest mind  
your pillow wept  
and covered your eyes  
you finally slept  
while the sun caught fire
You've changed.

--Wilco, *a shot in the arm*

two headed boy all floating in glass  
the sun now it's blacker then black  
I can hear as you tap on your jar  
I am listening to hear where you are...  
two headed boy they're no reason to grieve  
the world that you need is wrapped in gold silver sleeves  
left behind Christmas trees in the snow  
and i will take you and leave you alone....

---Neutral Milk Hotel, *two-headed boy*
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ACT ONE/ THEY MEET

Susie met Bobbie at The Soda Shop. The year was 1993 and sometime before he sauntered up the vinyl padded booth where Susie and Claire sat discussing the difference between the colors plum and mauve, they'd both sat in a crowded movie theater and watched the comeback of John Travolta's career.

Actually, they didn't meet at the soda shop. They'd bumped into each other in line at the theater's concession stand. It was Bobbie, really. He couldn't decide on the popcorn or the Sno Caps and looking straight ahead into the warm glow of the popcorn display, had nudged Susie with his elbow. It was the look Susie and Claire shot him that told him he'd mistaken her for someone else.

In the end, Bobbie ordered Sno caps. Susie and Claire Dots. The clerk confused them. Susie was handed his Sno Caps, Bobbie her Dots. No correction was made.

It was at The Soda Shop, she with Claire and he with gummy yellow residue stuck between his two front teeth, that Bobbie bit his tongue mumbling his opening line.

"Vanilla Soda, ever try a--fuck." Bobbie stuck out his tongue. Pinched it between his thumb and forefinger, running his pinky over the already healing wound. Swallowed blood. The salty liquid enough to unclog a green, half chewed Dot lodged in the back of his throat. That done, he ordered a vanilla soda.

The jerk couldn't find or didn't want to find the vanilla.
“Chocolate OK?” he said to Bobbie seated at the counter flicking his tongue around in his mouth. When he shifted it to the left and back, for instance, catching its tip on the worn edge of his upper wisdom tooth, nothing. Slid it down to the lower right incisor and pain shot down the length of the muscle. He enjoyed this. It was like pulling scabs off knees. Made things seem more real, more rooted. In between the tongue exercises, he reviewed his opening line.

“Vanilla, ever try a vanilla soda? Something about a vanilla soda. Ever try one?”

“You look familiar,” was what came out of his bruised tongue when he collected himself enough to walk over to the booth where Claire and Susie sat, conversation in a lull.

“Very familiar,” he repeated when Susie slid over giving him and his chocolate soda more room.

Claire smiled.

“You too,” Susie said.

They hadn't actually met at The Soda Shop or the concession stand. Weeks before, both had attended the Disco: America’s Candy Apple Wasteland lecture. Susie had been seated down front or center or off to the side, in a corner. Bobbie sat somewhere in the same row watching her lift her wire-framed glasses on then off, then onto her face; as if the very location of them on the tip of her nose granted her some, new insight. Midway through the lecture, he’d gotten up to use the restroom and caught his shoe around the strap of her purse. He dragged it clear out of the lecture hall into the lobby. He hadn't wanted to disturb the
speaker, whose name he no longer recalled, but who he was sure would have
pointed him out as the reason disco was dead had he lifted the leg where the
handbag was entwined, lost his balance and tumbled down the aisle.

In the lobby, Bobbie had opened the purse, removed Susie’s cash, then
stuffed the brown leather bag into nearest trash receptacle.

Susie, in the restroom herself at the time, had watched Bobbie open his
calfskin wallet, slip in her crisp twenty-dollar bill, then walk away. She never
bothered retrieving her purse.

“Due for a replacement anyway,” Claire had reminded her when she returned
to her seat.

Back at The Soda Shop, the soda jerk skipped up to the booth where Susie
and Claire and now Bobbie sat.

“Chocolate OK? “ the soda jerk said looking at Susie and Claire and then at
himself in the mirrored wall behind them.

The soda jerk was not really a soda jerk. He was brighter, more handsome,
with a clean soft complexion. He was hired not so much to jerk the sodas, but to
give the appearance of doing so. A model who’d been practicing his James Dean,
and who, at his agent’s request, had taken the job in order to as his agent had said,
“Relive the experience from a different perspective.”

“The chocolate’s quite good,” Bobbie said slipping his tongue over his incisor.

Quite good? What an ass Bobbie.

James Dean held the soda jerk’s hand on the walk back to the kitchen.
Susie twirled the ends of her blonde hair, waiting for conversation, for chocolate, for Bobbie to find James Dean's face in the mirror.

"Amazing isn't it," Bobbie said. "I mean you looking so familiar."

The juke box played Johnny Cash. No ring of fire was spotted in the tri-state area.

Claire smiled.

"Yes, really quite amazing," Bobbie said stretching his left arm up, then bringing to rest on the sticky vinyl behind Susie's blonde pony-tail.

"Very familiar," he said or she said cutting off each other's words.

"Look," he said.

"Yes. I see," she said.

"Very familiar," they said

"You owe me—" they said, but neither could think of anything that was important enough to want to owe anyone.

Claire smiled. Kept on smiling.

"Have you?" they said.

"Of course," they said.

Susie twirled her straw around her soda glass, watching the ice-cubes melt.

Bobbie flexed. James Dean smoked a cigarette on his biceps.

'Really, familiar?' Susie said flashing her chocolate tinged teeth. 'I have a familiar face. People are always mistaking me for someone else; it's a gift, really.'

Claire smiled.

"Yes," Bobbie said. "A gift."
Truth is they didn’t really meet at The Soda Shop, the theater, or a lecture. It was a baseball game, no a casino, no a Laundromat. The day was Sunday.

Susie come straight from church where she’d hail maryed then motherogoded then spilled wine down the front of her flowered sundress. Bobbie slept late. Got up planning to watch football, then realized it was June.

It was noon, or around the lunch hour anyway, when they both pulled into the Laundromat’s parking lot. She drove a Toyota. He, a Ford.

Susie, in her stained dress, was about to set down her laundry basket so she could open the glass framed doors when Bobbie, dressed to a T in faded jeans and a crisp white shirt, reached out from behind her and opened the door.

“Come here often,” was the line he’d been practicing at the time. He said, “Here let me,” kicking himself by clenching his jaw hard enough for teeth to grind.

“Thank you, “ she said.

Claire smiled.

Susie pulled a pair of wrinkled sweatpants and a T-shirt from her basket. Made her way into the restroom and washed out her dress. Changed.

When she returned, Bobbie was gone. Forgot his detergent at home. James Dean snickered from his bedroom wall.

“It’s funny,” Susie said gnawing the tip of her straw. “Everything seems familiar. I don’t remember anything ever being unfamiliar.”

“What do you mean?” Bobbie said, taking a swig of his chocolate soda, relishing in the burning sensation lapping his tongue.
“Well, take us. We’re familiar. We’ve known each other for years even though we just met. I’ve seen you everywhere. I might have even slept with you before, you seem so familiar.”

“Wait a minute,” Bobbie said. “Are you the girl last weekend, over at the bowling lanes? Pink stripes in your shoes?”

“Yes,” Susie said. “I own my own bowling shoes, and yes they have pink stripes, mauve actually, but you’re missing the point.”

“But it was you?” Bobbie said. “You were there, right?”

“I could have or could have not been there and you’d have seen me anyway.”

“So you were there?” Bobbie said.

Claire found her smile in the mirror. Somehow, looking at Bobbie, she felt like sneering. She would have none of that.

The soda jerk skipped down the aisle, tipping his hat to each of the patrons. Wrote James Dean never wears a hat on his order pad.

“Bobbie, Billy, John, Jake, whatever your name is?” Susie said.

“James, my name is— Or I don’t know. What is my name?”

“I don’t know,” Susie said. “I don’t know you.”

“You’d like to though,” Bobbie said withdrawing his arm from around Susie and placing it alongside his other one sprawled out on the table’s Formica top. “I mean we could get to know each other. Leave The Soda Shop right now and go for a walk or we could—”

“No. We can’t,” Susie said. “Can’t ever leave The Soda Shop, the lecture halls, any of it. We’re stuck here. Unless. No, better not to think of that.
"What?" Bobbie said, raising his eyebrows.

"If we," she whispered. "Kill Claire. If we kill Claire, maybe we could get out. But I'm no killer. Besides, I like Claire. She keeps me in line, in pantyhose, in bubble-gum flavored lipstick and pink striped bowling shoes. NO. We need Claire like we do chocolate."

"Did James Dean ever commit murder?" Bobbie said.

"Why even if he didn't, I bet he had it in him. I bet he could slide a switchblade right into an angora sweater and not even flinch."

"Do you really think so?" Bobbie said.

"Oh, yes," Susie said. "You can see it in his eyes. Steel blue, cold eyes. Nothing like yours. Soft and gummy looking, melting eyes."

"But I could, can have eyes like his. I mean if I tried. Really tried."

"No. The soda jerk, he could kill. It's in the way he moves," Susie said looking at the soda jerk somersaulting from table to table.

"Do you think he'd do it, if we ask him?"

"No. He has a thing for Claire. Wrote his phone number on her palm already," Susie said slipping her own hands underneath the table, out of sight.

"Face it," she said. "Things could've turned out differently, if these were vanilla sodas we were drinking."
NEVER BE A LAWYER

"I'm involved. Maybe that's it," I say to my bathroom mirror, toothbrush in mouth, Colgate dripping down my chin. People do strange things when they think sleeping with the same person, sharing cereal with the same person Sunday mornings begins to mean more than sex and soggy Cheerios. Take Stephanie. She had two month fling with a chef a few years back and became convinced all food, except Hershey's Chocolate Bars, contained a slow poison like asbestos and years later, alone and old on her deathbed counting the ceiling tiles, she'd realize. Somewhere around two-hundred, it'd hit her. The chicken divan at Café Lombards. She'd lick her lips, tasting the forty year old cream sauce and die, her tongue protruding from her mouth like some road-kill.

These are things you think when you're involved. You think the post-offices, governments, television commercials and magazine ads are all out to ruin your happiness. Somewhere hovering in the radio waves, microwaves and ultraviolet rays; somewhere in your chicken is a conspiracy against you and your breakfast pal.

Things like this, they're never planned. You don't wake up one morning and suddenly decide you've got too much extra space in your bed. It's only after too many nights with Punnett squares, with scientific hypotheses on the current state of Tupperware and its effects on human genetics; after all those mathematical expressions giving way to astronomical figures, you want the black hole sewn up. You ache for a different expression.
“Could be why I’m dreaming of monasteries?” I say into the eye of the sink’s drain, sick of the way my mirror shows off the spidery red veins in my eyes, like a DNA helix snapped in half and searching for the point of fracture. “Maybe we should switch to pancakes?” Maybe I should stop talking to my bathroom drain.

“It’s the same dream,” I tell my hairdryer, head flipped over trying to create the illusion of full, bouncy waves. “A monastery plucked straight from the eighteenth century into my subconscious. Instead of ivy creeping up the lattice-work, it’s lavender. Instead of the picturesque garden of sugar snap peas and tomatoes, I dream a field of weeds. The tomatoes squashed and rotting, the peas overshadowed by Lincoln Continentals, Cadillac El Dorados and Monte Carlos. Huge, rusted-out cars receiving oil changes from monks. Somehow, I know the oil is a new synthetic brand promising to make the engines run smoother, like new. I watch from a window above, the monks emerge from the underbelly of cars, Travis’s arms around me.”

“His name is Travis, the guy sharing my box of Cheerios.” My hairdryer doesn’t know this. Travis never blow-dries. His hair is too short for illusions. I try to explain this to the Conair, but it doesn’t want to listen.

“What’s in it for me?” it taunts.

I turn it off and toss it on the toilet seat. I give my already limping hair a few fluffs, grab my gray wool coat and head out to The Slippery Gin where, given the job market for pop-culture geneticists, I’ve just been promoted to head waitress.

Travis does an acoustic set there on Wednesday nights. He comes in after the suits who work over at the courthouse move on to Cafe Lombards or Beige. I’m
usually too slammed to notice him until he's up on the plywood box Pedro helps him pull out from the loading dock.

Tonight, for some reason, it's slow. So I inch my way behind an artificial palm tree and watch him prepare for the night. I listen to the snap, release of metal latches and watch Travis lift his twelve-string from its velvety lined case. Listen to the shuffle, clunk of his steel tips hitting the tiles and the rattle hiss of hollow metal when, as he removes the microphone stand from behind the tarnished brass umbrella stand with haste, the metals connect.

Travis is dressed, like usual, in faded jeans and a dark, wool sweater. Back and forth, plugging in the microphone cord, relocating a bar stool onto the make-shift stage. Testing, Testing. Routine movements, things he's done a hundred times. I watch him lift a small, round table then waddle back towards the plywood box where he places the two-top gently, so the metal legs don't clink, next to the bar stool.

"He moves," I whisper into a plastic tropical leaf. "Like an antelope."

"More like a gazelle," the leaf retorts. I don't argue.

Travis sings protest songs. He sings roads and women and wine. When he gets to the one Dylan song with a brass bed, he flicks a wink over to the corner table where I stand, fingers in belt-loops, trying to convince a couple with perfect posture that the mold on the blue cheese is natural, part of the aging process. The woman, one of those pocket organizer types with full pale lips and a French manicure, nudges her salad to the edge of the table and says she thinks she'll try the soup instead. It's at this moment I realize I'll never be a lawyer. Not that I ever imagined myself in a courtroom under piles of research: case numbers, historical documents,
evidence. It’s only now I know. I realize I lack the skills needed for argument, the
rhetorical devices needed to persuade. It’s only now I accept that waitresses and
prostitutes are removed only by the service they perform and the creation of
genetics occurred because, for a few centuries, there was too much food on
someone’s plate. Somewhere, sometime after the survival gene mutated and
evolved into greed, Tupperware and its patented burp lid arrived on the scene.

I’m sure the couple has plenty. They don’t even drink wine. Round two of an
imported micro-brew listed at four dollars for twelve ounces. If they’d look at the
small print, down below the description of the beer, (an authentic amber ale with
raspberry sparkles of taste) they’d notice it was made somewhere off the coast of
Alaska, and the bite is not hops but ground salmon scales swimming around for
texture, for flavor.

I toss a smile Travis, remove the offensive salad and glare at the toothpaste
speck on my left black boot as I walk, chin in the arugula, back towards the kitchen.

“Two more raspberry brews,” I shout to Gary, the bartender. They’re words
I’ve said too often, let fling carelessly out of my mouth. I’ve lost all taste for them,
the feeling of the phrase puckered on my tongue. Gary nods.

In the kitchen, Pedro stands by the grill, sweat latched like mountain climbers
into the lines on his face.

“Need a cup of the corn chowder.” He turns, gives me a smirk and the
climbers lose their grip, tumble into the abyss of his food-splotched shirt. He ladles
out a small ceramic bowl and I notice, when he hands me the dish, his nails are
chewed down and ragged. I don’t bother asking if his wife and daughters got things straightened out with their green cards.

“Gracias mi amigo, mi amor,” I say hoping, when I blow him a kiss, for a laugh, wanting to hear the deep bellied rumble bubble up out of his throat, if only for a moment. Pedro only shakes his head, rolls his eyes and gives the pot of chowder a good stir.

“Here you go,” I say to pale lips neckline, place the soup next to her Kenneth Cole handbag and the glance over to Travis’ fingers crunched around the guitar’s neck, then up to his neck. Thin and lanky and strangely beautiful. His cheekbones look like slivers of ice melting underneath the drink of the stage lights.

Travis dreams, he says, of a day when it’ll all be better, when peace is something we can hold in our hands, like an alligator in a jar. I like him for that, his dreams. He’s got a degree in sociophysics, a minor in molecular-linguistics. Sees language as connected cells spawning some strange new, ever-evolving organism. He told me last Sunday, post-Cheerios, leaning over the margin of the New York Times, language is like mold. I think about explaining this to pale lips and her beau, about grabbing the chowder and launching into a diatribe about mold and language and salmon scales. About Tupperware. But I don’t want to distract them. I catch the tossed out wishbone of their conversation. His day. Her day. And Barbara Walters. They both found her special so compelling. Besides, I’ll never be a lawyer. I’ll feel as if now, unable to even convince a plastic palm tree, that it’s all for nothing. How could I possibly think Punnett squares could solve anything?
I look over at the couple singling them out as one might a cell under a microscope and spotting the disease, wishing you could, with squirt of a chloride solution, wipe the sample clean away. Mendel's Second Law doesn't exist. Everything is linked. Still, looking at the way he sips his beer, holding the aperture of the bottle up to his mouth, attempting with pursed lips and a confined exhale, to produce a harmony with the delicate slurping sound she makes when she inhales spoonfuls of chowder into the small vacant space that is her mouth; I can't help but think maybe he'll choke on a salmon scale and she'll get a piece of corn stuck in a molar. Maybe somewhere between last night's episode of Melrose Place and Tom Brokaw, they'll hear Travis's voice and sigh. Maybe not.

I wouldn't even say Travis has a great voice. He's not a Frank Sinatra, a Louis Armstrong or anything. Sometimes I don't even think he can carry a tune. He tells me what do I know. We sing *What a Wonderful World* looking for bed frames in the garbage dump out beyond Slocum's city limits.

"Meg, you're tone deaf," Travis said last night, tossing a piece of a chair, a leg I think, out behind him.

"Am I?"

"Can't carry a tune to save a goldfish from the toilet."

I was rather good at carrying the wholly bucket filled with broken light bulbs and an old metal doll crib, some relic from the depression era.

"What's with the doll crib?" Travis said when I toss it into the back of his Volvo station wagon.
"Thought maybe it'd be fun to refinish. Reminds of the one I always wanted when I was a kid." I think: the one Marcia McCloy said was too ratty for her dolls. Then, maybe I'd like to give it to a kid one day.

Travis wiped his forehead with the back of his hand, picked up an old railroad tie and the emblem from a Steudebaker. We climbed into the Volvo, buckled up, drove back to my place, watched I Love Lucy reruns and drank too much red wine. Soon we were in my kitchenette eating rocky road ice cream straight from the tub with our fingers; our legs propped up on the refrigerator, counting body hair.

"You've got long arm hair."

"The better to feel you with," I said too tired to giggle. I pulled his T-shirt up and ran my arm hairs over his stomach. We passed out with the tub of ice cream between us, our heads in each other laps.

Travis wraps up the brass bed song, clears his throat and strums a chord. C-sharp.

"This next one," he says to the palm tree. "It's about betting on the long-shot. Having faith in your convictions."

"Is he talking about convicts?" Someone, I think, pale-lips says.

The umbrella stand snorts.

Travis looks so vulnerable on the makeshift stage, at the mercy of the blue-cheese couple, the salmon swigging micro-brew crowd. I want to run up on the plywood box, cover him with my long arm hairs, my scrawny shoulders. Instead, I shoot the umbrella stand a dirty look, cross my arms over my chest and think of the doll crib. I'll paint it orange. Somehow this makes me feel better.
Rita, a regular, waves me over to the bar and I go.

"Meg, dear," she says. "Do you know what you need? Some earrings. You'd be so pretty with some earrings." I look at her, at her painted face, her strapless black dress and dangling earrings and think about her husband home alone with her two dogs and wonder if he knows about the college kids she gives late night tango lessons. Wonder if he cares and when she cooks the paella for their dinner, if her Tupperware is lined up like soldiers in her kitchen cupboards, waiting for the forward command.

"Don't worry, dear. I'll bring you some. You wear them and you'll catch a good one." She's talking about men, not fish.

Rita considers herself my patron in her self-created search to find me a suitable man. A rich man. She gives me flower scented hand lotion from Bath and Body Works, long silky scarves and knock-em-dead red lipstick. Brushes my hair off my face and says I should be a model; tells me I'm beautiful, and after she's had three Black Velvets' on the rocks, I sometimes believe her. Once, after she told me to bleach my hair, I called her Mother.

Travis is halfway through Stewball, his fingers finding C, then D, and his voice beginning to sound like he's spent too much time in cramped elevators. The more I look at him, at his dripping skin, the more I begin to wonder if we ever went to the garbage dump and came home with all those light bulbs he's storing in my lawnmower shed for when inspiration hits him. He tells me it happens like that. Last time it was a broken wheelbarrow filled with egg shells, cigarette butts and a black and white postcard of a rooster we found tacked to a telephone pole. The back read
“Call you in the morning Love. Q.” Travis entitled it *The Rooster Came First* and sold it for seventy-five bucks to some ex Jasper Johns fan who told him he showed real promise. That’s what Travis does when he’s not singing folk songs or selling suits at Slocum’s Big and Tall Man’s Shop. He creates.

Travis isn’t big or tall. He’s average height, average weight, but he sells a lot of suits. He tells me it’s all in the delivery.

“What don’t you become a mailman?” I said pre-Cheerios, sticking my finger into the side of my head. Ka-boom!

“Funny,” he said and we went back to *I Love Lucy*. The candy factory episode.

That night it was his place and we ate a jar of Clausen dills on the roof of his apartment, counted the worn slate roofing and then climbed down. We fell asleep in his claw footed bathtub we’d planned to fill with water, but after all the rum and cokes thought better of it. I woke up to the glare of white porcelain in my face and thought maybe he was onto something with the egg-shells. Maybe not.

Set break. Travis moves, gazelle-like, over to the palm tree where I stand trying to ignore an argument between the plastic appendages. Something about power.

“I’m the one holding us up, you know,” the trunk says.

“Dear, I’m the one with the looks. Without me, we wouldn’t have even got this gig. Still be at Wal-Mart with those God awful cactuses.”

“Cacti.”

“Whatever.”
“Shut-up!” I say and clench my jaw.

“What?” Travis says and wrinkles his eyebrows, confused.

“What?” I say and shrug it off. Travis would never understand the relationship I’ve developed with Tupperware, with mirrors and hairdryers. He’d never understand if you listen close enough, everything breathes.

“So, what do say we head out to The Soda Shop,” Travis says. “Have us a few of those vanilla ones. We’ll spike ‘em with vodka and carve dirty jokes on the table-top with a pocket-knife when the waiter isn’t looking.”

“Yeah, OK. Sounds great.”

Travis winks at me again and heads up to the bar where I watch Gary slip him a screwdriver, heavy on the screw. I wait for him to meet me back in the Tropics, but he only taps his finger on his temple then extends it out towards me. No one knows we’ve been sleeping together and we’d like to keep it this way. This is his sign for think about it or thinking of you or Eureka. Something.

Clap. Travis’ steel tips connect with the plywood box. His cheeks melt and he begins, setting his double screwdriver down on the table top, again. I think: what I’m doing with a guy like this?

“He’s not exactly your type,” Stephanie said to me over Bloody Marys and Camels at The Greasy Spoon last Saturday afternoon. “The guy doesn’t even wear deodorant, Meg.”

“It’s made of metals,” I said waving my celery stick at her. “Did you know that? You’re spreading metal into your armpits every morning. It’s no wonder we’ve got shaver burn.”
I’d switched to baby-powder that first morning after, when we went out for breakfast. After sex, Travis had tucked his hands behind his head, his elbows jutting out at perfect right angles, looked up at the roof of my canopy bed I’ve had since I was ten and explained the dangers of deodorant, micro-brews and stale silence.

“You’re slowing poisoning your body,” he’d said. No wonder there’s an increase in breast cancer. Aluminum is the termite of metals, Meg. It weasels its way into the pores and before you know it free radicals are roaming around like vagabonds, looking for any place to call home. If I were a free radical, breasts would be the first place I’d go.”

“Besides,” Travis had said, sliding his nose under my arm, “I like the way you smell. Like a gherkin smothered in honey.”

I didn’t tell Stephanie this. Didn’t tell her I had blushed or we’d told bad jokes till five in the morning while we hung forest green sheets around my canopy with safety pins, trying to keep the light out a little longer.

“Ever hear the one about the duck?” I’d said sticking a safety pin into the layers of fabric. “A duck walks into a bar, says to the bartender got any grapes? Bartender says this isn’t a fruit stand. Duck walks out. Comes in the next day and asks for grapes. Bartender says next time he asks for grapes, he’s going to nail that duck’s flippers to the floor. Duck comes in the next day and says, hey barkeep got any nails? Bartender says no. Duck says got any grapes?”

Travis had grabbed me around the stomach and tickled me until I felt urine drip down my leg. I’d punched him on the side of his head, hard. He had a lump for three days. I didn’t tell Stephanie this either.
“Listen, Meg,” Stephanie said and lit a Camel with her streamlined Zippo. “All I’m saying is a girl like you could do a lot better. Have you looked in the mirror lately? You’re not exactly getting younger.”

Looked in it? I’m taking it for an old fashioned Socratic walk around the veins in my eyes, I didn’t say.

Stephanie, she’s the kind of girl who picks the longest line at the supermarket so she can browse through Glamour. Repeat. Browse, not buy. She’s my best friend, sure, has been since one day in second grade when I won a 110 camera for selling the most Hallmarks and she climbed the Spider, a jungle gym forbidden to all of Slocum Elementary ever since Ryan Cozak fell off it and broke both his arms. I still have the picture I took of her, arms out in victory, hanging in the corner of my apartment. Next to it, slightly crooked in its aluminum frame, is the one I took back when we were in college. She’s covered in pancake batter and eggs standing by the shore the last night of our summer jobs at Bull on the Beach where, in between serving prime rib and clams, we’d locked ourselves in the deep-freeze, smoke weed from a pipe made out of a deer antler and played hacky-sack with the frozen meat.

Stephanie’s a vegetarian now with a wall-in closet in her bathroom big enough to hold the steaks off three steer. She tells me she needs it to house her make-up, deodorant and perfume. Last time I was at her place I counted fifty-seven Tupperware dishes and seventy-eight lids.

“You body gets used to the same brand. Deodorant is like perfume, you’ve got to rotate,” Stephanie said calling up the past.
I thought, watching her exhale cigarette smoke, why are we repeating this conversation? Why does her face look exactly the same in those photos? Why, after thirty years, can I look into her eyes and see pigtais and freckles?

Stephanie ordered another Bloody Mary, picked at her dish of canned fruit cocktail, dolled up with canned mandarin oranges and fresh grapes.

"Whatever happened to what's his face? SUV guy. You know, the stock broker? Now he had something going for him." Stephanie waved her celery at me, asking for a dual.

Tomato juice dripped onto the wooden table top and I watched Stephanie's shaky hand wipe it up with her napkin. Watched the waiter respond to her wave and rush over with a replacement. I took a chomp out my celery, eating my sword before any more blood was shed.

"Brian," I said. "His name was Brian and he wanted me to wear wooden shoes, you know, from Holland and a grass skirt and sing You're in the money while he sprayed cheez-wiz in my hair."

Stephanie stabbed a grape with her fork.

"Once," Stephanie said, pausing to pluck a grape seed off the tip of her tongue. "I knew a guy who kept an alligator in his bathtub. It wasn't huge or anything, about the size of a Golden Retriever, but with shorter legs. He'd take it out for walks on a leash, around the block, that sort of thing. He wanted me to wrestle it, straddle it wearing a velvet evening gown and a clown's wig. He was dentist."

I've never heard about this guy and suddenly, I thought even poor Stephanie had her secrets. I stared at her puffy eyelids, at the small nose I've seen her pick
the cocaine scabs out of when she thought her walk-in closet door was shut until all I
could do was revert my own eyes down to her long, dainty fingernails painted the
color of a wet bruise and order her another drink. It's all I could do not think of my
dentist, of his rubber gloved hands and wonder if Stephanie wasn't kidding when she
mentioned she thinks she's got the HIV. When she mentioned she's dying out there
in the fluorescent lighting, water coolers and computer programs whose languages
breed otherness, disconnecting us somehow into smaller and smaller packages until
someday, Poof! We'll all disappear.

"Are you OK?" was the question I couldn't bring myself to say, not with blood
dripping down her nose, with her excusing herself to the restroom. She'd call me
hostile. She'd done it before.

"Meg, you know, sometimes you're a goldfish waiting to be flushed," she said
last time she was in town. Her voice sharp and the smile on her face reeking of
cocaine.

"I know," I'd whispered turning my head towards the stretched necks, the
eyes rolling like thumb flicked marbles down the length of The Slippery Gin's
polished, wooden bar. "Sometimes I'm a real bitch, huh."

"I don't know," Stephanie said, leaning over The Greasy Spoons' Formica
table top, getting her white blouse in the pool of tomato juice the napkin missed.
"You're not the same Meg. What are doing with a guy like that? He's not exactly
John Wayne you know? Jeezus, Meg. He's not even Harrison Ford?"
I spent the remainder of our lunch discussing the finer points of strip searches, drug clinics, and Prozac with the pepper-mill. Stephanie went to the restroom three times, ate a lot of celery sticks, and laughed like crazy.

"Call me next time you're in town," I said and handed the waiter the bill.

"Hell," I said, "Call me next time your not in town. Call me tomorrow, OK?"

Travis closes with *Puff the Magic Dragon* and when he sings the line about the scales falling like rain, I hand the salmon beer couple their check. I say thanks for stopping by and have a goodnight and think, through the fog of pale lips perfume and the moon-glow of candlelight, of Travis’s smell, like old fashioned potato chips. I think of his breath in the morning before Colgate and his body before the bulk of winter sweaters. After my shift, he’ll meet me at The Soda Shop and we won’t order vanilla sodas, we won’t even stay. He’ll be slumped over the counter washing down a cup of coffee, waiting for me. I’ll say let’s go home and he’ll say your place or mine and we’ll wind up at the garbage dump, tossing beer bottles into bald tires while we sing *Fly Me to the Moon* badly. I’ll grab him around his waist and he’ll return the favor and somewhere underneath the piles of hypodermic needles, rubber gloves, toilet seats and sun-melted plastic cemetery flowers is our brass bed, somewhere underneath the Tupperware gene, I’ll close my eyes and dream.
BEING JOHN WAYNE

I got a call from my friend from Pittsburgh who wasn’t calling from Pittsburgh because she’s in Cleveland because that’s where the guy she’s dating lives. He runs a club in the Flats, well he doesn’t really run the club; he books the bands, which is like running a club. He drinks Jack on the rocks and they always have a good time. She usually calls and says we saw the Skinny J’s or Wilco or. Only now when she calls which was last night, which is really today because it’s five-thirty in the morning, her voice sounds jumpy like she’s been popping reds only I know she doesn’t pop reds or anything because that’s kids stuff and she’s twenty-seven and not a kid.

It’s not time telling me something weird happened; something really weird always happens and she calls relaying it all like I’m a damn tape recorder.

I’ve gotten calls from jail where they took her belt like she was going to hang herself for drinking a little too much tequila. Where she was holding up too-big-borrowed jeans with one hand, phone with the other, pretending not to stare at the butch decked out black leather who she said told her she was just about the hottest thing this side of the jail cell. Where she said you’re my one phone call and talked about the butch, about everything till time was up. I listened going wow, really, ok, because what’d do when you’re the one phone call? Can’t talk about the shrimp scampi you had at dinner. How the shrimp were raw and the garlic made your tongue want a mint, but you weren’t going to eat their mints, not the ones in the open
dish. You’ve watched 20/20. Heard those stories, ‘Feces and urine found on restaurant mints.’ No, can’t talk the movie you saw which is what I wanted to talk about because the guy I was dating didn’t get like I got it and not many people do you know, get it like I do. She does.

So, I get calls. From the hospital where she said real quick the number is—and I called back and she said took my clothing said IV, terrified of needles, broken ribs, ass hanging out of a paper gown.

I understand the calls from highways, byways, sidewalks and clubs where I can’t hear her so she screams. Where one time, a techno mix thumping in the background, I made out something like heard Dock of the Bay and thought about the acid when we lived at the shore, fog rising and the bird, remember the—the heron I said. Yeah she said. Or she won’t remember by the time she gets to the phone why she called, but hey, how was I?

I know it’s her before I pick up the receiver.

I always pick it up.

I can’t believe what the hell just happened she says and I say what and she says have I got a story for you. Hold on, I say because it’s five-thirty in the morning and if I’m going to hear a story I need some coffee. I fling the phone across my bed. I don’t own a cordless. I never wanted the option of taking the damn thing in the bathroom with me. You have to wonder, don’t you? When someone says they’re on a cordless. I mean for all you know they’re taking a dump and you’re on the other end eating a big old salad.
I go into the kitchen and warm up a cup of coffee in the microwave because I'm twelve hours away and she's paying for the call and she's a bartender so her cash goes and goes without seeing a paycheck and I don't want to make her wait for the drip, drip, drip of my coffee maker because the thing is ancient. You could get a caffeine high from cleaning it out. I burn my tongue and spill half of it on and my almond colored linoleum. That's what my landlord called it when he showed me the place. He said, "And the kitchen's got brand new linoleum, a nice almond don't you think?" I thought, it's not almond, it's beige, only now I'm calling it almond and it's got black, greasy coffee on it and I don't have time to clean it up.

She can't afford to call but I don't say it because I'm thinking she did she just buy a four hundred, yeah, a four hundred dollar Ann Klein coat, which she let me borrow when I crashed at her place before heading back somewhere, some home. I spilled a nice pinot noir on the crushed velvet. That's what happens when I see her—I ruin velvet. I twisted off a button too. But plastic can be replaced, velvet?

She's got cash. I know cash goes because you're always thinking of the next night. The Friday when executives with hairpieces lather on their wives' Mabeline to cover the spot where the wedding band they keep checking didn't fall out of their Dockers belongs. Where they slap fifties on the bar for their mistresses who drape Chanel evening bags stuffed with a thousand nothings over diamond tennis bracelets. Where silk and cashmere dines and you smile and they're drunk on Bellividare martinis so you slip them a free one to compensate for crushed velvet,
food, phone bill from a guy’s apartment. Why the hell doesn’t he pay it? I never met him, maybe he’d offer but she’d never let him. Pride, fuck, the girl’s got pride.

I’m back I say and she says what took so long and her voice sounds like an electrical line buzzing in a forest. Better light a cigarette she says because she knows everything will go down a lot easier if there’s something in my mouth.

I bend down over my vanilla candle I never let bum out unless it bum out and light my smoke, phone stuck in the space between my shoulder and ear, listening.

“I don’t know where to start, it’s crazy.”

Usually she starts with guess where I am? Usually I guess, like I said it’s not like Trivial Pursuit, getting a golf question and Arnold Palmer’s already come up seven times. It’s more like which hand is the quarter in only you got three hands and there’s no quarter. But I know she’s at Nate’s. The ritual is gone. Displaced. She starts at the beginning.

“I got here, met Nate, we went out, then back to his place to watch a video. I’m buzzed and we rented Slingshot and I didn’t want to miss the capitalism of this kid, this kid making money out of rubbers so I go into the kitchen, make a pot of coffee. I’m grinding beans thinking about the night, about everything you think about in a guy’s apartment when you’re in their kitchen and they’re not. I’m thinking, humming, grinding, when I hear a scream in the upstairs apartment. I don’t think about it for one, maybe six seconds, because it’s a scream and they always stop, right? Only it doesn’t. Then, I hear another voice. A man’s. I ignore it, but the whole time it’s getting worse. It’s a high pitched scream, a series of them, and all I
can think is a woman is being beaten and no one's going to do a damn thing. I want to make sure it's real because reality—"

I'm not listening. Sometimes she has these moments, you know, where she begins to question her existence. Cranks out this new age shit she's got herself wrapped into. Reincarnation, my life as a bug, and works her way into the meaning of reality, which is where she's at now. Reality a chess game in her mind until it's not. Then it's connect four, the pieces fire, earth, water—and she's spitting out air so damn fast, I want to interject, to scream get on with the damn story so I can get some sleep when I realize she already has.

"— In the living room and before I can say anything Adam looks up from the game of solitaire he's got spread out on the coffee table says, 'Mind your own business.' Now I know it's real and I can't stop thinking about fists. I'm sitting on the sofa between Nate and Adam trying hard to pretend nothing is going on upstairs, that it is nothing. But I can't. I looked at Nate, at Adam—they weren't moving a muscle. It wasn't their business. And before I know it I'm standing up, hands on hips, like some feminine version of John Wayne saying I'm going up there and if you guys want to follow me—"

Now I'm thinking about fists. My own raw from cracking the windshield of Tony's Trans Am, about spackle, masking tape, the time it took to plaster the hole in an apartment. About the days she wore sunglasses. The days she didn't. Turtlenecks in June, diamond rings pitched in cornfields, bruised laughter.

"— A woman answers. She's got a cordless phone up to her ear her long spiky fingernails clicking against the plastic like she's just gulped down five
espressos. 'Bobby, Bobby Oh God Bobby.' It's all she says. I don't know if anyone's on the other end and there are no marks on her face but something's really wrong. I breeze past her on a mission. Like walking through a stranger's apartment at two in the morning is natural, normal. I'm this skinny kitchen and there's Bobby a gun in his left hand, the left side of his head blown off. There's not much blood and I'm thinking this guy just killed himself and I'm calm. I'm cool as a cucumber. I'm staring at a dead man, a dead handsome man with a goatee and the prettiest brown eyes staring back at me and they're not even glazed over. Simone, I find out that's her name, is still screaming and I ask if anyone else is here. She points down the hallway says my son. Ah shit was all I was thinking walking calm, cool down the hallway into a dark room. There's Bobby Jr. cowering in the top bunk, his NFL blanket tented around his body like we use to do over kitchen chairs, remember?"

"Course I remember. Holly Hobby, Strawberry Shortcake sleeping bags. I don't remember. Astronauts weren't we always? No, i was. You were. What were you?

"Jeezus I don't remember, but this kid reminded me."

She was always the mommy, but I can't say it. She'll never say it again. Not after she had to wear pads in her bra to soak up the milk, the sour milk leaking through blue satin at the senior prom.

"You'd think I'd want to scream, cry at the sight of this kid. All I can see is his face. He's about eight years old. looking right at me without ever seeing me. I say, 'Hiya Bobby, I'm Steph and I need you to do me a real big favor. i need you to climb down out of there and come with me.' I've got get this kid out of here right? He's a
big kid, he’s only eight years old, but he’s a big kid. I’m carrying him around my
waist like a toddler and we’re walking down the back stairway of the apartment, back
down these rickety narrow wooden steps that are more like a bunch of
gangplanks—“

Whoa, stop the story I want to get off. Can’t believe she walked into another
suicide, that she’s carrying a kid who’d be about the age of him or her if it didn’t all
go sour, if the night in the park, the 22 and Jon’s head against the oak’s trunk even
after and did she just say toddler? And she’s no clue how close to the edge she is,
was, will be, but I can’t say anything because she’s a damn Chatty Cathy doll,
spitting out information so fast that to interrupt, stop the flow would be to impose a
different—

“—Me wobbling because the kid is heavy and I never had my coffee. The
whole time I’m saying to this kid, who’s damn heavy, I’m saying, ‘Hey Big Guy it’s
gonna be Ok, your mom’s Ok. I’m gonna take you down to my friend’s place. Do
you like Nintendo?’ He shakes his head and I’m smiling because I don’t want him to
remember me without one. His daddy is dead and I’m talking about Batman and he’s
laughing and we walk into the apartment—”

I’m lighting a smoke with my right hand, soaking the left in hot wax watching
vanilla flakes mold onto my fingertips. Smoking, thinking about, but not mentioning
Jon’s death, not believing she’s ignoring these facts. Note addressed to her. The
hazards on my VW rabbit blinking the back-beat to the ambulances’ red. AM radio
bursting in between the static, the weather. Hot. Yellow ribbons strangling car
antennae.
Can't believe this death is existing separate from it all, from navy satin, blood stained sweatshirt I soaked in bleach because it was a Christmas gift, not Jon's, Tony's. And Jon wore it. He ruined a perfectly good designer sweatshirt and I watched his brains float to the top of my bucket, then dissolve.

"— Say my teeth locked so tight I can taste my gums, 'This is Bobby. He came down to play a little Nintendo with you Adam.' I widen my eyes. Adam smiles. Takes Bobby's hand and the two are deep into the whole thing in seconds. Nate and I are out the door, back upstairs to get Simone, who's still on the phone screaming, 'Oh God Bobby.' I ask her if she's called the cops. She nods. I hear sirens. She won't leave the doorway. Wants to go back to the body and now there's blood all over the linoleum and it's seeping into the living room carpet. It's funny. I now know how long it takes for a body to drain itself."

"How long?"

"About fifteen minutes."

I'm thinking about coffee, dropping the phone, brewing. How long would that take, for it all—

"Weren't you freaking out?"

"No, (Pause. The sound of smoke through just moistened lips) I should of cried, or screamed or something. Even the second time, with all the blood and the cops banging up the stairs with Simone, Nate and me walking my—it's weird nobody heard the shot. I heard the screams but not the blast—"

"Maybe the screams covered."

"No, can't."
“Maybe it.”

“No. And no one heard it. Anyway, the cops are coming up the steps and.”

I know where it’s going now. It’s the usual story now. The one you’ve heard so many times your head shuts down like your mom’s vacuum cleaner on Sunday nights, right in time for the prime time movie. Cops. Interrogation. It’s Agatha Christie, Dan Rather and Lassie all rolled into—only now I’m looking at it through something I blame dripping wax, stale coffee, histories colliding. Unless it’s a pattern, some meaning. Purpose. Now I’m the one: cracked, reds, eight legs spinning in the corner of some apartment, blood congealing into cracks of linoleum. I need more time. Sleep. But something in her voice, a repeated word maybe, drags me out.

“— Rubbing Simone’s back and we’re all having coffee out of ceramic mugs like it’s some bizarre poetry reading because there’s still incense burning and we’re all huddled around telling tales. Two hours ago, I was staring down a dead man. How the hell do I.”

“I don’t know,” I say thinking about answers, coveting. Wishing I could tell her it’s over. It’s the last crazy, fucked up thing she’ll ever have to deal with, that all the work, college, smile she wears every day with a can I help you? or what’d yea’ have sir speaking through it, are worth something. But I can’t. Can’t tell her somewhere two old ladies are walking up and down a beach collecting bits of seashells not saying anything because it’s all been said. And music, the smooth chords of a guitar playing over and over in their minds, are all they need. Maybe once or twice they strum the same chord, harmony in silence.
I pause. “I don’t know.”

She ignores me. Goes on.

“I’m done telling my story, now they want Simone’s only she’s not ready. She’s still clutching the phone mumbling, ‘Is he Ok? is Bobby Ok?’ I pull a cop aside, tell him she needs to hear he’s gone. He walks over, says, ‘I felt his pulse, he’s dead.’ Great, I’m thinking, real smooth, sure know how to talk to a lady.

Nate’s busy trying to calm down Simone by offering her his hand. She takes it. They’re sitting on the sofa. I move over to a policewoman ear, whisper, ‘Try to be sensitive.’ She puts her hands on her hips, her guns, says, ‘I know how to do my job.’ Now she’s John Wayne.

I’m angry, pissed off because of the kid. Can’t get the kid out of my mind, the image of him under those blankets. I swallow my cold coffee and go back to rubbing Simone’s back. She’s going on and on it’s all over the place. I look over at one of the cops, the quiet one. He winks.”

“Maybe she was trying to protect him,” I say.

“Protect him, from what? The guy is dead.”

“From a bad image. He’s got a son right? Maybe she doesn’t want the cops.”

“Yeah, but she doesn’t care. Didn’t even ask where the kid was the whole time. I’m worried so I tell her Bobby Jr. is upstairs at the landlord’s and she says, ‘thanks,’ like I just saved her from having to break a twenty by tossing her penny in line at a convenience store.”

“Poor kid.”
“Damn right. And you know what he said when I was taking him down those back stairs. He said, ‘Is my mommy going to be arrested?’ ”

“Wow,” I say. I can’t say what I’m thinking, which is what the hell is going on here, which is why is this happening again. Fate flipping quarters in the back room of a bar, betting head, tails. Don’t think she’s had enough with the black eyes, coke fiends, car wrecks, father wearing a coat of plastic he called skin, mother drowning it out until at sixteen and six months there was nothing to be said, only done. Not going to repeat history, not going—then there’s the back room. Raise the odds. Once I’d like to see snake eyes.

“—Rubbing Simone’s back only now my hand is on auto-pilot. I’m watching her tears thinking they’re not real only they are, too real. Cops ask her if Bobby was right or left handed, she tucks her right hand behind her back, forms a gun. I’m the only one who sees her do it. ‘Left,’ she says.”

(Sound of boot-steps. A door opening. Voices.)

“Up this way guys, second floor. Can’t thank you enough for coming on such short notice, but got to get this floor cleaned before it sets in. Don’t want to have to replace—”

(Sound of door shutting, of flint against metal, of a deep exhale.)

“You Ok?”

“Yeah, just can’t seem to get the smell out of my mind.”

“Of blood?”

“No, burnt flesh. Hair.”

And all I can think to say is I know what you mean.
4/1 I’m walking down Greenwood Avenue when a man nubs his way around the corner. Pulls me so close I can see the stubble on his chin, the purplish pockmark overtaking his right cheekbone.

“Like to buy an alligator?” he says and pulls out a jar, an oversized pickle jar that looks like it’s been lifted straight from a deli counter, from the folds of his gray trench-coat. Inside the jar, a baby alligator stretches vertical, up towards the holes punched in the metal lid. The man jiggles the it and the sunlight catches the film of mud caking its underbelly, sets about evaporating the puddle soaking its hind legs. Its body is small and perfect and trapped.

In the time it takes me to step away from the man’s open mouth, from the vinegar haze streaming from it, I actually consider it. Consider myself a superhero swooping down to rescue alligator-kind from this—this villain.

“No. Thanks.” I stumble, catching my balance on a streetlight. And for the next two blocks think: Is there a black market for alligators now? Was there always? What isn’t for sale? I mentally begin a list. In my head I scratch with red ink, “Things not for sale.” It’s all the further I get before I pull open the door to Late Nites Salon and toss the list behind the photo of my sister’s kids I’ve tacked to the mirror at my station.

I almost tell Maude about the alligator, but she’s too busy with a spiral perm, yapping away like she does about sit-coms and protein diets.
“Cut out the pasta. Red meat all the way,” Maude says to a teenage girl who keeps staring into the mirror, like she can’t believe it’s her, like the button nose and marshmallow skin belong to someone else, someone more deserving.

I check my appointment book. Two perms, five cuts and one dye job. By the time I’m halfway through shampooing a recovering cancer patient, I’ve forgotten all about alligators and deli jars.

“Haven’t had curls like this since I was a little girl,” Linda tells me mid-scrub, her neck resting on the lip of the porcelain bowl and her breath, when she opens her mouth to speak, smelling strangely like lavender.

“Lovely curls,” I say and fluff out her wet, graying hair with a towel. “A little mousse, bit of the hairdryer and you’ll be like new.”

“Now, I only want a trim. Just a trim, Trudy. None of that fancy stuff.”

I watch Linda’s look into the mirror; look at me, at my well groomed bob and long dangling earrings, poised behind her, combing out her tight, knotty curls.

“Don’t worry,” I say looking back, into the mirror, into her muddy brown eyes and the fine blue veins around her temples.

“I won’t take more than an inch,” I say. We just need to straighten things out, get rid of some split ends.”

I slip my scissors diagonally between two strands of her hair. Clip. Razor-cut the edges around her face, the straight-blade grinding against the strength of the follicles. It’ll give her a wispy look, something easy to tend. Easier to pick out of her tub-drain if it comes to that.
I've seen hair like Linda's before, hibernating underneath the scalp, wanting to stay close to the skull, to the mind underneath it. Then it switches places with the danger and pain and fear. One shrinks under and the other emerges, wild and strong.

Remission, Linda tells me when I swing her chair around, away from the mirror so I can tidy up her bangs. I bend down and when I snip, snip at the hair above her nose, I try not to look past her chin, try to avoid her plain button up oxford and the lopsided chest underneath it.

"More sleep," I whisper into her radiation curls. "What you need, Trudy, is more sleep."

4/3 Lunching with Ann. This is what Ann calls it, lunching. We're seated at a corner table in some trendy café with palm trees and new age music. The waiter displays a trimmed goatee, fingering its coarse texture while he goes about uttering the luncheon specials in a calm, cool tone. We both order Greek salads with goat cheese, the house Chablis.

"So Trudy," Ann says brushing her blond waves off her forehead. "How are you dear?"

Ann with her cell phone, her corvette and e-trades, her diamond studded change purse and style, style, style wants to be a godmother. Can't wait, she says, to be the maid of honor at my wedding. She's like that ant who moves rubber-trees, such high-hopes. I sometimes think it's the only reason we still go lunching. That and so Ann can tell Andrew how she rescued her friend, the hair-stylist, from the jaws of poverty, if only for an afternoon.
Then, I think of her in her flannel pajamas after the roar of the world crawls into its den, and know sometimes she sees me floating around her head and says something like, “That Trudy.” And fades off to sleep. This is the Ann I don’t see. I get the one who says fabulous too much and squeezes my hand with ice-cold fingers.

“I’m fine, Ann. Really, things couldn’t be going better. I’m happy. I’ve never felt more content, more satisfied with my life these past few weeks. I know last time we got together. Well, David and I are on the outs. But I’m fine, really.”

I can’t believe she twists me into spilling my guts, it’s something in the way she breathes, this slow steady rhythm like a rocking chair or the ocean until I’m telling her the whole deal with the black balloons I had sent to his office.

“God Trudy, what were you thinking? How perfectly rude.” Ann squeezes my hand. A glacier carves a canyon into the nerves of my wrist.

I bite back the word relapse, smother it with quick, careful sips of wine. Who am I to uproot her rubber-treed hope?

4/6 At my sister’s house. How am I? How’s David? How’s work? How about a haircut? My nieces jump on my thighs bearing books about baby animals who’ve lost their mothers, toilet training and sharing.

“Aunt Trudy this one. Read this one again.” I make silly faces and even sillier voices, dropping my chin and eyebrows down for the elephants, stretching my neck out for the high-yip of the baby chick.

Jane drinks too much red wine. She does this every time I see her.

“Two glasses is just too many anymore,” Jane says.
She looks terrible and forgets to make all the stupid faces in the right places.

“Aunt Trudy, you be our mommy today. Our Mommy’s no good anymore.”

Jane goes into the kitchen and leaves me and the kids to helicopter rides.

Over the hot rush of the faucet, I hear her sobs.

“Be nicer to Mommy, she’s got it rough with you two munchkins.”

I tuck the kids in with Dr. Seuss, tiptoe down the stairs and watch, from the landing, Jane shuffle the cards for 500 rummy. It’s her favorite game. When we were kids, we’d play for hours. Maneuver our sleeping bags into the crawl space underneath the house and deal by flashlight. Tonight, she’s fixed a cheese tray and we’re seated, legs crossed, at her kitchen table. We are ladies.

Jane beats me three hands in a row and when she bends down to scratch in her score on a notepad, her one front tooth seems to disappear and her hair sprout to the length fit for pigtails. In a smile, she shrinks right before my eyes. And for a few moments, there are no coupons to clip.

How can I burden Jane with words like Stage III and metastasis?

I tell her she’s a good mother instead.

4/12 I never get more sleep. I do spend more and more time with the Discovery channel. I watch the mating habits of the duck-bill platypus, the giant sea tortoise, birds of prey. The male osprey’s courting ritual involves the gift of fish from the male to the female. The male soars and sweeps, spreading its angled wings out, then drawing them in for the dive. It’s not the amount of fish caught that will impress the female, but the amount shared.
David isn’t a fisherman. He did share his fettuccini Alfredo with me one night at Café Lomards. Shared that story. The big bike accident of his childhood that left him with a broken jaw. Two months of Campbell’s chicken noodle soup, green Jell-O and ice cream. Who wants to hear another Jell-O story, anyway? Haven’t we had enough? Haven’t I given enough? I want the swoops and dives. Where’s my fish?

4/13 “Trudy,” Maude says over the phone. “How are you feeling? You haven’t been to work for three days.”

“Touch of the flu, a bit under the weather,” I say.

“Your customers are asking about you. Mrs. Rittle is dying for a trim. Her-ex-step son is engaged.”

Every minor event in Mrs. Rittle’s life called for a haircut. She’s on her third marriage, this one to a chain of groceries stores and a man. A nice guy really, brings their little boy in. A real card, that one. Sings show-tunes at one of those dinner theaters, The Green Apple, I think.

“Set her up for next Thursday,” I say. Tell her I’m sorry. I’ll be back soon. A day or two. You know how these things are. The second you say you’re better, it slaps you in the face.”

4/15 The answering machine reminds me I’ve got people to call, places to go and things to buy. They’ll tell you it’s the other way around. The urine and blood, the cells, are things I don’t need anyway. Samples. Nothing like the cheese trays and veggie trays at the grocery store enticing shoppers to buy the newest version of saltine crackers or low-fat dips. The raspberry jam to go with the peanut butter. Change the setting and definitions shift, ever so slightly like Teutonic plates.
"And in return for the generous sample of your ovary, Ms. Maines, you'll be rewarded with... you guessed it. Pills and Bill!"

Computer printouts with numbers attached to phrases like "services rendered" and "procedures performed." When did the system of trade get so complicated? And why did it cost me two years salary to give away something that wasn't any good in the first place?

"Ms. Maines. Dr. Miller's office. Please contact us as soon as possible. The doctor would like to arrange a meeting time. We'll need to perform another battery of tests."

Charge me up Doc! Ground the negative. Let's jump start these growths.

Next message.

"Trudy. Trudy? This is your Mother calling. How did things go at the doctors? I'm sure fine. Two years remission! Your father is so..." BEEP!

Next.

"Trudy, David. Call Me."

"Dr. Miller's office again. We really shouldn't delay things much longer. The growths could... BEEP!"

4/18 I eye people on the street wondering if underneath their leather bomber jackets, navy pea coats, beige London Fog raincoats, are specimens of animals, their eggs. On the bus, I sit next to an old woman with sensible brown shoes and a yellow rain bonnet. I look down at her hands, at the brown vinyl pocketbook between them, and know she's stowing peacock eggs in there. When the bus takes a sharp right I hear them bumping against one another. Then a crack. I pull down
the plastic cord above me and scamper down the aisle, head held low. From the
corner of her glaucoma eye, the old woman glares at me. I run the ten blocks back
to my apartment and lock myself in with sour milk and peanut butter for three days.

4/20 For the benefit of my mental health, I call the cable company and
disconnect all extended channels from my service. I'm left the three major networks,
the home-shopping channel and FOX. In between the sit-coms, there's an
advertisement for Cadbury Easter Eggs. Instead of the sugary yolk spilling out from
the cracked chocolate shell, I see an alligator. I cough up a glob of peanut butter, try
flushing my remote control down the toilet, and end up phoning the landlord to
remove its remains from my garbage disposal.

4/23 “The tests are conclusive,” my doctor says. “We could set you up for
another round of BEP, but at this point I'm more concerned with your liver. Chances
are if we go in there for a second peek, this time we'll have to remove—”

I don't like my doctors eyes. They're like rotten eggplants. All smushed and
dark in his head. He has this habit of wiping his hand over them when he talks, like
he knows they're no good. Like he knows he's got rotten vegetables for eyes and if
he only wipes hard enough, with enough force, they'll go away. So, I don't look him.
I let him ramble on and concentrate on the stuffed and shellacked big mouth bass
hanging in the corner of his office. Now what good is that doing anyone? All empty
inside.

4/25 My landlord transports baby kangaroos in the leather pockets of his
utility-belt. I'm sure of this. When he climbs underneath the sink to unfasten the
disposal, a fluid oozes out from the nail pouch. I don't touch it. I lean down
alongside him and pretend to pick up my remote's gnawed number 3 button and peer in. Something fuzzy and an eye.

"Don't see how you managed to get that thing stuck in there, Ms. Maines."

"Must've picked it up with a tea saucer I suppose. I searched and searched for the damn thing. Isn't that the way with things, always wind up where you least expect them."

"Try to be a more careful next time," he says turning on the switch above my kitchen sink. The disposal growls.

"Yes. Thank you for coming over," I say.

The landlord leaves. I touch the puddle of fluid, it's warm and gooey. Almost mucus-like.

4/27 I can't go into the grocery store. I stand outside for over an hour, watching the automatic doors open and close, open and close; the whoosh-hum of them like a man tossing his raincoat on a recliner, then asking his wife for a cocktail.

I think of chilled chicken eggs, mayonnaise jars and pickle jars and see the baby alligator peeking out from behind a Clausen. See the old woman in the sensible shoes stomping through the aisles, cackling as she transports the peacock chicks back towards the meat counter.

I pay a teenage boy with hair the color of window-sill tomato twenty bucks to go in for me. "Wait here," I say and run inside to the corkboard advertising things for sale. I tear a flyer down and jolt outside. On the way out, I read "brass bed, like new." In red ink, I write:

Peanut Butter
I scratch off the egg and hand it to the tomato kid. He never comes back out. I wait and wait. Maybe he escaped through some hidden passageway? Maybe I was too busy hummin My Little Chickadee and staring down the automatic doors, old western style, to notice.

I go home. Dive into my vacation money, all forty bucks of it, (I usually go to Atlantic City) and order take-out. A cheese-steak drenched in green peppers and onions. Tack an envelope on the door. It reads: money in here, knock once and leave food. Undeneath, I write thank you.

4/24 David shows up at my door. I recognize the soft thump tap of his knuckles against the wood. I look though the peep hole, anyway. He knows I do this. On the other side his displays teeth, large and glassy, his head like a child’s balloon above his small distorted body. I open the door. His face deflates.

“Maude says you’ve stopped showing up for work. I went to see you, wanted to bring you these.” He smells like winter rain and curry and lust.

When he pulls his left arm out from behind his back, I see daises. I stare into the petals’ purplish veins, at the dark, greenish centers gripping the petals. I gawk. I glare. I grow disgusted with the centers, the seeds that allowed the petals to swell and blossom only to trap them there.

“It don’t think it’s working out. The whole job thing. I much happier without it and do you know men are walking around the city trying to pawn off alligators?”
David’s eyes are the size of the Arctic Circle, his chin dipping into the
Amazon.

“Baby-doll,” he says. “Let’s go inside. Have a seat. I think you need to have
a seat.”

He tosses the daises on the old foot-locker I found out at the city dump, set
up on cement blocks and passed off as an entry table, puts his hand on my
shoulder, guiding me. I feel as if any moment, the soft touch, like the soft thump of
his knuckles on my door could shift, change.

I’m afraid to look in his pupils, afraid I might see eggplants or alligators or
worse.

I bite my lip. Hard. A drop of blood, then two, drips down my chin.

“I’ve got nothing to do with the alligators, nothing to do with any of it,” I say
and duck behind him as we walk into my living room.

The sofa cushions are slashed open, the legs on the dining room table sawed
off. I did it two days ago after the landlord and his kangaroos. I didn’t want him
stashing anything here. You can never be too careful.

David takes one look around and wraps me up in his arms. I let him. I dot his
white shirt with my bloody chin, the red streaking like finger-paint before the cotton
blend sucks it up, claims it as its own.


“T can’t explain it. It’s inexplicable really. One thing led to another, then
another. Sometimes you’ve got no control over the way things happen.”
“Trudy, I think we should go. Go out for a walk, for a drive. Get out here for a bit.”

I step away from him, from his grasp and he lets me go. I get the daises from the lid of the foot-locker and make my way into the kitchen. Above my refrigerator, in the highest cupboard, is my crystal vase, the one my mother kept in the attic.

“It was too nice to keep out,” she’d told me when, back in Stage I, she gave it me. Back in the land of minor procedures, the meadow of full recovery.

“What, with the dog and you girls running all over the place,” she’d said. “It would’ve broken. Sure as sugar.”

I climb up on the stove, reach over and open the cupboard’s door. The vase is dusty with a mouse turd in it. I grab it, jump down and scrub it clean. I squirt a glob of dish-soap on the inside and let the rush of water transform the cut crystal into prisms dividing the soap bubbles into twos, then threes. Smaller and smaller rainbows rising up over my vase, hands, arms, face.

I fill the vase with cool water and plop the daises in. I don’t bother removing the rubber-band from around the bunch or the plastic shielding the petals, protecting them from the bumps and bruises of transportation. So eager to quench their thirst, I neglect to trim the stems like a good florist always reminds her customers to do.

“Take them with you. Let’s go,” David says. I turn and he’s right there, the lines on his forehead curling up like scared caterpillars.

We end up at his place. After I make him throw out all his eggs and take his mayonnaise jar, his pickle jar and penny jar out to the trash, we sit on the sofa. I hold the vase and he touches my knee with an open hand.
His eyes are blue, that’s all.

4/25  David unwrapped the daises, cut the stems and put them on his bedside table. They haven’t started to wilt yet, but watching the petals curl in towards the centers, I know it won’t be long. Valium. With Valium and David’s breathing like a hairdryer being flicked on, then off. I sleep. In my dreams, nothing happens.

4/30  My body is a deli jar. I write it over and over again in the space where my television once was. I fill up the bathtub, climb in and closing my eyes think, while the water enters me, alligators need water.

I see the man again, his pock mark and stubble exaggerated in my memory. See how he startled me out of a daze, ripped me from the meadow of full recovery. I rewind to the minutes, hours, days before I saw the hatchling alligator torn from its natural state, from its meadow of mosquito swamps. Both of us trapped. Biopsies. Trans-vaginal ultrasounds. Exploratory surgery. Unilateral salpingo-oophorectomy. A slip of the knife, one down. One to go.

“Ms. Maines. The other ovary has contracted a tumor. It’s metastasized throughout the pelvic region.”

Options. Options. Optical illusions. All involve more chemotherapy. BEP. Possible radiation therapy.

My eggplant doctor behind his doctor desk in his doctor office, wore a gold watch. When he slipped his hand down his face covering his rotten eyes, I saw it. A Rolex. How many ovaries does a Rolex cost?

“Yes, I’d like to buy a Rolex.”
“That’ll be three ovaries, give or take a uterus.”

Then I gave a woman her first remission haircut.

Leaning back into the bathtub, I let my head sink under and the water in my ears sounds like the ocean. I wish I were the ocean, unable to hold this thing growing inside me. Unable to support my own destruction.

Hysterical. Hester. Hysterectomy. Flashes of pamphlets, articles, Med TV. The less a woman ovulates, the less active the ovaries, the less the chance she will develop ovarian cancer. Abort mission! Germ-cell cancer of the ovary, uncommon but aggressive in young women, is a disease in which cancer cells are found in the egg-making cells of the ovary. Defected, cracked, bruised monsters. Cysts. We’re into stage III now. Menopause at thirty. My blood cells raping each other, over and over again.

“Yes, I’d like to buy an alligator. Let me take it off your hands.”

I open my eyes and come up for air. David stands in the doorway. I don’t understand his face, the way his lips stretch out towards his ears. I don’t understand how his eyes hold darkness and light at the same time. Right now, I don’t care. I just look at him standing in the doorway soaking me up without taking one step towards me.

4/30 Maude calls. The message on my machine is not a surprise. In short, I’m losing customers fast. Mrs. Rittle wants to know if I’m in the hospital.

“Where are you Trudy?”

I disconnect the phone, sick of losing things and lunching and the sound of my voice on a machine.
I walk. Walk along the streets, secretly hoping I'll run into the trench-coat
guy. Truly believing for a moment, if I could have that moment back, if I could return
the alligator to its swampy meadow, things might've turned out, might still turn out
different. Around each corner, I think I hear the hollow sound of the deli jar scraping
against the buttons of his coat, bumping his belt-buckle.

Somehow, I end up at the cemetery pacing up and down the tombstone
aisles. Off in the corner, shadowed by the branches of willow tree, I spot a statue of
an angel missing two-fingers from her hand. Her hand is stretched out, reaching for
something she'll never be able to hold. I stare at the space between her fingers,
open triangles, V's. Pull out my list. "Things you can't buy." Write radiation curls,
place the note in her palm and walk away, the soggy spring grass beneath me.

A salt breeze blows over my face and I stretch out my arms like wings and
know, without turning around, the statue's palm is empty. And my list? It floats. It
scars and swoops and dives out beyond the cemetery grounds. Flirts with the
evening sky.
MUSHROOMS AND RAISIN BREAD

The sunflowers I planted in our concrete flowerbed are ready to burst into full bloom. I spent the long lazy summer days watching them trade their delicate leaves for the hearty, scratchy ones now towering to the top of our bedroom’s sliding glass door. I bend down, snapping off three brown dead leaves low on the stem before making my way out our patio gate, to my car, to the grocery store.

I’m planning a dinner for you. It must be perfect. Perfection wipes clean the dirty laundry I let pile up atop the washing machine, coffee stains, late nights I forgot to call, eyes I rolled too many times with insecurity behind them.

After counting my tips I’ve decided on Chicken Ala King with fresh green beans in place of the mushrooms that always turn your stomach. The chicken is thawing in the refrigerator and the minute rice measured for three, just in case.

The moment my flip-flops crunch down on the black rubber, releasing the automatic doors, the whoosh-hum of the air-conditioner hits me with a brisk rush of air and my nipples brush up against the cotton of my favorite blue sundress.

The suit with gray eyes and a bald spot glances three times past the head of iceberg lettuce he cradles in his hands to me carefully selecting our vegetable. My face flushes. Immediately I want you here beside me, rushing me, pulling me with your smile over to the frozen food section so we can argue over Chocolate chip Cookie Dough and Chubby Hubby and I can let you win.

But you’re not here.
I feel his eyes dissecting me, pulling me apart from the thighs up. I grab two handfuls of beans and stuff them into a plastic produce bag I open with my teeth and move on to the canned food aisle, the last cave in the postmodern world.

I only buy Campbell's soup. I pause before reaching out for the Cream of Celery, letting my Andy Warhol luncheon play out in my mind. Andy and me discussing the American Dream, Marylin's lips looming over us, scraping clumps of tomato out of a tin pot. When Andy's dye stained fingertips push back his wig, I realize I never, we never, did go to his museum.

I shouldn't even be buying the Cream of Celery. My recipe actually calls for heavy cream and a collection of spices, but I need to improvise if I want to make it to the Cookie Dough and the Liquor store for a bottle of Chardonnay. You don't like wine. I'll pick up three jugs of strawberry Juicy-Juice to tide us over till Monday.

There's an old woman over at the bakery counter, inquiring about the store's fresh baked raisin bread. Her voice startles me as I, with my little red plastic basket, breeze past her.

"It says here that this raisin bread is fresh baked. It doesn't feel fresh to me."

I'm already in the meat section, drowning in raw steaks and yellow Styrofoam when the response comes from a man behind the counter, the details of his face bleached out by the bakery case lights. His words tumble down the aisles; but by the time I turn to catch the meaning, I'm too late. They're lost in a language I don't understand.

I want to see the old woman's face again, right now it seems the most important thing, to offer her my smile and have her return it. Maybe suggest she try
the date bread. But I'm under a tight schedule. So I only catch the back her slim figure and wonder is she a mother, a grandmother?

I pace back and forth in front of the rows of ice-cream tubs, calculating prices with ounces like you taught me. “Stay away from generic brands.” I hear your voice say, although you never actually said it. I'm ready to make my move. Ready to jump in front of the cart holding two small girls clutching green-stamps in their little fists. A woman waddles past over to the pints of Haagen-Dazs.

Cheesecake, I think, would be the perfect ending.

I backtrack over to the bakery counter. She's still there, her ringless knuckles expanding and contracting into miniature cliffs and valleys when she squeezes each loaf, testing it. I think the corner of my eye catches a teardrop, swollen underneath her battered bifocals. I reassure myself it's only the lighting and go about selecting our desert. I compromise in your absence, carrot cake.
Mobie and Allison were just friends. It hadn’t always been so, once they’d shared the same apartment, the same bed, bought to keep them above the same drafty wood floors. It didn’t work out. Mobie liked to arrange things into neat, organized piles. Allison had more clothes on the kitchen table than in her closet, so lunches often had to be eaten standing over the kitchen sink and dinners on the old, checkered blanket Allison would stretch across the living room floor.

There were other reasons. Mobie liked Crest. Allison preferred Colgate. He liked the thermostat at sixty-five degrees, she preferred seventy-two. Late at night, Allison would creep down the stairs, reach behind the sofa and vengefully turn down the thermostat dial. In the morning, it’d read seventy-four. They’d spent an entire winter that way. Allison secretly wondering if they were experiencing some sort of self inflicted menopause.

The next winter, Allison left. Moved to a different town, a different apartment with steam radiators that kicked and punched hot air into her bedroom, so she often awoke sweated and twisted in her poly-cotton blend sheets. She switched her toothpaste to Mentadent and let newspapers, books and clothes consume the space in what she called the den. She ate dinners out with men who asked her questions like, “What’s your favorite color?” and, “Do you believe in God?”

Once, at a restaurant serving world-fare cuisine, slurping up a Chinese noodle, she’d looked into the wire-framed glasses of the man seated across from her trying to eat a crock of French-onion soup, a string of cheese wrapped around his
spoon, and said, “God is orange.” She couldn’t remember the question. Only that he’d passed on dessert and drove Allison straight home, the radio blasting a modern-classic rock station.

Still, Allison had been content those two years. Busy anyway. She took up indoor rock-climbing at the local fitness center, read books with titles like *Composing a Life*, *How to Succeed by 30* and *Pretty Girls Don’t Lie*. And lied a lot.

She told fabulous tales to the other secretaries in the office. Stories, Allison considered, listening to the steam kick-box her radiator, selling to *Playboy* or *Readers Digest*.

“My weekend,” Allison would say sipping her Starbucks double latte, “Incredible, truly incredible.”

In the retelling, questions were never asked. Things were just known, understood. Conversations like dandelion spores ready to blow into many different directions.

Garlic breath, Old Spice after-shave and gnawed toothpick bits in ashtrays, were a few of the details Allison chose to leave out. She got so good at the recreation, she’d often prepare the story during the actual date. By the time the waiter served the *tiramisu*, Eric had become a Brian, Brian a Charles. All with exquisite taste, style and smiles. There were no bumps on noses, huge clefts in chins or snorty-pig laughs. On occasion, just to hold interest, she’d insert some small thing like a booger hanging off a nose or an unzipped fly that, given the right context, could be forgiven. No one ever farted or said things like “neat-o” or “dude” or “I’m a Sagittarius.”
One night, she ran into Trudy, her hairstylist (not to mention the hairstylist for over half the single, secretarial staff under thirty-five). Allison, at Café Lombards, was seated across from Dwayne or Don or Gary, the guy with the road-kill on his head. When Allison feared Trudy had over-heard Astrological signs being shared and ex-wives discussed, she decided story time was over.

Dwayne or Don or Gary was her last great hoorah, her singing fat-lady, her hairpiece blowing in the wind.

“My weekend? Awful,” Allison said plopping a chamomile tea bag into her I’m a Hot Lemon Lover mug.

“His name was Amie. He told me to call him Dwayne. Or was it Gary? I met him at the restaurant. He’d said he had to work late.”

“Was he married? Do you think he was married? Dating a married man, Allison, how exciting.”

“No. A house-painter.”

The women didn’t laugh, they didn’t cringe or gasp or anything.

“I paint houses and my van broke down a couple of weeks ago and I don’t have the cash to fix it. I don’t even know if I can afford this dinner. That’s what he said to me!”

The story was not going as Alison had planned. Minus the bus pass, Gary had actually taken a taxi, it was all true. The paint stains on his fingers. The crumpled up clothes and sad droopy grin. The way Gary had yanked off his hairpiece like it was a Yankees cap at a rodeo and apologized for its absurdity, for himself. Just some sad, middle-aged man who painted houses and took his dog for
long hikes in the park just to get the hell out of Dodge for awhile. It wasn't awful, or funny or even-mildly amusing. But at the time, Allison had been too busy trying to duck away from Trudy's princess wave like it was cancer or worse to even pay attention.

“It wasn’t that bad, actually. He was a nice guy, just a plain old nice guy who wanted to eat dinner with someone other than his Boxer and Tom Brokaw.”

The women scattered, roaches from light, back to their desks, their forms, and memos. Back to their lives.

Allison quit the following Monday. “I’m moving back to Slocum,” she told her boss, the other secretaries and Gary who’d phoned about a movie.

She gave reasons like I’ll be close to my mother, I miss the landscape, my old friends. I miss the eggs at The Greasy Spoon diner. All were legitimate, given the right context. Allison never thought she was pretty anyway.

“The truth,” Allison had said to Gary in the movie theater lobby, “I don’t want to be a secretary anymore. Don’t want to be here anymore with its pettiness and tuliped lawns and smiles. Did you notice everyone smiles here? All the time. Don’t you find that odd? Don’t get me wrong, I like to smile, I smile. But all the time! It’s like I’m living in a city of mannequins. Everyone so damn chipper all the time.

“I’m from the Midwest,” Gary had said. “Guess I didn’t take notice.”

“Oh,” Allison had said. She’d never been to the Midwest. It always reminded her of Mr. Becker, her second grade teacher, of the scolding she got for coloring outside the state lines. Since then, the Midwest had seemed to Allison like a glob of vowels, waiting for a good solid “T” or “P” to get in there and shake things up.
"What's it like, the Midwest?"

"Lot of the same, lot of the same everywhere, really. Most people get too caught up in place to realize people want and need the same things no matter where they are." Gary ordered a jumbo size popcorn, two sodas and through the entire movie, some alien torture chamber romance flick, Allison thought; and this guy paints houses? What color? She was sure there were no shades of mauve or almond or grenadine taking up good space in his van.

When she moved, Gary's van was fixed. He offered to haul her old sofa and Lazy-boy out the Salvation Army. Packed boxes and wrapped her coming-ware in newspaper. He ran to the hardware store for more masking-tape, the grocery store for more boxes and dropped off her old tarnished brass bed frame at the garbage dump. In return, Allison treated him to take-out Chinese, pizza, a few snide grins and one smile.

Helping her secure her goldfish in the front seat of her Ford Escort, Gary told Allison if he was ever out her way he'd look her up.

"Sure, if you're ever out there, stop by," Allison said slamming down the Escort's hatch.

Then, Gary wrapped his arms around Allison's and pecked her cheek. She wasn't any good at it, the whole hugging thing. Afterwards, she'd played with a hang-nail, kicked cinders around with her feet and wished for a sudden cold-front to rid her of this heat spreading like hives down her neck.

"Take care now," Gary said and patted the bumper of the Escort as she pulled away.
Allison didn’t dare turn around to see if he’d climbed back into the van. Ever so sly, like a dog near a trash can, she adjusted her mirrors until she found him, standing there in her kicked cinders pulling the scab, Allison had noticed earlier, off his elbow.

On the two day drive back to Slocum, Allison let the NPR chat away in the background and thought of her mother’s meatloaf, of her friend Clara’s collection of sea-shells and Mobie. She thought again and again of the Christmas card he’d sent with no return address. Two kittens crawling out of a velvet stocking hanging over a fireplace. “Love Mobie,” on the inside in blue, smeared ink. Would he still be in that basement apartment? Still thinner then me? How would Mobie age? Gracefully, she was sure. Then, she’d see Gary’s hairpiece lying there on the table next to his grilled Salmon-steak, his broccoli florets, and she’d laugh. Once, she laughed so hard the Escort swerved into the oncoming lane and almost hit a semi. “That Gary,” she’d said, the sun causing her eyes to tear. “That Gary and his rug.” And sighed.

Two weeks into her new job, the manager for The Dog Eared, a local pet-shop, Allison decided her days of indoor rock-climbing were over. In Slocum, she could climb real rocks on real mountains. “Yoga, that’s what I need,” she said sprinkling some brine shrimp into the Cichlid tank. Yoga, she liked the way it sounded. A creamy, soothing word.

Waiting around the YMCA for her first class to begin, Allison spied in on an abdominal crunch class. The door was open anyway, so it wasn’t really spying, more like casual glancing. Bodies all curled up on mats and terrible grunts and groans hi-fiving each other in the sweaty air. Allison thought she recognized a grunt,
low and quiet, coming from somewhere in the back. Thought she recognized the
longish, brown hair and high-forehead the grunt was seemingly attached to. Mobie.
Way back in the corner, sharing a mat with an aging Betty Crocker type. Mobie
rolled up like a hedgehog, his arms tucked behind his head and elbows jutting out,
like he’d often done after they’d made love or ate roast beef off the living room floor.
Elbows, Allison thought, remembering the bluntness of them, that always reminded
her of pin cushions.

“Mobie? That you?” Allison said when Mobie and his duffel bag pressed
through the mob of sweat-suited women crowding the doorway.

“Allison, Allison Cringhaw. How long has it been?” Mobie gave her a sturdy
hug.

“Too long. You look, well, great.” Allison’s hives returned.

Through the stretches and instructions and blurb about how yoga was going
to rejuvenate Allison’s sad pathetic life, she couldn’t believe she’d run into Mobie
again. She could, yet she couldn’t. She’d expected it, yet had hoped he’d have
moved on, no, out of Slocum. Wasn’t that how they first met? Nice, easy stretches,
open the garden gate for the tension. let is roam free... Ran into each other?

He’d been dating Julie, a skittish woman who often completed her sentences
with phrases like well, you know what I mean, when, Mobie later confessed at
seventy-one degrees and rising, he had no idea what she meant.

“She was always said things like I was at the Laundromat the other day and
this man offered to help me fold my laundry. He was old enough to be my
grandfather and you know what I mean. Or, after we’d made love, I ask her how was
it, and she'd say, good Mobie, you know what I mean. How can a person always know what things mean?"

"I don't know," Allison had said tossing the quilt off her body.

Julie had convinced Mobie to attend a small gathering of her friends, and Allison was there with a Dwayne or Bob or Eric, some guy she'd met at the ATM machine. Eventually, she ended up on the bathroom countertop, her body leaned into the mirror, arms raised and fingers pinched around a pimple.

Is your gate open? See your tension take flight, flee, flee...

"Oh. Sorry," Mobie had said when he walked in on Allison, mid-squeeze.

"It's OK, I don't know why I come to these things, anyway. I always end up in the bathroom, finding faults in the mirror. Too drunk to drive home."

"I came with my girlfriend," Mobie had said, opening the door a smidgen.

Mobie on the closed toilet seat and Allison in her long-flowered skirt on the edge of the bathtub, that's how it went. They talked about nothing, about plastic trees and fairies, about life. In the shower after the YMCA run-in, Allison realized they'd talked about life.

Allison held a mouse by its tail, wound up and Whack! Its body struck a fifty-gallon aquarium then went limp in her hand. Allison slipped the stunned rodent into the boa-constrictor's cage and sighed. She couldn't, no could, no couldn't believe she'd run into Mobie again. She truly believed Mobie would've moved onto other things. He had always been so with it, so together. Between that and the thermostat, she had had every right to leave.
Allison with her odd jobs, crazy spurts of interest: photography, floral-design, pottery classes, her ant farms and furniture refinishing phases, could never stick with one thing.

"It's the routine of it I don't like. I get bored," she'd told Mobie, after she'd spoken with the polite, cheery voice of some woman who worked the classifieds of the Slocum Gazette. Forty-two words, fifteen dollars and her cross-country ski's were as good as gone.

"That what you're going to do to me? Try to sell me in a classified ad. For Sale: A Mobie. Neat & organized, needs very little tending. Stick out a bowl of water out for him. He'll be fine. Loves his back rubbed."

Mobie, Allison remembered, had stared at the thermostat dial plotting, Allison was sure, his next move.

"No Mobie, I'd give you to a friend, you don't just toss your Mobie away."

Still, Allison was sorry Mobie didn't get his music store. That was always his dream. In the two years she'd been away, Allison often imagined Mobie had set up shop in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Phoenix. A "P" city somewhere. Outside the hot and cold flashes of their apartment, he'd often ramble on about it.

"I just think the Music-Lands and discount record stores are killing the music industry. Only carrying big labels. There's no voice in anything. I want to carry only independent labels. Give hope to the talented musicians. Let them know they don't have to sell out to brand-name America."

These were the conversations Allison didn't like. They seemed so pre-packaged, like Kraft cheese singles. Over-processed. Allison had liked the way
Mobie’s hands raised over his head, reaching. Mobie, speaking from his arms, seemed so, well Mobie.

At first, Mobie dropped by The Dog Eared and roamed the aisles, picking up fish nets, plastic hamster tubes and salt licks. Always arriving around the time Allison was putting the Harold, the cockatiel, back onto his caged-in perch.

“Wanna grab some coffee?” he’d say twirling a dog collar around his fingers.

“Sure, I’ve just got to make sure the alligator’s all set up on feeder fish.”

Felix, the owner of The Dog Eared, had recently taken a trip to visit his parents in Florida and smuggled back a hatchling alligator. As a kid, he’d told Allison during her twenty-minute interview back in the salt-water aquariums, he’d always wanted one.

“At that time, people kept them as pets. So when I saw the chance, I grabbed it. It’s important, if you take this job, to make sure Baby is well taken care of.”

“Yeah. No Problem. I’ve got nothing against reptiles.” Allison just needed a job and she liked animals, they never caused hot-pricking neck rashes.

Over coffee, Mobie always fidgeted a lot and talked about his job at the phone company. When Allison left, he’d signed on as an operator to help pay the bills and to support his band, Willful Obscurity. He was an executive now.

“It’s not bad, the pay is good and I get to travel. Had to put the band on the back-burner for a while, but the other guys, there still around, we get together over the weekends. That sort of thing.”

Allison always sipped her coffee. Was he getting thinner? His wrists look like chicken necks. His eyes like wrinkly grapes. Was he sleeping at all?
"That's good Mobie. I remember how much you liked the band. You should spend more time on it. Maybe try to get some new tracks down." Allison always smoked too many cigarettes and smiled.

Soon Allison and Mobie spent most of their weekends together. They'd go to movies, lunch, the Laundromat. Did their grocery shopping from the same cart. It seemed stupid to go alone when they both had errands to run, when both had nothing better to do on a Saturday night anyway.

Mobie, or it was Allison, was concerned, after they'd gotten their boxes of cereal mixed up at the registers, that some past feeling might well up and expand like water freezing. Folding Mobie's white athletic socks one Sunday, they set the record straight.

"It's silly. That whole thing between us was a long time ago. We're different people. If we'd have know what good friends we'd make, we could have thwarted the whole mess."

Mobie poured fabric softener into a machine and invited Allison over to see his new apartment next Sunday Afternoon.

"We'll do brunch," he said in some accent Allison couldn't quite place. Something between Elizabeth Taylor and James Dean. Then, he lifted his arms up towards the vents in the ceiling.

For a week, Allison thought about it. How would his apartment look? Would he still have all those posters on the walls, the ones she refused to let him tack up in the bedroom. Modern Rock posters with red abstract monsters wearing high heels, disconnected body parts and clowns. One, she remembered, of two clowns in bed...
covered by an American flag. One clown was sewing something onto the flag, a letter or something.

At The Dog Eared, she’d get so caught up wondering if he’d still have the same tweed sofa or old clothes tree where he’d hang his jeans each night, she’d forgot to feed the alligator, who’d been moved to a metal washtub, his rats.

“Allison, something wrong?”

“No Felix. Why?”

“I’m a bit concerned with the care Baby has been getting? I came in last night to check up on things and the poor guy had almost chewed though the chicken wire.”

“I’m sorry, I must’ve forgotten his dinner last night. This young couple came in right before five and needed some Ick Cure for their elephant nose fish and we got to talking and— I’m sorry.”

“Allison, you won’t find a job like this anywhere. Great hours, good pay and then there’s Baby. Now how many jobs have a perk like that?”

Allison had to admit, for the first time, in a long time, she enjoyed what she was doing. The pay was OK, the hours better, but tending all the animals, watching them grow and change. The Iguanas ate lettuce right from her hand. She found herself smiling and when she did, she thought of Gary and his hairpiece, Mobie and his arms. Gary hadn’t bothered to call in the month or so she’d been back. That was OK, too busy painting. Besides, she and Mobie were doing fine. It was great being just friends. Allison ran her fingers through the soft, smooth quills of a
sleeping hedgehog and said it aloud, “Just friends.” She liked the way it sounded, the way her tongue curled up into it.

Mirrors, Allison discovered, took up most of the space on Mobie’s walls. He’d tossed out all his posters and bought mirrors. Smoked, beveled, wood framed looking glasses that laughed at Allison’s hips, wrinkles, and limp tousled hair. The sofa had been replaced with a futon, the ratty old desk they’d bought at the Salvation Army with a chic aluminum one. Only the clothes tree remained in the corner of the bedroom, barren and alone.

“What do you think?”

Allison swallowed and tried not to look at the lump in her throat staring at her from a mirror etched with some sort of paisley design.

“I think, I think you’ve gone overboard with the...”

“Mirrors. My therapist recommended it. You know after you left, I was in therapy for awhile. Fear of abandonment. Something, Allen said, that stems from the time my German shepherd ran away when I was three. Then, you left and I got very lonely. Allen said I needed to face things. Look in the mirror at least once a day. Face yourself, Mobie, he said. I had so many things to face I couldn’t spend all day in the bathroom, so I bought one for the bedroom, one for the living room and soon it was a hobby. I pick them up at junk-yards and antique dealers. I’m going to get rid of them soon, I guess. How about some tea? Try the Jasmine.”

“I don’t feel right about drinking flowers. Coffee? ”

Allison sank into the futon. Therapy? Mirrors? Why didn’t Mobie mention it before? She looked into the long smoky mirror in front of her. All she could do think
about was white rabbit from Alice in Wonderland. I’m late, I’m late. But there was absolutely no place she or Mobie needed to be, not now.

The rest of the afternoon they discussed Willful Obscurity. They’d discussed it before, in passing, but in his home territory Mobie went on and on about rifts and lyrics and the new bass player, Rob. Rob this and Rob that until Allison felt the Mobie from coffee shops and movie theaters had been stolen from her and she was left with this, this mirror guy.

Besides, secretly, Allison always hated the band. Remembered the band practices held in their bedroom into the early morning hours. The sound of the violin lingering long after the drums and bass had stopped. Once, sleeping on the tweed sofa, she’d awoken to silence and shortly after Ingrid, the violinist, tiptoed past her and slipped out the door. “Nothing, we’re just friends,” Mobie had said when Ingrid dropped by with some honey and Chamomile tea for a cold Allison hadn’t noticed Mobie had contracted. She thought about asking him now, after all this time, wondering if he’d confess to what she’d known all along. It didn’t seem to be proper. Friends don’t discuss those sort of things, do they?

“No coffee, Allison. How about a soda?”

“Fine. Just fine.”

The alligator situation at The Dog Eared escalated. Felix had five metal wash tubs torn apart, then welded back together to give Baby, who was now into Cornish hens, more room. Felix insisted the reptile stay in the store-front so passer-bys could get a good look at the one and only alligator in Slocum. When it was slow,
Allison would pull out an animal: hedgehog, guinea pig, box turtle and stand over by the register and let it scoot around the counter. She exchanged her glances from animal, to shoppers, and back again. Some shoppers paused to look into Baby's reptilian eyes, those two tiny black diamonds in a meadow of green. Others shuffled by at a pace that reminded Allison of the time a shipment of chameleons escaped their cardboard carrying boxes. Zip, zoom, gone.

Today, the winter rain chained the shoppers to malls, away from the two streets that composed Slocum's downtown. Allison placed a bit of an apple on her shoulder and watched a chuckwalla's claws latch themselves onto the grooves of her wool sweater. The lizard preferred cacti leaves. She watched its pale pink tongue lap the air, the muscles of its jaws work furiously and wished Mobie was here.

He stopped by less and less. They still had their weekends, well except for this past Saturday night, when Mobie had a date.

Allison had curled with a bag of popcorn and her Spanish dictionary, conjugating verbs. She and Mobie were planning a summer trip to Spain, compliments of the phone company. Mobie spoke perfectly, but Allison was always getting her tenses mixed up. Saying things in the present, when she truly meant the past. Later, the phone had rung.

"How was it. Get any action?" Allison had teased, she always teased.

"Bit of a bore. Kept using the word actually, negating everything I said. Actually, Mobie, Tom Cruise's first movie was Legend. Actually, the poverty line's at $9,340 not ten thousand."
“Where does she come off?” Allison had said pulling her quilt tighter around her body.

“Actually,” Mobie had said. “I don’t know.”

Allison took it as a sign that no action was given or received. Still, she wasn’t one to put all her signs in one basket.

“Miss? Miss? How much for the hedgehog? It’s my little girl’s birthday and she would adore it. It’s perfect.”

“The hedgehog?” Allison said slipping the chuckwalla back into its terrarium. “It’s not for sale. Bit of a cold, I think. I wouldn’t want to sell you a sick animal. How about a dwarf rabbit? Children love bunnies. You know, you can actually litter-train them just like cats. We’ve got a book that’ll explain the whole process.”

“I don’t think so, I had my heart set on the hedgehog. Thanks anyway. Hope the little bugger gets better.”

“Me too,” Allison said and escorted the man out the door.

“Busy, busy, busy,” Mobie said into the phone. “The band’s taking off, I can feel it. This bass-player, what talent. You should hear him. Come over and listen to a practice. You should, I need another opinion.”

“I don’t know Mobie. I’ve got things to do this weekend. I’m busy, really.”

“Things. What things? What do have to do that’s so important.”

“You know Mobie, my whole life does not revolve around this friendship. I’ve got a date, if you really want to know. This man came into buy a hedgehog and I
sold him a rabbit and we're going out to dinner. Besides, I never could stand that Ingrid."

"Ingrid? She moved to New York over a year ago. Working for Blondie's manager, something with a web-site."

Allison twirled the phone chord around in her fingers.

"I'll see what I can do. I might be able to rearrange things with— with this guy."

Allison hung up the phone and paced around her apartment. "Just Friends," danced a jitterbug on her tongue. It did the tango down her arm. And once, in a moved totally uncalled for in the cha-cha, it dipped her!

Mobie was right, the band was good. Allison couldn't really elaborate on it, she didn't have the vocabulary to speak musically to musicians.

"What'd you think?" Mobie said, when Rob and Eric and Icepick (the drummer) were lugging guitar cases and amps out to their station wagons.

"I think. I think you guys were great. Really, Mobie. Very Good."

He brushed his wrist across his forehead, wiped off sweat-tears and sighed.

She'd wounded him. Kraft-cheese singled him. And there wasn't a thing she could do about it. So she went home, plopped down on her bed and tried to think of more appropriate things to say. Words like: riveting, mysterious, dangerous, captivating. The problem was rock music didn't sound like a romance novel. It sounded good.
The next day Rob waltzed into Allison’s Yoga class. Typical, she thought, staring down his black sweatpants, black T-shirt and expensive black sneakers. What was it with musicians and the color black?

“Mobie’s friend, right?” he said, pulling up a mat next to hers.

“Mobie’s bassist, right?” she said legs straddled, touching her right toe.

“Yeah, among other things.” Rob stuck out his legs like two pine boards, straight and narrow in front of him, bent down and wrapped his wrists around his calves.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means, I am other things besides Mobie’s bassist. So like women, always sticking people in categories.”

“Isn’t that what you did? Mobie’s friend. Isn’t that what you said? I am other things too.”

She liked him. The cut of his jib, her mother would say. Yes, she did.

The fifty-yard dash. That was the length of Allison’s “relationship” with Rob.

“I don’t know Mobie. His tongue just felt wrong in my mouth.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? His tongue felt wrong in my mouth.”

“It means what I said.”

Allison tossed Baby a chicken.

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, it felt wrong in mine too.”

Allison watched Mobie watch the alligator, its jaw open. Snap shut. Poultry slide down its throat in a smooth, easy gulp.
There was no belly punch, no eyebrows hitting widows-peaks or quick turns of the head. Allison’s jaw remained put. She wanted it. She longed for all the melodrama she’d seen in made for TV movies *Kissed a Boy!* to line itself up in her mind and march single file through the deep trenched synapses of her brain. Out through the Sahara of her throat, left, right, left, and fire simultaneously out the tip of her tongue in one loud explosion. Boom!

She got Mobie. Just Mobie sitting on the windowsill, watching the alligator digest its food. Mobie with his head tucked into his chin, Mobie curled up outside of his stomach crunching class. Mobie in pain.

When he stammered up the courage to walk over to the tropical fish aquariums, to Allison, all he could do was look at the one lone Oscar swimming back and forth in its tank. The fish dreaming, Allison had often thought, of its ancestors, of the wild rapids and slow murky waters of the Amazon.

“Lot to face, huh,” Allison said and kicked herself.

“I don’t even know what happened. You came back and things got messy. I could to talk to him, really talk to him. I haven’t done with anyone but the mirrors for a long time. Then he kissed me one night and before I knew it we were eating out the same cereal bowl.”

“So, the jerk was dating both us than. Back stabbing us both.”

“Guess so.” Mobie ran his thumb along the length of the Oscar’s tank. The fish followed it, its eyes latched onto what Allison could only imagine it thought was its dinner.
Somewhere there was a spark, then two, then a strange thrashing from the store-front window. The electricity went out.

The smell of burning alligator flesh smells nothing like roasting chicken. It smells nothing like singed hair or rubber tires or metal. The smell of an electrocuted alligator is nothing like Allison had ever smelled before or hoped to smell again. And the sight, the two black diamonds eyes melting like candle wax into the water, mouth agape and tongue swollen and purple and ridiculous. When it was over, when the chomp from Baby's electric heater sent him to his untimely death; the sound was beautiful.

The filters from the rows and rows of aquariums released one last series of bubbles, sending them up, up to the water's edge where they exploded into vapor. The buzz-hum of the black lights over the frogs and snakes and tarantulas tanks fizzled out. The artificial waterfall from the artificial pond ran dry. Even the radio stopped churning out its lost loves and bubble-gum rock. Everything took pause. The parakeets didn't chirp, the cocketial didn't talk, the metal hamster wheels screeched to a halt. Even rabbit's feet stopped thumping. And Allison was sure if they'd sold puppies, which was the one thing The Dog Eared didn't sell, they would've stopped their yelping.

"Mobie," Allison said. "Would you please stop talking to that fish and give me a hug."

Mobie turned. Arms folding arms, and Mobie's body curling into hers.
There is more. Felix’s face in the morning, for one thing. Rob’s departure from Willful Obscurity. Mobie’s departure from the phone company. The grand opening of Alligator Wishes, Slocum’s one and only independent music store. The summer Gary showed up and Allison got her house painted a nice cornflower blue. The following Spring when the paint turned thin and drippy, leaving her originally white house more like a Salvador Dali cloud than she’d wanted. In life, there’s always more, so much more. But let’s just leave it at that. Shall we?
Go into a backyard. Find the spot where grass doesn’t grow. Maybe it’s in the garden. Maybe it’s in the tracks from Daddy’s car—a blue station wagon pulled in and out of the lawn Sunday afternoons to polish clean with dish soap and a hose. Maybe you’re in Grandma’s backyard where bare dirt is harder to find, where the only dirt you can find is around her compost bin stuffed with dead weeds, orange peels, and apple cores. Grandma’s dirt is real black and when you pick it up, smush it between your fingers and let the bits and pieces fall back again, your hands smell gross like they do when you scrub potatoes. Maybe you’re in your best friend’s backyard where the dirt is orange and clumpy and your friend says his dad told him it wasn’t dirt, but clay.

Don’t believe it. Say clay comes from the store, comes all wrapped up in plastic and it’s not just orange but all different colors. Argue about it. Go on and on. He’ll say my dad said or my aunt said and you say well, my mom said or my real best friend said until it’s all been said and you’re both sick of it. Then, go back to telling jokes about counting and teachers and making-up rules to made-up games. But this isn’t a game.

Carry your pitcher. The cracked, mustard yellow Tupperware pitcher you found buried deep in some cupboard because it’s too ugly and old for fresh squeezed lemonade. Bend down and pull the hose up to your side, watching the water trickle out, then get sucked up into the grass. Grab the metal handle, press down and think of the way Mom’s diamond ring disappears into the shadow of her
broad knuckles when she waters her garden. Think diamonds look better look better that way.

Drop the hose letting the handle clink, scrape onto the sidewalk. Skip down the sidewalk, down to the bare dirt, holding the pitcher, listening to the swashing sound of the water. Skip higher, faster till water bumps out over the lip, onto your jeans, leaks down into your skin. Think about water balloons and Ryan Cozac, about his birthday party and the sting of a balloon exploding on your chin. Smile. Remember the praying mantis you showed him. Splashing water into the dirt, see Ryan Cozac freckles, his scabby elbows and crooked front tooth being eaten by the praying mantis, by you.

Pour in more water, drowning Ryan Cozac and diamonds and Daddy’s car tracks and with a stick—a stick you didn’t have to look very hard for because sticks are always there—stir. Create a brown, black gooey mess. Think about cookie dough before the flour, how it’s slimy and sugary and how Mom always says, “Don’t eat that.” But when she turns around to wash out the butter dish, you stick your fingers in and suck them clean, the sugary mess melting on your tongue.

Knead your fingers in the mud, thinking this goo is like cookie dough goo until you know it’s not like cookie dough goo at all. It’s really like the kind of goo Dad slaps on the wall with the thing that looks like what Mom uses to flips your eggs. Once, you asked him what it was called and he said, “Go away,” because you threw a baseball in the house and now he had to stick goo on the wall when he’d rather be sawing up wood or something.
You don't like that your goo looks like wall goo because the more you think about it, that goo is a covering goo, an eraser attached to Daddy's frown. Shake your head, wipe your hands on your jeans and spit. Spit into the grass, then grind it in with the sole of your Keds.

Pour in more water until it's a soupy doopy goo. Think soupy doopy goo sounds funny, a giggly tummy tickling funny. Singsong it over and over again, "You're a soupy doopy goo, a soupy doopy sloppy ploppy sort of goo." You like that it's sloppy and dirty because you don't want to be clean, don't want to worry about dirt underneath your fingernails or on your face or staining your clothes because it's Saturday and you're in your play-clothes.

Your clothes feel right on your body. Old, worn jeans with the rip in the knee and the T-shirt saying some old, faded out of date thing. You like them because they're your play clothes and because you remember when they were not. Remember when Mom and you went shopping to buy them.

She made you undress behind a door with long, skinny slits in it, like the one Grandma hides Grandpa's clothes behind. After he died, you'd crawl into the darkness, into the smell of his clothes and sleep. Safe. There were lights behind this door. Bright glowing tubes that made your face look funny in the mirror, made the stupid baseball bruise all purple and yellow. Mom was embarrassed because you wore socks with holes in them and underwear that was not your newest. You didn't understand why she was embarrassed because no one saw your underwear except her because she poked her head in even after you asked her not to. You yanked the jeans, stiff and hard, up over your socks and underwear and walked out
into the racks of clothes, where Mom made you turn around in a full circle, twice. Where she pulled and yanked at the belt loops like she wanted to lift you off the ground, lift you out the lights and mirrors. Like she wanted to give you wings, instead of check the fit. She smiled and said "Do you like them?" "Yes," you said because you didn’t like the lights, because now you were thinking about your socks and you didn’t want to waste the whole day there, trying on school clothes. You took them off, then home.

It took a lot of recesses to turn them into what they are now, yours.

Play with the white strings around the hole in the knee, stirring mud. Think about the willow tree, the one responsible for the rip in your jeans. Its lower limbs bent and wrinkly like your Grandpa’s arms when he held you. Once, your neighbor Katie told you the willow was magical. She said, "Make a wish, make a wish," and wrapped its spaghetti limbs around her and twirled. You wished for Swedish fish and a new baseball. You climbed higher and higher, the seams in your jeans stretching and wished and wished for a new baseball. Then, the tree spit you out. Spit you right onto the grass, your jeans ripped, elbows bloody and Katie laughing.

Rip the white strings clean off and roll them between your fingers, into tight little balls. Stick them in your mouth, then launch them clear over to the rusty swing set. Say to the mud: "Sorry I didn’t wish Grandpa got better." Promise you’ll never eat Swedish fish or play baseball again, ever.

Dig your hands deep into the ditch, sliding mud between you fingers. The mud will hang onto your fingers not wanting to let go, wanting to become a part of you.
Shove it off and say, “Get back in there mud.”

Laugh.

Say: “It’s silly mud thinks I’m the boss.”

Push the goop around with your fingers, and listen to the sound it makes. It’s a slurpy-sucking sound nothing but mud can make. Wipe the tickle off your nose and forget about the mud until you feel it, hanging off your nostril. The smell reminds you of summer rain and diving your feet into puddles that grow when you have to leave the pool early because it’s thundering and you’re still wearing your bathing suit.

Yank-up pieces of grass and throw them into your ditch. Look at the color it adds to your creation, the texture. You want more. Get up, mud caked and drying on you fingers and look for more color. Snap tops off dandelions and leaves off mulberry trees. Don’t pick the mulberries, they’re still green. Remember when you ate a whole bunch of green mulberries and Mom said, “Don’t do that again.” After the Pepto-Bismol, you avoid green mulberries like tomato juice and celery at Grandma’s house.

Tear the mulberry leaves at the veins, where they’re supposed to rip. Throw the leaves in your ditch and set aside the dandelions for later. Then, pick up the clumps of mud and arrange them in the bent-up pie plate you found in the garage, underneath your broken, red sand pail. Add more water. Too runny. Add more dirt. Play with the amounts, getting it just right because you have time to make mistakes. Sing little songs in your head. Go through all the songs you learned on the school bus and move to the ones you learned in Sunday School and then go back through
letting the songs, like the mud, get all mixed up. Sing a silly, mixed up song you
won't remember when the bubbles in the bathtub wash you clean or when you close
your eyes at night, but now it seems as cozy as the sun in your hair and as real as
the mud in your fingers.

Drop dandelions around the pie's edges and think about who's going to get it.
Think: Mom, Grandma, Stupid sister.

Throw your shoulders back like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, and say to the
mud: "I'll give it to Mrs. Miller."

Think about her big apple tree and the way she peaks her head out from her
lace curtains, then walks out in her faded apron, carrying her paring knife. See her
flabby-thin arm waving you over, then patting the spot next to her on the rough,
wooden bench. She always holds her hand out and you plop an apple into its palm.
When she cuts out the bruises, you watch the blue bumps on her hands sliding all
over the place. Over and over she turns the apple and never uses a cutting board.

Once, you asked Mom why she doesn't peel apples like Mrs. Miller and she said,
"Because I'm not Mrs. Miller, that's why," and went back to her cutting board.

Say: "Yep, I'll give Mrs. Miller my pie. She'll say it's a real pretty pie."

Besides, it's an excuse to go over there. Not that you need one, but Mom
says it's rude to go somewhere and not bring anything.

Look down at your pie, at the ring of dandelions. Say in Mrs. Miller's shaky
voice: "What you need, pie, is a centerpiece." Search again. Look in the flowerbeds,
the garden and around the lawn. Pick clover and mums thinking they'll be perfect.

When you put them in the pie's center, crunch up your face like Linda when Barbie
isn’t wearing the right outfit for her movie date with Ken. Strip them off and search again. Spend a really long time searching. Try mums, green beans, strawberries, and the peony with the big, black ant on the bud.

Grow frustrated and tired. Feel the sun slide down your shoulders. Take a piece of grass for a stem, the maple seeds for leaves. Pluck the petals off a daisy. Whisper I love him, I love him not. Never say Ryan Cozac, only think it. Spread the petals over the mud. Create your own flower for the center.

Put your hands on your hips and smile, proud of your work. Carry the mud-pie up to a back-porch and set it on the lowest step where it’ll stay for weeks, until Linda’s dog knock it off. Find your way inside. Mom will stick her head out of the refrigerator and say, “What you were doing and how did you get so dirty.”

Say, “Nothing and go upstairs.”

Open your cupboards and look at the beautiful glass pie plates Aunt Carol gave you. Know you’ll never use them. Somehow, somewhere along the line you never learned how to make crust and besides you don’t have time for that sort of thing.

Plant seeds and potted flowers to give you an excuse to play in the dirt, an excuse you never thought you’d need. Late at night, alone and tired, grab an apple out of the fruit basket you don’t know why you bother putting out, it’s only you. Rinse off your paring knife, the one in the stack of dirty dishes. Try duplicating Mrs. Miller’s expert job. Try again and again. Fail.
Think about the mud-pies and baseball bruises and willow trees and Ryan Cozac's bloody nose. Take a bite of your apple, letting the juice run down your chin onto your satin nightshirt, close your eyes and make a wish.
SPLINTERED CRADLE-SONG

Hush little darling You should know by now never to turn the television volume above three, not on Saturday mornings. Daddy in bed & rough light sneaking under closed blinds. Light spying on you pouring milk over Cheerios, fingers shaking holding gallon spilling not a drop on the countertop clean & gray & shadowed by jug’s weight. Don’t you know? You with milk all over, dripping onto the floor. to skip cereal when container’s above the halfway mark. Eat a donut instead. All this & than you must always sit on the very tip of the braided rug, right up close to the television so you can sing the theme songs but not with Cheerios in your mouth or you’ll drip milk down your chin. Sop it up with the nightgown sleeve. Are you listening to me? Don’t ever turn the volume up. Not even if Spiderman’s trapped in a parking lot & laser rays shooting out of dark. Or open refrigerator’s door with a sudden jerk so pickle & jelly jars jiggle & clank. Walk on your tiptoes like Ms. Petsu taught you in ballet class. don’t say a word Never, not alone in the mornings or clink clink clink of glass lamp shades & his hairy toes when the staircase opens up to the spaces between the banister spokes. Fingers across then into slick wet curls drooping down his forehead. Stale sour smell & pulling you up by the arm. Rag-doll. If you’ve gone this far, go limp. daday’s gonna buy you a mocking bird They’ll come on weekends or evenings or anytime after the buzz-hum of the vacuum cleaner & settling of dust & bleach & Pine-sol & “Pick up your room, where’s your laundry?” from Mommy’s voice that doesn’t sound like Mommy’s voice at all. Coats piling on your bed & you dressed in something nice & sweet. He & his friends, luncheon
meats like edible cigars on aluminum trays & pop, fizz, gulp & Daddy’s “Com’n over little girl.” You’ll go. He’ll put you on his that knee & his lips will stretch out & up to his scratchy cheeks. “Recite a poem. Sing a song. Run upstairs and get that painting your teacher said showed real promise.” Do it now, fast. Legs leaping off lap mocking bird & you’ll run & get the crayoned smeared marigolds & don’t come back down. Disappear. Into the attic, cardboard boxes where Mommy puts last year’s curtains, bathroom hamper behind recliner into the corner of the bedroom. Go. don’t sing If you don’t, if you come down, he may slip out of company mode & it’ll be your fault.

daddy’s gonna buy you a diamond ring Twelve-string with case so big, so red fuzzy you’ll climb in & cuddle up when he pulls out his guitar. Hollow wood and bumping echoes off palms. if that Adam’s apple ticking, fingers squeaking up the neck. Fingers jutting back & forth like a piece of maple under the blade of a band saw twisting out your name. diamond ring Voice so turtledove you’ll almost believe it, almost think he walked right out the television screen. Daddy is not Mr. Brady. Say it again. Daddy is not—but he’ll seem so real. turns Until amplifier, taller-than-mommy amplifier even the Hulk couldn’t throw lands on your ankle, foot throbbing, but it’s not broke, only an accident, trip to the emergency room. Pokes & prods & little beams of lights in your eyes. brass 

brass daddy’s gonna buy you a looking glass

Never say you didn’t take it, haven’t seen matte knives, car keys, Sunday shoes, important papers that aren’t papers at all but scribbles on leftover bits of pine, oak, anything. You’ll always know where his screwdrivers are where these scribbles you’d never place alongside Lincoln Logs are. Yes, you’ll know, because negative answers lead to and if “I know you, your sneaky ways, know by that smile you’ve got
plastered across your face. Don’t play these games with me little girl.” You’ll know, & you’ll answer “Yes daddy, I’ve seen your __ & then you’ll think real hard where he put his __. And when he “how’s school?” you’ll pluck that looking out an incident, it does not matter from this day or last or that the moment actually belonged to Hannah or Bradley or anyone. It’s glass yours because you’re the happiest little girl in the whole world and if you don’t believe it go to full length that looking mirror behind bathroom door glass & say it over gets & over broke again. daddy gonna buy you a Billy goat Backseat of the station wagon, his face a pinched up change purse, cursing, screaming & you’ll be Wonder Woman in her invisible helicopter soaring in clouds. Except you won’t find any clouds because it’s all blue so you’ll find a bird & become that robin red breast in trees just starting to bud. Neck twisted, looking back, his foot heavy pulling you forward until nc more wings & you’re an ant crawling underneath the seat not really crawling underneath the seat because and if that Billy it would attract attention, lead to a swipe reaching for anything goat but air from across vinyl warm. You with knapsack with silken yellow baby blanket & dirt-smudged doll & tennis shoes on your feet because he’ll run out of gasoline. won’t pull Edge of the highway, dragging a blanket in cinders, sucking your thumb like a damn baby. A damn baby some lady who can’t turn down the little girl whose pigtails need pulled back into place picks up. And you’ll yes ma’am & smile & not once notice how her car doesn’t smell funny like his breath or have cigarette butts tumbling from the ashtray at S turns. daddy’s gonna buy you a cat and bull Blue spruce & decorations you’ll make hanging big & bulky on the limbs. Rainbow dots on everything. Tap boot one two ringing front room his hobby his customers gonna buy and
it but they won't because you'll “that's a lot of money” under your breath & he cart and bull so many lights, won't because diamond because jiggle bells wrapping paper “Had to bring the price down” bang bang banging up steps up cart & don't say a word hush, hush hush though the bull through stings like wasps between toes and stings mocking looking glass, looking looking goat bird with anticipation of pillow, roll over sleep. daddy's gonna buy you a dog named Rover Claw-footed deep, underwater so hair feels like honeysuckle smells & you a mermaid don't bark most times. buy you a horse and cart Lumberyard with rows & rows of 2X4's & you so little & the cart daddy's gonna pull through the isles so squeaky still & he holds each board up to his nose, checking.

He'll “don't want anything bent out of shape,” eyeing for knots & warps, never the plywood sheets, the pressed, recompressed particle boards not for the dry-sink that'll never be Mommy's or the doll house shingles you'll paint burnt red for some other little girl. Driving and if with wood sticking out the hatch, cutting the back seat into little sections you'll crawl under, finding your spot because the front seat has paint gallons & brushes & the dog. Driving that horse and cart not home but to Falco's where the neon signs look like the devil & Shirley Temple & stack of quarters. .. Watch that silver ball, stool slid up close, knees bumping against metal. Maybe you'll get a free game or two or five because if you don't, if they run out before it's time for Mommy to come home, you'll move to the bar, next to Daddy. Alongside men with sticky, bushy mustaches who'll ask you if you like olives, which you don't, before they stumble fall down off stools to pinch you're too-red-already-cheeks.

Still be the prettiest little girl in town First time. You'll creep up basement stairs to a driveway, gravel denting palms. Puke. Crawl back into slick, moldy sleeping bag.
Hold still.

Goddamn so pretty.

Kind of girl I can take out to a fancy dinner.

Hold still bleeding into the second, third, “the banged her good” floating by when you'll be in cafeteria hunched over reading remembering virgin shriveled up scared, subtracting them all knowing something catches in their throats, waiting.
Tammy and I didn’t want to bury you in the ground, we wanted to plant you in our tree-house. But Grandma insisted. She insisted the pastor say ashes for ashes and the funeral parlor’s chairs be padded with velvet. Mother insisted the end be pretty. The gash in your head covered with putty and the pucker in your chest smoothed over with a stiff-starched shirt.

They’ve refinished your face, Daddy. It looks shiny and new, even the crevices around your eyes look new. They’ve trimmed your hair. There’s no sawdust in it. It’s not wild and curly, not frizzy. Not anything.

Mother was up at three in the morning fixing your white shirt. I sneaked down the stairs, stuck my head between the banister spokes and watched. I listened to the spit, sizzle of the starch when she ran her iron over it. She made creases, straight as an arrow, down each sleeve. Two parallel lines, Daddy, run down your arms and they’ll never connect.

The pin-striped suit was back from the dry cleaners. It hung from a metal coat hanger on the edge of the ironing board. When Mother lifted up the iron, the
whole deal almost toppled over on her. I searched for your coffee stain on the collar, but it’s gone. Plain erased.

They’ve even shaved your face. Aunt Carla says you look distinguished. There’s no stubble on your chin and I can’t see your teeth. They’ve closed your mouth and you smile without showing your teeth. I’ve never seen you smile like that and I think it’s odd, like a dream.

You lay down, your arms crossed over your chest and your hands holding nothing but each other. Why would you want to hold your own hands, Daddy?

Uncle Don drove Mother and Tammy and me to the funeral parlor. He’s got a nice car. He called it a New Yorker, which doesn’t make any sense because he lives in California. I’ve never met Uncle Don before, but you know that, don’t you? Mother talked and talked about San Diego, the bridges and Uncle Don’s swimming pool and you weren’t invited.

Uncle Don’s got a moustache and his skin looks like a fawn’s back. When he talks, his voice reminds me of looking for a corner in a beach ball. He gave Tammy and me dolls with glass skin and kissed our cheeks. He smells like the sweet cream we feed the kittens.

It’s an important day, Daddy. We’ve got no more room in our cabin. Mother said Tammy and I can sleep in our sleeping bags tonight. She said we can put up the tent if it doesn’t get too cold. I think Tammy needs to sleep in our tent, away from all these people.

So many. They pinch my cheeks and rub my head and say remember me? Your Daddy drove a motorcycle, you know that? Drove that thing clear across the
globe to find your Mommy. A big black man says you dragged him clear across a
‘Nam and showed me his fake leg. It’s made of wood. I think it must be oak or poplar
to hold such a big man. It’s painted the color of his skin and I tap on it, making sure
it’s not pine.

There’s even a man who came all the way from a place called Turkey. He
talks funny. Says name is Calandar. He says knew you when you were a teenager.
We played Buddy Holly records together, he says. The twist, your Daddy taught me the

Daddy, I know this must be dream. There’s no sawdust in your hair and
you’re holding your own hands.

Tammy thinks you need your guitar, the old six string where Stewball the
racehorse lives. Lives in the box with the river of wine and my Junebug wings. I
watched her get Mother’s step stool out from underneath kitchen sink, climb up in
her stocking feet and her curl her toes under when she stretched up and unhooked
it from the nail on the wall where Mother put it that night, the one she cried and cried
and said go to bed already. Tammy carried the guitar into Uncle Dan’s car from
New York and tried not to touch the strings. I think the guitar would’ve been better on
the wall, but Tammy gives it to you.

She places the guitar across your chest, covering the paisley tie Mother
searched and searched for yesterday. Aunt Carla said the plaid one was good
enough, who’d know the difference anyway. Mother told her you hated that tie. Said
it was your father’s and you’d have none of his politic talk wrapped up in its knot. I
don’t know that word, politic. It reminds of the parrot we saw Pomeroy’s when we
bought Mother her scarf with the blooming daisies. *Polly want a cracker, Polly want a cracker.* That’s all it could say, caged and green under those lights.

Mother found the paisley tie in my sock drawer, way back in the corner where you told me to hide it. *Junebug put that tie away now. Daddy doesn’t need a tie to prove himself.* Mother just about cried when she found it, she was so happy.

My wink smacks Tammy’s cheek like a blown kiss when she puts the guitar over you chest and we both smile about the tie being properly hidden again. She holds my hand tight and it doesn’t seem right, you holding your hands with the guitar across you like that.

Grandma pats her wrinkly old hands on the velvet chairs in the front row. Tammy and I sit down. Tammy feels for the harmonica with her other hand, the one I’m not holding. It’s in her jumper pocket where I put last night after the banister and ironing board and Mother’s Damn it all! She was supposed to put the harmonica in the breast pocket of your suit. That’s what we decided in the hospital. Tammy sang and sang and I said, “You know where the mouthpiece belongs.” She jammed the chords down her throat and nodded.

I was wrong. Remember what you taught us? *Junebug, now you just think of something you’ve got to say and let the mouthpiece tell it for you.* The harmonica has more power then words, Daddy. I’m the harmonica now.

I give Tammy a voice. She doesn’t want to play me, but there’s no one else who knows. She sneaks me out of her jumper and goes to the bathroom. On the toilet, with the lid closed and the door locked, she puts me to her mouth. Her lips are wet and soggy and soft. She blows and her lips slid down me and out come all the
things she wants in life, all the things she wanted for us and I'm patient, Daddy. I let
her tell about the little boxes on the hillside and the fluffy clouds in the sky, the
clouds we'd play on. She tells about skipping from one cloud to the next. Tells
about the time we nursed those puppies from a bottle after their momma tried to kill
them and about all the crayfish wading in the stream. Those crayfish. I'd say, "Come
out, come out wherever you are?"

When she gets ready to tell about the night, Daddy, the night we should've
been home, she stops. She can't tell what she sees, but you know.

She slobbers into me and the salt tears rust my frame and I feel beautiful like
a maple leaf in autumn. Tammy slips me into the pocket of her jumper, hides me for
later, and I let myself go. I am another dream now, Daddy.

I am the dream we'd dream together in the tree-house, on the clouds, looking
down at the railroad tracks, at all the people in ties and high heels, checking their
watches and running late. We'd wonder about them, wouldn't we? We'd say all
those people were like the three blind mice. We'd say those mice were really robots
down there clicking their shoes over the sidewalks and we'd pray and pray they'd
join us outside that silly little maze. And I am the dream, flying down with my
Junebug wings and lifting all the people out of the maze. "See, isn't that better," I
say and they smile real, true smiles that are so bright I can't see their faces.

I'm sorry Mother found the paisley tie. I'm sorry for all the Polly's out there.

People walk by and drip wet salt onto your cheeks, your chin and the neck of
your guitar. They're all dressed in gray and black and navy blue. They look like one
big bruise. Except Aunt Carla. She's wearing lavender. Grandma says she looks
ridiculous. Says she's forgotten where she is, forgotten that it's October at least, and I am the dream slipping down the lilies Grandma said you needed by your side. Grandma said with lilies you'd be reborn again and stuck her fingers in her forehead, then made two points on a straight line across her chest. The lilies smell like clouds and I slip down the petals into the vase of water. You've let Stewball drink all the wine.

Uncle Chuck is asleep on the toilet again. The toilet in the funeral parlor bathroom this time and he smells like beer. Remember the night Uncle Chuck snored all night long in his powder pink bathroom. I climbed out of my sleeping bag on the living room carpet and shook you awake and you said let him sleep, said it was fun to pee outside. Said it was like camping and who'd want to pee in bathroom that color anyway. That bathroom is like Grandma's poodle, Junebug. We giggled about the poodle, about its squeaky mouse toys and the way Grandma puts it in her purse when she goes to restaurants. I said Grandma's carrying a pink bathroom in her purse, I said she's putting her sirloin right into the toilet. In the morning, I heard you and Aunt Susan from the tunnel of my sleeping bag. I heard divorce and bum and no daughter of mine will have to put up with such a drunk, passing out on the toilet.

Daddy, I know this is a dream. You've got no sawdust in your hair and I can't see your teeth.

I crawl up your nose, grab onto your nose hairs and wait for your breath to blow me out. I wait for your sneeze. Junebug get out of my nose. I grow bored with nose-hairs and silence.
Tammy sings about the hill. She sits on the velvet padded chair and murmurs the words. She rocks and wrings her hands and thinks of you riding Stewball around the globe, looking for Mother. Thinks you are the one-tin soldier and Stewball's your steed. I am her dream thoughts. We're neighbors, Daddy, she thinks. She brings you daisies from her garden and you shovel her walk in the winter and your breath, the wind from your nostrils, is like pipe smoke. Tammy sings she loves her neighbor and wrings and wrings her hands so the daisy stems get all twisted and her hands turn green. She inches up on her knees trying to look at your guitar, into its hollow box.

It's not hollow, I fill it up.

I am Stewball and wine and the Junebug's wings. Do you hear me, Daddy? I am all the sounds in the guitar's box. I smell wood and strings and bits of sawdust. I rake the sawdust together with my fingers like maple leaves and jump into the them. Leap into the sawdust like I did when you built our kitchen table, when you made Tammy and me chairs with our names carved on the bottom. Junebug, you'll always have a seat at this table. Any table is this table.

This is a dream, Grandma's poodle winks at me.

People whisper about that night, Daddy. They say it's lucky you left us in the car. Grandma says you never learned your lesson, says you were always getting yourself in trouble. That boy could never accept the way things are, she says. I growl at her poodle and it crawls back into the flaps of her pocketbook.

Aunt Carla pulls a Kleenex out from the sleeve of her lavender dress and blows her nose. Tammy and I squeeze each other's hands. We think about
Grandma being the farmer’s wife. I say Grandma tried to cut off your tail, Daddy, with a carving knife. I say she did the same thing to her poodle. Tammy almost giggles. Grandma doesn’t even know you’re not a mouse.

What are you, Daddy?

I am the guest-book, bound in leather, with your name on it. Grandma said we’d need a guest-book. Mother said that’s for weddings not funerals, but its got your name on it in gold letters, anyway. It’s your guest-book, Daddy, and they all sign it, they all own a piece of you.

I am the guest-book, and I try to feel which parts of you they know, which parts they claim for themselves. People press a ball-point pen into me, tattooing my skin. Grandma’s name is the first on the list and when she writes M for Mother I feel like the wood must’ve felt when you carved my name in it. It’s get easier, I grow softer with each name. *Junebug everything is composed of fibers, of pieces.*

You hold my hand now and we walk into the woods behind our cabin and you tell me the names of the trees and show me the world in the sky. From the harmonica come stories of bears and horses and warriors in the stars. I think of Stewball and wonder if the sky has rivers of wine too. *Don’t lose your wings Junebug.* You wrap your hand in mine and we go home. Your palm has round, hard spots in it, but your fingers feel like my quilt. We go into your woodshop and cut out the shapes of maple leaves with your band saw. You tell me mahogany is beautiful. We make jigsaw puzzles from an oak log. The oak is forty years old, but will never be forty one, you say. We plant seedlings in the yard and call them the oak’s children. They’re just the puppies; we feed them and they grow and grow. We
order pines trees from a catalog and soon there are thirty two Christmas trees out there in one big lump. We decorate them with pinecones dipped in peanut butter, then birdseed. We sit under the trees and listen to the birds nested above us. When Tammy laughs too hard, the birds flap their wings and fly away. *That’s music, Junebug.* I listen to the music of the birds’ wings and we dance. Tammy flaps her arms and says, “Do you hear my music?” She spins and spins. “Do you hear it, Daddy? My own music.” You say you’ll hold our hands no matter what.

I know this is a dream, Daddy. There’s no sawdust in your hair and Aunt Carla’s wearing lavender in October.

I am the Kleenex stuffed up Aunt Carla’s sleeve. Twisted and wet and soggy. I can’t see lavender. I feel the fatty warmth of Aunt Carla’s wrist, feel the thump, thump, of her heart and wonder if she’s remembered her medicine. Grandma’s always saying, forget your medicine again Carla, did you?

Inside her sleeve is like being in a tent at dawn. I can’t wait to sleep in our tent tonight. I want the velvet and bathrooms and poodles to be done. Come with us, Daddy. Sing us a song.

Aunt Carla yanks me out of her sleeve, wipes her eyes with me and blows her nose. She tosses me into the trashcan.

Who trimmed your hair, Daddy? Why aren’t you holding your guitar?

I am Junebug in the trash, I can’t see the mahogany casket. Words melt down into me crumpled up in the trashcan. Uncle Chuck hacks and hacks and spits on me. Grandma throws a candy wrapper at me. I hear Aunt Susan say you should’ve gotten that gas gauge fixed. A man with two little girls and a wife. She tells Uncle
Chuck you should've known better then to walk on someone's property with signs like that all around.

Did you see the signs, Daddy? I wonder if the dogs licked your face. The dogs liked you, I know that much. Even the black bears last summer.

I didn't see the cub behind me. You put your finger on your mouth and whispered, "Don't move Junebug." I was a tree and the air was stale like crackers. That momma bear on the other side of me rising up like she wanted to crunch my branches flat to the ground. Like she was snow, but I didn't want to hug the ground. I wanted my Junebug wings. "Even-trade," you said and ran out. You lifted me under your arm and we flew, we soared on my Junebug wings up to the branch of a cedar tree. We listened as the momma scolded her cub for wandering so far away. *Junebug, get out the trashcan.*

I am worried about the guitar, about the lid above your head. Tammy and I sit in the corner away from velvet chairs and lavender and lilies and worry and worry. Tammy checks her pocket to see if the harmonica's still there. We always check our pockets. We don't want to forget anything, Daddy. We checked our pockets that night. Tammy checked and checked to see if the car-keys were still there. We checked the locks on the car and sang and sang, waiting for you. We sang about Stewball and clouds and rain. You didn't come. We sang about the wind and roads and soldiers. You said you'd be six songs at the most and sing softly. You didn't come. "I'm just going to find a phone, so Mother can come and get us," you said. I caught the kisses you blew us from down the road and shared them with Tammy. "Thank you, thank you for the kisses," Tammy said and laughed and laughed.
Daddy, we sang thirty songs and Tammy’s hands were so sweated from the key.
And you didn’t come.

Tammy lifts her hands up to her nose and sniffs, checking for the metal key smell.

Grandma says you should’ve known not to go up to house like that. Says big houses and people like us don’t mix. Why do you think they build them up there on the hills, she says. They got their own world up there and they’ll do everything they need to protect it. He should’ve known better, Grandma keeps saying, should’ve keep on walking and he’d still be here. I don’t even think that man saw you, Daddy. He was walking in ‘a maze and you were in the clouds and he didn’t even see you. Grandma says, thank the Lord the police were called and you lived a whole day. Thank the good Lord for that, she says and hugs her poodle.

Tammy told the policeman you’d be back in two more songs. They tore her off the seat. She’s got good claws, Daddy. She is the bird. *Listen to my music. Hear it? Do you hear my music?* She sang all the way to the hospital. Beautiful songs whose words I don’t think we’ll ever know. She sang so much, she’s forgotten how to talk. She just sings and sings and when her voice box gets sleepy, she hums. She’s got the car-keys, Daddy, in her pocket with the harmonica.

I am not the car-keys.

Mother says it’s time to go. We climb into Uncle Don’s car from New York and I tell mother I need to go to the bathroom. Tell her I can go alone and I run back inside, but it’s too late. The lid is shut. I hear squealing horses and cannons and I smell blood. Blood flows from your casket onto the velvet floor and no one notices.
No one sees the broken strings, the cracked up, crunched up box of your guitar, its twisted neck, when they locked you in.

   We didn’t want to bury you. Everyone insisted.

   *it’ll all work out in the end Junebug. It always does.*

   Do dreams have ends, Daddy?

   I am Junebug on the edge of a cliff, at the mouth of a cave, swooping into a meadow, splashing in the river of wine. I wait for the beginning, the end.

   Somewhere horses wade in the stream where one day, I’ll trade my lungs for gills, my wings for fins.

   I am Junebug and you, Daddy, must be the buried treasure.
Start after the funeral. The woman on a park bench outside Hershey’s Chocolate World waiting for the man and wondering, what with Cindy’s white knuckles and Nate banging the lectern loud enough to splinter wood when he read the letters addressed to the dead uncle, to their father. Thinking, what with Aunt Carol’s macaroni salad holding her up so long, if maybe the had man changed his mind. Maybe she’d missed him.

“He’ll be here,” the father said. “If he wants to see you, he’ll be here.” The father watched the swarms of people drone by. “What color is his coat?”

“I don’t know anymore,” the woman said.

The father stood up, crushed his cigarette out with his shoe, then dissolved into the crowd. The woman watched him go. She watched his gray hair weld itself to the amusement park glimmer and his wrinkles give themselves up to the incandescent lights.

The woman sat alone. People wondered by in search of strollers, entrances and exits, sons and daughters, the shortest line for the restroom. A few looked the woman’s way, looked at her there on the bench sipping her coffee and she wondered if they thought her alone, thought her lost in all this display. And she supposed she was.

A breeze danced the jitterbug in the branches of the stark November oak situated above the bench and the woman felt in its movement the touch of the man’s hand upon the small of her back. She remembered that touch from casinos, motel
lobbies, roller coasters lines. Knew his touch from boardwalks, sidewalks, mountain trails and smoke filled barrooms where once, the man jumped down off stage in the middle of a set and kissed the dip in her neck. The woman could've killed him for that. She wasn't one for centers of attention, centers of anything. Everything so dependent on you.

A young mother sat down alongside the woman and tossing her infant over her shoulder like one might a favorite knapsack, patted its back. In the cadence of the mother's hand, the woman heard the clatter of the Las Vegas airport's slot machines, the recorded voices of Roseanne Barr, Sigfred and Roy and Neil Diamond reminding passengers to be careful when traveling on the airports moving walkways. She thought of the two hundred dollars she lost in Las Vegas and the $200 bottle of Chardonnay charged to a corporate account when the man and her were in Cleveland for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame opening. The ten dollar pepperoni pizza they ate with it. Joints shared in Disney World, the Pennsylvania hills and North Carolina beaches. LSD, moon fades and salt-licked breezes. The rainy, Frisbee days and trip to the Cape Hatteras veterinarian when the dog's ear became infected. All that wet sand.

When a body bumped her from behind she turned, her eyes in their combat glare.

"You're talking to yourself, you know that?" the man said.

The woman smiled.

The man looked so different with his new haircut and horn-rimmed glasses, his ever-evolving Goodwill wardrobe. Then, for a moment, as if he'd only yesterday
shared her toothbrush. They did that sort of thing then. Then things were always getting misplaced or lost or chewed by the dog.

The father stood behind them, ran his hand down the length of his face, then disappeared into the crowd.

No. Start three days later, the woman in the man's car, looking out the passenger side window, watching the night folding its arms around the mountain peak. Begin at their departure.

The woman stretches her neck up towards the car window’s edge and wipes her steamed breath off the window's pane. She looks out at the night. The sky seems to her like velvet. She closes her eyes and there is the velvet coat hanging on the coat rack at The Slippery Gin Bar. Months ago, someone had left it in a drunken rush out the door. Since then, the woman often caught herself stealing glances at it, way off in the corner. A black crushed velvet coat with a satin red lining, almost like the one she wanted when she was a little girl.

For two winters long the little coat hung on a mannequin at Pomeroy's, waiting, it seemed, for her. For two winters long, she passed by it, never mentioning it to her mother or aunt or grandmother always trailing three, high-heeled steps behind her, always pausing to overturn price-tags at the sales racks. Once, her mother fumbling into a pair black-flats over in the shoe department, a saleswoman caught her drawing a family on the coat’s sleeve with her fingers. When the saleswoman touched her shoulder and asked, “Are you lost?” the woman, then a little girl, turned quickly, shook her head and ducked underneath the nearest clothing rack.
“Do you think he’ll be there already, waiting?” the man says.

“I don’t think so, not yet.”

The woman watches the fog curl down the mountains, like fingers into a palm and thinks again of the coat. Once, after the waitress had left early with her husband, she even tried it on. Stroked her chin along its collar. Cigarette smoke clung to the fabric, but underneath it rose the faint smell of perfume, of skin. She’d slumped down on a barstool, the coat wrapped around her, drunk a glass of red wine and tried imagining the face of the woman who’d once owned the coat. Disjointed lips and noses and teeth floated in her head. Locking the door that night, she’d promised herself, when she found a familiar face in the velvet, she’d take it home.

The woman notices a few stars, like lint, poking though the fog.

"It's surreal, the sky I mean. When you drive by the sky, it looks like a dream."

"I suppose," the man says and loosens his grip on the steering wheel. "Maybe you're feeling a bit nostalgic, he says. "It's been awhile since you've seen the mountains, the effect they have on things." It's not what he wanted to say.

"I don't think so," she says. "But maybe you're right." The woman tucks her hands between her thighs and crosses her legs.

There is music. It leaks out through the speakers and into their ears. The woman listens for the lyrics, believes they hold some meaning, some concept she can’t quite run her fingers over. The singer's voice is slippery and his words difficult to pluck out from the guitar, the bass and the rhythm of the road underneath the car's tires.
It's the man's car. A new Volkswagen that reminds the woman of the times they'd driven this road in her beat up VW rabbit. The new car had rubber mats to protect the carpet floor mats, had a working heater and seats that didn't show their foam-rubber insides.

"It's like velvet, I think," the woman says, her eyes still slanted up towards the sky.

"What?"

"Like velvet," she says louder, clearer.

"Really, do you think so? I never thought of this song like that, but I guess maybe you're right. The guitar has a velvety feel." The man switches his hands to a more relaxed position on the steering wheel. The woman notices they've slid from the ten-o'clock and two o'clock positions required to pass a driver's test, down so his thumbs seem to hold six-thirty still.

It's after eight and his foot heavy on the accelerator. He could've set the cruise control, the new car had that option, but there were too many curves, too many S turns, to give control over to a computer. Besides, they spotted a deer a few miles back and didn't know what lie ahead. Proceed with caution, the man thinks, looking at the series of yellow signs, the black arrows guiding him around another bend.

"No, the sky," she says and shifts her body him.

"What?" the man says and catches her eyes. He'd felt them racing over his face, memorizing his neckline. Now in the net of his glance, they seem too big, seem to him like the deer's eyes before it darted back into the mosaic of trees.
"The sky is velvet," she says and looks down at her hands still tucked between her thighs.

"Oh," the man says and feels the loss of her stare, feels loss sink down into his toes.

They drive on. The woman searches for the man’s fingers in the sky, swiping patterns in the night. Feels his tongue lick the stars clean. The man watches the white lines on the road and imagines lines of cocaine on some strange man’s mirror. The man looks over at the woman’s profile, at the crescent of her nostril, and tries to shake free the image of her nose snorting up the highway’s lanes.

His stomach burns. Pain twists like slivers of a broken light-bulb in his gut. He takes a deep breath, silently, so she can’t hear it over the music.

"How’s your stomach?" the woman says and traces the outline of his ear with her eyes.

"Fine. It’s a lot better now."

The man shifts his eyes away from the road and its white lines, towards the woman. He looks at the tangles in her hair, her shaggy eyebrows and thinks of gardens, campfires, and lawns. Things that need tending.

A sliver of moonlight strikes the woman’s face so she appears to him, for a moment, like an elf. Magical.

Before he was a man, he’d spend entire days in the paneled walls of his bedroom reading about elves and fairies. It seemed to him the only way to make sense of all the wars, the deaths, and Matthew. It seemed with elves and fairies,
brother's corneas would mend, seemed any day now they'd be able to let up all the blinds in the house before sunset.

"You know," the woman says. "There's a lot wrong with the world. Sometimes it gets so I can't get out of bed in the morning, thinking about it." She watches his hands, his thumbs holding six-thirty in place.

"Yes," he says. "Try not to think about it. It'll drive you crazy thinking of things like that."

The woman gathers up pieces of music and holds them up to the man like vintage clothing, trying them on for a fit. "I like foam rubber," she says.

"Okay," the man says. Elves, he thinks, are beautiful. Elves are so beautiful.

"I mean," she says. "I mean, well remember my old car. How the seats were all torn up and the dog hair stuck in the foam rubber so I'd have to apologize every time I gave someone a ride home. I'd have to say, sorry about the car being such a mess." It's not what she wanted to say, but the sky was distracting. Everything moving by so fast, so it was only his thumbs slowing it down.

"It's just, well, there's a lot wrong with the world today. "And. And I think people forget about foam rubber." She lights a cigarette, presses a button on the passenger door and the window slides down.

The man looks past the strange men's mirrors, whose names spoken from the woman's voice across phone lines he's forgotten, but whose faces he knows from his dreams. He looks past the mirrors and lines and excuses of loneliness, of drunkenness, and thinks of the woman dancing with fireflies, the soles of her bare feet skipping across pebbles in the stream behind his home and her body...
"I'm sorry. It's the sky, really," the woman says.

...her body draped in fog until it seems only light diffused by fireflies. He thinks of the woman as a lampshade over a light bulb, spreading a warm soft glow.

"Like velvet," he mumbles.

"That's what I said, the sky is like velvet."

The man wants to tell the woman when he walks out to the wooded lot behind his home under the moon and stars he hears her laughter in the water burping over the pebbles of the stream. Sometimes, he wants to tell her, he sees her sigh in the shadows of wild flowers and touches her arms in the night breeze. Once, he even walked into a bar and the smell of her perfume on another body hit him and, for a moment, he felt the woman's touch behind a stranger's eyes, heard her voice in the clank of bar glasses and breathed her smile in cloudy air.

"There's too many people in the world," the man says. "It seems they're stealing pieces of each other. We're losing our souls somehow."

The woman remembers she'd used the word soul years ago when they sat in a diner, a conversation between them. She remembers the man said soul was an overused, worn out word. Soul is like love, people use it all the time. There's no meaning in it anymore.

"What?" the woman says.

"I said you can't think about the world. It'll drive you crazy thinking about all the people out there."

The woman wears the sky, brushes her chin against a star and collapses onto the mountains. In a breath, she consumes the fog.
“You’re right,” the woman says, wrapping the night tighter around her body. “It’s no time to bring a child into this world. There are too many things wrong in a world like this. A child would have no face in a world like this.”

“What?” the man says, turning down the music.

“I said children have it rough in this world.”

“Yes, they sure do,” the man says.

There were reasons the woman was in the man’s car, leaving him again. The death. The phone calls.

“Don’t come. He’d understand if you couldn’t make it.”

It was not so much for the dead uncle she’d hopped on the next flight, but for the voices echoing in her ears long after the phone was placed back on its hook. Sad and distant voices roaming around the blank walls of her apartment, perching themselves in corners like spiders only to careen down thin air on invisible threads and make their way to the woman’s photo album, return to the faces they belonged. It is difficult to hug a photograph, impossible to hug a voice.

In the plane, the woman had switched seats with an elderly woman wearing bright yellow sweatpants and clutching a knitting bag.

“I don’t know why that travel agent put me at an emergency exit. I told him I don’t even like the window seats. I’m okay, just fine as long as I don’t have to think of all those things out there, zipping by. Would you mind?”

“No,” the woman had said. “I don’t mind.”

The entire flight she’d watched the Midwestern grids fold in like pie dough, then rise into hills and lakes and mountains. While the plane hovered, awaiting
clearance at the Philadelphia airport, the sun set and the city lit up like dying fireflies. Small still points of white and yellow dotted the sky-line, unable to fly. The woman missed the city. She missed the lakes and streams, the digging of toes into rocky creek beds, the smell of pine sap clinging into fingers and hair, the veiny branches of maples and oaks and poplars soaking up her exhaled breath. She missed the man.

When she walked out of the terminal, it was the father she saw.

"I've been here for two hours. Your plane late?"

The woman smelled olives on his breath, smelled time spent and had asked if maybe he was too tired to drive home, if maybe it had a long day. Maybe, she'd told the father, she should drive.

"We're late," the man says. "Do you think he'll be there, waiting? I'd hate to have to make him wait so long."

"He doesn't mind. Don't worry, we'll get there soon enough. Soon will be there."

It annoyed the woman, this fear the man had of inconveniencing others. How can one live that way? Always worrying about disappointing others? How is that a way to live?

Besides, they were always late. When they took that trip to Las Vegas a few years ago, they'd missed their flight home and had to spend the night crunched up on the hard plastic seats of the airport. *Hey there travelers, careful when walking on the moving pathways.* The recorded voices had sneaked into the woman's dreams all mingled and twisted and longing.
“Did you remember your tickets. You always forget things like that,” the man says.

“Yes.” The woman bends down and retrieves her knapsack from the car’s floor mats. Her hands fumble with bills she couldn’t afford to pay, notes she’d written on bar-napkins, toothbrush, pens, pencils, half-used books of matches until she feels the high gloss paper pouch containing her airline tickets. “Got ‘em”

It had been her fault they’d missed that flight. She’d left their plane tickets next to the Bible in the bedside table of the hotel molded with steel beams into a pyramid. Her fault she’d grabbed their winnings, the evidence of a good time had by all in the dry, desert heat and forgot until they stood in line, waiting to check their baggage, exactly where the tickets were.

The woman turns again to the sky and its smudged black pattern. How it can protect us against anything? How can anything protect anything?

Fast forward.

The Volkswagen Jetta pulls into The All American Truck Stop with its diner and red Texaco star out front. The man hop outs.

“Be back in a jif,” he says. He leaves the keys in the ignition and the woman waits until he disappears into the rows of snack food and motor oil and breath mints. Then, she crawls into the driver’s seat and does doughnuts in the parking lot where some fifteen eight-wheelers park and the drivers play Johnny Cash, play Woody Guthrie and Garth Brooks and call their wives on their cell phones. The truck-drivers eat open face turkey sandwiches with gravy and sides of buttered corn. They wash laundry, take showers and think of paychecks and orthodontists and diamonds
wrapped in velveteen boxes under Christmas trees they didn't get to decorate. The drivers think of wives wiping snot from the noses of their kids and wink at the waitresses who bring them hot, fresh coffee. They wrap their hands around mugs and the coffee steam smells like linen sheets dried in the sunshine.

"What are doing?" the man says, holding his arms out, confused when the woman zooms by him walking out towards the gas pumps. The girl, holding her thumbs at six-thirty, circles back. She picks up the boy and together they drive over to the lot's corner where the father sits in a mini-van with two dogs in the captain's chairs. The boy laughs.

"Why did he park way over here? We wouldn't have even seen him if you weren't crazy, if you weren't such a nut, driving around like that."

They get out the Volkswagen, the father out of the mini van. The father provides cookies baked by his wife, the girl's mother. He provides a handshake for the boy and the boy takes it. The man shakes the other man's hand and feels the sadness, the loss in its touch.

"Good to see you son," the father says, his eyes on his penny loafers. Then he climbs back into the mini-van.

The girl kisses the boy, wraps her arms around him, envelops him. She kisses his dry lips with her dry lips and when the man gets back into his Volkswagen, he rolls the window down and she kisses his lips again. The car's overhead light seems blinding and she wishes she had wings to cover it.

"Thank you," she says to the boy in the electric blue car and the words are wrong.
"How is he?" the father asks the daughter when the red of the Texaco star fades. She mishears.

"Who is he, Daddy?" she hears and says nothing.

The father asks his daughter to put ketchup on the French fries he planned to share with the dogs in the parking lot's corner.

“One package or two?"

“Just one,” the father says.

They drive on. The father thinks of the tom-girl who climbed trees and once punched a boy so hard his nose dripped blood. The daughter looks out to the sky and thinks of women's shoes, of the woman who forgot her crushed velvet coat one night. She closes her eyes and sees leather boots with high, clunky heels stumbling down cement. Sees the ankle of the woman give way and hears the hollow snap of a heel, the thud of the woman's body against cement. The daughter smells the trickle of blood from the woman's nose, tastes it like wine on her tongue. She bends down alongside the woman, the broken heel in her hand.

“Are you OK?” she says.

The woman, without turning, bats her away with her hand.

“Leave me the hell alone! Mind her own business,” the one woman says to the other woman underneath the daughter's closed eyelids.

The father eats his ketchup soaked French fries.

The man drives on in a different direction. He sees the woman who skips across moss covered pebbles and dances with fireflies until dawn. Smells her cigarettes and hears the echo of her laughter in his living room, the taste of her skin
in his sheets. He looks at the sky and sees her fingers twisting her hair, wrapping her hair around the stars. The man glances over at the passenger's seat and for a moment the woman is there. He memorizes her face again, the curve of her nose, the way she tucks her hair behind her ears so they seem pointed and the softness of her eyes in the dark.

"Explain velvet," the woman wants to say, but not to the father.

The father clears his throat.

"Penn State loses three more games and we won't have to buy tickets next year and what time your flight leave? Those dogs like ketchup," the father says.

The daughter remembers what the father wants for her. She remembers two plane tickets next to a Bible in a steel pyramid.

Rewind six minutes.

The woman reaches her left hand across the gear shift, across the hard plastic emergency brake handle and touches the man's leg. Underneath the worn corduroy pants, she feels the man's knee. It feels knobby like knees should be.

"If you die," she says. "I'd smoke your ashes."

"That's what I mean," the man says. "Always with these crazy thoughts." And the man laughs. He reaches his arm over the passenger seat and links his fingers into the nape of the woman's neck, and laughs and laughs.

The woman thinks of the way the velvet coat brushed up against her skin and made her hair stand on end the night she wore it, hunched over the bar drinking wine. And she knows. Knows she'll never take it home, knows you can't claim anything, except maybe moments. Maybe, you can tuck moments into your pockets
and when the stars are too bright, you can pull one out, tuck your head under and crawl into its feel. Maybe, she thinks, velvet is only pockets of memories we dive into, longing to smother the chaos of the world. Maybe.

And the night played on.
I phone her Sunday mornings after downsing my first cup of creamed coffee. I always get the answering machine. “I’m not in, leave a message” in a voice that sounds rushed, a perfected rushed. I always leave a message when the beep signals my allotted time. I don’t need three minutes.

“It’s me. Call me when you get up.”

(click)

I clutch the coffeepot’s handle in my left hand, refill my ceramic mug and with my right, grab the newspaper off the kitchenette’s counter. The purple ink donning the entertainment section sticks out like a vein in the gray mass. I lick my pointer finger anticipating plum smudges, pluck it out and turn directly to page three. Two new flicks out this week. I read the write-ups, gurgling a series of sighs and humnfs. There are always these guys. You know the type—great film, three stars, two thumbs, five cups of Java, whatever. “Kept my fingers out of the popcorn tub, my eyes peeled to the screen. Hell, I’m getting paid to be here, anything’s damn good right?” Only it reads like they all read, like the one my coffee ring soaks up—the words bitter, sour, a familiar fresh. “Action-packed and bursting with American character.” Highly recommended says George Halzitt. Please. I write opinion letters to his boss in my mind. Maybe one day they’ll be good enough to send and I’ll get his job.

Maybe I should go to the movies.
I scan the classifieds. I’ve got a business degree, I should be able to get a job, but nothing looks appealing.

I tried for awhile. Wore the make-up and jacket and slammed heavy shakes into the soft hands of perfumed men, the callused hands of threatened women. Sat through their interviews, their interrogations. The black buttons on their leather seats pock marking my ass.

“So, why don’t you tell me a little bit about yourself.”

I am a Navy Seal. A war prisoner tied in perfect posture to a wooden chair, choking back the urge to rub wrists raw behind my back. A naked light-bulb swings pendulum-like in the dank cellar. The slow steady drip, dripping over clammy copper-teal pipes echoing cadences in between my enemy’s barks. Rusted torture rings jut out from brick chinked walls. My face is battered blue, purple, yellow black. Chest leaking a milky, cold sweat and I know. Know I’m dead if I’m silent, but if I talk, if I answer the questions, there’s a smear of hope somewhere. Only I always die unless someone, some Deus X Machinas swoops down and breaks me out.

(Static. A nasal voice.)

“Mr. Jeffries, Ms. Deam on line one.”

“Excuse me, I’ve got to take this call.”

Now I read the classifieds to know what I’m missing.
I refill my coffee cup, neglecting to add more milk, and shake out the comics. Garfield. I never understood the humor. What’s so funny about a cat eating Lasagna? Cathy. A woman with a strong handshake. This week’s Real Life Adventures showcases fix-it husbands performing yoga before cutting drywall. The caption reads “I am one with the line.” What’s so real about that?

Real life adventures? Not in my world. It’s rush, rush can we get another pitcher of Bud over here? Yeah, for a fifty-cent tip you can wade through the swash piles of people yourself Bud-dy. What do you think? I’m actually making minimum wage, that I—

Everything fades. I am dollied camera wheeling over an ever-changing scene. Drunken, slumped bodies now fields of wildflowers, tobacco smoke an early morning fog and I want the close up, want to move in on the hero’s face, but the flowers keep blowing, the fog never lifts. I feel a hand grabbing my arm, then ass. Walk away.

Where’s yoga when you really need it?

I know she’ll call soon, it’s three in the afternoon and life in Pittsburgh is at its fullest gray. I know she’s contemplating her first phone call. I’ll fall somewhere between her Ex. who’ll want her to take their dog for the day so he can smoke grass and bang on bongos in some basement and Mark, who’ll want to take her to dinner, maybe a movie. She’s not crazy about him.

I flip through the business section. Mergers, bankruptcy and what’s this? CoreStates to buy out First union. So what. I’ll leave the money laundering and
corporate piracy to men who get hair plugs for their mistresses and backrubs from their wives. And pray. Pray everyone makes mistakes like Big Bird told me when I was five.

I don’t think they do. I don’t think THEY crack because he left when the lease was up and not before. Don’t believe everyone recites dinner specials nightly and forgets the seventh salad dressing because it’s Thousand Island. Know you don’t bite chewed down, ragged, split up fingernails hoping the man you served a seventy-five dollar meal—the well-fitted, well-spoken gentleman who slapped his three-year-old daughter hard because she colored outside the lines of a Children’s menu—will be drunk enough to remember to drop at least a ten-spot on the table.

I’m going to the movies.

Front page. My last resort. It’s war somewhere. People dying in the name of something while politicians gather at the frayed edges of Persian rugs sipping brandy and patting each other’s backs because the election is coming up.

Strategizing.

Nixon’s face engulfs my own. Rubber and paint and it’s hard to breathe behind this mask. Three minutes, no more, no less. Storm the front, leave the safe cracking to Kennedy. Take one hostage, preferably a mousy woman. Ram the 8MM into the throat of tellers one, three and five. Reagan will take the even numbers. Three minutes, three minutes, hand trembling, fumbling with buttons on digital watch. Elbowed out the van’s side door.
Strategies. He knows them well. A musician he calls himself, yet he’s crossing the country on some corporate tour meeting God knows who at all hours and calling me, wondering if I’m busy tonight, do I have plans? “No I can’t pick you up from the airport. I have plans. Eleven O’clock. I’ll be outside the gate and yeah a late dinner sounds good.” Only he’s too tired and let’s go back to your place, which is a basement apartment below my parent’s house so he has to be quiet. “I love you” in the middle whispered loud enough for me not to hear.

Phone rings. I click on the talk button.

“Hello”

“Hey it’s me. What’s up?”

“Not much just wondering how your week went.” I expect her to break into a tale: mental patients paying for their meal, ice-tea only with hundreds of pennies, all unwrapped, the guy with an extra rib literally rubbing his heart raw, almost witnessed suicides, crazed boyfriends, roommates on Prozac. I adore her stories.

“Ok, it went.” We talk not saying much. She says she planning a dinner party next weekend. Am I coming?

Waitresses and their dinner parties.

We make plans. I’m bringing Carrot Cake.

She cuts it short, says she’s going to the movies.

It’s past five. I move to the sofa, settle down with a big bag of buttery popcorn. There’s some mob movie on HBO and I can’t concentrate on who’s killing who so I go upstairs and throw my laundry in the machine. Work shirts with bleach, work pants with black dye. Mom’s cooking Sunday dinner. It’s the only night of the
week the kitchen table doesn’t resemble the inside of a vacationer’s mailbox. She stands over the oven cutting celery for bread stuffing.

“Go to church this morning Mom?”

“Well, look who has climbed up from the depths.”

I know she wants to say more. Wants to know how I’m adapting to this second teenage life, if I spoke with him lately, if I’ve slept and --I know the bags sagging from the circles around her eyes are asking all of these questions, but I can’t answer them. We play the game.

I say something. She says something.

The mountain cliff molds into the shape of a skyscraper. I am a window washer leaning out from the top floor. Cars = color. Light catches them, unable to radiate their makes and models. The voice over all static and the cars, the splotches of people, jump from abstractions to reproductions, printed over and over and over, moving in inescapable grids. Absence of dimensions forcing a perspective on everything.

“Huh, no not hungry.”

I still want to go the movies. It’s a twenty- minute drive to the theater playing the new Woody Allen flick and if I leave now I can make it in time to see all the trailers. I imagine entering the darkness. A bag of red licorice in my lap, the hard plastic biting my neck and me lost in the reality of a lost Jewish man gone New York Hollywood.
I’ll have to act fast. I can throw on my favorite overalls and a T-shirt and be out the door in five minutes. It’s the drive, all the drives that’ve been getting to me lately. Too many and the car becomes a cue to think.

I’ll see it with her next Sunday.

Only next Sunday he calls and I’m in Philadelphia meeting him for a night on the town only he’s tired so we stay in and order room service and a movie off the hotel Pay Preview service. It’s some soft porn that’s supposed to get us turned on but all I can think is who the hell wrote this dialogue and aren’t these people required to take at least one acting class. We should have gotten the one with Kevin Spacey.

He likes to make a lot of noise and I’m worried the late-night cleaning crew will think I’m hired. Was I? I don’t know anymore, but it feels nice to cuddle up against his smell and have him wash my back with the bar of hotel soap. He use to count my freckles, brushing each one against soft wet lips.

I get home Monday night, the red light blinking on my machine. I expect the message to be hers, scolding me. I press play and walk away into my kitchenette. I know I have some Fritos somewhere.

It’s not.

Must have been some Telemarketer too busy chatting with the person in the next cubicle to remember to hang up the phone because I hear a distant whisper, a busy signal, then silence.
RENOVATION

Andrew W. Pennacost. June 23rd
1971- November 24th 1999. Survived
by loving wife Ann. Services to be held
on November 26th 1 PM at Gutterson’s
Funeral Home. Cause of death,
automobile accident.

Thirty two words according to the Slocum Gazette.

“No Ma’am, it’s not like a classified ad, you won’t be charged for the
obituary. We need the credit card numbers for verification purposes.”

Ann didn’t argue. She spoke the long string of numbers clearly into the
phone, thanked the woman for her time and hung up. No charges were accrued on
her credit card account.

Two days after the services Ann goes back to work.

Katelynn, Barb and the other girls are so supportive. They stuff her cubicle
with daisies, carnations, mums and silver helium balloon whose surfaces bare the
images of daises, mums and carnations spilling out of wicker baskets. Barb even
gives up her pre-approved A lists in the suburbs where the women, Luann adds, are
drunk on leftover communion wine and the men on imported beer.

“Each,” Barb says propping her arms up on the cubicle wall she and Ann
share. “Willing to take the credit card offers to spite the other.”

“HMO would’ve buried him in a plywood box,” Ann hears Katelynn whisper to
Luann from two cubicles down.

“Good thing we get the best APR offers,” Luann whispers back in her emery
board voice.
Ann smiles, bats a balloon, grabs the A lists and dials. “Hello. This is Ann, calling from MBNA America. How are you this morning? The reason for my call—”

“How are you?” Aunt Susanna’s had asked from her cell phone, from her stroll down a Florida beach.

“I’m OK, thanks for asking,” Ann had answered from her cordless phone, from the sofa with Andrew’s white athletic socks still stuffed between the cushions.

“Yes, well I understand you’re busy Ma’am. But Christmas is just around the corner and MBNA would like to thank you for being such a valued customer by offering you the new Platinum Visa.” Ann plucks the petals off a flower and rearranges them into a spiral on her desk.

“I’m sorry this just isn’t a good time,” coming dull and static into Ann’s headset, into her ears in stereo.

“I understand you’re very busy, but with the new Platinum Visa given to you at an APR of only 3% for the first two years, we can actually save you time and money. Convenience, we understand, is a necessity in the computer age and with a credit limit of up to $100,000 you can do all your shopping at home. Even mail your payments using your email account and—”

“How are you? We’re so sorry to hear about your loss,” bold-type faced and sent to Ann’s email account from a pastor she hadn’t seen since last Christmas Eve when he slipped a wafer into her mouth, patted her hand, and whispered congratulations on her marriage.
Ann continues talking into the phone, talking up the sale and types, “I’m OK. Thank you for asking,” in italics, comic sans font, twelve point. The flower petals disheveling in the process, a few clinging to skin below her elbow.

“To show our appreciation, we’re also offering balance transfers. All I need to verify is that you still reside at 17 Cherry Lane—”

“How are you Hon?” spoken through Barb’s whisky breath at four o’clock in the afternoon, Barb leaning over the Formica tabletop in the break room.

“I’m OK,” answers Ann and watches Barb retrieve her flask from the innermost pocket of her white, vinyl purse. “Thanks for asking.”

Barb tops off Ann’s tea with whiskey, squeezes her hand and smiles.

“Life,” Ann says into her cup of tea. “Continues.”

Ann thanks customers for their time, Barb for the whiskey, Luann for the winks and back pats. She walks down the Hallmark aisle in the grocery store, picks out a card with an indigo background, with “thank you” printed in the shades of the rainbow and writes, “Thanks for the wheels,” on the inside. She signs her name, signs love then drives the car Mark and Allison loaned her to the post office and mails it.

Ann thanks her mother for picking out the casket, the tombstone, for the words on the tombstone. She thanks the relatives for coming, for the FTD flowers, for the callused hands pressing into her shoulder blades, the fingers massaging her back into knots. Ann replaces cheeseburger with thank you when she pulls the borrowed car into a McDonald’s drive-through.
“Hi. Welcome to McDonald’s. May I take your order?”

“Thank you. That’ll be all.”

“Would you like some fries with that?”

“No. The thank you will be enough, thanks.”

Ann eats thank you, smothered in reconstituted onions and warm ketchup. She drives the borrowed sedan and thank you churns in her gut. Thank you, Ann thinks, gives you indigestion.

“Chew up five now,” her mother had said handing her a bottle of Rolaids at the after the funeral gathering. “They tell you two, but you take five.”

Ann had spilled five chalky tablets into her palm and looked at the crescent of people, the orbs of familiar faces gathered around her. Uncle Chuck with his bottle of Budweiser, Rich with mustard dripping down his chin and Reggie wiping his hand across the lapel of his suit. Aunt Susanna and Carol and Kim, all in pearls. Ann had chewed up the tablets, slid her tongue over her teeth sanding down the chalky taste and watched Allison, Mark, Barb, Luann, cousins and strangers and friends waiting for her to swallow.

Ann dreams thank you reaching out from a grave, clawing the flesh from her face. Ann dreams and dreams and dreams and says thank you to the mailman each morning when he hands her the stack of sympathy cards.

“Thanks for carrying all that extra weight so close to the Christmas season,” Ann says to the mailman who only nods, taps the rim of his hat and continues in a rushed gait down the sidewalk. Ann watches him go, watches him pause to toss envelopes in mailboxes, packages on porch-steps, then climbs into the borrowed
Chevy and heads to work where she knows thank you, at least, doesn't come with a face.

At work, she bats her balloons, dials her A lists and watches the flowers wilt. By the end of her day, Barb's flask is empty, she's made a record number of sales, and two flowers are tossed away into the trash receptacle usually reserved for newspapers and C lists.

"Ann, dear, how are you?" Allison asks one night from the front porch steps Andrew finished painting a charcoal gray three days before the accident. Ann shrugs.


And hugs.

"I'm OK." Ann says, arms locked at her side, leaning into a hug that smells of onions, garlic and curry. Smells of the Indian restaurant Allison said she'd quit working at the moment she got her MBA, the second they handed her that piece of paper two years ago.

"Thank you for asking," Ann says and sneezes. Snot and saliva cling like sex in Allison's long, brown hair.

In a month, Ann has fucked thank you. She's spit thank you in the toilet, on the sidewalk, into her bowl of soggy Cheerios. Ann has tossed thank you out the window at eighty miles an hour.

In two months to the day Ann picked up the phone and a man had said, "Hello Mrs. Pennacost." And she hung up, and he called back and said, "Ann, Ann Pennacost?" And she said, "Not interested." And he called back a third time and
said, without proper address, “Your husband’s been in a car accident.” Ann opens Andrew’s closet door for the first time.

His smell falls out into the bedroom air. Salty, mixed with the sweet odor of Polo, the bite of Old Spice, never-worn alligator skin boots (a wedding gift from Aunt Susanna) tennis shoes and loafers. Ann stands, a box of Hefty garbage bags in hand, and laughs. She laughs so hard she has to run to the toilet. When the white wine, Feta cheese, and salad cling to the rim of the toilet bowl, she dry heaves, almost choking on the rhythm of her own laughter.

Three days later, Ann goes to Andrew’s grave for the first time dressed in his favorite red and blue flannel shirt, the one he wore Friday evenings into Sunday, the one with the cut off sleeves and frayed shirt-tail, the one smelling more Andrew than Polo. She doesn’t bring flowers or flags or his favorite Crosby Stills and Nash album like she thought she would. She doesn’t do anything the situation called for.

When her father died of a heart-attack four years ago, it was baseball cards and his transistor radio she placed on the tombstone. And her mother, dressed in black like a proper widow, had scolded her.

“The cards are one thing,” she’d said. “I hated those damn things tacked up on my living room wall. But the radio. That’s pure waste.”

Ann planned and planned the visit to Andrew’s grave, then forgot even her thoughts on the twenty-minute drive to the cemetery where Andrew’s body lie next to his mother’s, Camille. Instead, standing over the tombstone her mother had chosen, she notes its craftsmanship, the precision of the letters, the well-chosen font. She runs her fingers over the stone’s edges, the marble cold and smooth, then
almost scruffy when it hits the carved words *Beloved husband and friend.* In the Arial font, she thinks, the words almost feel like Andrew’s face on the weekends. She never goes back.

Everything returns to normal. Barb stops sharing her whiskey. The cubicle flowers die, the balloons deflate and the sympathy cards are tossed away into trashcans, then shipped out to the city dump. Ann’s back to the D lists, the hang ups and lousy commission checks. Her mother’s back to calling in her complaints on Sunday afternoons rather than arriving at the kitchen door of Ann’s two bedroom home with various casserole dishes and a flapping jaw.

“It’s the arthritis Annie, dear. Gets so I can’t even climb the steps anymore. You know Pastor Willis’s wife, Marie, was telling me just this morning how for the longest time Dr. Patterson told her she had arthritis, turned out to be something else entirely. Get a second opinion Jeanie she said, and you know I think I will. Not that I don’t trust Dr. Patterson, but he’s getting up there. Not keeping up to date on his medicine journals if you ask me.”

Ann had worn aprons, gloved her hands with pot holders, sipped herbal tea and thanked her mother for coming.

Over the phone, Ann never says thank you. She sprawls out on the sofa in Andrew’s flannel shirt and flips through the pages of his *Woodworker* magazines, inserting the appropriate “really,” “yes,” “uh-huh,” when her mother pauses to breathe.

Ann flips through the pages of *Woodworker*, of *Popular Mechanics* and thinks over the tone of her mother’s sandpapery voice, more and more of her home.
Lately, she's found herself talking into the corridors, giggling over the porch steps. Around each corner, in the walls, along the wooden baseboards answer conversations she and Andrew once had.

"Annie, I know the place doesn't look great now. But see these baseboards? They're oak. Strip the paint, sand them down and underneath, gold. This house," he'd said grabbing her around the waist, breathing a kiss into her nose, "is a goddamn rainbow. All we've got to do is mine the gold."

"Shut up," Ann had said into his lips, "Get to work."

Ann cradles the phone, bends down, touches the white paint on the baseboards and remembers the taste of Andrew's lips, remembers the way he'd bent down and run his fingers across baseboards and whispered, "I promise Annie, like gold."

"What a goof," Ann says into the phone.

"What dear?"

Ann twists her wedding band around on her finger, "I said, how interesting, Mom."

Life, Ann thinks, looking up from the sofa at the drop ceiling in the living room, continues.

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"How are you Ann?" Mark says into his phone.

"I'm OK. How are you?" Ann answers from hers.

"Well," Mark says, "I'm good. Things are good. It's only that, well, Allison and I are wondering if you've had a chance to look for a new car. If—I don't want to
be a pain, Ann. I know things are tight and it's not the right time to be asking, but with Allison's new job we could really use— I'm sorry, I feel like a shit calling— it's just that the way things are going.”

“Sure, no problem,” Ann says. “I've driven by this Volvo station wagon for over a month. I'll get the car back to you next week. And thanks guys again for everything.” Ann spits into a tissue and belches underneath her breath. The thank you clings in the air, in the yellow phlegm.

“You know we wouldn't ask, but our schedules have been so tight lately and we could really use the extra car. Listen, let's plan to get together soon. Go out for drinks, maybe catch a movie. I know Allison has been dying to tell you about—”

Ann wraps Andrew's flannel tighter around her body. She runs her fingers along the baseboards. Free of paint, sanded with 60 weight, 80 weight and then 110 weight sandpaper. They're ready, Ann thinks, for the polyurethane finish.

“—about her new job and all that girl talk, all that talk that would've driven Andrew and I, well—”

Ann dips a paintbrush into a metal can, tells Mark she'll drop the car off next weekend. Tells him Saturday afternoon and sure how about a few drinks, she hears the new Kevin Spacey movie is supposed to be riveting.

“Tell Allison that's what the reviews say, riveting.”

Ann hangs up the phone. “Your welcome,” she says to the baseboards.

“You're so very welcome.”
By next weekend Ann owns a Volvo station wagon and the last baseboard in the house, the one in the master bedroom, is still sticky from the third and final coat of finish.

Ann carries a photograph, a Polaroid, of her home in her wallet. She shows it to her mother, the mailman, the checkout woman at the grocery store, and the girls at work.

“It needs a lot of renovations, Andrew and I knew that when we bought it.”

The girls nod, smile and go back to their A lists.

Ann sits in her cubicle dialing and thinks of the conversation she and Andrew had in the parking lot of the Bernville bank after they signed the fifteen year mortgage. Andrew had said the old home would give him something to think about when he stood watching machines punch holes in sheet metal, when he watched his arms lift one cumbersome sheet, then the next.

“Not that I don’t think of you,” he’d said leaning over the station-wagon’s emergency brake. “But our home Ann. Our home.” She’d agreed it’d be a hoot to renovate the place themselves.

“Hi, Ann calling from MBNA.” Ann says over and over again, fingering the Polaroid.

At lunch, she shows Barb the porch steps, points out the rosy-hue of bricks she had sandblasted and beams over the new vinyl spouting cascading down the home’s side.
“The vinyl spout won’t bend like aluminum, it much more durable. Can almost withstand anything,” Ann says. “I snubbed it with the lawnmower last week and it barely even gave. Really it’s amazing.”

Barb nods. Asks Ann if she’d like to go out, meet some new people. “This weekend,” she says. “We’ll head over to the *Slippery Gin*, have a few drinks, a few laughs.”

“Regular girls night out, Ann. Just like the old days," Luann says.

“I’d love to,” Ann says, “Really, but I’ve got plans. I’m ripping out the drop ceiling this weekend. You know there are actual logs underneath there. Andrew had said there may be termites. They may need replacing, but we’ll get it done. I’m not worried about that. Maybe some other time.”

The girls discuss Ann’s new hobby in the ladies restroom passing toilet paper between stalls.

“A lot of trouble if you ask me,” says Katelynn. “Why put yourself through so much trouble?”

“Do you think she’s OK? A photo of the home. She told me she’s building a bar in the basement. Andrew always wanted a rec. room. That’s what she told me,” Luann says reapplying her coral lips.

“People deal with things in strange ways,” Barb says sneaking in a whisky sip. “She’ll get over it. Give her time.”
Conversations at home are one sided. Andrew speaks to Ann from the baseboards, from the new roof Ann managed to nail down before the April showers. His voice gurgles up from the stopped up kitchen sink.

"Hey Annie, you know, now that I’ve got the new roof down, I should really take a look at the lawn. I think I’ll rent a till, carve out a space for a garden. I know you want to plant some herbs. What do call it? Fennel. Tulips, daises. What do you think about a stone walk-way? I could drive over to the quarry in Allentown, get some chunks of lime. Or were you thinking bricks? A brick pathway would be nice too, don’t you think?"

So, Ann rents a till. She throws on Andrew’s flannel and spends the following Saturday afternoon turning over a section of the lawn, spends Saturday evening with a flashlight and a sore back tossing uprooted hunks of grass into a big pile alongside the new garden Ann will never find the time that summer to plant.

Time, they say, passes. They say time heals all wounds. Time flies when you’re knocking down a wall in the master bedroom with a sledgehammer, making room for the walk in closet your wife has always wanted.

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Ann can’t believe she wasted so much time, so much money on makeup. Twenty shades of eye shadow, blush, lipstick, eyeliner, mascara. Installing the new shower head one afternoon her makeup case falls into the tub. Splotches of satin and matte colors become soggy and splintered. Mirrors crack. Plastic lipstick tubes and foundation tubes and mascara tubes shatter, revealing their dark, bleeding insides. Ann turns on the shower, maneuvers the nozzle and watches her old face
travel down the drain in a mottled rainbow. She wipes her nose on the sleeve of Andrew’s flannel and grins.

Ann wears the flannel when she stains the dry sink in the dining room a natural pine finish. Gets it soaked when she hoses down the Volvo Station Wagon. Drips hot mustard on its sleeve when jumps up to shout at the television during a Pittsburgh Steelers game. One Monday, she looks into the mirror, Andrew’s electric toothbrush buzzing in her gums, and realizes she’s put on the flannel instead of her white satin blouse. She spits out the toothpaste and runs to the bedroom. Ann tosses the flannel onto the unmade bed, opens her top dresser drawer and withdraws her lacey white, under-wire bra. Changes.

“Hi Ann calling from MBNA America. How are you this afternoon?” Ann talks and talks into the phone. Her voice seems distant. Seems like it’s rising up out of the receiver instead of the other way around.

“Does my voice sound strange to you?” Ann asks Barb in the break room.

“Sounds fine to me Ann,” Barb says.

Luann considers asking Ann if she’s OK. She watches Ann pull change out of her pant’s pocket and walk over to the soda machine. Luann notices Ann’s gait seems stiffer, more pointed and her hips, hips Luann was always secretly jealous of, seem narrower, almost incapable of swaying.

Barb takes a sip from her whisky flask and watches Ann walk back. She watches Ann sit down at the table and twist the cap off her soda. Her hands, Barb
thinks, seem larger and her palms are rough with calluses. But her voice, her voice seems just fine.

“How’s the house coming along, Ann?” Barb asks.

“Great. Building a CD rack this weekend. Andrew always talked about it. He’s got quite a collection, you know. Great music. I didn’t use to think so, but it’s grown on me.”

When Ann runs out of her lady-shick razors, she opens Andrew’s side of the medicine cabinet and grabs his electric razor. She hadn’t realized shaving could be so quick, so easy, almost painless. No knicks over knees, slivers out of her ankles or blood leaking down her leg, sticking to her nylons. Besides, she likes its steady hum. Thinks it almost has a voice like quality. She tosses her shaving gel into the trash bin and watches the vibrating circular blades in the mirror, arm lifted, shaving her pit hairs.

Food tastes different. In the six months since the funeral, Ann’s diet of Melba-toast, fresh-fruit, yogurt, vegetables had become flat, bland, boring. At the grocery store, she stuffs pre-packaged New York Strip, Pork-chops, salami, provolone and iceberg lettuce in to her cart. Cooks on the outside grill, March snow flakes evaporating inches above the freshly painted high gloss lid. Love handles were what she’d called Andrew’s.

Ann can’t stand the cubicle, the sound of some strange woman’s voice in her throat. So, she calls in sick more and more. At home, she plays Andrew’s collection of CDs over and over again. She’s taken by a Boy named Sue, Our House, and throws out her collection of Indigo girls, The Cranberries and even Patsy Cline.
Ann thinks in Andrew’s voice. She thinks, Annie dear why did you throw out your CD’s? Why are you wearing my flannel and jeans? Those loafers look just like mine.

Soon, her thoughts are no longer of Ann. Soon she cuts back her hours to part-time to have more time, she tells the girls, to work on the home.

Unemployment checks in Andrew’s name arrive in the mail, a mistake. Ann deposits them into the joint account she never bothered closing. She spends afternoons at home improvement warehouses and lumberyards. She’s developed Andrew’s eye for spotting warped 2X4’s. She longs for electric screwdrivers, table saws, band saws, and a lathe. Ann wants to finish the home. She needs these things, Andrew’s voice thinks, to complete the inlaid cherry bookcase, the kitchen cupboards and the entertainment center in the master bedroom where she imagines eating pepperoni pizza, Andrew’s favorite, and watching the 007 marathon on TBS. She doesn’t remember Andrew loved James Bond. Can’t recall he wanted to build the bookcase for her. “Somewhere,” he’d said lugging boxes of Ann’s belongings into the house. “We can put all your gourmet cookbooks, the novels and collections of poetry.”

Ann knows, remembers, the house somehow will shine like gold. Gold reminds her something. She can’t remember what.

When she shaves her arms, brushes her teeth and showers with ivory soap, that before would’ve said left her skin flaky, hard and unfeminine; Ann looks down at her stomach and swears she sees Andrew’s hair sprouting up from her belly-button.
"What she needs, "Allison told Mark one night after their brief visit to Ann's home. "Is a man, a little fling. Something to distract her from it all."

So arrangements are made and Ann, in an effort to please, in a desire to shut them all up already, agrees.

The next Friday night at The Slippery Gin, Ann walks in dressed in Andrew's flannel, Andrew's Levi's cinched tight at the waist with Andrew's belt she'd used an ice-pick to create an extra belt loop more fitting for her stature and smiles.

Still, Brian, the surprise guest, is open-minded. When Allison phoned two days ago, to set up the rendezvous, she'd briefed him on Ann situation, told him what Ann really needed was to get laid and that speaking from experience, Brian was the one to do it.

Brian walks in dressed to a T in Dockers and a sweater vest. He introduces himself and plants a kiss on Ann's rough hand. He's so polite he doesn't mention the smashed thumbnail, Ann forgotten to properly cover with a Band-Aid. Brian chats about politics, Hollywood, controversial issues in the local news. And Ann says nothing.

Allison sips her cocktail. Ann and Marc sling back shots of Jack Daniel's, in between swigs from their Bud longnecks, gnaw on beer pretzels and pick at their teeth with pinky nails.

It wasn't even the belch that did it. Women, Brian knew, belched too. It was when Ann got up to go the bathroom, scratched her crotch, and pulled at the seam below the zipper of her jeans, that Brian politely excused himself before she could return.
“Are you OK, Ann?” Allison asks Ann’s answering machine shortly after the Brian episode. Ann’s answering machine doesn’t answer.

The girls at work no longer concern themselves with Ann, with the part-timer. Ann avoids the lavatories during breaks, eats her hoagies and drinks her black coffee outside on the picnic bench, alone. Ann spits into the grass, rolling phlegm around in her throat, aiming for telephone poles, handicapped parking signs and the bird feeders she has hung from the branches of the well landscaped office lawn. Ann spits and never says thank you or Andrew or tombstone. She eats her hoagies and never considers she’s allergic to green peppers, that once they were the cause of terrible hives.

Ann doesn’t consider it odd or even slightly bizarre, when she runs the electric razor over her face and chin. She doesn’t even realize she’s begun shaving her facial hair, until, one Sunday evening when she run her hand across her face and feels stubble. For a second she thinks of marble and the word husband. Soon, she gives up shaving on the weekends.

“So many projects,” Ann says in Andrew’s voice, stripping off the varnish from the staircase banister. “I need a break.”

Ann, dressed in the flannel and jeans, gets in the Volvo and drives. She drives and drives, searching for something and ends up at Faico’s, a dimly tavern whose bar is lined with unshaven, flannelled men. She pulls up a stool and talks to Ron, who tells her she shouldn’t be wasting her time with ceramic tiles.

“They’ve got these stick-on ones now. Maybe not as fancy, but you drop something on them and it won’t shatter quite as quick either.”
Ron taps her Bud bottle. Clink. Soon they’re sharing plumbing tips.

“You need someone to help you out with that pedestal sink, give me a ring,” Ron says and hands her a business card. “Home number’s on the back. Be glad to help. Those things are a bitch to balance.”

“Yeah. Great.” Ann says and feels, at last, someone understands.

Ann doesn’t know how she ended up at Hackman’s Steel Co. How she got through the interview or how she’s now standing on the cutting line, watching machines slice sheet metal over and over again. She looks around her, at the other men, and can’t recall where she’s seen them before. For a moment, she sees her name carved on a gazebo, sees the words “Hackman’s Company Picnic” on a flyer, stuck with a fruit-basket magnet on a refrigerator. And Andrew’s face. She sees Andrew’s face last summer, bending down to touch the name carved on the wooden slates of a gazebo, sees his face smiling up at someone. Only for a moment.

The name was easy to change, Ann became Andie. She’d written it on the application without giving it a second thought. Had written “Andie” with Andrew’s left-hand.

Andie was not a telemarketer. Andie punched holes in sheet metal five days a week and spent his weekends, sawing, sanding, nailing, gluing, grinding: creating the perfect home for the wife he hoped would someday return.
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