1995

Red meat and whole milk: stories

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Red meat and whole milk: Stories

by

Mary Elizabeth Burrell

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HOW ROSALIE LOST HER HUSBAND

Once before, we thought Rosalie Medeiros’s husband had died at sea. It was an unseasonably warm September day and Rosalie polished the chalices in Saint Lucy’s by the Sea, the Portuguese church in New Portland. The church is drafty, even in the summer, but as Rosalie polished, her face grew as red as the teardrops that fall in the stained glass portraits of the saints that line the east and west walls. She hummed along with the hymns from the religious station she set her little radio to and wished she could take a nice, cool shower and make her skin shine as deep as the silver she’d just rubbed.

Weeks earlier, when the old janitor fell asleep in a confessional and didn’t wake up, Father Rabassa approached Rosalie and asked her to take over the job. “She’s always here anyway,” he’d said to her husband Manny who immediately protested, arguing “No man’s wife, certainly not one expecting twins, should be made to lug heavy buckets in a dark, drafty church when her husband makes more than enough money.” Rosalie told Father Rabassa to ignore Manny and she took the old janitor’s job to keep herself busy and her pockets comfortably lined while her husband was out on the fishing boat.

She put away the polish and the only sound in the church, besides the Widow Santos’ low snores, was the dull flap of her footsteps on the marble floor as she walked on thin, leather sandals to the narrow closet in the sacristy where the mop and bucket are kept. As she squeezed the extra water from the mop back
into the pale bucket, Rosalie noticed the old woman in black asleep in the front pew. Her black mantilla had almost fallen off the puff of white hair, and her head had fallen back and her mouth lay open, slack as a fish's mouth on ice behind glass at the market. Her closed eyelids looked as soft as Father Rabassa's cassock, which Rosalie washed weekly in special fabric softeners. In sleep, the widow's skin lost the wrinkles and lines of sorrow from the simple survival of years.

Rosalie shook her head affectionately and remembered when she and her fifth grade classmates used to call the old woman "The Black Widow" in the back rows of catechism class after school, and fabricate mysteries around the sudden death of the Widow's husband. The young girl used to hide behind her thick black hair as she and her friends giggled in the back rows and whispered lies about the Widow praying for the sudden storm that took her husband. The Widow has had a special affinity for Rosalie Villa, now Rosalie Medeiros, since then and has prayed since then that Rosalie would not know the sorrow of losing her man to the sea.

Rosalie always addressed the Widow to her face with a respectful, "Yes, Mrs. Santos," and "May I please, Mrs. Santos?" She thought tenderly that the old woman, a regular at the eight o'clock mass, must have lost her mind, her faith or her ability to sleep at night since she took to falling asleep in the same position during the middle of her novenas to Saint Jude. Rosalie plunged the mop into a bucket of clear water and wondered who she prays for.
After the series of commercials, a meteorologist with a nasally Boston twang came on the air and Rosalie listened with fear to the report of a sudden storm on the seas about twelve miles out from the harbor. She knew at once her stubborn husband, her man of only seven months was in danger. The storm’s location was exactly where Manny’s boat would be happily hauling in lobsters.

She tried to continue on with her work as usual, mopping blindly and furiously, but Father Rabassa released her to kneel next to the Widow Santos and pray for her husband’s safe return. She was pregnant with twins at the time, and she cried in the pew next to the Widow, her tears soaking her grandmother’s mother-of-pearl rosary she held in her hands. As she prayed, she tugged so hard on the slippery rosary that it slipped between her fingers. The string, a fine fishing line, snapped and the beads undid the loose knots and bounced, noisy as hail on car roofs, on the clean marble floor of the church.

The Widow leaned over to Rosalie’s ear, rested a thin, veiny hand on her shoulder and whispered “All gone.” She meant the rosary, but Rosalie thought “All gone,” meant her husband and a look of fear and loss came over her face. She began to cry again, “Dear God, please, not Manny. You can’t take Manny from me.” Her crying got louder, the wails more piercing, and the sobs more violent. Salt water began to drain from her palms as well as her eyes. Peeking around the corner of the sacristy, we thought at first that it was just the tears streaking her hands. But as she held her stained hands out to the Widow, who watched wide-eyed, more and more fluid drained out. As it drained, Rosalie’s
figure became more maidenly.

"Offering up the son for the sake of the father," whispered Father Esposito, a newly ordained priest sent to Saint Lucy's by the Archdiocese to try to revitalize our old church.

The next evening, the entire crew of the boat returned safely. They had lashed each other to life rafts, like Caribbean sailors do, with Manny helping each crew member until the Captain finally had to tie him down, saying he could help the others no more. "My wife is carrying a daughter, and a son, who I will name after you," Manny had said just moments before the last raft was launched, leaving the Captain on board to go down with the ship. The crew survived the night on the rafts, and were all healthy but somber when the Coast Guard picked them.

At home with her husband, Rosalie cried and wailed, and argued that her working at the church was not nearly as dangerous as the possibility of his never returning. Manny finally acquiesced and took out a moderate life insurance plan which nearly consumed their meager savings. Manny held the pen above the dotted line, glanced at Rosalie with love and grudgingly muttered, "Just in case," Rosalie's refrain during their argument. Manny signed mumbling about how his own mother had never worked, never mind involved herself in the family finances, and he couldn't understand why Rosalie was so insistent, especially with the job thing. "All that lifting and bending, you should be at home, taking better care of yourself, and my children," he repeated, capped the pen and patted
her on the stomach.

Rosalie reluctantly continued to come to Sunday mass with Manny, and her figure continued to grow. Despite all the fluid which flowed from Rosalie that one day, a little girl was left growing in her mother's womb. We watched Rosalie, head bent low over the back of the pew in front of her, her grandmother's cream lace mantilla hung like a ghost's vestments over her thick black hair. She'd close her eyes and move her lips in a rhythm more like a song than a prayer as Manny prayed to the statue of Saint Lucy and her outstretched arms.

The Widow Santos likes to tell stories about the fishermen's prayers, her favorite being the one about those who used to come to church before going out to sea. If in the silence of their wordless prayers, they heard the echoes of the sea within the high ceilinged darkness of the church, then they would be successful in their next trip out at sea. The Widow believes this, having lost her husband at sea the same Sunday she fell asleep during Mass. She's been every day since then; she spends more time there than even the priests, the old janitor used to joke. She comes early for eight o'clock mass and stays until just before lunchtime, saying novenas and drifting gracefully into sleep. Rosalie began to believe in the power of her prayers as much as the Widow did, and used prayer to battle the elements.
What should have been the happiest day of the couple's life turned out to be the beginning of the end of their love. Manny, in a panic, drove an inflated and puffing Rosalie to Saint Ignatius' hospital to give birth. When little Clara emerged without a brother, Manny finally understood that Rosalie had sacrificed his son in the mythologized flooding puddle in church. He drained his fury at his delirious wife, still dazed from the drugs she had asked for, screamed for during her hardest contractions, and stormed out of the hospital, calling her a witch. The Widow Santos, present at the birth per Rosalie's request, stopped Manny as he slammed doors and shoved unoccupied wheelchairs out of his way.

"Manny, can't you recognize a blessing in disguise? Rosalie showed a greater love for you than for your unborn son," she told him. "You're young, you can have another." But he didn't understand.

When Rosalie came out of her drug induced fog, she asked first for Clara and was told that the nurse had taken her to the nursery. Second, she asked for her husband and when the Widow told Rosalie that he'd gone to light a candle for the baby in Saint Lucy's, Rosalie confessed to the Widow that she'd seen a vision during labor.

"When I looked up at the light, focusing and breathing like they told me to in class, I saw the face of God."

The Widow's mouth dropped in awe. She crossed herself, feeling she was in the presence of one truly blessed.
"It was horrifying. He was laughing at me," Rosalie said seriously. "He laughed so hard, it shook the light fixture. Mrs. Santos, the pain was unbearable, I had to have the drugs. I thought I was going to die."

The Widow assured her that the baby girl was fine, healthy, and when Rosalie fell asleep, a fitful sleep filled with dreams of hurricanes and shipwrecks, the Widow, very much confused, went to track down Manny. She found him in Saint Lucy's, praying so hard he sweated raindrops on the wooden kneeler. He held one hand to his stomach, his guts churning in painful cramps of constipation. With his other hand, he wiped away the sweat from his brow and we began to wonder if the church floor would ever be dry again.

Manny found work on another boat, this one called the Santa Clara, and the crew of burly drunks impressed with his previous heroism in the storm. They belched heartily and slapped Manny on the shoulder a lot, showing him that he was among friends, fellow fishermen who would give him their last lifejacket. Manny a little afraid of them at first, tried not to take offense at their coarseness. So when his constipation returned at sea and began to impede his work on the boat, he endured the cramps in private. He was constipated for the entire three week journey out at sea, but since his incomplete family depended on his contribution, he suffered the painful knots in silence and helped with the nets to the best of his ability.

Five months later, Rosalie polished up the church and it shined like a cathedral. The saints on the walls looked as if they could come down at once and
feed the hungry of New Portland. Still, the Widow Santos was the only communicant at the eight a.m. mass, and the only one in the church, except the priests, until the middle of the afternoon when she would go home for a simple meal. After her vision the day of the little girl’s birth, Rosalie left her mantilla and the pieces of her grandmother’s rosary at home, and brought Clara in a white wicker traveling basket and set her on the steps to the alter so she could check on her from anywhere in the church. She no longer sat and prayed with the Widow, and we could hear her humming to Clara as she cleaned, "Hmmm, hmm, hmm, 409, hmm, hmm, down to the shine."

Manny and Rosalie again appeared to be a happy family, though Manny’s prayers to Saint Lucy included a plea for a son along with his usual entreaties for safe, fruitful voyages at sea. We saw Rosalie on the wharf as the Santa Clara motored out of the harbor, a furtive smile on her face that Manny mistook for adoration. He stayed on deck, watching Rosalie until her figure was out of sight, while the other fishermen began inspecting the nets and traps. Rosalie felt the distance between herself and the boat swell and she held Clara in the basket close to her body as she walked along the cobblestone street back to their small apartment near the church.

But Father Rabassa let it slip at the spaghetti supper that in a conversation in the sacristy, Manny had revealed that Rosalie refused to sleep with him anymore. "Isn’t it a sin not to accept the possibility of more children?" Manny had asked, remembering the vows they’d both agreed to not two years earlier in
the very same church, as well as the Widow’s prediction of more children.

As it turned out, not even the Widow Santos, Rosalie’s closest friend, knew that Rosalie had only prayed once since Clara’s birth, and that was only to reject both her God and her man. Manny would come home from the sea and try with all the energy of an eighteen-year old, to plant healthy sperm into his wife’s body. But his endeavors proved fruitless. And though Rosalie spent so much time in church, she didn’t tell Clara even one story from the Bible.

*

Now it looks like the sea may have taken Manny for sure. The Santa Clara’s trip started out routinely, taking all night to motor out to the seas twelve miles from the New Portland harbor. Manny, as usual, was constipated. He made sure, like he has for the past five months, to empty his bowels at home, knowing that it would be another three weeks, when the boat returned to shore, before he would be able to sit on the cool toilet seat and squeeze, his face apocalyptic red after the exertion, and satisfy his bodily needs. He knew that Rosalie still loved him; she kept the bathroom immaculately clean for his enjoyment. "Cleanliness is next to Godliness," he muttered under his breath, and wondered if it was appropriate to cross himself.

The water was calm for the first week and the sun shone down warm on the boat as the men began to sweat and smell. During the morning, the other fishermen checked on the lobster traps and hauled in the catch; one gloved hand over hand working on the ropes, which we call lines, dragging the traps up
against the water as they kidnapped the lobsters while Manny stopped often to
knead his abdomen. The fishermen on the Santa Clara were quicker and had
been fishing much longer than Manny and began to resent his incapacity.

Late in the morning, they fixed the traps and nets and waited until
afternoon to cast the heavy empty traps out into the sea. The fishermen took
their oniony smelling shirts off, and tossed them into a pungent pile which the
we’ll have to wash when the boat gets back to shore. Manny inhaled the salty,
fishy aromas of the sea and felt invigorated. Empty of the anger he felt at his
wife -- "How could she betray me like that?" he had asked the statue of Saint
Lucy on Clara’s birth day -- he let himself believe the Widow and her prophesy
that he and Rosa would have another baby soon, a son.

During the next two weeks, while Rosalie continued her daily routine as
church custodian, Manny increased his coffee consumption to three thermoses a
day to try to induce his bowels to void themselves. The bread and fish he ate
during the voyage sat in his stomach and he tried, straining and pushing until
his face was nearly purple, to relieve his cramps and squeeze the pulverized food
through his intestines. He sat on the toilet, we call it the head, with his head
tucked between his knees in profane prayer. He listened to the splash of the
waves slapping the side of the Santa Clara and felt the water from the bowl
beneath him and intuited that the water blessing his bare bottom was sea water.
He wished he was out on deck with the others, but the coffee sent him to the
head hourly to pee and the warm yellow stream smelled like the inside of his
coffee thermos.

The other fishermen, fed up with their invalid cargo, took to outright ostracism of Manny. The last night out at sea on this last trip, they banned him from the sleeping cabin in secret hopes that the sea would take him away while they slept. He lay outside with the smells of the ocean and the day’s catch mixing with the biley smells of the men’s belches which wafted out from the cabin. Manny’s head swam in misery, and he heard only the ripping sounds of the fishermen passing gas as he hoisted himself up into a sitting position, the cramps from his constipation bearing down on his guts. He pulled himself up by the arms to the railing and vomited three weeks worth of food into the sea. He prayed between heaves for strength and for the quick passage of the night so he could return to solid land, and his health.

Back at home, Rosalie listened to the late news on the radio as she put Clara to bed and turned on the faucets for her shower. As Manny retched over the side of the Santa Clara, a sudden rain, warm as bath water, began to fall. Rosalie stepped into the shower, and picked up the pink soap in the dish as always, with her right hand, content to finally wash the ammonia smell from work off her skin. Manny lay prostrate and miserable against the lobster pots piled on the deck, his skin crawling under the astringency of the rain and salt water.

Like most of us in New Portland, Rosalie never varied her bathing ritual out of superstition that change might bring about a poor outing for Manny on
the boat. She still loved him, she thought, though she could love him better at a distance, "When I don't have to listen to all his 'holy talk,'" she thought, shuddering at the memory of his amateur sermonizing, especially about money. She caught herself starting to wonder how much she really needed Manny, after all she had her own job, as she lathered her left arm, then her chest and legs in vigorous circles, just like the dust rag she took to the pews at church.

The routine of bathing let her mind wander, and she did most of her best thinking in the shower. She thought of the Widow Santos' devotion, her genuine belief in her prayers and the saints who hear them. Then she thought of Manny, always catching himself in an impure thought or action, then praying, as if Santa Claus himself were watching, and taking away a present for each time he misbehaved. "Hypocrite," she said to herself, seeing for the first time the holes in Manny's piety. Rosalie dropped the soap, breaking off a shard which slid down to the drain, and the Santa Clara hit a large wave, cracking off a large section of the port side which slipped into the sea. When Rosalie washed over the stretch marks that remained on her belly, Manny was suddenly filled with the urge to procreate, to leave a son to do his work, and carry on his name. He prayed an apology to the Captain of the old boat, lying below him on the ocean floor.

Rosalie opened her mouth to the stream of water from the shower nozzle as a deafening rip of thunder tore over the Santa Clara and the skies opened up in a torrential downpour, soaking Manny as his skin pruned. Rosalie reached
for her henna shampoo, a luxury she hid from her husband, but absentmindedly squirted a dram of Manny's dandruff shampoo into her hand.

The boat was pitching steadily, fully enveloped by the storm that didn't disturb the others sleeping inside. The winds around the boat whipped the lines in a clanging requiem. Rosalie lathered her hair, wondering if it was Clara's diapers or dirty clothes that emanated a strange briny smell that floated heavy over the bathroom air.

When Rosalie reached for her conditioner, she realized her mistake with the shampoo. In a panic, she turned on the faucet and water exploded like a torrent into the bathtub. She rinsed her hair furiously, washing out the thick chalky dandruff shampoo. Another swell doused Manny's body and he vomited up the drink. "Just a son," he cried to the squall, "All I ever wanted ..." His cry was interrupted by another breaker crashing over his body.

He remembered what Father Rabassa told him that day in the sacristy and wondered, "Am I really serving myself over God, and is this my punishment? But God, even you wanted a son," he tried to defend as the boat pitched violently and another unexpected swell threw him closer to the gash in the port side.

Rosalie turned off the water, pushed aside the shower curtain with a swift sweep of her hand, and vigorously towel dried her hair; she looked furtively around the bathroom, as if someone, the Widow Santos maybe, were watching her. As Manny grabbed onto the railing and knelt with his pruney callused
hands clutching the slippery railing, he watched the water ripple past him and out the port side gash, large enough for a man to slide through and fall out of the boat. Another wave swept over him and carried him into the sea, strangely warm with the fragrance of coffee. He pictured the statue of Saint Lucy, her arms outstretched to receive him. He gargled sea water and flailed his arms at the water, imagining himself swimming to her while the waves tossed him about on the water as if he were another fish. In his groping at the water's surface, he hit the plank that had fallen off the boat, grabbed for it, and hugged it, his legs dangling in the water. He watched the Santa Clara bob helpless in the waves as it continued to chug on towards New Portland. Another large swell snuck up behind Manny and smacked him hard on the back of his head. He saw the sea tumbling over him, gray with white speckles and his arms relaxed and he slid off his plank into the water. Under water, the white speckles dimmed and the rage of the storm faded to a wet insulated silence.

Rosalie felt a sudden swelling of the space in the apartment, as if there had been a drastic change in the pressure of the air. Her head suddenly felt unbearably heavy, and white dots danced and spun in her dizzy vision. Manny gargled salt water calling out his wife's name and Rosalie wobbled in a faint. Her weight crumbled, her legs folded and she fell forward, dropping painfully on her knees. As Manny watched as the ocean around him swallowed him up and continued to drag him down to the darker depths, Rosalie, landed on the wet tiles of the bathroom, sprawled on the floor and watched the light dim to
speckled gray, then black.

Rosalie spent the night on the wet tiles of the bathroom, woke early in the morning, and dressed ignoring the aches in her shoulder and hip. She had to be especially careful pulling on her stockings, her knees hurt from the fall and had overnight turned a sickly greenish-purple color. She woke Clara, fed and washed her and bundled her into her basket. The pair arrived at the empty church before either the sun or the Widow Santos was up. Rosalie worked hard and fast, determined to clean the church to its most brilliant shine, one the last time, before anyone woke up. She'd polished the silver, mopped the marble floor, ironed the linens and hemmed a tear in Father Rabassa's cassock before the Widow Santos appeared. She shuffled through the door in her usual black mourning, but more slowly, as if burdened with a heavier sadness. When she peered into the church and saw Rosalie, sleeves up, whistling to herself as she polished, she stopped her steps and her breathing.

"Oh Rosalie, we tried to call you, but there was no answer, and we feared..." the Widow Santos sat down and put a hand to her chest. She breathed with difficulty as Rosalie stood over her.

"Oh my dear," the Widow said in anguish, "I'm so sorry, I know just how it feels. But the pain will pass."

Rosalie gave her a look of bafflement.

"There was a storm last night, an unexpected squall blew up in the middle of the ocean. No one in New Portland felt it, it sat just right over the Santa
Clara. It tore a gash in the port side of the boat, and Manny..."

"Manny?"

"Manny was out on deck. My dear, I'm so sorry. They think he must have been washed through the hole in the side of the boat. It's a miracle that the entire boat didn't sink with a gash so big. The captain radioed the Coast Guard early this morning. He and the rest of the crew slept through the whole thing, and woke up only as the winds were dying down and the sea stopped rolling. The Coast Guard has sent boats out for a rescue. They hope they can reach the Santa Clara before it goes down, but it's too late for Manny. He's gone, my dear. He's gone."

The Widow's tears burst through and she wailed in mourning into her handkerchief. Rosalie sat down next to her, held her like a child, patting her head. "He's gone, he's gone," the Widow repeated over and over, and Rosalie wrapped the widow in her arms, rocking her and making quieting, soothing sounds she would make to Clara to get her to stop crying and fall asleep.

The Widow finally did fall asleep, breathing in deep snores. She'd become congested from crying. Rosalie eased her arms out from her embrace, laid the Widow's head onto the pew back and watched as the Widow's mouth slowly dropped open. Rosalie slid past the Widow, quietly stepped over to where Clara lay on the altar, happily sleeping in her basket. The last we saw of Rosalie, she was in the doorway of the church, scanning the immaculate interior, taking one last look at her work. She turned and with a proud smile, quietly closed the
church door without waking up the Widow.

*

New Portland hasn’t been the same without Rosalie, or the Widow Medeiros as she’s now known. There hasn’t been anyone except Father Rabassa and Father Esposito to clean St. Lucy’s. Everyone else is leery of the job. “You’ve got to have a death wish,” the women say, calling to mind the janitor dead in the confessional and Rosalie’s husband at the bottom of the sea. The Widow Santos is still the only communicant at church, and sometimes in the afternoons, she’ll take some polish to the silver and hum a hymn. Otherwise, she doesn’t talk much, not very sensibly anyway. We’re secretly glad that Rosalie left, and we wish her happiness. New Portland is no place for a widow.
When Bridget was about four and a half years old, she dug up the buried carcass of her brother's dead hamster. The funeral a week earlier had been a terribly solemn affair as she and Danny paraded slowly down the back steps and around the corner to a bald patch under the back porch. The children hummed *Here Comes The Bride*, thinking it was *Taps* while Mother and Father at the top of the steps sucked in their cheeks to keep from laughing. Danny muttered his good-byes as he packed in the dirt above the old shoe box that served as Harry the Hamster's coffin. When Father marked the grave with a bright white stone the size of his fist, Danny lost his composure with a gasp and a few tears and ran clumsily up the steps into the house. Bridget stayed with Mother and Father at the grave site: solemn, reverent, confused.

She wondered all the rest of the afternoon how Harry was going to eat, and breathe. When she asked Mother at dinner, Danny's eyes widened and his hand froze mid-air between his plate and his mouth. "That's not funny," he answered. "No, I mean it," Bridget protested. "What's Harry gonna do now? How's he gonna eat?" Danny ran from the room flinging names back at his little sister. Mother folded her napkin and followed him upstairs. When they came back down a couple of hours later, Danny apologized to Bridget watching television in the living room with Father. The apology helped, but no one answered her question.
I haven’t cried yet. I’m not sure that I will. Always when I leave a man I cry a little, sometimes in front of him, sometimes on the bus back to my own apartment, but always where someone else can see. It helps me to feel better about the sadness I don’t feel at ending a perfectly good relationship. I just five minutes ago ended the kind of relationship everyone wishes for, and I’m on my way to see my mother. I look at the faces of the men on the bus and wonder when was the last time they cried, and why. Maybe when I see my mother I’ll cry. I’d like to.

Sometime during high school, Danny started calling me Bridget the Fidget, then just Fidget. Restless and uneasy, that’s me.

Mother and Father sent Bridget to an all girl’s college out in the boonies of Western Massachusetts, thinking that the structure and the distance from home would do her good. She was miserable and lonely and so mad at Mom and Dad for sending her that she only came home once, during Christmas Break of her freshman year. Later, Bridget decided that college hadn’t been as bad as she’d expected. After all, she had spent some time hanging out with the girls in her dormitory. But graduation separated her from them permanently. What she remembers most vividly about college is learning how to hide her aloneness. She’d leave the dorm after dinner, backpack on and call loudly down the hallway, “Going to the library. Send the cavalry if I’m not back by midnight,”
and then she'd hurry out to the graveyard. You don't see headstones from the 1700's and 1800's at home, but they were all over the place at her school. She showed me one from 1600 something, but it was too old and the date too rubbed off to tell. Bridget did a couple of rubbings, but was afraid her roommate would find them and think she was weird, so she stuffed them in a trash can in a public building. Fidget and I have seen stuff like that in museums, historic gravestone rubbings. They're framed now and everything.

*

Four and a half year old Bridget was more impressed with the ceremony of the funeral than the fact that Harry the Hamster was dead. Even Danny's rare display of grief was not as intriguing as this mysterious ritual for a hamster whose only accomplishment was to race to nowhere on a plastic wheel. Bridget wondered about the funeral, and what it did to Harry that he didn't need to eat or drink, or play, even after Mother finally sat her down in the kitchen and tried to set her straight.

"Darling, when something, or someone is dead, it's gone to us forever," Mother reached into the cupboard, passed over the plastic cups Bridget always used and pulled out a glass-glass, an adult glass.

"Well how can he be gone? I saw Daddy put him under the porch. You were there too." She watched Mother fill the glass with juice and pass it to her without comment, as if this wasn't the very first time she'd been allowed to drink on her own from an adult glass. Sometimes grownups got confused and
made the biggest things little, and the littlest things big.

“Well, technically Harry is still under the porch, his body is,” Mother finally answered. “But the Harry we knew, well, he’s gone.”

Gone, like when Father goes to work? Or gone like Bridget would never be three years old again? Death must have done something to Harry that Mother didn’t want to tell her about. Bridget watched to see if Mother would say anything else and forgot about the glass, missed her mouth and poured juice down the front of her shirt. Mother just shook her head and with a sad smile sent Bridget upstairs to change.

The next morning after breakfast, Bridget headed straight to the dirt pile under the back porch and stood over Harry’s shallow grave, humming *Here Comes the Bride* to herself. Father’s bright white stone was still there, marking the ground as a place of distinction. Bridget knelt down, still humming, and dug into the ground with her hands. Finally she tapped the box top and cleared enough space around it to lift it out of the ground. She opened up the lid and saw without fear the week-old carcass of Harry.

She cradled the body in her dirty hands, in awe at how Death had transformed the tiny, fuzzy body of Harry into a crumbly mess. She walked slowly up the back steps, watching her two hands balance the parcel. She stepped deliberately over the threshold, into the house, down the corridor and straight into Mother who nearly screamed. Bridget looked up, started. Her hands opened. Harry fell like a small bag of potting soil, bouncing once and spilling
onto the eggshell rug. Bridget slowly bent at the knees, hands out, groping for Harry, her eyes fixed on Mother’s look of disgust and disbelief. Mother seemed to come to all at once, grabbed the girl’s arm and pulled her up from the floor, yelling questions and reprimands as she led Bridget to the bathroom sink and filled her hands with soapy water. Harry the Hamster remained spilled on the carpet until Father came home and picked up all the pieces with a bemused grimace.

The spanking hurt, as did the punishment of room restriction for a week. But the worst was when Danny yelled, “Bridget, that’s gross. Get away from me,” and pushed her away as she tried to hug him in apology. Danny wouldn’t let Bridget feed or even pet his new Harry the Hamster.

The incident eventually graduated to the annals of quaint family history and took its place among the tales of cunning mispronunciations and I-can’t-believe-she-did-that stories.

* 

Sometimes, when I tell a man that it’s over, he cries. That’s when I cry in front of them. Some get confused, others get angry and call me names, different from the names Danny called me when we were kids. But I don’t hear because I’m already gone. I always know just when to leave. It’s the same every time. Just when they’ve gotten comfortable enough to tell me everything they swore they’d never tell another living soul in their lives, I get bored and guilty, and I know it’s time. Except this time. I never wanted to feel that way about Nathan,
so I left before I could. I didn’t want to. But I’d rather be alone than afraid.

I’ve never actually said this, put words to it, but I’ll say it now. I’m afraid of getting left behind. Aren’t we all? I didn’t want to get left. Not this time, not ever, especially not this time. There, I’ve said it. Happy?

* 

Bridget was barely five when the McNamara family held a funeral for the dog they’d recently adopted from the store in the mall. The pup hadn’t grown much in its short stay with the family and though she knew Terry the Terrier had always been sickly, Bridget wailed when she found the motionless body of her best friend in its crate.

Bridget was still crying at Terry’s funeral, and there was no laughing this time as Danny hummed *Taps*. Danny helped Father lower the box into the ground; Bridget couldn’t do anything more than sit on the back steps, hold Mother’s hand and cry. Terry was laid to rest next to Harry and her grave was marked by a broken brick Danny found at the construction site just down the street.

At dinner, Bridget sat quietly at her place at the table. She didn’t eat or ask questions about Death. Bridget had no playmates besides the dog, though the constant rumble of bulldozers and tractors down the street repeated the empty promise that children would soon be living across the street in the half-built housing development.
That night, Bridget couldn’t sleep. She tried to keep Danny, in his bed across the room, awake with questions. “What if Terry really isn’t dead? What if she’s just sleeping. Oh, no, Danny, what if Terry’s still alive?”

Danny rolled over, tossed back the blanket and sat up. “Bridget, for the last time, go to sleep.” He rubbed his eyes. “Terry’s dead. She’s buried, just like my first Harry. Remember Harry Number One? They’re both dead. You bury dead things. Now please go to sleep.”

“But I don’t have any friends now,” Bridget cried.

Danny slid out of his bed and padded over to Bridget’s. He patted her on her back as she cried into a corner of her blanket. “Mother and Father will get you a new dog. Not a new Terry, but maybe a Henry, or a Susie. How about a big sheepdog named Susie. Would you like that?”

Bridget lifted her face from the blanket, wiped her eyes with the soaked sheet and nodded. Danny brushed her hair back, kissed her on the forehead and went back to bed. She sank deep into the covers of her own bed and fell asleep petting the back of her own hand the same way she used to pet Terry’s ears.

* 

When Fidget was in college, she got into the habit of going to funerals. She’d sit towards the back, but near enough so she could cry along with everyone else. It helped for a while. Bridget had become prone to unexplainable crying spells at the oddest times: waiting for class to start, in the serving line at the cafeteria, at the drug store. But after a while, the funerals got boring. The
ceremony became just a ceremony, the repetition wore the beauty right off. Even though the ceremonies were all the same, the people were always different. After a while, Bridget could tell who was family, who was a colleague and who a distant relative just by watching the way they grieved.

The one thing that kept Bridget coming back, funeral after funeral, was that there was always so much love present. It was palpable and wet and left stains next to the teardrops on the pages of the songbooks. For a few weeks Bridget went to every funeral she could find. She'd close her eyes and pretend she was the person dead. She'd sit in the pew, knees together, hands in her lap and feel all the love streaming towards her, into her. She told me once that those were some of the most beautiful moments in her life.

Gradually, people at funerals began to look at her differently. They could somehow tell that she was most definitely not there for Joe Schmo in the coffin. They whispered behind their hands to sisters and aunts, “Who is she? Do you know her? Wasn’t she at Dr. McElroy’s funeral?” Bridget was approached at one funeral by the dead man’s wife herself. The widow stood with her head elegantly tipped to one side and her hand extended, benignly waiting to shake Bridget’s, and asked how she knew her late husband. Fidget stammered. The blood shot straight up from her chest into her neck and face and spread under her skin. Finally, she admitted that she didn’t know him, she just, she just, she sputtered, turned and ran out of the church, leaving the widow alone and baffled.
The day after Terry the Terrier's funeral, Bridget stood in the center of the quiet garage, trowel in hand. Her hands began to sweat. Her mouth dried. She remembered digging up Harry, bringing him in the house and getting in all that trouble. No, that couldn't happen again. What would Mother and Father say this time? She wouldn't get in trouble like that again.

She slipped out of the garage, slunk back under the porch and quickly dug a hole just big enough to slide her hands in and squeeze Terry's box out. She hurriedly plowed the dirt back into the hole and replaced the brick, watching to see if Mother appeared at the back door. She lifted one end of Terry's box, dragged it across the yard and dropped it behind the garage.

It was thirsty work, disinterring Terry, but Bridget didn't dare go inside for a drink. Mother was sure to cheerfully ask her what she was up to. She quietly pushed open the garage door, wheeled out her little red wagon, rolled it over the dry grass behind the garage and parked it next to the coffin box. She hoisted the box and its contents into the wagon. "If Mother and Father found out," Bridget didn't dare finish the thought as she wheeled the wagon across the back yard, over the rugged dirt of the empty lot next door to a lonely clump of trees and bushes down the street.

She was safely out of sight and hearing from her own house, but Bridget was sure Mother could hear the pounding of her heart in her ears. When she looked around she saw no one, and sat down on the edge of the wagon, ready to
pull back the first flap of the box lid. It made a snapping sound, a loud one, and Bridget looked around again, waiting to see if someone would come looking for the noise. She pulled back another flap, took a breath, and pulled back the last two. Lying on the bottom of the box was Terry. The dog looked like she did the previous day when they’d found her in the crate and Bridget reached in, pulled her out and laid her on her lap. Her eyes were closed and she looked asleep. Kind of. Bridget sighed and smiled, glad to have a companion again.

*  

I remember the last time my brother Dan cried. He was seven or so and we were having a funeral for his hamster. Mother and Father were always getting him hamsters to replace the ones that died. Danny named every single one of them Harry. I don’t know why I’ve remembered that after all these years. It was like he was trying to keep something alive, something larger that he knew as Harry. But back then it was all just hamsters to us, and they died almost as fast as Mother and Father bought them.

*  

Bridget kept Terry behind the clump of trees and thick bushes and played with her like a doll. She would change the scene or game with props she found nearby; a pile of leaves for a bed, an arrangement of sticks for a house frame. Bridget was Mommy, and Terry was the baby, napping and eating mudpies. She stayed with her baby Terry until the streetlights began to flicker on and it was time to go home.
The next day, Bridget ate breakfast impatiently and dashed outside, her pink Fall jacket dangling off her shoulders and hanging from her elbows. She ran across the empty back yards to the lot and found Terry just as she had left her, in the box on the wagon hidden in the bushes. Bridget lifted Terry out of the box, propped her up with sticks and rocks into a sitting position. Bridget fed Terry breakfast, placing the food in Terry’s mouth and moving her jaw to chew the leaves.

They played catch. Bridget rolled Danny’s whiffle ball to Terry, aiming for the space between Terry’s open paws, keeping score as high as she could count. They played Mama Bird and Baby Bird when Bridget piled leaves and sticks into a nest around Terry. They played school with Bridget as the teacher and Terry as the disobedient student who had to sit in the corner, nose hidden with difficulty under stiffening paws. Bridget pretended to ignore Terry as she continued teaching the bushes and saplings. It was past Bridget’s nap-time when she lay down, just for a moment, against Terry’s coarse belly and fell into a shallow doze. She awoke slowly, it was hard to see in the twilight. She thought she’d dreamed that Mother was out into the neighborhood, calling her name. But her sleepy ears realized that the calling didn’t stop when she woke up. Mother’s voice got louder and closer, and by the sounds of it, Bridget was in trouble. Bridget wouldn’t learn until much later, when she herself was a mother, that half of the anger children hear in their parents’ calling voices is to hide the panic.
Bridget pulled Terry by the front paws to the box and the wagon, hampered occasionally by Terry’s stiff snout catching on bumps and divots in the ground. Bridget gave a good tug and came away with Terry’s paw in her hand, cleanly separated at the shoulder. Mother’s voice was louder and closer, so near she could probably see if she looked close enough into the bushes. Bridget quickly hoisted the very heavy dog up into her arms and dumped her into the box. She threw the paw in and heard it land with a dull thud and then roll to the far side of the box. She quickly wheeled the wagon behind a far tree, camouflaged it with branches. When Mother was looking the other way, she darted behind a tractor and sheepishly hurried over the dirt from the monster trucks.

“What did we tell you about playing around the construction site?” Mother took a swipe at Bridget’s rear and missed. “And what have you been rolling in? You smell terrible, like,” Mother sniffed, “Ugh, like rotten something.” Bridget sniffed, but didn’t smell anything. Just dirt and Terry and leaves. “You’re getting straight into the tub when we get home. You just wait until your father gets home.” Mother didn’t say anything more until they reached the house. Bridget was left to soak and wasn’t let out of the tub until Father returned home, in a particularly good mood and announced that they were going out for dinner. The meal lasted for hours, and Bridget got only a look from Mother for spilling over Danny’s water glass when she tumbled backwards out of her chair.
I count fourteen men on this bus. All these men and they think they’re so big and strong. None of them look at each other. Some will look at a woman, but most just look out the window, like they’re so important they can’t be bothered with you, even though you’re just like them, you’re taking the bus too.

Nathan wasn’t ever like that. He’s the kind I always shied away from. You know, the ones that seem perfectly normal, with every great quality in just the right amount and seem too good to be true and so probably are. So you convince yourself that this is the one who’s going to want to tie you up with your nylons and leave you there for three days, so you’re mean as hell to the nicest guy in the world.

Nathan always seemed to be the exception to all my rules. In a way, he reminds me of all the nice parts of my brother, Dan, like when Dan made elaborate arrangements for Mom to be there at his Ph.D. graduation even though she was in a wheelchair and the ceremony was outside on the grass. And how he, the popular Senior, was always kind to me, a lowly Freshman, and made sure all the cool kids in high school knew me as his little sister. He gave everyone rides home from school, and I always rode shotgun. He saved that seat for me every time.

Nathan’s like that all the time. It’s nice, but it scares me. What would happen if I got hooked, if I became dependent on him? What would I do if the love left? Where would I be then? Nathan is wonderful, yeah, but how do I
know that that he really has loved me all along, and isn’t going to stop loving me? How do I know that he’s not going to leave me?

* 

Five year old Bridget continued to play with the corpse of Terry the Terrier and the day after they went out for dinner, she timed her visit so that she’d arrive home just before Mother began to miss her and look in the cupboard for new lunch ideas. When she was in the bathroom, she pilfered a roll of surgical tape and some wide gauze, planning on playing Doctor and Patient with Terry and her broken paw that afternoon. Bridget wasted almost the whole afternoon trying to tape the leg back on, devising an elaborate harness of tape which only ripped off patches of Terry’s fur when the paw fell out of its tenuous tether. It was frustrating work, and the more Bridget moved Terry around, the more the other paws threatened to fall away. “Stupid dog,” Bridget stopped just short of the dog and kicked the wagon instead.

The next morning, Bridget pushed an old long-sleeved play shirt up her zippered jacket, and bounded to Terry’s hiding place. The plan worked! When Bridget finally got the shirt on Terry and arranged her just so, it looked like the pup was alive and intact. Well, not quite alive, Bridget decided, cocking her head uncomfortably to one side as Terry did. But the intact part was all that mattered. What fun would Terry be as a body with no arms or legs to pull her around by? And if Bridget could keep her like this, maybe she’d freeze back together! It was starting to get pretty cold out at night. She could see her breath when she came
out of the restaurant the other night.

But the next morning when Bridget pulled Terry out of her box, two paws stayed inside. As much as she tried and thought, arranged and repositioned, she couldn’t come up with any games that kept her as entertained as that first game of toss, or Mama Bird and Baby Bird. “Stupid dog, why did you have to die? We could have fun,” Bridget pushed on the side of Terry’s head, sending the dog in her tee-shirt over onto her rigid side. She caught a whiff of something acrid, smelled her hands and made a face. “Yech, Terry, you stink!” Bridget laid the box on its side, pushed the dog back in, dropped in the two paws, and managed to shove and heave the box back into the wagon. She watched carefully as she pulled the wagon out of the clump of trees, construction workers pointing and staring at her as if she’d appeared like a ghost, out of nowhere.

She pulled the wagon quickly as she could, ignoring the stares of the workmen who returned to their big frightening toys when Bridget crossed into the next empty lot. She was back in her own yard, behind the garage before she knew it. She snuck around the house, found Mother busy on the phone, and ran back to the garage in search of the trowel. Fifteen minutes later, Terry was back under the porch in her coffin-box under loosely packed dirt, crowned by a broken brick. Bridget plodded to the side of the house, turned on the outside faucet to rinse the dirt and odor off her hands.

*
Dad died shortly after his seventy-seventh birthday; he was always perfectly average, demographically speaking. I used to wonder about Dad’s sense of priorities, and where exactly his children fit into them. His funeral was rough for me. I wasn’t as sad as I thought I was supposed to be. Mom’s glaucoma worsened into total blindness shortly after that and Dan and I decided over the phone that we had no choice but to put her in a home. He lives in Toronto. Mom wouldn’t like the weather and Dan’s got his own family to take care of. I couldn’t have taken care of her the way she needs to be and the nurses are all good about giving Mom her injections just as she needs them.

My footsteps sound so much louder than the rubber wheels of wheelchairs, and I feel guilty that I can visit the nursing home and come and go freely. I’m afraid sometimes that Mom may resent me for that. I know she’s glad to see me when I visit, and I can tell by the way her face softens and comes to life when she hears me hello that she loves me. I’m her daughter, she has to. We both realize that. And I try not to notice that her body is deteriorating.

As I walk through the long, wide halls of the nursing home, wide so two wheelchairs can pass each other with room to spare, I imagine having a therapist, and her asking why I go visit my mother every time I leave a lover. I don’t know what I’d say, I’d probably make something up. I watch Mom for a moment before I knock and enter her room and wonder if maybe I could take care of her in my apartment. If I really wanted to, I bet I could. My voice hits three distinct notes when I call “Hello,” and Mom’s face softens and lights up as I
step into the room. She’s sitting in her wheelchair, as always, her face towards the window, the brightest spot in the room. They want to amputate one of her legs, the right one, I think. But she won’t let them. I want her to keep it. The idea of them hacking her into pieces is cruel and gruesome. Even still, I’m kind of relieved that she always has a blanket covering her legs.

I kiss her on the cheek. We make small talk, share recent stories and events. We pause, and sigh, and I know what’s coming when Mom says, “Bridget, I hate to see you so unhappy all the time.”

I roll my eyes because I know she can’t see me.

“Bridget, darling, you’re almost thirty, when are you going to settle down? You visit so rarely, I forget we live in the same city. I always hope that the next time, you’re going to come in here waltzing, instead of shuffling. I do. All this old bag of bones wants now is to know that you’re happy. You’re never happy when you come to see me.”

“Mom, I’m always happy to see you...” I rest my hand on her arm. I can feel the warmth through her thin sweater.

“You know that’s not what I mean. My darling girl,” Mom reaches out shakily and I give her both my hands. She pulls them into her lap and holds them tight in hers. Her fingers are soft, strong. “You were always so unhappy, even when you were little. You’ve had enough of that. You deserve more now. You deserve pure bliss now.”
I see Mom’s throat tighten and I’m about to cry too, until she lets my hands go and pulls a tissue out of the wrist of her sleeve. She dabs at her eyes quickly, like they do at funerals, and I have to turn away. I can’t remember the last time I saw her cry. I want desperately to reassure her, but I can’t without lying.

Mom sits up straight and composes herself. She tells me in a calm wistful voice that the company she sold our old house to, the one with the pets buried under the back porch, has gotten the whole neighborhood rezoned, and they’ll start construction on an industrial park soon. I sigh and shake my head; if it’s not one thing it’s another. No matter how much distance you put between yourself and what you love, it always hurts when things change without warning.

I stay with Mom until 4:30 p.m. when the nurse comes in and gives her an injection. She steps out for a moment then returns with a ridiculously early and unappetizing dinner. I eat whenever I get hungry, either pulling something out of the fridge or stopping at a take out place. I could never take care of Mom on my own. I suddenly feel pangs of real sorrow and I wonder if Mom knows that I don’t want her to live with me. I say good bye with the same promise to return soon.

According to my bus schedule, I’ll have to switch routes twice before I get a bus that will take me about three blocks from the old house. They’ll have to extend the route when the industrial park gets built, I imagine as I drop my
change into the slot.

I'm still thinking about Mom as I watch the scenery chug by, people living without thinking, while I'm here just sitting and thinking. I realize for the first time that Mom knows a lot more than I've given her credit for. I guess I always figured that because she's blind, it would be easier to keep things from her. But she knows this set-up isn't as picture-book as if she lived with me, and I lovingly took care of her. But she lets me go. I kiss her good bye and she never knows when I'll be back again. Or if. It's always up to me. Despite this, she still loves me. She chooses to love me, irregardless.

Suddenly it dawns on me and I smile this silly, loopy grin and I laugh out loud. Right here in this silent bus filled to the aisles with strangers, I sit alone in my seat and laugh as I finally realize what I've been doing all along, and what I should have been doing, with Nathan and all the rest.

I laugh again, slap my leg and my hand reaches up and pulls on the cord at the window. The bell dings, the bus rolls to a stop and I float through the crowd of people and out the door. I stand on the sidewalk for a moment, looking up and down the street with one word racing through my mind. Phone. I have to call Nathan. I can love him, and stay with him, irregardless of what I think he might do. No, things aren't even remotely over between me and him.
We are revealed by our bathrooms. They detail what we will endure, and what we cannot abide. The stains on the sink and the trash in the basket betray us to our casual visitors who drop in unannounced and unobtrusively ask "Oh, could I just step into your bathroom a minute?" We look at each other and wonder. Did you leave stubble in the sink? Did you leave that box of tampons out on the counter? We should have taken the apartment with a half-bath by the kitchen. We look away, each wondering if the other forgot to flush. Again. "If you have, and you embarrass me," we think simultaneously. "I didn't know you were expecting company," we say together. We smile it off when our guest flushes, and we hear the door open.

Martin and Nicole Bennett's apartment had just one bathroom, and in it, Martin's shaving equipment held greatest importance. He detested plastic or disposable razors, wouldn't allow Nicole to even bring them into the house. He preferred instead to keep the old shavers on the vanity table which crowded the small room. As the water flooded into the tub, Martin glanced over in inspection of the decommissioned razors, lined up like soldiers waiting to be decorated for admirable performance above and beyond the call of duty. The current commander in chief was the silver handled razor Nicole had given him a few months earlier for his twenty-ninth birthday.
Martin watched himself in the mirror, smoothed down the dark brown hair shading his pale face and ran the water into the tub. He noted the time as he unstrapped his watch and laid it next to the sink. Nicole should be home soon, he anticipated and as he stepped into the bath, he heard her key in the front door of their apartment.

"Anybody home?" she called.

"In here," Martin answered as he sank into the warm water. Her footsteps snapped taut and steady on the wooden living room floor. The carpeted hallway muffled her steps as the deliberate gait continued, bringing Nicole to the doorway of the bathroom.

She crossed her arms and shifted her weight, "I see you're the only one who hasn't heard?" she asked calmly. She dropped her weight to her hip, pressed it to the doorway.

"Very good, thank you and how was your day?" Martin smiled and closed his eyes as his hands came up, full of water, and he splashed his face.

"Please get out of the tub, Martin. The water's contaminated," she sounded almost annoyed and placed a foot before her, leaned over to the door and pulled a towel off the rack.

"What are you talking about?" Martin cupped the soap in his hands, dipped his hands into the water and rubbed until a bubbly lather came out between his fingers. Nicole crossed her arms and held the towel by a corner in one hand.
"It's true. It was all over the radio on my way home. There's been a leak in a holding tank in a sewage treatment plant just outside the city." He closed his eyes and rubbed lather around his beard, on his forehead. "The water's all reversed or something and the contaminated water's been pumped through the taps."

"Eek!" Martin cupped his hands in the water, splashed his skin clear of soap.

"Martin," Nicole stamped her heel into the carpet. "You're bathing in sewage."

Martin held his hand out for the towel. Nicole blew air through her dark bangs and dug her heel into the rug. There was a rush of water, like a short waterfall, and Nicole looked up to see Martin standing, naked and dripping. He ran his hands through his trim, brown hair. He held out his hand. Nicole hesitated then took the two steps to the tub and pushed the towel into Martin's hand.

He leisurely wrapped the towel around his waist, secured the fold with a tuck, then plowed into Nicole, lifting her up in one motion and dumping her safely, wetly into the tub. The wide eyed and slack jawed look of shock and utter disbelief stayed on Nicole's face as she wiped her hair out of her face. Martin's face split into a hearty grin as he knelt down beside the tub, leaned an arm on the edge of the tub and flicked little waves of water at Nicole.
"No, dear, you're the one bathing in sewage! Mmm, tasty, but I can't quite place the spices," Martin joked as he licked Nicole's ear.

"Ugh, Martin!!! If anyone told me, the bum at the end of the street, that the city's water was contaminated, I'd've jumped clear out of the tub!"

"Sorry Nic," Martin laughed sincerely. "I've heard better out of you."

"I didn't get you at all? Not even for a second?"

"Half a second. Maybe," he smoothed down her wet hair, ran his palm behind her ear, along her jaw. They kissed, then Nicole splashed her husband.

He helped her out of the tub and out of her wet silk blouse which she rung out over the tub. "You should have seen me this afternoon, then, I pulled one of my best." She sat on the edge of the tub, extended her legs out and alternately pointed her toes.

"Mmm, and who was your victim this afternoon?" He faced the mirror, fingering his silver handled razor and glancing at the reflection of his wife.

"I haven't seen Clare in ages, so I thought I'd stop by her office today. Actually I decided to give her a call first. So when I got back to the studio, I called her and we talked for a bit." Martin ran the sink faucets, wet and lathered his face while Nicole went on.

"Actually it was pretty funny, I asked about her car. She said that it needed work, and she decided to take the bus until it gets fixed, she'd left it home. I said that that was strange, I'd passed by her place this morning and hadn't seen her car in the drive. Dead silence from Clare, so I went on and said that yes, I'd seen
someone on North Main driving a car, just like hers with a good sized gash in the passenger's door."

"You said that? To Clare? At work? Oh, you are an evil woman!"

Martin turned around and let a smile crack through his admonishment. He had covered the brown hair on his cheeks and chin in foam, but as always left his mustache alone. "She's such a hen."

Nicole laughed for the first time since she'd returned home. "Well that nearly put her over the edge. 'First I get into a car accident, then two days later, my car gets stolen, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.' She was almost in tears before she would listen to me and I told her I was only kidding, it was just a joke, blah, blah, blah."

"Nic, why do you continue to torment us this way?"

"What? Oh, Martin, I'm only joking, I always tell you that!" Nicole rested her hand on Martin's shoulder. He craned his neck to kiss her hand.

"You better hurry up and finish your preening. I want to shower and change. We're supposed to be at Paul and Maggie's in an hour." Nicole tapped the face of Martin's watch and turned into the hallway. Martin looked back at the mirror. The face was familiar, young, mustached, handsome, the one he'd seen every day since his seventeenth birthday when he'd woken up with a full beard. Since then he had to shave twice, sometimes three times a day to stay clean-shaven and keep up with the phenomenal rate at which his facial hair grew. It had amused Nicole at first. She talked about him not shaving for weeks,
years then begged him to shave his head like the art students on College Hill and grow a long, long beard. She never seemed to like the mustache, but Martin refused to part with it. Until now.

Martin heard Nicole go into the bedroom. She had a heavy walk for such a slight thing, and Martin could always tell where she was in the apartment by her footsteps, whereas Nicole could turn a corner and jump back startled by Martin rounding the same corner. She’s always the one playing the tricks, he mused, tapping the razor against the sink.

He squirted a ball of shaving foam into his palm, covered the hair under his nose in the froth, and took one stroke with the razor in the middle of the mustache. He held the razor up to his face again, and in four even strokes, he saw the clean shaven face he’d forgotten he hated. He remembered a second too late how thin his upper lip looked bare, and how he looked more like a gawky teenager than a successful architect.

"Fuck. I look like a bald rodent."

"What?" Nicole called from down the corridor.

"Uh, nothing, Nic," Martin gave himself a confused look in the mirror. He hadn't heard her leave the bedroom.

"Martin, we've got to go. We'll be late as it is."

He left his shaving things out, rinsed off his face, and opened the door. Nicole was in the kitchen, peering into her small purse. The black leather clashed with her blue silk dress, her favorite, but Martin was the only one who
cared about such a small thing. Maggie and Paul were close friends, after all, and if they noticed, they'd certainly never say anything. He dressed, agitated at having to hurry, and was sure his shirt and tie didn't go.

He was so busy fixing the length of his tie as he walked into the kitchen that he almost ran into Nicole who gave a start and a little cry.

"You look beautiful," he said, taking care to observe her from head to toe. 

"Thank you," she smiled. 

He hurried out to the street to bring the car around. Nicole waited at the door, and Martin held the umbrella over her as she slid into the car and out of the rain. Martin took a moment to look at Nicole before starting the engine.

"What? Is something wrong? Do I have lipstick on my teeth?" she asked pulling down the mirror behind the visor. 

"No."

Nicole paused. "You look nice."

Martin arched his eyebrows and answered, "Thanks. For not saying anything." He turned back to the windshield and missed the befuddled look from Nicole.

Minutes passed as tediously as the traffic. Martin joined I-95 as the population of Providence drained and cars raced inches past each other as the Big Blue Bug on the Pest Control Building and the Thurbers Avenue Curve crawled by. The constant stop and go grated on Martin and his mood sank when he reached up unconsciously to stroke his mustache. He turned his head to one
side to look at Nicole. He squinted his eyes at her, wondering why she hadn't yet said anything. Maybe she was waiting, she hadn't come up with anything yet. He stared at her, hoping to find an answer written on her face.

"What? What is it?!" she asked. "You've got the strangest look on your face and I suddenly feel guilty, for no reason,"

"I'm just waiting, that's all," Martin answered in a knowing tone.

"Well they've moved up some," she nodded at the car in front, "You can go."

"Okay." He gave a false laugh.

They drove on in silence, Nicole seemed to be comfortable enough but Martin felt as itchy as when the mustache had first mercifully sprouted. It was strange with it gone. The air felt colder as it passed over the tender skin above his lip. He remembered the thin feature he so disapproved of, sucked in his upper lip, and gave it little bites, hoping to swell it up before he got to their friends house. He looked out his side window as much as possible, so Nicole wouldn't see, and ask. She would think he was being ridiculous and he'd never hear the end of it. She'd probably tell Maggie and Paul over dinner.

He drove up in front of their house, helped Nicole out of the car and held the umbrella above her head up the walkway. When they got to the door, Nicole rang, and Maggie instantly greeted them, singing out places in her overdeveloped neighborhood where Martin might find a parking space.
In the living room, the two couples talked briefly over cocktails, Paul as always asking Martin about some or another architect he read about in a magazine. Martin finally found himself relaxing, and even laughing as Paul patted him on the stomach and said, "Lost some weight, I see. Looks good." Dinner was as enjoyable as it was successful. The roast was tender and delicious, the vegetables snappy and flavorful, the wine a perfect complement. Martin ate heartily, echoing Nicole and Paul's kudos to Maggie. No one said a word about his mustache, a relief, Martin decided vaguely over dessert.

"She told you, I suppose, about that horrible prank she played on poor Clare this afternoon," Paul elbowed Martin as Nicole helped Maggie clear the table.

"Yes, Nicole's been quite the little trickster today," Martin agreed, dabbing his napkin at his mouth. He touched his upper lip for a moment, instantly self-conscious. How he could forget! Here he'd been acting with confidence all night. He almost hit his hand to his forehead.

"Awful. Dreadful. I don't know how Clare could take such a thing," Paul tried to scowl, but the corners of his mouth couldn't resist turning up in a grin.

"Well, I'm taking her out to lunch tomorrow afternoon, to make up for my horrid behavior," Nicole poked her head in and dramatically threw the back of her hand over her forehead, and pretended to swoon.

"The horror, the horror," Paul placed his fingertips to his chest and threw back his head.
Maggie and Nicole returned to the dining room and when the laughter
died down, Martin spoke, hesitantly "Yes, well, she's not the only one who can
play a prank."

Maggie looked at Nicole then at Martin, intrigued. Nicole's eyes squinted.

"Yes, well, I thought I'd play a little joke on Nicole, and shave off my
mustache. She's gotten the last laugh so far. Hasn't yet said a word about it."

Martin waited for surprised looks to overcome Maggie and Paul and the
following, 'Oooh, aaaaah, so you did shave your mustache. We thought you
looked different.'

Paul and Maggie looked at each other, then at Nicole. She smiled uneasily
in return and quickly shot Martin a warning look.

"She's good," Martin winked to Nicole.

"Martin, what do you mean?" Maggie asked politely.

"Yeh, you with a mustache. You'd look like one of those Chippendales
guys," Paul mused and let out a nasally chuckle.

"I think it's you who's playing the joke on us, Martin," Maggie lightly
tapped his arm, "Though I think you'd look quite handsome with a mustache.
Don't you Nicole?"

Martin clenched his teeth before saying, "Didn't have enough, did you?
Came in here and told them to pretend that I've never had a mustache, so I
could never have shaved it off." His frustration steamed to rage through the
calm of his sarcasm. "She did, didn't she? Thinks she's the only damn thing in
the world anyone should pay attention to!" He was yelling now.

"Really Martin," Maggie looked wide-eyed, "I don't know what you're
talking ..."

"The Hell you don't. Go ahead, since you're all in on this, play it out.
Make me the butt of your joke," Martin slammed his palms onto the table, stood
up violently, knocking his chair back.

"MARTIN!" exclaimed Nicole. "You apologize at once. Paul, Maggie, I
really can't tell you how sorry..." Martin kicked the chair back and started for the
door. "This has gone far enough. What do you think you're doing?"

"Oh yes, I'm terribly sorry I've spoiled your fun. Ha ha ha, very funny
Nicole, what a good sport. I'm going home," Martin yelled, flailing his hands,
thundering down the hallway.

"Hey, I think you ought to take it easy. No one's making fun of you. We
just don't know what you're talking about a mustache." Paul called. Maggie held
both Nicole's hands as she stood, and again tried to excuse her husband's
unexplainable behavior.

Nicole and Martin sat enclosed in their silence and anger during the car
ride home. Nicole didn't so much as change her breathing as Martin deliberately
sped along the slick streets, taking turns at wild angles. They did not speak to
each other when they got home, when Martin threw his keys onto the kitchen
counter top and stormed into the bedroom. Nor did they speak to each other
after they dressed for bed and turned out the lights in the bedroom. Never in
their five years of marriage had they gone to bed so angry that both refused to
speak and Martin lay in amazement not believing that this was the most serious
argument they’d ever had.

In time, Nicole’s breathing become heavier and deeper; she was falling
asleep. Martin sighed, wondered if he’d overreacted just a little. But he was so
sensitive about his upper lip, Nicole knew that, or she should. He rubbed his
finger over the lip, stubble was already growing in. By morning, he should have
the whole mustache back. It could be worse, Martin decided, I could have been a
bald rodent for longer. He leaned over to Nicole, caressed her arm with the back
of his hand. He pushed himself up onto his elbows, kissed her gently on the
cheek but Nicole, awake now, turned away.

"You really upset me tonight," she paused. "I know I can be a little too
teasing sometimes, but I'm never straight out malicious, I'm never destructive
like you were tonight. Not with your friends, anyway. Think about it Martin.
Would I get up in the middle of dinner with, say Trevor or someone, and say
something, like, I'm pregnant and Martin hasn't even noticed?"

He felt the sting of her words, leaned over again. "No. You're right. I'm
sorry too. I'd hate to be upset with you. But you really had me going." He
brushed his lips softly on her mouth. She relaxed and returned the kiss. They
tangled their arms together and kissed gently for a few moments.
"It must feel strange without the mustache," he whispered.

"Oh God, that again," she said, breaking the embrace. Her voice cracked, she sounded on the verge of tears.

Martin slammed his fist into the headboard, "Damn it, Nicole, you've really gone too far this time." He grabbed the blanket off the bed and stomped into the living room. Never before in their five years of marriage had they slept apart.

* 

Martin woke up late and with a headache from the wine at dinner and the arguing. He found himself more tired than angry, and started a pot of coffee to help alleviate both. In the bedroom, the clock read 10:16 a.m. and the bed had been stripped and made with fresh sheets. Nicole was already gone. He remembered her lunch date with Clare but wondered why she'd left so early.

He went to the bathroom. In the mirror, he saw that his beard and mustache were completely restored. His thin upper lip, like a bad dream had disappeared in the morning. He washed and lathered his face, took the silver razor and started stroking his cheeks as usual. He stopped at his lip. The mustache was such an improvement. He looked younger, and scruffy. It hid the thinness of his upper lip. He decided to leave it and decided to wait until later to trim it, when it was completely grown in. If Nicole hadn't noticed the mustache gone, how would she react to him with a mustache?
Noon on Saturday and Martin had nothing to do. Nicole had mentioned Trevor last night, and he decided it was high time he gave him a call. It had been a while since they'd gotten together. Martin left the building, started up the Angel Street hill. When he came to Trevor's building and rang the bell to his apartment, there was no answer. He continued up the hill, breathing deeper and deeper until he came to the crest, and looked down on the Thayer Street intersection. He'd been passing Brown University buildings all along and when he got to a sandwich board on the sidewalk advertising a student production of Othello, he stopped in and bought tickets. He had the feeling he should try to make up for last night, without knowing why. "What we do for the women we love," he said to the harried woman behind the desk who slid the tickets towards him.

Martin decided against going straight home, there was nothing there for him to do, so he walked back down the hill. On the way, he decided to waste some time in the Art School's Museum and, ironically, bumped into Trevor right outside the entrance. They exchanged the requisite small talk, with Trevor abruptly ending the conversation with an invitation to a small dinner party he was throwing.

" Sounds like quite a bash. What's the occasion?" Martin asked.

"Anniversary,"

"You're not married. You're not even seeing ... You are seeing someone. You're not getting married, are you?"
Trevor shrugged and winked.

"I've got to meet her. Will she be there tonight?" Martin bobbed his head in excitement.

"Cappriccio's. Seven sharp!" Trevor called, waving.

Martin was still grinning as he paid for his ticket to the museum. "So the old dog finally got leashed," Martin thought aloud to himself as he went inside.

Martin returned home around four, with more than enough time to bathe and dress before it was time for dinner. Nicole wasn't home yet. Odd, Martin thought, flipping on the light in the bathroom. His mustache had grown in fully now and after taking his time trimming it, he routinely shaved away the hair on his cheeks and chin. There was no sign that Nicole had returned since the morning. The pervading silence started to annoy him so he flipped on the radio, listened to the news on public radio. He fixed and finished two drinks too quickly, and checked his watch often. At 5:40 p.m., Martin called Clare's, but hung up when the answering machine answered. He tapped his fingers on the kitchen counter until the clock reached 6:25 p.m. He decided to start towards the bus stop, he couldn't take the chance that Nicole would return, and with the car, in time for them to make it to the restaurant. He taped a note for Nicole on the refrigerator, telling her where he was and to meet him there whenever she returned.

He arrived at the restaurant early and squeezed past other people waiting in the hallway, on the stairs to the bar downstairs where he finally caught the
frenzied bartender's eye and ordered a drink. His eyes glazed over in the smoke of the basement bar as he surveyed the diners meeting in pairs or groups. If this is what it's like to be single and thirty, no thank you, he thought, finishing his drink. He tried to catch the bartender's attention again, but instead, caught the eye of a beautiful woman across the bar. She seemed, however impossible, to be alone. She'd cut her hair short, and it was a shade darker than he liked, but very attractive. Her blue silk dress brought out a luminous blue in her eyes. They seemed almost to glow. He picked up his empty glass and squeezed his way through the noisy crowd to her.

"Don't I know you from somewhere?" she asked coyly.

"My name is Martin," he extended his hand, returning the smile. How intriguing, he thought. This was definitely better than the tickets he'd bought as a truce.

"Hello," she delicately took his hand.

He leaned in close and whispered in her ear, "Voulez-vous couchez avec moi, ce soir?"

She smiled into her wine glass and with a blush said, "I would, but I don't think my husband would let me."

Martin laughed for a moment but stopped abruptly when he felt a strong hand grip and squeeze his shoulder. He turned to face Trevor. "Long time no see," Trevor said, stepping in between the pair. "You know my wife," Trevor said, intimately resting his hands on Nicole's shoulders.
Martin laughed, heard himself laughing alone, then stopped. Martin stared incredulously at the pair, facing him with the expressions of a painted portrait.

A voice behind Martin said, "Senor, I will show you to your table now," and the three were led upstairs to a large table set for six at the back of the restaurant.

As he passed through the chatter and clatter to the relative quiet of their table, Martin noticed for the first time that Trevor, whom Martin had never known to wear a mustache or beard, bore a remarkable resemblance to himself when he'd been clean shaven the night before. He, too had a thin upper lip, but somehow, on Trevor, it wasn't so bad. Trevor smiled the same smile he'd flashed at Martin outside the museum that afternoon as he offered him the chair across the from Nicole.

Martin cleared his throat and asked, "So, how long have you two been together now?"

"Four years," Trevor answered, putting his hand over Nicole's on the table. "Remarkable, isn't it? The shotgun wedding, the miscarriage. Strange but we actually found ourselves in love through all that. Who'd have expected us to last?" Trevor said thoughtfully.

"Well certainly not us!" declared Maggie, with Paul standing behind her.

"Good to see you again," Paul shook Martin's hand firmly, almost tightly. "Still got that mustache, eh?"
"I think it looks quite handsome," added Maggie, settling herself in next to Nicole. "Not all men can wear a mustache," she said aside to Nicole.

Martin was still speechless as Clare arrived. She took the last seat, next to Martin and he thought she gave him a lingering smile.

During the course of the dinner, Martin spoke little. He stared at Nicole, sociable and affable as he'd never seen her before. With the group immersed in a discussion of Nicole's upcoming photography exhibit, Martin took an opportunity to speak privately to Trevor. Above their conversation Martin could hear Maggie squealing. Several important people in the art community had committed to attending Nicole's opening reception, and Maggie wanted to know names, details.

"You said that you and Nicole married because she was pregnant?" questioned Martin.

"That's right, but she miscarried three months later. Naturally everyone thought that would be the end of that. But we found we'd grown quite fond of each other. Say, I thought you knew all this?"

"I did," feigned Martin, "I just forgot. And all this was four years ago?"

"Right. Nicole was nineteen. It was a year after she was working at that awful photographer's in Fall River. I just started with the firm. There's a future to be had in architecture, Nicole couldn't help but be impressed."

Martin was dumbfounded as he listened to the details of his and Nicole's early years together. Why, Martin wondered, would Trevor present it as his
own? Was this some sort of cruel penance? If so, then for what? Martin was too confused to be angry and spent most of the meal with his mouth open, and his food cold on his plate.

After latte and tiramisu, Trevor clinked his glass with his spoon and addressed the group. "I'd like to make an announcement. Everyone, Paul, you can finish with that later. You all know how much we enjoy these evenings out with you," he laid a hand on Nicole's blue silk shoulder, "But all this frivolousness must stop." Maggie, Nicole and Paul made sounds of disappointment, then laughed. "We must introduce a new, serious and altogether more mature party to our party: the future Trevor Bennett, Jr., or Nicole Bennett, Jr."

"A little Bennett? You mean you're pregnant" exclaimed Maggie.

"Three months. Do I show?" joked Trevor pushing out his stomach.

"No! Yes, I mean, I'm pregnant," beamed Nicole swatting at Trevor.

"We're going to have a baby." Nicole looked at Trevor with adoration and devotion Martin had never seen in her eyes before. He was about to stand, but couldn't feel his legs. Surely this was beyond cruelty.

Maggie stood to offer congratulations and hugs, and the rest of the table did likewise. Martin too stood, was lost in the crowd until Paul rested his hand on his arm, squeezed the muscle tightly then released. All without looking Martin in the eye. A warning. Martin left the table in a daze.
"Oh Nicole, is it safe?" asked Maggie.

"Oh yes, it's nothing like last time." Nicole's words floated on the air following Martin as he stumbled through the thinning crowd and lurched out of the restaurant, unnoticed by the others.

Once outside, Martin leaned against a parked car, his chest heaving. He couldn't breathe. Through his wheezing he hallucinated steady, heavy footsteps behind him. He whispered a hoarse, "Nicole" but saw Clare walking towards him in a slow, methodical gait.

"Martin, are you okay? You don't look so good. Let me call you a cab."

Martin held up a hand to resist, but it fell to his side.

"Let me take you home," Clare's voice was strong, in charge. Martin watched as she whistled and caught the attention of a taxi. His eyes saw that she took his arm and lead him into the back seat. His eyes then focused on the door to the restaurant, glazed over as he felt Clare climb in beside him. He heard mumbling as she gave the driver the address of Martin's apartment. The cab pulled away from the curb, joined the traffic as Martin stared at the doorway of the restaurant, waiting for a swish of blue silk to come running out, waving and calling. Martin felt the pull on his torso as the cab turned a corner.
"You know, like Prince, or Madonna," Scott says, spreading his hands across his face like a marquee. "Just 'Scott'." He's sitting across the table from me, next to Kathie, and I get the view of the starry-eyed look on his face. Kathie raises an eyebrow and I start laughing.

"Scott, Prince and Madonna don't need last names because they have weird first names. Like Jesus. Nobody names their kid Jesus anymore," she asks Kathie over her chocolate chip muffin. She's fair and slight, and can still eat anything. She's also Scott's girlfriend.

"Yeah, or Romeo. How many Romeo's do you know?" I ask. "Do you want Scott to disappear from the nomenclature lexicon?" I steal a piece of muffin off Kathie's plate and pop it in my mouth. She smacks at my hand, misses and sticks her tongue out at me.

"Yeah, I'll be the last in a long line of Great Scotts," he retorts.

Kathie and I groan. "Like Scott Baio," I raise my coffee cup in a toast.

Kathie laughs. "Or Scottowels!" Her cup thuds against mine. She and I gang up on Scott like a girlfriend and a little sister do. Everyone used to think that Scott and I are brother and sister, but now some think that about Scott and Kathie; they're both undernourished-looking arty-farties.

"Are there even any famous Scott's? Maybe you'll have to change your first name, too," I suggest.
"You have no imagination," Scott snaps at me. "No wonder you never go anywhere, or do anything."

"Jesus, Scott," I can't believe he just said that. "It's not like you're the only one who's ever crossed the state lines." If I can act angry, I won't feel the hurt.

The waitress comes by and pours coffee for all three of us. The conversation's dead, and Kathie and I are watching Scott pick at his food. He stabs at his omelette, smearing pepper and ketchup over the top like paint. He knows I'm watching him. This always happens when we fight. I just watch him until he gets all jittery and anxious, and finally apologizes. We seem to be fighting a lot more lately.

Scott and I have been best friends since third grade, although sometimes he feels the need to leave home, and me. He took off to L. A. my sophomore year at the University of Cincinnati, read and wrote screenplays for a while, but quit and came back home when he found that his own writing was "...contaminated by the trash I had to read at work," he said. I think he should have been an actor.

Kathie sniffs at our standoff and grabs the newspaper from the table next to us. Most of the front page articles are on the upcoming election. It's an off year, bo-ring.

"Hey, didn't you used to live with Liz Peterson?" Kathie asks me, snapping down a page of the paper.
What? "Uh, yeah," I answer defensively. I shoot Scott an evil look and he shrugs his shoulders. Liz and I used to be roommates after we graduated, and I slept with her once. Sort of. Scott knows this, I told him once in confidence. We haven't talked about it since. "Why? Is she in there?" I ask, but don't listen for a reply.

God, Liz Peterson. I wonder what's she running for now. I can't remember if she's even been elected to anything yet. I've tried not to notice what she's been up to. How does Kathie know about Liz Peterson? Sure, she and Scott were together then but still, I don't remember all her friends.

"Sis, hello. Smokes?" Scott asks, apparently for the second time, waving his long fingers in front of my glossy eyes. I throw the pack at him. He gives Kathie a smoke and offers me one. I want one, but refuse him. She gives me this "What?" look and I just turn my head. She folds up the paper, and tosses it on the table next to us. Scott apologizes while we're at the counter, paying for breakfast.

Later, I'm in my apartment, talking to my Mom on the phone. We live in the same town, but she refuses to come to my apartment. I don't know what she's afraid of finding. We talk on the phone or in her kitchen.

"Ma," I whine. "Enough with the politics. They bore me."

"Sissy, would you stop with this "Ma" thing. Where did you pick this up?" Mom's gotten to the age where she forgets and misses what it's like to be young, so she tries to relate to me like she's twenty-seven too.
"You’re much too grown for this bored attitude, Sissy. You’re probably the only one in this town who doesn’t care about its future."

Because this town has no future, not for me anyway, I want to say.

"If you’re not going to vote..." I hold the phone away from my ear while she goes on. Two minutes seventeen seconds later, she says “But I don’t think now is the time. Not if that Peterson woman is the change."

No one’s mentioned Liz to me in I don’t know how long, now twice in one day? This is too weird. Mom gets back on the Campbell bandwagon and I breathe a sigh of relief.

“Amelia’s going to vote for Campbell,” Mom continues.

Amelia is my little sister. We’ve never been close. I always thought she was a sap, and I feel bad about it now because she’s been so much better to Mom than I have. She’s the one who moved back home with Mom after Dad died.

"Sissy, are you there?" Mom asks, probably checking her hearing aid volume and I let fade this awful image I have of Amelia spoon-feeding Mom a few years down the line. I agree to vote for Campbell.

There’s a knock at the door, and before I realize that I’m hoping it’s Scott, he walks in behind Kathie. She bounces up and down on my couch like a little kid all excited, reminding me that it’s the Saturday of the opening reception at some University gallery for this foo-foo photographer they know. I’ve totally spaced it. I’d been working all afternoon on a mailing list for the Public Library where I work. I’ve got a computer, and the Library doesn’t so I get to take all
sorts of work home. Before I can ask why they hadn't mentioned anything about the reception at breakfast, Scott miraculously turns his attention from the TV to me.

"You see the weirdest people on the bus. You're so lucky you've got a decent car. Mine's a piece of crap."

"And let me guess. It's dead." Again. No wonder I couldn't remember the show. I'm tempted to thank them for inviting me for my company.

I go into my bedroom to change, leaving them in the living room, Scott with the remote control and Kathie with a beer. I change and go back out into the living room, stand in front of the TV and Kathie almost spews beer out her nose. Scott's eyes totally bug out.

"I guess you're not used to seeing me dress like a girl," I say. I really went all out. I did my hair up and put on bright red lipstick, an old tube of Mom's, to match my red slip dress.

"Forget about Banana Republic, THAT'S hunting gear!" Kathie points the neck of her beer in my direction. I blush a little and say that she and Scott look good, too. And they do. Scott especially, jeans and a blazer complement his build.

"Shotgun!" Kathie calls, still bouncing as I lock my apartment door and follow them to the driveway. Scott and I look at each other. He shrugs. I roll my eyes and he gives me a please-be-nice-to-Kathie-look that she'd hate if she saw. He goes around to the back door on the driver's side, the one that actually
unlocks and opens. Kathie’s teasing him that we’re going to lock him out and I roll my eyes again. In my really catty moments, I call Kathie immature to Mom, who pointedly reminds me, "Miss On My Own", that I still come over to "borrow" the washing machine and dryer whenever I can't scrounge up enough quarters.

We drive west, into the sun. It’s slow going, and takes almost seventy minutes to get to Cincy, but it doesn’t seem so with Kathie trying to tie Scott’s shoelaces together, the two of them getting in a tickle fight, and me catching three Slug Bug’s. We get to the University, hopelessly hunt for a parking space, and by the time we get to the reception, it’s totally crowded. Kathie offers her elbow, I slip my arm into it and we walk into the gallery like a snooty nouveau riche couple saying “But dahling, art is life,” and other such stupid things.

After Scott finds the photographer and introduces me to her, a giraffe of a woman in orange organdy, Scott takes Kathie’s hand and escorts her through the gallery. They look close at the photographs, and talk with their faces close. They look like a real couple. Complete. Scott places his palm on Kathie’s back, low and to the left, the side closest to him. Watching, I can almost feel it. He lets her lead him to the next photograph, and I have to look away. I’m blushing, and guilty, and I don’t know why.

I turn back to the refreshment table, gulp a plastic tumbler of white wine. The vegetable tray stares mutely up at me, the cherry tomatoes like Christmas ornaments. Should I just put the whole cherry tomato in my mouth, and bulge
it to the side of my mouth like a squirrel, or bite it in half with my front teeth and risk squirting seeds all over some unsuspecting patron of the arts? I do the squirrel thing and of course, while I'm chewing, I see the back of the head of the person I least want to see in the world. “Everything in threes,” I hear in Mom’s voice.

Liz Peterson and I met in English Comp. and proceeded through the usual undergrad experiments with booze, drugs, boys, majors, credit cards. We graduated in ’89, Scott made it back from France just in time to watch me walk. After that, Liz and I got a two-bedroom near campus, and I continued writing for some local ‘zines, and worked part-time at the animal shelter. Liz got her degree in politics and elementary ed. and when she wasn't subbing in the public schools, she campaigned for the underdog du jour. And then, one normal night during a commercial break in Seinfeld, she surprised the hell out of me and told me she was gay.

I was stunned, curious. My biggest thing was how I’d never had any idea, especially when Scott said later that he’d thought so from the moment he met her. She told me about the people she’d had crushes on during school. I wasn’t one of them and I wasn’t sure if I was slightly relieved, or slightly snubbed. We ended up laughing a lot, and hugging and promising to be best friends always.

"Sissy! Hey, what are you doing here?" she asks. She’s seen me swallowing the tomato, but is gracious enough not to mention it. She looks
great in a cream silk suit with pants, a thin black string necklace and really, really short hair, almost a buzz. Next to her I look like a trawling slut.

We make small talk: the show, the upcoming reunion, the election. I surreptitiously look for Scott and Kathie while she tells me about how it’s been so difficult getting any support, except of course from the women’s interest groups around town. She’s running for the school board, she says when I don’t respond right away. She tells me she plans on going to the reunion, “Trying to stay visible, you know, campaigning and networking and all that. Nothing is worse for a politician than anonymity. Enough about me, I’m sick to death of always talking about myself lately. How are you? What have you been up to?”

This woman is smooth. She hasn’t so much as batted an eye from the moment she saw me and I feel like the temperature in the gallery’s shot up 3000 degrees. “I saw Scott earlier,” she continues. “Did you come with him?”

“Oh you know, same old same old,” I answer, ignoring the mention of Scott. “Actually, not much has changed with me since I saw you last. I’ve been bouncing from job to job, you know how it goes.” I make eye contact, once and briefly, before looking back at the crowd for Scott and Kathie.

“Well, good luck. Good to see you again,” she says and presses her hand on my arm. It’s that same strong, but gentle touch. And she never even asked me to vote for her! Scott and Kathie appear out of nowhere wearing matching smiles and saying we’re invited to dinner with the photographer at so-and-so’s restaurant, so get ready for a late night. I fill my glass with more wine.
Dinner happens at a new French Cambodian restaurant on Ludlow St. and we have a blast. We end up at Sudsy’s, a laundromat/bar and fight our way through Doc Martens and blue hair and dryers to get to the bar and point to the taps for beers over the blasting industrial rock.

We stay for a couple of hours, and it feels so good to be back in. It’s fun watching Scott watching me get hit on. I drink my beer and ponder why he’s never made a move on me. I haven’t been a tomboy in overalls in a long time. I also haven’t been in a bar like this in a long time, and I’m getting pretty buzzed off of the music, the people, and yes, the beer. Scott looks like he’s pretty buzzed too when he comes over to chase away the barflies. I see Kathie watching us and pretending to be talking to someone at the table, and I’m struck with this incredible jealousy. He’s with me now, but she’ll have him later, longer. I look at Scott and fight off one of the strongest urges I’ve ever had to kiss him, right here, right now, I can almost feel it, taste it. Kathie starts making her way over to us.

Scott and I end up getting very drunk, and Kathie drives us home. We sit in the back seat, call her "Jeeves" and say "Once around the park," until we’re falling on each other, doubled up laughing. Kathie drives us right to their apartment and without a “Good night”, “Good-bye”, or “Kiss my ass”, slams behind her the door to the bedroom behind her. All the better. Scott and I make fluff and butter sandwiches and sit real close on the couch, close like he and Kathie were at the gallery. My dress is so thin it’s almost like our skin is
touching. We’re not listening to the TV we’ve turned on, and we talk about the stuff we always said we were going to do, but haven’t gotten to yet. Well, I haven’t gotten to any, yet.

Scott sighs. His eyes are glossy and his face is shiny. I lean my head against his smoky shoulder. He strokes my hair, and I look up at him when he says, “I love you Sissy.” At last! I close my eyes and move my face closer to his. I get so close to his face, our lips are almost finally touching when I feel his hands pushing me away at the shoulders.

"Sissy, you don't want to do that," he says, looking suddenly sober.

"No, Scott, I do. I always have." I reach for his hands, try to pull them off my shoulders.

"Sissy, what's gotten into you?" he says, with patient amusement. He sits up straight and we’re not touching at all.

"Scott, I love you," I say trying to make my words sound earnest, and not slurred. I’m drunk enough to finally say it, but I’m sober enough to realize that he doesn’t know that I mean it. He doesn’t believe me. Why? Liz.

Liz and I had gotten into a pretty intense talk one night after she came out, about what it’s like to be attracted to women, and to make a long story short, we spent the night together. If I had been with a guy, I wouldn’t even have considered it really sleeping with him, but Liz did. I thought of it more as a blurring of the lines, a grayish crossing of the boundaries, more experimenting, and things stayed okay between us as friends for a while.
Scott wasn’t at all surprised when I told him. He said he’d always thought we were a little closer than most. But later, he started telling me about a couple of lesbian magazines around Cincy, and why didn’t I write for one of them? My heart sank into my stomach. I realized he’d taken it all wrong.

I moved back to my parents’ and started dating furiously. I slept with any guy I could, which wasn’t really so many. But Scott still thought of me as one of the guys. Literally. I don’t know why I never came right out and told him, it was just, I don’t know, experimenting I guess. He knew me better to know that I really wasn’t like that. Didn’t he? I guess it took a while for me to figure everything out myself, and by that time, Scott and Kathie were inseparable.

Scott’s still looking at me like he’s never heard the three magic words before and I start crying. I’d always imagined that this scene would go differently, that when we finally said “I love you,” to each other, it would be a new beginning for us. An ending, and a beginning. But this isn’t it. No, this is all wrong, this isn’t it at all. I can feel myself swaying and pitching as I stand up, grab my purse and reel out the door.

When I wake up in the morning, I don’t have the luxury of those few minutes when you really have to think hard about what you did the night before. It all descends on my memory almost instantly, and I turn over and try to go back to sleep. But I need water, and the phone rings. I let the machine pick up while I bend my head under the bathroom faucet.
In the kitchen, I see two red lights flashing on my answering machine. The first message is from Mom. She hopes I’m not answering because I’m at church, and not hung over in bed avoiding the phone. And voting; it’s on Tuesday at the high school. Do I want to come over tonight for dinner? Amelia’s making spaghetti, with homemade sauce, and do Scott and Kathie want to come, too? I shake my head. I think Mom sometimes forgets that it’s the machine she’s talking to, and not really me.

The second message is from Scott, saying he knows I’m here, where else would I be, he means, and he’ll be over in ten minutes. I don’t bother to clean myself up because I know I won’t answer the door. I’m wearing just my bathrobe and last night’s make-up is smeared under my eyes when the lock rattles and Scott walks through the door. How did he...? Oh yeah, I gave him a key.

We make uncomfortable small talk for about thirty seconds before Scott says, "You know, we should talk about last night." No beating around the bush.

"What’s there to talk about?"

"Sis, c’mon, I’m making this real easy for you. Right here, right now, you can say whatever you want." I don’t say anything. "Sissy I don’t want to lose our friendship over this."

Friendship? This is way past friendship, I want to say. I finally look up into his face. I can see him, he’s here, but he’s not, and there’s nothing I can do
about it. I don’t know what to think, or say, and all I can come up with is, “Did you tell Kathie?”

“She’s not talking to me this morning,” he shrugs.

“Scott, I just don’t understand. How can you, I mean, she and I are so different, yet... I mean...”

“What is it with you two? Why can’t I have a friend and a girlfriend who aren’t clones of each other. Jeez, between the both of you it’s like I should parade one by the other to get approval.”

My mouth drops open by itself. If he realizes what he’s just said, he’s not letting on.

“Sis, it’s no big deal. Really. And yes, I do love you,” he takes my hands like in the movies, “But it’s different from the love I feel for Kathie. Anyway, this isn’t about Kathie, this is between me and you.”

“No, it’s between me and Kathie,” I say in earnest. He gives me this confused look and I’m not surprised. He really truly honestly never thought of it as me, or Kathie. If I can be depressed, I won’t have to feel humiliated.

*  

Mom calls me at work on Monday, asking me to notify her the next time I decide to fall off the edge of the earth without telling anyone, and I realize that I forgot to call her back about dinner. She goes on about voting for Campbell again, and then back to dinner, and I say thanks but I can’t come over for dinner
tonight, either, not that leftover spaghetti doesn’t sound great. Mom had Amelia cook enough for five last night, just in case we all showed up.

I meet Scott and Kathie at The Crosswalk for dinner. They’ve got the best appetizers in town and we order one of each. Earlier, Scott called me at work, saying “Big news,” but I don’t want to be the one to bring it up now. Kathie’s acting like she’s about to explode. I’m thinking, worst case scenario, they’ve got someone up their sleeve for me.

"We’re going to New York," Scott says. Worse than worst case scenario. Kathie’s beaming at him and bouncing in her seat. I wish someone would pin her down.

"Really?" My back teeth set.

"Yeah. My father’s going to Alaska and he’s letting us have the apartment," Scott says this to the tablecloth.

"You gotta love rent control, it’s what, $350 a month?" Kathie’s addressing Scott. "That’ll be like, maybe a week’s paycheck for me."

"So, you’re just up and going to New York?" I look at Scott and he looks at Kathie.

"Well, we’ve never really had problems finding jobs, so that’s no big thing," she says. I get the feeling she’s almost daring me to object, so I say the obligatory good luck and pretend to be happy for them. Kathie keeps bouncing and Scott avoids eye contact, and talks about how much he’s going to miss The Crosswalk’s fried mushrooms.
"I'm sure New York's got some great food too," I say. We finish eating, stay for drinks since the conversation's rolling along and Kathie is the one to get blasted this time. On one of her trips to the bathroom, she meets some people she knows playing pool, leaving Scott and I alone with this awkward silence. Finally he throws down his napkin and says, "Sis, you really ought to try to go somewhere, do something different. There's nothing going on here. I'm surprised you're not as bored and dying to get out of here as Kath and I am."

Before I can say "bullshit", Kathie comes back and says, "Hey, Sis." Kathie has never called me "Sis" before, and I don't like it. I also don't like this wild, drunken look on her face. "There's someone back there I think you'd like to meet." She staggers, gets up to my ear and pointedly whispers, "A woman." She's loud enough for Scott to hear. He lowers his eyes and I see him mouth "Shit." Kathie's almost leering at me.

I slide out of my chair and mutter "Fucker," to Scott, but quiet so Kathie can't hear. I don't yet want her to know just how pissed off I am, and I let her introduce me to someone who works on Liz Peterson's campaign. "Oh, how marvelous!" I say. I've never held a conversation with my back teeth clenched before, or my smile so tight and fake, but neither Kathie nor this woman seems to notice. She ends up giving me her phone number on a napkin and a lingering handshake to go with an "I'm so glad we got to meet," she leaves with her friends. Kathie decides she wants to get into a deep discussion of What It's Like To Be A Lesbian and I resist the urge to slap her.
When Scott finally comes back to find us, he finds Kathie hugging me like we’re best friends. "Besides Scott, you're my best friend," she says and I want to tell her just what kind of a best friend Scott is.

Kathie ends up passing out in the car, my car again. I help Scott get her dead weight into their apartment and into bed. They've decided not to leave for New York until Scott's car gets fixed, or until one of them can get a reliable car, so it'll be a while. But the night still has that feel of the last night in town.

In the bedroom, Scott gets Kathie's shoes off and I collapse next to her on the bed, feigning a deeper state of drunkenness than I feel.

"You really don't love me." I whisper to Scott. He bends at the knees, his face level to mine horizontal on the bed.

"You're my oldest friend, and I love you for that."

He kisses me on the forehead. How patronizing.

"Kathie's a really good person. I wish you knew that," he says.

I don’t move, or say anything and after a few moments of silence he finally says,  “Are you okay to drive home?” I grunt, lift my hand and let it flop onto the mattress. “You shouldn’t drive. Why don’t you just stay here tonight? I’ll sleep on the couch.” I grunt again and he shuts the door, leaving Kathie with me.

I turn over, get up on my elbows and look at her. She’s clueless, passed out and breathing deeply. In the car on the way home, I’d wanted to do something to her, I tried to think of what I could do, how I could hurt her, this
person who has ruined everything. Something angry and destructive. “So, Kathie, how much do you really want to know what it’s like to be a lesbian?” I remember thinking in the car. But now I have to stop myself. She looks so vulnerable, in this awkward sprawl, twisted at the waist, her legs turned to one side and one arm pinned under her back. I shake my head; she’s almost pitiful, really. How could Scott love this?

I push myself up and kneel next to her. I look and I peer, but I just don’t get it. Why not me? I begin unbuttoning her shirt. When I get two or three buttons undone, I see her bra. It’s just plain cotton. I unbutton a couple more buttons in disbelief. Boring and completely functional; it’s so un-Kathie. This is what turns Scott on? I don’t believe it.

I listen for Scott’s snoring on the couch in the living room. I can hear him loud and clear, so I crawl slowly and quietly to the middle of the bed, unbutton the top button, then the zipper of Kathie’s pants, a blue twill, probably Gap, possibly Scott’s. I pull aside the flaps of her pants like a newspaper, but I can’t see anything. I scramble to the foot of the bed, and pull Kathie’s pants down to her knees.

I’m shocked. She’s not wearing any underwear. No wonder I couldn’t see anything, there was nothing to see. But what I see isn’t nothing. I’ve never seen another woman like this, not my Mom, not even Liz. I just lay there that night with Liz, and she did what she did. I wonder if Scott knows this, Kathie’s not
wearing underwear, if she always does this. All these thoughts flood my brain at the same time, now I'm face to face with this, with Kathie.

I stand there and just look at her. She's half naked now, but there's nothing vulnerable about her anymore. She's suddenly more real, more vital than I've ever believed. I force myself to raise my eyes and look at her face. The palms of my hands go damp and cold. Even under closed lids, her face looks so aware, and I suddenly know how much I've underestimated her. My anger and curiosity have fled leaving this warm, hollow feeling in my chest.

My stomach growls loud, like I'm going to be sick. She rolls over, and I almost jump out of my skin. Her legs get tangled in her pants, and she tries once to kick out of them. She groans, like she's waking up and I know I have to get the hell out of here. I can't leave her like this, though. I have to do something before I go, some gesture, like covering her up with the comforter. But I can't figure how to get it out from under her without waking her up. Defeated, I tiptoe out of the bedroom, cringing at the regular noise of the floorboards. In the doorway, looking back at her, I realize that I never needed to do some grand angry act. What I've done is damage enough.

In the living room, Scott's asleep on the couch. I'm taken aback when I see him; I almost forgot he was here. He's poised on the edge of the couch, one arm flung above his head, the other hanging over and grazing the floor. In sleep he looks omniscient, understanding. Anonymous. I feel like I should want to wake
him up, and apologize. I could cry and he’d wake up confused and tell me everything will be okay. Yesterday, I might have believed that could happen.

I whisper, “I’m sorry,” then silently shut the door to their apartment. I don’t know what she’ll say to him tomorrow, and what he might say to me, if he ever does speak to me again. What’s worse is this feeling that maybe she’ll end up hating him because of me. Worse yet, they might break up. I picture her ready to slam the front door, yelling something, “If this is what your friends are like...” I close my car door as quietly as I can. They’ll hate me, come morning, and I can’t blame them, but how can I explain? Turning the key in the ignition, I really start to cry. I cry just long enough to decide that if I have to, I’ll try to talk to them, if it’ll help keep them together.
Unlike most of her friends, Annelisa was anxious to have a baby. The love between her and her husband Paul was so deep and so vast that sometimes she swam and floated in it in peace and other times she feared it would crush her if she couldn't somehow spread it and share it with a baby, a wanton greedy receptacle they could love and nurture. To Paul she argued that twenty-five was just the right age, and catalogued her perfect health and the financial assets they shared.

Alone in the bathroom she squeezed warm urine from the dropper into the test and squealed, "Wonderful! Perfect timing." The specimen cup sat on the counter and held in the yellow liquid the possibility of motherhood. Next to the cup she set down the test, a white square of plastic encasing the litmus paper, and checked her watch. Five minutes until a pink plus or minus sign. In five minutes, it would be 10:37 a.m. Paul at the office would be filling his coffee mug and making lunch plans with co-workers. They liked him as well as respected him.

Annelisa waited impatiently, making faces to the baby face she pretended to see in the mirror: happy, cooing, "Mama", baby talk. A baby would be perfect. Her friends asked if she didn't want more time as a wife, just Paul and her? But she couldn't explain how the past three years felt both like three days and thirty years. She and Paul had planned out their lives during long walks at the beach,
intertwined their lives like fishing lines tangled in the air then holding hands on the rod and dipping down into the water to catch the biggest fish.

10:44 a.m. The time startled Annelisa when she looked at her watch. How could I have drifted off day dreaming like that, she thought. On the counter, the white square of plastic displayed a minus. It’s a lie, Annelisa convinced herself throughout the day. “See here, and here,” she insisted, but grew sullen when Paul admitted that he couldn’t see the faint signs of a plus Annelisa claimed she saw. They went together to her gynecologist’s office and sat side by side on blue cushioned chairs as her doctor at her desk flipped open Annelisa’s file.

“Negative. But you’re young, you have plenty of time to start a family.”

Paul wrapped his arm around his wife’s shoulder and leaned his head down, towards hers. The doctor watched them for a moment, but found herself having difficulty breathing and left the room, gasping. In the office, the kindness from Paul diffused around his wife, trying to cushion her, insulate her from the news. Annelisa felt the word “Negative” wash over her skin like water from a shower, tepid at first then growing warmer, hotter as she felt surprise, then anger, disappointment, and determination. On her way out of the office, Annelisa asked, “Are you sure there’s nothing wrong with me? It’s like sometimes, there’s too much and I’ll, I don’t know, if there’s no children,” Distress hurried her words and the doctor took Annelisa’s quivering hands in her reassuring ones.
"It's not like it's now or never, Annelisa. You have plenty of time."

Annelisa joined Paul in the car, faintly more relieved. She watched the streets pass as Paul drove them home, craning to watch mothers pass with hidden babies in strollers. She wanted to roll down the window and tell them to hold their babies closer, hug them more, smile wider, sing with more love at bedtime. It was hard to stop herself from calling to all of them "You don't know what you have!" She saw with agonized eyes a mother holding a small child by the arm, shaking her finger at him as he pulled to get away. A small cry flew out of her mouth and Paul turned from the windshield to see Annelisa's face and palms pressed against the window. He took his hand from the wheel, gently turned her chin until she faced him. Fear had drained the color from her eyes and skin and as he began to form comforting words, they both felt a shock, then a slow, hard push from the driver's side. In an instantaneous moment, a heavy red Buick pushed through the door of the car, popping open Annelisa's door, and throwing her out of the car onto the road. With a blistering shattering of glass, the two vehicles passed over her shocked body lying flat on the road as the Buick shoveled the car like a toy into a telephone pole and trapped Paul inside.

Annelisa's eyes fluttered open for a moment and as she looked at the pale fuzzy dimness above her she realized that she didn't know where she was. A distant steady beep sounded like a chorus and she hazily decided that it was her alarm going off. Her right arm meant to lift and shut off the beep but when she
tried to move, a shot of pain seared through her bloodstream to her brain
sending her back into a foggy sleep.

The next time she awoke was to voices nearby. They said her name once
or twice, and “she” a number of times, and Annelisa struggled to keep her eyes
open and focused on the blurred figures at the foot of her bed. The dense smells
of heavy flower bouquets surrounding her pushed her back into
unconsciousness.

“If ... it’ll be because she’s in such good health. What should we tell ... No
shocks, keep her calm... She’ll ask...” The voices bounced back and forth between
a soprano and a tenor and she fell back into an operatic dream. She awoke
shortly thereafter to pale fuzzy grayness again, and realized that she was in the
hospital.

Eventually they told her about the accident, the drunk driver of the Buick
who survived, unhurt but remorseful. Paul’s car was unrecognizable after it had
to be pried from the telephone pole. And Annelisa was so lucky, the one in a
million chance that not wearing a seat belt saved her life. And the impossibility
of her landing where she did, and the cars moving over her, leaving her
virtually unhurt except the shoulder she broke on impact. And the worst news
of all, the confirmation of Paul’s death, a few hours after they’d gotten him to the
hospital. Something about the jaws of life, and everyone was so good, and
helpful, and kind. The rest of the information blurred into another song of her
mother’s soprano and the doctor’s tenor until she heard, “And you must rest.
The baby’s been through a tremendous stress, and so early in the trimester, it is imperative that you stay as calm as possible. Your mother says she’ll watch over you. You need to relax if you’re going to get 100% mobility back in that arm.”

“Annelisa, why didn’t you tell me about the baby?” Her mother’s face filled her entire field of vision and she slipped back into unconsciousness.

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A year later, Annelisa’s shoulder healed, leaving her with a wide range of motion, but some stiffness on rainy days. With sedatives and surgery, she had also given birth to an unhealthy baby girl afraid of light, darkness, noise, silence, company and solitude. After the baby learned to cry, she tortured herself for a month. She couldn’t bear the sound of her own wails, but didn’t recognize herself as the source and so cried all the louder and frightened herself all the more. By the time she was two months old, she developed a perpetual trembling the doctors could only shrug at and hope she’d grow out of.

The baby spent all her time in a crib in the kitchen with Annelisa’s mother and when Annelisa managed to extract herself from her bed to attend to the baby, she always found a startled, abandoned look on the her face, as if she didn’t know to trust her own mother. Annelisa’s mother spent her time taking care of both girls, as Paul’s death threw Annelisa into an emotional fog from which sleep was the sole and meager relief. Over time, her mother tried to encourage her, take her out, cajole her, bribe her, yell at her to get into the car they were going to the store and they were taking the car and that was final.
After several trips in the car, Annelisa learned to give up clutching at the door handle at every turn, pressing imaginary brakes from the moment she spotted the stop sign. She managed to limit her glances to the baby behind her in the child seat to one every few minutes, and with a smooth turn of the head, not a terrified jerk which set the baby’s face back to startled abandon.

Annelisa knew the day would come when her mother would not be there, humming in a comforting soprano while flooding the house with delicious warm smells. She waited in fear for the moment her mother would sit her down, hand her back responsibility for the dry desert that was her own life, and for the still unnamed, fragile baby. Though Annelisa knew it was coming, inevitable as the wind, her stomach still knotted, like it did whenever she buckled her seat belt, when her mother sat her down Tuesday afternoon and announced her plans to go out of town that weekend. Annelisa held herself on the edge of composed until Thursday evening, when she found a set of strange keys on her bedroom dresser.

“What are these?” Annelisa nodded to them, afraid even of touching them.

“Yours. We rented you a car, just for the weekend. It’s a big Oldsmobile, a very safe vehicle. You have plenty of food here, but in case of an emergency, we didn’t want you to be stuck. Now don’t you worry at all. Driving a car is like riding a bike, and it’s about time you got back up on that old horse.”
Annelisa protested, took on the baby's frightened abandoned expression and backed herself into a corner until her mother finally hit the stone bottom of her patience and unleashed a hurricane of pent up frustrations, the words hitting Annelisa like hailstones. This time it was her mother crumpled up in a ball on the floor in tears, and Annelisa doing the comforting, a year of tenderness and love spilling out. She held her mother in arms like thick seaweed and rocked her gently, to a rhythm. Finally composed, they apologized to each other.

Before leaving for the evening, Annelisa's mother picked up her purse, and led her daughter into the kitchen to check on the baby one more time. They entered the room to a strange sound coming from the baby's crib, a gurgling noise, like a clogged drain struggling with a sink full of water. They rushed to the side, peered over and saw the baby girl, clutching her toes with one hand, gurgling and humming a tune to herself. She rolled her big eyes over to her mother and grandmother, opened her mouth in a great smile. She scrunched up her lips and from her mouth came, "Uhmmaaa!"

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Annelisa found herself revitalized by the smile of her daughter and spent most of Thursday night in a rocking chair beside the crib, watching each discreet movement, listening to each specific sound the baby made as she slept. She recognized that although something in her had died when Paul did, something had been born and this baby was what Annelisa craved, not a cursed reminder of her lost love. She realized finally that her hope, her baby had for the past three
months lived a life of starvation that threatened them both. How could she have done that? Is that what Paul would have wanted? The thought, though, of happiness, of joy without Paul made her almost faint and she thought instead of her mother and how she used many different ways to show her love. That scene today was just another way, Annelisa realized.

She was woken up the next morning by her parents, bubbling with anticipation and eager for a look at the child. They spent hours simply staring at the baby, now called Joy, and passed her from one to the other and back again. Joy smiled, lolled her head and rolled her eyes from one side to the other, watching everything and following everyone. It was difficult actually getting the grandparents on the road Friday afternoon.

Friday night, Annelisa spent an hour bathing Joy, luxuriously and tenderly soaping the bubbly child who cooed at the warm water streaming over her skin. Drying and diapering and dressing turned into games, with the baby laughing at all of the noises, humming, singing and dancing Annelisa couldn’t keep in. The baby smiled deep in her eyes, yawned wide, showing small pink gums. She sighed as she yawned, closed her mouth with an “Ahhhhhhmmmmmm,” and looked at Annelisa with a satisfied expression.

Annelisa herself went to bed shortly after Joy fell asleep in her crib, now pulled into Annelisa’s own room. “Oh, if only Paul could see you,” Annelisa whispered, leaning over the crib for one more look. “Of all the things I’ve wished for, I wish for that the most. To be together, just once.” Annelisa drifted
off into a wistful sleep, dreaming of herself passing Joy to Paul.

Annelisa’s eyes opened in anticipation of Joy’s hunger pangs around six Saturday morning. She slid out from between the bed covers, stepped lightly to the infant’s crib and peered in. Joy laid on her stomach just as Annelisa had put her down the night before, one pudgy arm in flannel at her side, the other near her face, thumb out ready to be sucked. How odd that the baby was still asleep, Annelisa mused. She’s so still, too still, Annelisa’s throat dried and closed as she reached over to pull the chain to the lamp on the dresser. In the artificial light, the baby’s skin was an ashen gray color. The chest was still, the lungs were not working.

Sunlight barely streamed down onto the drowsy, early morning city. Annelisa tore down the streets, the rented car a thundering tornado speeding through benign streets. She spiraled like a reckless gust of wind into the hospital, possessively clutching Joy at her breast and asking of every figure in a white jacket where to go, what to do, can they please help her. Annelisa and Joy threw the bored Emergency Room staff, waiting for the end of a quiet night shift, into a frenzy. White jackets with serious expressions dialed phones at their elbows, white sneakers slid on clean tiles. A stethoscope checked for a heartbeat. A pair of sneakers wheeled in a large white boxy contraption on a metal cart.

“Please, you have to help her. She only just... A couple of days ago she...” she couldn’t finish the sentence. Responsibility and failure weighed on her heavier than love. She strained on tiptoe to look over white jacketed shoulders to see
her Joy slip away with a thin, sad, thankful smile on her lips.

As she waited immobile on the chair outside the reception desk, Annelisa ran all the questions and inadequate answers through her mind. A weak heart? Any stresses lately? Lucky to have lived as long as she did. Did all we could. So young. So sorry.

She absently dropped into the driver’s seat of the Oldsmobile and navigated the boat lazily through the hospital parking lot, busier now with mid-morning Saturday life teeming around her. But unlike small pebbles pulled into the ocean and rolled across the sea floor under a current, Annelisa could not be pulled in. She drove slowly, ignoring the noise and stares of other drivers who passed her impatiently on the right. She drove looking not at the road, but seeing Paul and Joy meeting in a wispy white place. When they looked at each other, they hugged like beloveds, separated for a brief yet impatient time. They spoke to each other quietly, glancing back occasionally at Annelisa standing alone, as if waiting. They finally nodded to each other, turned to Annelisa and waved.

Annelisa looked up at the windshield with blurry, tired eyes, and found herself pulling up safely into her driveway. There was a figure she couldn’t immediately recognize on the porch, rocking on a familiar chair. As she turned the key and shut off the car’s engine she hazily looked again at the porch. The figure seemed to watch her intently. She opened the door to the smell of her own front yard, familiar, yet distinctly different, as if she hadn’t smelled it for a
long, long time. She started to shake her head, but found her neck unusually stiff.

Annelisa stepped down onto the gravel driveway. To walk, she carefully lifted one foot, set it down firmly on the slippery gravel, did the same with the other. Her steps were slow as she was suddenly struck by the absurdity of worrying about such a little thing as a gravel driveway. Hadn’t she ever before been concerned about a fall? Her memory seemed to fail her as she stopped and wondered aloud, “Now what am I doing on the driveway?” She turned, tried to focus on the vehicle behind her, and was barely able to tell that the car parked there was the one she’d just gotten out of. Oh yes, the rental. Now what am I supposed to do about returning it? Can’t remember. Strange, though. She turned back to the house, her joints creaking. Now who’s sitting on my porch? Annelisa found that her eyes couldn’t see across the distance and started towards the house.

As she came closer to the porch, her fragile eyes teased her with the image of Paul sitting on the porch, rocking in a chair which she remembered from her mother’s porch. “Yes,” Annelisa squinted into the eleven o’clock sun peeping over the roof, determining that it was Paul, though older. Much older. Curiosity and thrill fluttered through her like a run through a sprinkler on a hot, hot day. He returned her stare with eyes shrouded by fifty years of aging and motioned for her to come closer as he rocked. Annelisa took her steps up the walkway with determination, took a firm hold of the banister, and slowly mounted the stairs to
As Annelisa rested on the top step, her joy stepped aside and she realized suddenly how winded she was.

"Are you all right, love?" Paul asked, concerned, rising from his chair.

Annelisa pointed to her chest, "It's so hard, all of a sudden."

"You're all right. It's natural."

"You breathe like this? How do you get used to it?"

"Aging is supposed to happen gradually, so you don't notice it all at once. White hair becomes you."

Three young children had been playing under a tree and came running up the steps and hugged Annelisa about the knees. "Nama, Nama what did you bring us?" They clamored about her with eager, loving faces.

"What are all these children doing here digging up my front lawn?" Annelisa answered. Nama? Odd, but she found she knew each of these children intimately and fondly.

"It's the First Day of Summer. Bumpa called us up and asked if we could come over and go swimming, like we did last year. We have to all go jump in the stream behind the house at noon, r'ember?" A pinkish blonde girl full of energy twisted her arms around the arm of Paul's rocker.

Paul stood up and held onto the hand of the smallest freckled child. "And this afternoon, Grampa has a surprise for all good children. Now everyone in to find your parents and your swim suits," Six little bare wrinkled feet scampered
across the porch, streamed through the front door into the house.

“A family celebration for the first day of summer?” Annelisa mumbled with difficulty under her breath. She forced a smile and shook her head.

“I thought you’d like to see them. The blonde one is Joy’s. She’s called Ann, after you. They’re all so glad to see you. We all are, Anna,” Paul almost whispered, offering her the rocker. She sat down heavily, laughing at the new weight of her own aged hips.

Annelisa seemed to know without remembering when Paul, on his seventy-fifth birthday, declared that he was too old to get out all of his wife’s name and she’d have to be content with ‘Anna’. But she seemed also to remember a card, sent recently for her twenty-fifth birthday and addressed in Paul’s usual way: a capital A with a long squiggly line, dotted towards the end.

“They’re beautiful,” Annelisa watched longingly as the sound of small feet scampering up stairs inside drifted out to the porch. “This, is beautiful.”

Paul leaned, almost sat on the railing. His eyes followed his wife’s as she glanced around the porch, the yard, as if taking it all in for the first time. She peered into the shady darkness behind the front screen door, low voices of couples talking and laughing among themselves, calling out answers to children’s questions in high insistent voices. “This is what I always wanted,” she sighed.

Annelisa watched a strange look sweep into Paul’s eyes as he said, “Except that it’s no different from what you left. It’s as unpredictable as ever. This is
only one moment, Anna. It could be our last. But back there,” he gestured to the rental car with his thumb, “Where you were this morning, there are infinite possibilities for more moments. You can choose that, if you wish. Over this.”

“Choose? How? Why would I want to? This is what I always wanted. Isn’t it, Paul?”

Paul didn’t answer. He looked at his fingers instead, turning his hands over onto the palms, then the backs, then to the palms again.

“Yes, right now, and it’s what I always wanted. But it is possible, you understand...” Paul bowed his head and lowered his voice to a whisper, “We may neither of us make it through the night tonight. All this could be is, well, the good-bye we never had.”

Annelisa looked at Paul. All the longing she’d ever felt, for him, for a baby, for Joy, flooded through her, washing out the sorrow. Here in her reach was the dream, all the nostalgia had been packaged up and presented to her with a bow. And yet.

Paul’s reluctance made her wonder about staying twenty-five. She never would have predicted a week ago that Joy would have revived, and smiled, and cooed and brought her back to life. If she couldn’t have seen that on its way, what else might there be for her at twenty-five that she couldn’t predict? No, Paul was right. There were no guarantees at either twenty-five or seventy-five. How to choose?
Annelisa took a deep breath and inhaled the scent of roses, carnations, plants from the pots she seemed to remember hanging from hooks in the ceiling of the porch. She looked around again.

"Anna, please. I'm very anxious for you to decide," Paul almost whispered. He lifted only his eyes, waiting it seemed with dread.

"Mom?" A voice drifted out from the front door. A tall thin woman stepped across the threshold and smiled at Annelisa with familiar eyes. "Mom, Ann wants me to ask you something."

Joy! Annelisa tried to speak, but was overwhelmed. The high voice of a child cried out, "I want Nama to go swimming with me." The little girl appeared at Joy's side, naked and holding a pink bathing suit in her hand. "I'm not going swimming unless Nama goes too."

Joy rolled her eyes with a smile, "We'll be back." She took the child's hand and they disappeared back into the house. Annelisa listened as two sets of footsteps climbed the stairs and Joy talked her daughter into putting on the bathing suit.

Annelisa smiled deeply at Paul, "Well, if there are no guarantees..." She didn't finish but turned her head, Paul did the same, and they both looked in the driveway. The rented Oldsmobile was gone. Annelisa looked back to where Paul was leaning on the railing, half expecting him to be gone as well. But Paul remained leaning on the railing, rocking a little, smiling at her. The only thing missing was a notion trying hard to tug at the corners of her mind and fool her
into thinking this was all imaginary. Annelisa leaned up from her chair, took a step over to Paul and was at his side.

He patted her sleeve with his hand and said, “There’s a whole family in there, waiting for you.”

Annelisa peered into the doorway, towards the voices as a child called, “Naaaaama! Buuuuumpa! We’re ready. Where aaaaaare you?” She took a step towards the house and said “Well then, I guess I’d better go get changed for this swim.”
WHOLE MILK, OR TOO MUCH COULD GO WRONG

Tuesday

Eggs.

They can have omelettes for breakfast one day, or eggs, probably Saturday. I can scramble them if she wants. He'll have his fried. Easy or sunny or whatever he calls it, and mix his toast in with them. We'll probably go out for brunch Sunday.

Milk.

Whole? Skim? 1%. I know he still likes whole milk, but she sounds pretty health conscious. Skim. He can deal for a weekend.

Butter. No, margarine. No, butter. It won't kill us this once. And who knows now which is worse for you after all? Maybe I shouldn't get any. But what if she asks for margarine and I tell her all we have is butter? I'll get both.

Nick and I will eventually use up what the kids don't.

Nick, is that you? Doing the shopping list. I'll get one sweet roll. If I get a half dozen, you'll eat them all before they get here.

Bread. English muffins or bagels, or something like that. Web asked me to make a lasagna, so I'll need noodles, we have tomato paste and spices, ricotta cheese. Nick, are we all out of parmesan? Well I don't eat it. Didn't we just have spaghetti recently? Well, was there any left? All right, I'll get some.
Lean beef.

Provolone.

Sandwich stuff. But they’ll probably be going out for lunch, Web likes that place near the mini-golf. Well, whatever they don’t eat it while they’re here, I’ll make sandwiches out of and they can take them with them.

Detergent. I wonder how many loads of laundry Web will have this time. What am I thinking, they’re flying. He probably gets this Sally Ann to do it. It is Sally Ann, isn’t? Nick? Is she Sally Ann, or Sarah Ann? No Ann. That’s right that was the other one. Wouldn’t he just be mortified with me if I did call her Sarah Ann? Now that I’ve thought it I’m sure I’m going to do it. Nick, if I want to get her attention, I’ll elbow you, and you call her! Aw, c’mon, be a sport!

Where was I? Coffee, from that place where Handy’s used to be. I’d better get tea while I’m at it. I can’t remember if Web said she drinks coffee or not. They all do these days. Even Nancy. We never drank coffee in high school.

Nick, Nick? Did you talk to Nancy about maybe actually being nice to this girl, Sally? She’s going skiing? Since when? I never told her she could go skiing with the Wallace’s. You did? When? Well then why all the debate over Web bringing her THIS weekend? They might as well’ve just come next weekend then, right? Nick? Nick, she’s coming this weekend to meet the family. Not just you or me, but all of us, as a whole. Well you can just tell Nancy she’s not going. You should have thought of that when you told her she could go this weekend.
Nick, please, can we finish arguing when I’m done with the shopping, the laundry, and the housecleaning? I’m plenty busy. I have to finish the list, go shopping, and this house is a wreck. Go. Go watch the rest of Jeopardy. I can’t talk to you when you’re like this.


*


What is it? The country with a birth rate of zero? Of course China has a birthrate, although they might not have a population growth rate. I don’t know.

Can I have that circular from Cub Foods, that brown one? Thanks, sport. Oh look, they’re selling compact discs and books, and movies at the supermarket. Well, I knew they rented movies. Yeah, they have had that earthy-crunchy
nature music display up for a while. I should leave a little basket of soaps and lotions up in the bathroom for Sally. Well, it’s one of those girl things. I wonder if that’s a good price for pantyhose. No, I’m not going to put out a little basket of pantyhose! Ha ha.

Hey, you were right, it was Vatican City. Why don’t you try to get on Jeopardy? Nick, you could easily win in a half-hour what Web earns in a year.

Oh right, what does it take, double A? I just saw a coupon, now where...?

Well I’m off. It’s not too, too late and I won’t have time tomorrow. I want to clean the house. Me too, I hope they know what they’re doing. You will, really? Thanks. Do you want to split up the list, or do it together? Yes, that would be nice. Thank you, Nick.

Do you suppose she’s as nervous about this as we are? I remember being nervous meeting your parents. Now, sure they do, and I love them too, but I was still nervous, then.

Wednesday

He’s not coming. I don’t know. He said that they decided it was too expensive to fly just for the weekend after all. I don’t think they ever bought tickets. It’s a big deal to me. We haven’t seen him in so long. It’s like being prepared for a thirty mile drive and then when you get there, they tell you it’s another hundred miles, you know?
Did you talk to Nancy? Well, if Web and Sally aren’t going to be able to make it, then I guess it’s all right for Nancy to go skiing this weekend.

Check the bus schedule.

Chicago to Omaha, that’s going to be such a long ride for them. What? Well then I’ll go into the city and pick them up at the bus station. I’m sure they’re not going to come by bus anyway. Why? To spend all day Saturday on a bus to stay overnight then leave early Sunday, and spend another day on the bus? Fine then, if they do, I’ll get them. God forbid anyone ask you to go out of your way on your day off. Nick, stop. I’m not going to be dragged into another argument about how-many-hours-you-have-to-work-just-to-put-food-on-the-table. Please, I’m beginning to lose my patience.

I’m sorry, too, Nick. I just want to get them here so we can see our son. I worry about us sometimes. No, all of us, as a family. Sometimes it just feels like there’s more pulling us apart than there is keeping us together. I don’t know. There’s just too much that could go wrong. I’m just going to call him quick and see what he thinks about the bus.

* 

Call the airlines.

Nick, you used up all those frequent flyer miles on your trip to Phoenix, didn’t you? Damn. Well, it’s not an accusation, I just wanted to know before I called the airline. To see if I can get them tickets for this weekend. He can pay us
back. Will you just watch TV and let me just call them? God forbid anyone ask you to do anything for the family.

Well, I have good reason to be jumpy. They can't take the bus, it wouldn't be good for Sally, since she's pregnant. Yup, that's what he said. Pretty far along, I guess, he didn't say. Doesn't that explain a few things?

Hello? Yes, how much Omaha to Chicago, round trip, Friday, economy. I'm sorry, I meant leaving Chicago Friday and going to Omaha, returning to Chicago Sunday night or early Monday, preferably early Monday. Yes, day after tomorrow, and this Sunday. Something direct, please, if you have it. Oh. Well they're staying over Saturday night, doesn't that count for something? I see. Yes, well, I would have liked to have made a reservation two weeks in advance, but my son only called this evening... This is really a kind of a family emergency, you see. You can't make any exceptions, or reductions for extenuating circumstances? Uh-huh. So, if I died and my son had to fly home on two days notice, you'd still charge him that obscene amount? No, a reservation won't be necessary, thank you. Blood suckers.

Do you know how much they wanted for a plane ticket from Chicago to Omaha and back again on two days notice? Nick? Nick? Never mind.

Hi, I'm calling about train service from Chicago to Omaha this weekend. Oh? I'm still here. I see. Of course. There's nothing you can do to get my son home to me this weekend? You sound like a nice boy, you wouldn't happen to be going to Omaha this weekend, would you? They'd split gas with you. Oh, no,
I guess it would take you a while, from Philadelphia. Thanks anyway. And call your mother this weekend. Mothers worry, even if you’re all grown up and on your own. Thank you, good bye.

What Nick? Yes, I did tell him to call his mother. Well, he sounded like a nice boy, he was very patient and understanding. Not like that woman at the airlines. That really steams me, that they’d charge you that much to fly on short notice, no matter what. Verify? Why can’t they just take it at your word? Or do you have to show up in black with a veil and runny mascara and a damp hankie?

Call the bus. Just in case.

Call Web.

Thursday

Call Web again. No, I think he’s not answering on purpose.

Make the lasagna. I can freeze it if I have to.


Make up the spare room for Sally. He can sleep in his own bed. Well you can push the beds together if you want, but they won’t sleep there while I’m in this house. Yeah, sure, but in this house he’s still our son.

Fix up the bathroom.

There’s just not enough time.
Change the tablecloth on the dining room table.

Run a dust rag over the living room. I wish I had time to get my hair done. I look like I have a wren’s nest on top of my head. Aw, that’s sweet of you sport, but I know you’re lying!

Pick up the car from the shop.

Nick, we’re going to the shop to pick up the car at 8:00 am tomorrow, right? Okay. Just checking.

What do you think? I don’t know. My mother would say it’s in bad form to give a baby present before you’ve given a wedding present. Oh, I don’t know, he didn’t say which. He didn’t sound like he wanted to talk about it. I don’t think he much expected this either. Poor Web. Yes, I suppose it is good our parents aren’t around to see this. The times are a-changing, aren’t they?

Confirm airline reservations. Maybe.

Call credit card company. I want to verify that the ticket price doesn’t exceed our credit limit.

Get a nice card to put Web and Sally’s check in. Don’t I still have to go to the store? Where’s that list? Card. We can mail it out if they can’t make it this weekend. Nick, I don’t feel right giving them a check. Are you sure it isn’t too impersonal? Well maybe it’s an okay thing to do now, but still... And have her pick something out of the catalog, or just tell us what they’ll need, you know, later, and we’ll send it to them closer to the time? I don’t know.
Nick, you smell like peach. Did you use those soaps I put out for Sally?

"Nancy did it first," you sound like a little kid. I put those out for Sally. It's a nice touch, not something you actually use. Well you deserve to smell like peach then. I'm going to try him one more time, tell him he can pay us back for the tickets, or part of them whenever he gets back on his feet. Right, when the baby's got a job!

How is all this happening to us?

* 

Confirm with the airlines. Web knows to pick up the tickets at the counter when he gets to O'Hare.

Call the shop and tell them we'll pick up the car on our way back from the airport.

Do I need anything else at the supermarket? Oh I'll just stop in and see if anything catches my eye. Whole milk, maybe. We can put it in coffee if Web and Sally don't drink it. I don't think one quart of whole milk is going to clog the arteries of the whole family. And Nancy is going skiing with the Wallace's? Well I didn't think Web was going to make it there for a while either. And it's too late now to tell her no. With Nancy gone, I'm going to need you to help me, sport.

Oh I'll be fine, don't worry about me. Times like this, I wish Mom was around. I do miss her, yeah, but it's like, I don't know. Well, I guess sometimes I wonder if this is what it was like for her. Was it different when we were kids? It
must have been, it had to have been. Didn’t it? Oh, honey, I know, I’m just being facetious. But if someone twenty years ago had told me that this is what our family would have ended up like, I wouldn’t have believed them, you know? That I’d be bending over backwards for a woman our son got pregnant then married without even us meeting her, or knowing about the baby until two days before we meet her. I’m sorry, it’s just not something I ever, I mean, Web’s a good kid, we shouldn’t have to deal with this kind of thing. We worked hard to make sure he’d be okay. And now all this nonsense shuffling travel schedules. I guess I didn’t realize just how much I need to see him. Make sure he’s all right, you know?

Thank you honey, I needed that. Were our parents like this? We certainly weren’t like Web when we were his age. I mean, we just didn’t treat our parents like that, missing holidays with the family to go do whatever. Or get married and telling your parents afterwards, exactly!

Oh Nick. You were a hopeless romantic, weren’t you? Sorry, still are! Imagine if we really had eloped? I mean if we really had gone through with it. I never thought you were serious when you talked about that. You were seriously? You really would have eloped instead of getting married with all our friends and family? Oh of course not now, in retrospect. Yeah, you’d better say that! Get back here and give me another hug.
Friday

Drop Nancy off at the Wallace’s on the way to the airport.

Pick up Web and Sally.

I’ll drop you off at the shop and you can drive the other car home. And you’re going to stop at the market for milk? Thanks, sport.

Yeah, I’m ready. Let me just get my coat.

You’re right, you’re right. It’ll all be okay, I know. I just never thought that ‘this’ was what ‘okay’ would turn out to be.