Blue glass bowl: a collection of short stories

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Blue glass bowl:
A collection of short stories

by

Sarah M. Wheeler

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CLARE

Ricky finds me hanging around Center Street in between the Copper Kettle diner and his father's ice cream store. B's is only a few yards beyond that, placed at the very head of the street. It was planned that way, since the bar is the most important part of town, for my father anyway.

Ricky pokes his head out of the store and calls to me. "Clare-- what're you doing out here?" he asks and then shakes his head. He's forgotten he's let me loose on the world; I don't need a babysitter anymore, since I turned thirteen.

I roll my eyes and stop in front of the store window where Ricky is spraying windex in wide arcs on a smear of ice cream below the neon sign that reads "Pa's Ice Cream". I take a seat on the cracked sidewalk. It's the middle of January but Ricky keeps the sidewalks shovelled real well since an old guy slipped out here two years ago and threatened to sue. And believe it or not there is actually a lawyer in Layne. His office is right next to the real estate office. There's also a bait shop, a drug store, and a shoe store which is small and doesn't do good business. All of these are located along Center Street with B's manning the helm, looking down over them as if it's in charge of whatever business goes on.

Ricky is scrubbing at the window, since the ice cream is
dried cold to it, and I get tired of watching him, and feeling
my butt so cold on the ground, so I get up and walk around
him, peering into the alley to the right of the store. Tiny
bits of dead grass poke up through the flattened patches of
snow mixed with gravel and dirt. Ricky's car, a red Ford
Torino is parked here. I was about nine when he got it and he
used to give me rides all over town. It was different from
riding in Ty's truck; the heat worked for example, and
besides, Ty never took me on rides just for the hell of it.

I come back out of the alley and Ricky is watching me.

"What're you doing here?" he asks again.

I shrug. I don't wanna tell him the truth, which is that
I'm bored and I don't feel like hanging out alone at the
house. "There's no light at the house," I say, which is true.
"The lights in the kitchen are all burned out and so is one in
the living room." I never call it a family room. Not with the

"Go buy some," Ricky says, motioning towards the
drugstore.

"I don't have any money. Ty got up early this morning."

Ricky frowns. He knows what this means. Ty, my father,
only gets up early for one reason, to drink. He doesn't leave
early often; usually I beat him out the door to school and I
snatch whatever cash I need off his dresser, but once in a
while, when he's feeling especially low, like when he's
remembering my mother, Ivy, he gets up when the birds start chattering in the trees outside his window, and sneaks out to his truck to make his getaway.

When I was about six, a month after my mother left us, Ricky appointed himself my official babysitter/guardian. Ty had turned into a wild drunk in record time after Ivy ran off for the city, and everyone agreed he was just not responsible enough to have a kid, not that they felt responsible enough to take me on. I don't know what made Ricky think he was responsible enough to take care of me, but he did. And like I said before, he's giving it up a little since I'm thirteen now, but it kills him to do it, especially when he hears things like this. Although, I can admit it is nice to know someone worries about me.

"It's not a big deal," I say.

"When Emory gets here for his shift we'll go get some bulbs."

I narrow my eyes slightly, trying to think what he's thinking. He could just give me a coupla bucks so I could run down and get them myself. I think he misses taking care of that stuff. It makes him feel important, and useful. He took over his dad's store after his dad had his first heart attack, and when he died, Ricky went right on running the place even though he doesn't give a damn about ice cream. He just likes to be useful and important.
I continue to sit while Ricky windexes the windows and keeps an eye out for Emory, one of his younger brothers. I keep an eye out for Ty, whose truck is not parked in the gravel lot at B's, which is where it usually is at this time of day. It's weird how he picks the morning and afternoon to drink; but I don't care to get inside the mind of a drunk and figure out what he's up to.

It's also weird how things got like this. For example, I remember Ty didn't used to be drunk all the time. I remember doing family type stuff with both parents, not like Ozzie and Harriet, but still, things like dinner together in the kitchen, which is one room I really hate now, especially since we never got rid of the strawberry wallpaper that I know Ivy loved. I guess I remember arguments too, yelling, chairs being thrown around, that kind of stuff. And I remember no one knew, not even Ty, till Ivy was gone, just how hung up on her he really was.

I squint my eyes in the late afternoon sun. It's dreary in Layne this time of year. The whole town is whitewashed in snow, hard and dry underfoot, but still it sparkles in the sun, which we're lucky to see about once a week. I'm not one of those types who can't stand the darkness of winter, otherwise I might go crazy at the sound of the wind blowing over the flat land where the prairie grass still pokes out through the snow, even in January. I once heard a whisper that
Ivy was like that, scared of winter and the darkness and flat fields, like graveyards that wave in the wind, and that's why she ran away. But I don't believe she had to have a reason like that to leave. Ty is good enough a reason to leave Layne forever and not come back, especially when she found out he wasn't as charming as he seemed, which is what I would call the main problem with Ty besides booze. Everyone knew his family was nothing but a bunch of losers, but they sure were the damned most attractive losers in downstate Illinois. Most of those good looks have slid into worn, tired faces now, but back about 20 years ago he and his three brothers were all smart, looking like Cary Grant in jeans and baseball caps, working odd jobs because they didn't give a damn what they did with their lives, and each got married purely by accident, ending up with wives who were bored and bitter and kids who didn't like them any better, but didn't know what else to do for a father.

Only I got lucky enough to end up with a replacement father, since Ty turned out to be the worst alcoholic of the bunch. And I suppose only I wanted my father to give a damn about me, which I know he doesn't. I don't know why I even care, except that it seems wrong that he shouldn't want me, and that he should love my mother who doesn't want him, which I guess sounds like a vicious circle where I'm always in the middle.
Emory pulls up to the curb and waves at us. He looks nothing like Ricky, who is tall and skinny, scrawny really, with wavy hair that he keeps cut short because the other three have wavy hair and he doesn't want to look the least little thing like them. His brothers are all shorter than he and have straight teeth. Ricky wore braces for a long time when I was a kid.

"Hey Clare," Ricky says, opening the door to the tune of an electronic bell. "You notice Ty's truck's not over there?" he asks and goes inside. I follow him, not saying anything. "I saw it drive off earlier, about an hour ago, and I could have sworn Little Valerie was driving."

I still don't say anything because I know that's exactly who was driving the truck. I saw her myself.

* * * * *

I walked home alone from school, since I only live a couple of blocks away, right off Center Street on Broad Street. My block is cramped with small, two story homes mostly painted white. Ours though, is a hideous melon pink and it stands out like a big warning sign. Ty painted it that color the week after Ivy left. He figured if she ever came back, even just to drive past and see if we were inside, she would see the color and might want to stay. "Pink's your mama's favorite color," he told me. I never believed it would work, although Ty kept believing it might for about five years. She
never came back though, not even just to drive by and see if we were inside.

Ty's truck came roaring and spitting up beside me then, music crashing out of the open window, loud enough to touch. Valerie was inside and she leaned out at me and smiled, which could have cracked the makeup she was wearing, had it not fit so tightly over her face. People always commented about how made up she was, about how she ought to try to not look so trashy, because, after all, she really was a nice girl. I just wished they'd see her the way she really was, a washed up cheerleader working in her daddy's shoe store, secretly dating half the married men in town.

Little Valerie, who's really not little anymore, but nicknames stick in a small town, yelled something I couldn't hear over the music.

"What?" I yelled back.

"Get in," she said.

"What're you doing in Ty's truck?" I shouted, but she shouted back, again,

"Get in."

I shrugged and climbed up, slamming the door and snapping off the radio. "What're you doing in Ty's truck?" I asked and she didn't answer, just kept singing along with the radio that was no longer playing. We rode a couple of yards to the house where she told me to get out.
"What the hell is this?"

"Jesus, Clare, you don't have to yell," Valerie said, puffing up her blonde hair. I could see her brown roots and secretly I was glad. I would have liked to share that secret with her, just to let her know I knew what she was. "Ty told me to pick you up." She motioned at the truck and then the house. "So I picked you up and now you're home. So get out."

"Why? Where are you going?"

"I have errands to run."

"Ty said you could run errands in his truck?"

Valerie let off a sigh like I was buggin' her to death and the truth is, I really knew why he leant her the truck. She's had Ty wrapped around her little finger for about a year now, which a lot of people might not know, but they sure see him preening and swaggering all over town like a big fool and they have probably guessed that it's a woman. I couldn't see what she saw in him though, because, in my opinion, the mist of alcohol had to completely hide the good looks and charm they say he once had. But I also knew Little Valerie wasn't too discriminating when it came to men; from what I saw, mostly she liked ones she didn't have to be serious about.

Valerie told me once more to get the hell out of the truck and I jumped down and walked into the house without looking back or acting like I cared much.

About a half hour later, after a furious search for light
bulbs, I gave up and decided to go into town and find Ricky since I didn't have any money and Ty's dresser had no cash on it. Who knew what Ty had done with the money that had been there. If he wasn't at B's, he could have gone into Dwight to the Crazy Weasel, which is the place he usually reserves for his more serious breakdowns. People all say how considerate Ty is to not let me see him in this condition, that he deliberately avoids me for my sake. Yeah, what a laugh. I know what really happened. I know Ricky had caught him stumbling up the porch steps one day, refused to let him in the house and told him he'd be watching me from then on because there were times when Ty obviously couldn't handle it. But still, some people like to pretend Ty actually does care about me. The theory is, it's good me for me to think I'm loved.

Ricky and I go into the drugstore and pick out some light bulbs. I ignore the kids from school who are hanging out by the magazines, sneaking glances at me, who they never talk to. And when we pay, I ignore the cashier who still finds reason to sneer at me even though Ty was the one to fix his heater when it went out last week. But Ricky doesn't notice all that, or at least he pretends not to and even smiles at the man when we leave.

Even now, something like seven years since Ivy left,
people still remember it like it was yesterday and they can still hear Ty yelling at her down deep in their ears, and they can't let me out of it. He blames himself for her leaving, and so do they and I get blamed along with him. They stare at me in an odd way, even when I'm just buying a light bulb. They all forget about me except to stare, forget that I need to get fed and go to school and have to pay bills, so they pay Ty in cash for his handyman services instead of a check which would be just that much harder for him to spend so fast. Only Ricky didn't forget about us, about me, and I no longer wonder why, now that I'm older. He found Ty curled up in the corner of the garage, wrapped in oil spotted newspapers, and I guess he couldn't forget after that, after running to the phone to call someone to come help, after finding me waiting for him in the kitchen, knowing full well what was going on even though I was only six. It was just fine with me that Ricky took over being my father then.

And he was a good guardian when I was too young to really guess what it meant that he was there and not Ty. Not for one minute do I think Ty could have ever pulled himself together for me back then, and I have never wanted Ricky to stop taking care of me, but I do wish, against my better judgement, that my own father would feel just a little bit bad about ditching me and would feel even a little bit like he loved me.

We drive silently, and I try not to think about where Ty
is tonight, because by now it is nearly five-thirty. I wonder if Little Valerie is still with him and I don't want to know what they might be doing.

Our block is long and still, a hill at both ends and a deep valley in the middle where our house is, waiting a yellowed melon color under the dim streetlight. No other house lights up the way ours does; no other house is as neglected as ours is with the rotting porch, peeling white trim and mossy wood stacked along the side; no other house is as lonely as ours is.

Ricky parks on the street and there is no truck anywhere in sight. We go into the house and both of us are startled to see, through the darkness of the living room and the pale glow of the hall light, Ty is swilled up on the couch, moaning and holding his head.

"Shit," Ricky curses, which he doesn't do often, and drops the bag with the light bulbs on the floor. I can still hear them breaking into tiny glass shards as Ricky half drags and half carries Ty upstairs to the bathroom. I don't follow just yet. Instead, I look around for bottles, beer, hard liquor, whatever, but I don't see any. I pick up the jacket Ty has been huddled under on the couch and smell it hesitantly, then more carefully. I don't smell beer or smoke. I look up the stairs after them and wonder if Ty was at the bar at all today. It's hard to believe he might not have been, so I
charge up the stairs to see what's really going on. I stop up halfway when Ty starts yelling.

"She's dead! She's dead, do you hear? She's dead!" I gotta know what's going on, who's dead, so I race the rest of the way up. When I get into the bathroom, Ty's still yelling and he's holding Ricky's face in his hands and there are tears in his eyes and running down his face.

"Who's dead?" I ask and Ty looks over Ricky's shoulder to see me. He finally stops shouting and lets go of Ricky to grab hold of me, pulling me into his arms and I am amazed to still not smell any alcohol. But I am even more amazed when it turns into a hug because I can hardly remember the last time my father ever hugged me.

"Little Valerie Dorsey's dead," Ty whispers and then Ricky pulls him back and he sits on the toilet and begins to cry with great, loud sobs like I haven't heard since the day my mother left.

* * * *

They found her about an hour after she left me off at the house. She was out past the church by Bix Xavier's new house. His wife, Joyann, was actually the one who found Ty's truck wrapped around the light pole like some foreign piece of sculpted art. Joyann was out for her run when she heard a hellish shrieking, most likely the tires, and then the
resounding crash that must have broke into pieces in the air.

They found Little Valerie inside, clinging to the bloody steering wheel of Ty's truck. She wouldn't let go, not even in death, and they had to break several of her fingers, as well as the expensive fake nails, to make her let go. Ty told us all about it, all the gory details. He said the nails were painted a funny violet pink, which I already knew, and they were not as long as she might have wanted 'cause her mama would have kilt her if they were.

As it turned out, Ty was on a job that afternoon and he had loaned the truck to Valerie because he thought I ought to get a ride home, which doesn't make sense to me. Why would he want Little Valerie to drive me home? He never worried about me getting home before.

Ty wasn't drinking at all and wasn't prepared to hear that his truck had been in a crash. As far as he knew, I was in that truck, which is what he is saying when I come back from the garage where I was told to go get sodas for us all. We have moved to the kitchen now, and at the door I hear Ty telling Ricky,

"And she could have been in that truck too. She would've been killed too, like Valerie." He moans and puts his head on the table and I realize this is the first time I have seen my father have a sober conversation with Ricky, or anyone for that matter, in a long time. It's not that Ty isn't sober
every once in a while, it's just that not many people want to
be around to talk to him.

I also realize, with quite a shock, that Ty has been
worrying about me. He was actually worried that I might have
been in that truck. I stand still in the doorway, clutching
the sodas, wondering if I've heard right, and hoping that I
have. I feel sort of odd about it, because I've always made it
a priority to try to not to believe something that might get
me hurt, and now all of a sudden, just because he's knocked
over by this accident, I am too and everything else is out the
window.

I even manage not to get upset when Ty disappears, no
surprise, for the next two days. He took one long look at me,
and he was near crying again, before dashing out the door that
night. Ricky just sighed and locked the door behind him. I
usually go over to stay at his house when that happens, and I
did this time too. I don't necessarily like his parents' house
because even though I don't have a family, that doesn't mean I
want his. I mean, like I said, Ricky's been good enough to me,
as a sort of father, and I suppose I should've asked to just
live with his family a long time ago, but two things stopped
me. One was the weird loyalty to my original family, no matter
what shape it was in, and two, I find it's easier not having
to care about people like you're supposed to in a real family.
'Cause the truth is, no matter what I say or how I feel, being
alone means no one can leave you so there isn't anyone left to hurt you.

The day of the funeral, Ricky drives me to the house to get dressed. When we get over to Broad Street it is around eight, a quiet white day where the snow seems to have muffled any sound and frozen any feeling out of the day. I see no signs of Ty at the house when I unlock the door and go in. All the lights are off and there are still no new bottles around. I run upstairs to my room to search for something in my closet to wear. Ricky follows behind me, checking a little more thoroughly behind doors and in the bathroom for Ty.

When I throw the light switch on in my room, I see Ty has been here. Hanging over a kitchen chair, moved up here, is a navy skirt and plain white blouse. I've never seen them before and when I investigate, I can see there are still tags attached to them. I guess Ty must have gotten them at the Walmart or KMart in Dwight, or Guiness Town, which is the next town after Dwight.

"What's that?" Ricky says from my doorway. He points to the clothes, and I can't help it, I smile a little.

"Ty left 'em," I say and Ricky shakes his head. For one moment I am filled with a sort of panic. "What dya mean?" I say. "Are they from you?"

"No," Ricky says and I feel a rush of relief. "I didn't get them. Why do you suppose he did?"
"Cause he was scared-"

"Of what?" Ricky sneers and I start to feel a little stupid.

"Scared that I was in the truck. I heard him say so," I say.

Ricky nods. "Yeah he said that, but-"

"Just get out so I can get ready," I snap and he shakes his head again, but closes my door.

I don't really have a lot of nice clothes, like skirts and dresses, so I feel a little self-conscious, especially since they don't seem to fit right. The blouse is too big and the skirt is kinda tight so that I don't pull the zipper up all the way but I figure no one will notice it under my coat.

I go down stairs and Ricky is standing in the hall, waiting. He is wearing a dark suit that makes him look pale and somber. Even his expression is strained, and I wonder if he is disappointed in me, like we've always agreed about Ty and now maybe we don't see the situation from the same height this once.

We drive to the Dorsey's house on the other side of the railroad tracks, where Ricky says the funeral will be held. He says this grimly, with his face held tight and impassive, like I suppose some people like to be at funerals, and things begin to feel grimmer and grimmer as we get closer and closer, like the whole world has stopped producing anything new or good for
this day when most of the town will attend a funeral.

Personally, and I wouldn't admit this to anyone around here, I didn't like Little Valerie all that much. I didn't really know her much either. She had sat with me a few times, including last summer when Ricky said I still needed to be watched.

Ty came home early one of those days and found Valerie instead of Ricky making lunch while I hovered in the background, steaming, because she didn't think I knew how to make a stupid sandwich. At first, I figured Ty would be kinda angry, but he didn't seem to care one bit and walked right past us to get a beer out of the fridge. What really surprised me was that when he went to the backyard, Valerie followed him. Like I said, I didn't like her much and I didn't like being watched by her, so I was glad to get her out of the house. But, I didn't know what to make of her going outside with Ty.

I was so curious about this scene that I watched out the kitchen window, and there they were, Ty, tall and slumping slightly, with a baseball cap on, and Valerie, tall too, and curvy in tight shorts and a halter top. She had Ty's beer and was swinging it back and forth like a brown baton. I could hear them laughing but I couldn't hear what they were saying. Back then, I thought Valerie was kind of pretty, just because she was older and had all that long hair and I've always felt
sorta plain and no one bothers to tell me I ever look nice. I could tell Ty felt the same way, because it'd been such a long time since any woman in town gave him the time of day, and I could see him lighting up under her attention, even after just one minute. He stood up straighter and smiled more, gesturing with his hands as he talked. He leaned against the old black grill and smiled at her and she slipped a finger under the edge of his blue workshirt. It wasn't long before she was sidled up to him, leaning into his face, practically kissing him. And that was enough for me. I knew right then and there she'd never really be serious about him but he would be about her and my existence wouldn't even cross their minds.

Of course Ty was so caught up in his drunkeness that he didn't notice any of Valerie's other men friends, not even the most obvious ones that she took out in public and certainly not the most secret ones that she brought out to our house that summer because it was so easy to hide there. Not from me though.

As we approach the Dorsey house, I am surprised to see Ty standing at the end of the drive, alone and with no sign of a new truck. People are parking on the wide grassy lot the Dorsey's live on. It's more open on this side of town. We drive up there too and as we go past Ty, I want to roll down my window and tell him thanks for the clothes and say he looks nice in the shabby brown sport coat he is wearing. But these
are the moments Ricky looks out for. He needs to remind me how Ty is not the kind of father I should forgive.

"He's probably bombed," Ricky says.

"I guess," I say and I turn to look at the big house in front of us. "How long we gotta stay at this?" I ask.

"God, Clare. She died, okay? We're staying for the whole thing." He turns off the engine and we get out. I let the heavy door swing shut loudly behind me and the sound seems to wake Ty out of his trance.

"Clare, hey there, Clare," he says and he sounds like he hasn't had a drink in awhile. He walks real slow and rubs a hand over his face a few times. Ricky moves to stand beside me and I can feel him tensing.

"Hey, Ty," I say. He stops in front of us for a moment and his hand is clenched at his side, as if it were holding a bottle.

"Let's make nice today, Ty," Ricky says through his teeth.

"He's not making trouble," I tell him and start to the house. I'm not looking forward to what's in there, but I don't want a scene between these two either.

All the mourners are being led into the house to the living room where there's this large easel covered with pictures and mementos of the dearly departed. Apparently, pink is her favorite color because the whole room is done up in
pink flowers of every variety and shade, their thick scents mingling in the packed room. The smell is overpowering and I'm not so certain I'll be able to take it for long. Then Bix walks up the aisle of two sections of folding chairs. He has been picked to run the ceremony and is carrying a gold container that looks like a large tea strainer, letting off grey smoke and a sharp odor. The flowers are forgotten as I start to sweat under the smoke and several others begin coughing. I hope that's not Valerie smoking in that container.

Bix stops at the easel and hangs the container on a wobbly stand next to it. I want to laugh at the solemnity of the whole thing, which feels phony to me, like we're only playing funeral instead of actually having one.

Ricky pokes me in the back and we move to a coupla empty seats and Ty follows, rocking uncertainly on the balls of his feet. He makes it to the chairs with us and we all sit down.

Bix gets everyone's attention and begins to speak, raising his arms over his head as his emotion rises. He's wearing something like a white poncho that spreads under his arms like wings and I think of Valerie like that, taking off from inside the truck to hover over the truck where she'd meet the clouds and melt into their wisps until she didn't have a body anymore, except those artificial nails. What would happen to the ones that didn't get broken? Would she get to keep them in heaven?
Someone starts to play an out of tune piano and Bix's wife begins to dance up the aisle, flapping her arms slowly, mimicking Bix's movement, swaying to and fro in, dressed in a thin white leotard. She makes it seem silly, like we're playacting being sorrowful again, except for the Dorsey's who are sitting in the front row, clinging to each other and crying quietly.

When Joyann's dance is over, Bix asks us to come up to the easel and say goodbye to Little Valerie, and people start filing out of their rows to make a line in front. I feel myself shaking suddenly and when I look over at Ty he is doing the same. I turn to Ricky who smiles and leads the way to the front, Ty following us closely.

We wait in line and after several seconds I hear, over the hushed whispers of the mourners, that Ty is crying. I can't help myself, I turn and he is staring at the easel and the tears are running down his face, like they were the day she died and he sobbed in the bathroom for me. I feel a lump grow in my throat then, because as he reaches out to touch the pictures, it occurs to me that I am not what he is thinking about; I know he is choked up about her.

"Stop it, Ty," I say softly and I can feel the tears running down my face now.

Ty howls loudly and the whole place stops to look at us. I wonder what's happened to Ricky because so far he hasn't
said a word.

"I'm sorry, Clare," Ty howls to me and I want to disappear into the floor. "I'm real sorry your mama's gone," he says, hanging his head.

"Just shut up, Ty," Ricky hisses, suddenly by my side again. He takes my arm as the whole room waits for what is to come next, and I do know there is more.

"I'm real sorry about your new mama too," Ty says and runs his hand over the easel, smearing his fingerprints all over Valerie's face. "I let her use that truck—" he stops to howl some more as his words sink deep in my ears where I can finally hear them.

"My new what?"

"She was gonna be your new mama," Ty says hiccupping.

Well that beats all, I think, clear for one moment before I start to howl too. Ricky puts his arms around me now and tries to drag me back, leaving Ty there at the easel where he is only caring about that stupid Little Valerie and not his own daughter. Suddenly I shove Ricky hard and he stumbles back as I rush forward, into the captive crowd, waiting breathless, and I can feel the sobs making me breathless too.

"I don't want a mama!" I yell and the room is ringing with the sound. They'll never forget this funeral, I think, and neither will he. A little grin turns up my lips and I stand where I am, angry.
"You need a mama," Ty tells me and he is angry too.
"She wasn't yours, you know; she wasn't yours to keep."

"No human is ever ours to keep," Bix breaks in suddenly, playing the preacher again and I decide, yes, I am going to drag him into this cause he asked for it and I know he was one of her men too. "Just how stupid are you? How can you believe she loved you when no one else does, not even me? Do you know I saw her with Bix too, last summer? She was with him and you and who knows who else!" It is all coming in a rush and I can't stop it till I accidentally look over at Joyann who is suddenly red in her white leotard. I stop and look around and the rest of the room doesn't look surprised, except for Joyann; no they're transfixed, this time by my father and I, the two outcasts who do nothing else in this town than hurt one another and anyone else who gets in their way.

I'm truly sorry for Joyann and I want to find a way to apologize to her but Ricky snaps out of it and takes me to the car. It's bitter cold outside and can feel the tears freezing to my face in long stinging streaks.

Ricky opens the car door for me and as we drive off, no one comes out of the house after us, not even Ty. They're all one group now and we're another; those who loved Little Valerie, and those who love me.
"Jesus, Rae, you almost got us killed! Pull over and let me drive," Gary said. He reached for the steering wheel but Rae swung the car suddenly to the shoulder and he lurched into the door. Rae braked to a quick halt and prepared for a fight. But Gary said nothing, just opened his door, got out, and slammed it shut again. Rae shifted and bumped her way across the seat to the passenger side. She could feel the vinyl seat pulling at her sticky legs, and she wanted to get out of the car for a moment and walk along the road.

They were driving through Maine, having turned off the coastal highway, and Rae felt if she could just get out of the car for a minute to walk and see the green stretch of highway in front of them instead of flying through it in the hot car, if she could just get into the woods for a minute, she might feel something of herself again. She could touch the dripping wet bushes and tree trunks, and feel the rain stinging the heat from her face and she might just remember what it was like when she was interested in those things, when she didn't mind whatever predicament she had found herself in, when predicaments were a joyful change. Now it seemed all she was interested in was putting one foot in front of another into the next day and each next day was one step closer to the end
of this trip. But at the same time, when this trip ended, when they left the flowing sheets of concrete highway behind, she'd be settling down for good, no more running around and goofing off and doing whatever came into her mind. She was determined to give it up, and yet the thought made her vaguely uneasy.

"Just let me get out and walk," Rae thought silently as Gary started the car. She watched the windshield wipers flapping lightly back and forth with a slight squeaking sound, smearing bugs and wet leaves from one side to another. It had been drizzling since the night before and the humidity seeped through the vents into the car because the air conditioner didn't work and they couldn't stand to not have some air blowing into their faces and over their arms.

A white curtain of gauzy fog muffled the road as they drove and it persuaded Rae to slip into a drowsy state near sleep where her eyelids hung low and she could feel her shoulders slipping till she was nearly hunched over in her seat. She could tell Gary was watching her from out the corner of his eye and she wanted to straighten up, to not let him see her like this, looking small and defeated and ready to sleep, but she couldn't help it. Behind her eyelids was a lush green world she wanted to slide into, where she could see the sun every now and again pushing through the full clouds in bright patches. "It's so green here," she whispered. "Look at it," she said and hadn't realized she had spoken aloud till Gary
answered.

"We do have vegetation at home, Rae." His voice was vaguely snide. "Damnit—I can't see a thing. Get out of the way!" Rae's eyes snapped open and she saw him gesturing to a battered green truck in front of them.

"Just relax. You're too tense today," she told him, with a quick smile as she realized she knew the reason for his tension. It was an odd reason, but she was certain it had to do with the hat. She had found it yesterday in an antique shop that was more of a collection of old odds and broken ends that people keep in their attics or cellars till too much time has passed for them to remember why they kept it at all. Gary had sniffed around the shop like a dog unhappy with his lunch, but Rae was insistent on looking around. She hadn't insisted on anything this whole trip, until yesterday. That was her mistake. She had let Gary get totally out of hand; she had let him believe he really was in charge, which was something she ordinarily didn't do.

She did leave him with the illusion he was running her life, handling her finances, picking out her car, finding her apartment, deciding which boyfriends she ought to see, generally keeping her sensible. He believed she needed his help, and why wouldn't he when that was all he was ever told about her. "Take Rae to the bus stop and see that she doesn't miss her bus," her mother used to tell Gary when Rae was only
six and in first grade. "Be home by ten, Rae. Don't make Gary have to come look for you," her mother would say when Rae was in high school and going on a date. Her mother died when she was a junior and Rae was surprised to see how relieved she was. She figured it would be different without her mother to worry over her every move. In her mother's mind, a girl needed to be watched and taken care of as she had been by her brothers, and now Rae had to let Gary look after her. Which is what she thought would end with her mother's death.

Instead, she found Gary had taken her mother's instructions to heart and thoroughly believed he had to follow behind Rae and keep track of her moves. And she let him think that was so, simply because he took care of things she didn't feel like dealing with. Why argue when he said he wanted her to do things this way or that way? She could always go off on her own and do what she wanted anyway, and she did. He usually got all bothered by her "antics", her running off for the weekend with some guy she had just met, or staging a strike at work with her fellow unsatisfied co-workers, or whatever she had dreamed up on impulse to break the silent boredom. It was too bad she didn't realize earlier just how upset he got, but then, that was Gary's problem and not hers. She had always felt she had handled her life quite well without anyone's help actually being necessary.

There was something so totally different about this mess
with Lawrence though, and she wasn't entirely sure why. She had made mistakes before, but nothing that threw her completely off balance like this, made her certain she was a pathetic failure. Since then, she had let Gary take over completely while she went into hibernation.

And then yesterday, inside that store, she could see through the window as they passed by, a pink hatbox peeking out from under a dusty mound of moth eaten doll clothes and she had to get to it. So Gary followed her inside and watched as she pawed through the pile to pull it out. She held it by the pink satin cord and took it to a nearby table where she snatched off the lid. Inside was a straw summer hat, the wide brim circled by faded floppy pink roses.

Rae had clutched the hat tightly, and repeated many times in a clear voice that she would buy it whether or not Gary wanted her to. She would wear the hat too, regardless of whether or not it had been sprayed or disinfected somehow for whatever scalp disorders the previous owner might have had. In the three weeks since Lawrence had run off with the contents of her bank account, this was the first time she had felt like herself, wanting something, or wanting to do something, and it had set Gary back on his heels; she could tell that without even looking at him. He had been so sure she was finally in line and now she was showing signs of her old self again. His mouth was set in a firm line and he had abruptly stopped
speaking even though the owner of the shop now looked at him strangely, as if he were a child about to have a tantrum.

Rae traced the brim of her hat with her forefinger, pursing her lips slightly when Gary turned sharply off the road. She looked up to see they were now parked at a Dunkin' Donuts. So far in Maine they had seen Dunkin' Donuts ever few miles.

Gary looked anxiously around the lot. They were parked next to a large black sedan with white license plates. Rae could see three men inside the store sitting in brown window booths, reading sections of the newspaper. She ignored the light rain and climbed out of the car, setting her hat on her head, covering her densely curled black hair. There was a sensation she could feel in her toes, one that made her want to run it out of her system, run till she couldn't see the car any longer, but she pushed it down flat with the heels of her feet and followed Gary to the entrance. Two of the men looked up at them while the third stayed buried in the paper, newsprint staining his fleshy fingers. A bulky man with slicked hair, dropped his paper and stood, smoothing his grey suit as he stepped over to them. Gary had been mouthing the names of the donuts as he read them silently off the board, but he stopped, glancing uncertainly as the man greeted him.

"May I help you?"

"You don't work here, do you?" Rae grinned, but the man
returned a somber frown.

"The store is closed--for a funeral." He turned slightly
to the counter and smiled. "Isn't that right?" he said to a
teenage boy with stringy hair who had appeared from the back.

"Um--we're closed," he said haltingly. He grabbed the
ends of his hair and pulled lightly. "You'll have to come back
later."

"Are you the manager?" Gary asked, looking back and forth
between the two. "Which of you is in charge? Because we
haven't eaten anything, not even breakfast, and you don't have
a "closed" sign on the door--"

"I'm sure you understand our position. Sign or no sign,
we're closed."

"But--"

"A funeral is, after all, more important than your
breakfast, wouldn't you say?" He smiled again, revealing a row
of crooked, coffee stained teeth and Rae felt the urge to take
a step back.

Gary shook his head and touched Rae's arm. "Let's get out
of here," he grumbled.

"There's a restaurant--" the boy said, glancing quickly
at the man who continued to smile at them, frozen in his
victory over them. "It's a couple of miles up. You can't miss
it," the boy said.

"No thanks," Gary said and they left the store.
"Why not go to the restaurant?" Rae asked.

"I'm sick of these little greasy spoons and diners. I'd like some normal food for a change."

"Donuts are normal food?"

"I can take you to the restaurant," a voice said. Rae and Gary looked at one another.

"Where the hell---" Gary glanced around, but there was no one in sight.

"Back here," the voice said and a head appeared round the corner of the store, then quickly disappeared again. "Don't come back if they're watching you," the voice said.

Gary shook his head, bewildered, while Rae looked into the store out of the corner of her eye. The men were back into their paper so she stepped cautiously around the back. Gary let her go, watching wearily. "Rae, I don't think you should."

Rae waved a hand at him. "Just stay there." She came all the way round the back to see the head, now attached to the stout body of a boy dressed in a shirt with the Dunkin' Donuts logo and wrinkled khaki pants.

"What's going on?" Rae asked.

The boy smiled and put his hands in his pockets. "Did you see their car? Government plates, you know. FBI."

"Really? How do you know?"

The boy shrugged. "I just know. Do you think you could give me a ride to that diner? I'm pretty hungry myself."
Rae looked him up and down once more. He looked okay, chubby and smiling, which for some reason was reassuring, as if chubby smiling people never got anyone into trouble, which was good because although she wanted to go with him, she didn't want trouble.

"I suppose we can drive you," she said to the boy and went back to the front of the store. Gary was waiting, tapping his foot in a shallow puddle beside the car. "He's gonna show us to the diner," she said and got into the car. She waited for Gary to get in, but he didn't. Instead he tapped at her window. She rolled it down with a sigh. "What?"

"Who is he?" Gary asked, leaning in the window.

"He works here."

"Great. So why's he hanging out back of the store? Did he tell you what's really going on in there?"

"It's a funeral," she said.

Gary shook his head. "I'm not giving him a ride anywhere. Something's fishy out here."

"Well I'm hungry and I'm going to the diner. Give me the keys." She held out her hand but Gary took a step back.

"Forget it," he said. "I'm gonna see what's going on in there."

"Just stay out of it, Gary. Let's go to the diner." She slid into the driver's seat and rummaged through her purse for her set of keys. Gary continued to stare at the men behind the
window while Rae started the car. "Last chance," she said.

"I'm going in there. Maybe they're looking for that guy. They ought to know he's back there."

"Gary stay out of it," Rae said, feeling a small panic run through her for the kid. She didn't want Gary meddling in his business, like he always did hers. Gary was good enough to convince anyone of anything and he had only managed to not hold her for so long because she didn't listen, not to one word he had to say. He was just too serious and preoccupied with taking care of life business. But for that one little bit of time that she was down, and just for that one moment, she had heard one thing he had said. "Maybe you're just too lost, Rae," he had said. "Maybe you just don't know what you're doing." And it was all he had needed to say to convince her.

She didn't even mean to do it, but there she was, letting the brake up and feeling the car roll gently to the back of the store. The kid was still there, running his hands through his shaggy blonde hair. He smiled when he saw her in the car, but his face fell just as quickly when he saw Gary coming at him. "Get in," Rae said to the kid and he jumped in the front seat beside her.

"Don't, Rae," Gary called to her. "It's a mistake," he warned and for a moment her hands froze on the steering wheel. A mistake. Was she about to make another one? She didn't really know anything about this kid. But something else took
over then, instinct probably, and she let the car roll forward. Gary watched her as she slipped the wheel through her hands, turning it tight around the corner. She could almost feel the lurch in Gary's mouth as she did something he told her not to, as she made this second decision for herself in three weeks. She knew it might not be the best decision to make, but she also knew she had to make it. It could be her one last hurrah, one more bout of joyriding before settling down.

The kid slid down in his seat as they went out the drive of the store and turned onto the road. Then he sat up a few inches to see out the window.

"He's just watching us," the kid said in amazement. "What do you think he's gonna do? Is he gonna go in there?"

"Probably," Rae said. "He doesn't like this whole thing. I know he'd rather walk away from it. He doesn't like trouble. Especially the kind I get into."

"You get in trouble often?" the kid asked her.

"Well," Rae considered, "I never used to think of it that way. Am I in trouble now?" she asked.

"Don't you know?"

"I guess not," she mumbled after a minute.

"You wanna know my name?" the kid asked sitting all the way up now. "It's Nick. Although it might not be after today."

Rae stared at the road, weighing her curiosity with the
sight of Gary's face in the back of her mind like a cold wave rushing over her feet. "What does that mean?"

"Nothing," Nick said offhandedly. "So what's your name?"

"Rae."

"Rae? For a girl? Your parents want a boy or something?"

Rae tilted her head, uncertain for a moment. "I don't know. I never thought about it."

"Never? You never said to yourself, 'gee my name sounds like a boy's name'? You never thought maybe it was odd?"

"I've never known anyone else named Rae, boy or girl. Besides, my parents had Gary."

"Gary? That guy back there?"

"Yeah. He's my brother."

"Oh," Nick said. "Why don't you turn off here?" He pointed to a small street leading off the highway. She turned and they were now headed down a remote road surrounded by dark trees. Water dripped in large drops, splattering the windshield, off the leaves hanging low from branches stretching over the road. Rae imagined the trees were throwing the water down on them, squelching their trip, trying to stop them with a minor blinding flood. They were alive and menacing even though they were only trees shadowed by one another and not some great darkness beyond her power.

They drove in silence for several minutes and Rae noticed Nick trying casually to look over his shoulder.
"It's about five minutes up," he said when he caught her looking at him. "Don't worry." He gave a small cough and sat up straighter. "Nice hat."

"Thanks," Rae smiled, reaching up to finger the roses. She told Nick how she had bought it.

"So why are you riding around with this guy, your brother? This is supposed to be a vacation, right?" He waved his hand over the pile of suitcases and bags in the back seat.

"Not exactly."

"Well then, what?" He turned to her suddenly.

Rae was amused by his curiosity, but at the same time, she didn't want to tell Nick anything, not about her past and the things Gary called her mistakes, but which she had always thought of as her life, the things that made it a life and not an existence, like Gary's. She liked this total stranger, but why drag him into their quarrel? Why let him know his getaway would be another bargaining chip in her war with Gary?

"We're going to visit someone," Rae finally decided to say, trying to make it sound lighter and carefree, but Nick must have noticed she was nervous because he fell silent again beside her. Up ahead, Rae caught sight of the tiny diner, a square white building with a tall sign reading, "FOOD" outlined in unlit neon tubing. She pulled in the gravel parking lot and drove up under the front window of the diner where the specials were advertised in faded photographs taken
long before bacon and eggs were considered health hazards.

As she got out, Nick hesitated, half in and half out of the car.

"Um, is this okay?" he asked. "I know it looks bad, but the food is really okay. I mean, I've only been here once; most people don't know it's back here--" he hesitated again, this time out of the car and on the way to the door where Rae waited for him.

"It's fine," she smiled. "Let's go inside."

The diner was damp and empty, not one table occupied. They stood for a moment while Rae tried to decide if they should follow the sign that said "Please wait to be seated."

"Come on." She waved Nick over to a booth and sat down, brushing off the seat first. Crumbs from unseen previous visitors were scattered over the black tile floor. Music played on the speaker overhead, low and cheerful. The walls were bare and a dull yellow color, the windows uncurtained, the tables armed only with a metal napkin dispenser, salt and pepper, all three of which were speckled with greasy fingerprints. Nick looked around them uncomfortably.

"Relax," Rae said, starting to touch his hand, then changing her mind. Might make him more nervous, she thought. He was already so fidgety, touching the napkins, the window sill, his hair, repeatedly scratching and glancing at his shoulder. He reached behind him on the seat and pulled up a
royal blue baseball cap, flapped in the air, waved it open, then jammed it on his head, sliding the visor down low to cover most of his forehead. "You still got eyes under there?" Rae laughed and after a second Nick did too.

"Yeah, just nervous, is all. It's too early, you know?" he said and looked around the diner again. "Usually they got waitresses in this place."

"Any waiters?"

Nick looked at her and grinned. "Which reminds me," he said, "I never asked if you had a boyfriend."

Rae narrowed her eyes. "Why should you?"

"Just trying to make conversation. Gotta have something to say while we wait." He smiled again and bounced in his seat.

A tall waitress in a brown polyester jumper came around the counter with a limp pad in one hand and a torn dishrag in the other. She swiped at the table lightly, barely making the rag connect with the table, then pulled silverware wrapped in paper napkins from her pocket and dropped them in the middle of the table.

"You gonna want place mats?" she asked. "Cause they're back in the kitchen in an unopened box. I'll hafta open it." She waited patiently while they considered it, then smiled when they said no. "Okay then. Ready to order?"

"We don't have menus," Rae said.
The waitress scowled. "You seat yourselves, but you don't take menus," she muttered and walked away, bending behind the counter and coming back with two greasy menus. "I'll be back," she said and disappeared into the kitchen.

Rae opened her menu, feeling the grease, slick under her fingers. She looked up at Nick, concentrating hard on his selection. She searched for his eyes under the cap, deep in shadows and spaced too far apart. His eyelashes were so pale it seemed he didn't have any at all. She wanted to see if she could see his nervousness there, if he held in his eyes. She knew she must have held her own nervousness there. It was how Gary had managed to figure something was wrong before she had even told him. She wanted to get rid of it, but she wasn't sure how. Running away so that she was free from Gary's trip for a few minutes didn't seem to be enough; buying the hat wasn't enough. Maybe it was something else she needed. But what? And how much longer before she had to figure it out, because as soon as Gary caught up with them, she might as well forget it. The whole thing would be gone. She could sense the morning getting away from her, slick in her fingers like the grease on the menu.

Nick laughed and Rae jumped in surprise. "Sorry," he said.

"It's just so quiet in here," she said softly.

"We could start talking again."
"How old are you?"

"I don't know-" Nick looked confused. "Weird question. I'll be 19 in two weeks. Why?" A sly smile spread over his face and Rae could feel it contagious. "You wondering if I'm old enough for you?"

"Don't worry, you're not," she laughed.

"How old are you?"

"Oh, now women don't like that question. Don't you know that?"

"I guess not."

"I'm 30 in a month."

Nick pushed the cap off his forehead. "Holy--don't think I've ever been out with a girl that old."

"I'm hardly old and you're hardly 'out' with me."

"I forgot. You rescued me," he grinned again and opened his menu. "Think I'll go for the ham and eggs. Who knows if I'll like them in my new life. Don't know if they tell you all over again what you like and don't like," he muttered.

Rae would have asked what he meant but the waitress came back and took their orders, then left quickly, as if she had more important things to do in the back.

"So you don't have a boyfriend and you're on vacation with your brother. How did that happen?"

Rae frowned, tired of his persistent question, but deciding to answer if only to shut him up. He might as well
know. "My boyfriend drained my bank account and when I told Gary, he decided we should find him."

"How?"

Rae nodded her head. "That's exactly what I said, but not till it was too late and we were already on the road. He had dragged me off while I still believed I was a helpless fool."

"Helpless--"

"He always tells me I can't handle anything right; my life is one big board game and he keeps track of the pieces."

Nick nodded. "So this time you believe him."

Rae shrugged. "All the stuff I do, the stupid schemes I get mixed up in, they've been no big deal. Just something to do, some excitement so I don't get bored, at least that's how it was in my humble opinion. But this one--"

"It's serious," Nick said.

"According to Gary it is; I can see he's really bothered this time." She sighed. "And I guess I can admit my judgement was pretty far off. I suppose I could get myself in real trouble at the rate I'm going. Maybe I was just lucky before."

Nick frowned. "He's got a tight hold on you, you know that? Making you believe what he wants you to believe, do what he wants you to do."

"But I never felt that way before. See I would just go about doing whatever seemed interesting or fun and if it got too messy, I just let Gary fix it. I figured he liked doing
that, taking care of me. He really believes it's his duty as my brother." She leaned across the table, close to Nick's face. "This time though, I mean, it's not the money. Do you know, I loved Lawrence? I mean, how did I screw up so bad that I loved this guy, a con artist?" She stared into his face for a minute, certain he'd give an answer. But he didn't and she flopped back in the booth. "So, here I am with Gary, and we're headed for Lawrence's mother's, and he's driving me crazy, but tell me, is he wrong about me?"

The waitress bumped out of the kitchen with a tray of hot plates. She set the plates carefully in front of them, emphasizing the care she took, making sure she'd get a good tip. Rae started to eat, feeling a little embarrassed for telling Nick so much, but Nick only stared mournfully into his swimming yellow eggs.

"You play golf?" he asked, suddenly brightening. "I got a great swing. Wanna see?" He stood in the empty diner, grasped an imaginary club and swung with all his might, sending the ball into the distance beyond the tables and counter and kitchen and garbage dumpster in back. "Great swing," he said happily.

"Yes," Rae nodded.

"Had plenty of time to practice."

"Really?" The tone of the conversation had taken on a foreign note, as if Nick had come over to her from another
table to introduce himself to a pretty girl.

"You ever play a cardboard piano? he asked, lining up his next drove. "I learned golf like that, like learning the piano on a cardboard keyboard."

"Why would you use a cardboard keyboard?" she asked, frustrated with him now. What was all this suppose to be?

"Oh," Nick said, sitting down and shoving a forkful of eggs into his mouth. "Had to," he swallowed. "Learned in prison."

Rae choked on her roll loudly enough to catch the attention of all the invisible customers she imagined eating silently with them. "Is that a joke?"

"Nope," Nick said. "I was in jail. Selling drugs. And I really hate to tell you that, seeing how you're so mixed up."

"I see," she said, but she didn't see at all. The boy in front of her was sweet and young, with a chubby face, crooked thin lips and deep blue eyes nearly the same color as the baseball cap on his head. This was not a person she could imagine fending for himself in a prison full of criminals.

"And those men at the store?"

"No, they're not here to take me back to jail; I'm done there. So I don't think you'll get in trouble for taking off with me."

"But you can't be sure of that, can you?" Rae asked miserably. I've done it again, she thought.
"I'm not under arrest; it's protective custody. I'm a witness. Hey, all they'll want, if they want anything, is to make sure you keep your mouth shut about me. This isn't like—Look, I'm headed somewhere where they'll tell me who I am and what I do, but none of that will change anything about me. See that's my point, Rae," he said eagerly, and now he was the one leaning over the table. "I'll be a certain person in their eyes, but in mine, I'll still be Nick. They don't have a hold on me unless I let them."

"Nobody has a hold on me. Not if I decide I want it this way," Rae said.

"Have you decided that? Or is Gary pushing you?"
Rae shrugged. "Good question," she muttered.

"And why would you want it this way? Letting him take care of your business." Nick shook his head and took another forkful of eggs. Rae watched him silently for several minutes.

"If I just let things quiet down for awhile," she said, "you know, play the cowed sister, be average, he'll let up and I can be myself again. He'll forget, like he always does."

"Yeah, sure," Nick said shaking his head again.

Suddenly the door of the diner was thrown open and the glass rattled on its frame. Rae could feel the shock wave settle over them like a vibration, and then the place was alive with tall, bulky men in dark suits and slicked hair. She couldn't see any of their faces because they moved so quick
with their eyes pointed in one direction: Nick. He squealed, a humiliating sound to hear, and climbed up the back of the booth trying to throw himself into the one behind him, or maybe even out the window, Rae wasn't sure. But a man was waiting for exactly that move and he reached out to pluck Nick up in one swift motion, hauling him out of the booth. The diner was still then when the door opened again, this time with much less noise. Gary stood in the doorway, looking ridiculously like the ringleader of the whole event. Before he could say anything, the waitress poked her head out of the kitchen.

"Seat yourselves," she said. "And keep it down out here. We're busy, important stuff, so shut the hell up." She disappeared again and Gary stared, wide eyed. He didn't seem to understand what was happening, but he stood there, waiting for someone to give him directions. Then he caught sight of Rae and suddenly he was alive, yet slightly bewildered.

"Well, we found you," he said. "These guys have business with the kid."

"I know," Rae said.

"You and your brother are free to go, Miss," the man in the grey suit said.

"I took care of everything, Rae."

"I figured you could," she mumbled.

"Sure he took care of everything, Rae." Nick sneered,
twisting to face her, and causing considerable pain to himself as he did so. "You know what I told you; there wouldn't have been any trouble. Don't let him give you that shit again."

"That's enough son," the man holding Nick said and jerked him back into place.

"Let's get him out of here," the man in grey said and the others nodded in unison.

Nick twisted once more to see Rae and the panic that gripped him gripped her too. She could feel it in her stomach like she could feel the urge to run, but they both knew it would do him no good. The men hustled him out the door and into the long black sedan with little trouble, although Nick squirmed and wriggled as much as he could to get out of their hold.

"Let's go, Rae," Gary said softly, subdued by the scene. He wasn't even looking at her as he said it.

"Just a minute," Rae said. This got Gary's attention. He turned to her and frowned. "I'd like to finish my lunch. Maybe you should order something too."

"I'm not hungry."

"You were hungry before," she said and sat down, picking up her roll and taking a bite. "I'm going to finish this before we leave." Gary sighed and sat down opposite her, pushing Nick's food away.

"That kid was a fugitive, you know."
"Yeah but he wasn't under arrest," Rae said.

"Still, I had to do some talking to get us out this. They wanted to question us, see what we knew about him." Gary settled in his seat and crossed his arms. "I just told them how you have a habit of taking up with strangers; it doesn't mean anything. It's just your way."

"I suppose," Rae nodded.

"And you just seem to take up with more trouble makers than anything else."

"Bad luck huh?" she smiled.

"I don't know that I'd call it that," Gary frowned. "Can we go now?"

Rae shrugged and put down her fork while Gary pulled money from his wallet and dropped it on the check. "You really think I'm pathetic Gary?" she asked suddenly and Gary stopped in mid motion to look at her.

"No, Rae," he said softly. "It's just--I wish you weren't so--"

"Like I am."

"I wish you were more like me. Content with how things are."

"Average," she said, glancing down at the table top.

"Well, whatever you call it, I don't jump in cars with fugitives. If you were more like that--"

"Like you."
"Right," he nodded.

Rae narrowed her eyes as it became clearer to her. "I wouldn't be me."

Gary said nothing but stood and walked to the door. Rae followed slowly. She stopped and waited for him to open the door for her, but he was staring out into the parking, the trees beyond, wet and glistening. "I don't like worrying about you Rae," he said so she could barely hear. "If you weren't, well, like this, I wouldn't have to. That's all there is. We've got no other family..." his voice trailed off and Rae didn't move, or breathe for several seconds till he finally pushed the glass door open with the palm of his hand and held it there for her. Rae stepped past him and walked to the car.
A COOL DETACHED BODY

Jennie already knows Lucky is not her brother when she goes to Midway Airport to meet him. Christmas break is finally beginning for him; hers started the week after Thanksgiving since DePaul runs on the quarter system. Jennie has been waiting to see him since then, since she found out. She is anxious to see what it will be like between them, not that things are different. Although, she knows it's not really that big a deal that Lucky is not her brother; they still grew up together. But still, now that he is her cousin, how will it be different?

Jennie walks through the airport quickly, her legs stretching to their full length, as she usually walks when in the city. She is irritated to be late and knows they will most likely miss their train. So she dodges past people, not excusing herself as she brushes by, to get to the gate where he is waiting for her. It is the Northwest terminal, located all the way at the end of the airport where the chairs are still molded plastic and the paint is not new and there are no news stands.

Jennie strides with hard footsteps, feeling the tiled floor through her moccasins because they are thin and full of holes. Going so fast, it gets out some of the anger she still
feels when she thinks about how her parents have lied to her and her sister all their lives. Why not just tell them the truth? Why not just say Aunt Janet is Lucky's mother? Why keep that a secret? She thinks she can guess though. Aunt Janet is not a favorite relative in the family. She has not had a real, steady job since she got out of high school, preferring to travel and make only enough money to get by. She lives with whichever of her friends happen to have a place at the time. She wouldn't have been a suitable mother in her parent's eyes, and Jennie can imagine this is why Lucky came to them. And maybe her parents didn't want her and Judith to know that the unsuitable Aunt Janet was the mother because they needed to protect her and Judith from this Aunt. Yes, Jennie could see it all in her mind, how her parents figured things and how they set about keeping their secrets. But what does that say about Lucky then? They didn't just keep a secret, they kept him a secret. That is hard to forgive.

She lets her mind wander on these things so that she misses the gate and has to turn back. She curses out loud and bumps into a man standing behind her. He is surprised to hear her cursing and she rolls her eyes with a small grin and walks past him.

Then she sees him. He is standing against the wall and lighting a cigarette with a red lighter. When he sees her, he grabs a small suitcase at his feet and comes to meet her, the
cigarette held between his lips. Most of his lower face is covered with a dark brown beard, the dark whiskers climbing over his cheeks, and as he walks, suddenly, she realizes with curiosity, she doesn't recognize him. It's like she is being approached by a stranger and she takes a step back as he gets closer and then she stops, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Hey, Jennie," Lucky says, grinning, and takes the cigarette from his lips, the smoke curling and twining around his head. He ignores the No Smoking sign on the wall and she doesn't remember him starting to smoke.

"Hello, Lucky," she says politely, as if talking to a stranger she has just met, and when she realizes that's how she sounds she adds with a smile, "How was your trip?"

"Fine," he shrugs.

"You look different," she says and he does because she remembers the nonsmoker who wore khakis and polo shirts. But here he is, tired and rumpled in dirty jeans and a stained, grey t-shirt under a dark blue jacket. She looks carefully through the smoke and sees his eyes are red and the thin, pale skin underneath stained a purply blue; he hasn't slept all night. This is more like the Lucky she knows, an insomniac. She smiles again and slaps him lightly on the arm as he takes a drag of his cigarette. "When did you start that?" she asks.

"I don't know. How long has it been since you last saw
"You didn't come home for Midterm, or Thanksgiving," Jennie says, watching the cigarette lose its glow and the smoke disappear in a puff. She looks back up at Lucky who is starting to look more and more familiar to her. She's glad for that and even a little amused to see what her reaction was to him in the first place. It's like she's meeting him all over again for the first time in her life. Maybe that's even appropriate now, she thinks, since he has a whole new set of genes and characteristics since he is Aunt Janet's and not her mother's. Jennie knows now why he was always so different from her and her sister Judith. He never liked playing their games, or going swimming in the summer. But now she can see it is because he is like Janet and Janet never liked those things either.

"We better get going, huh?" Lucky says.

"Yeah, I guess. We'll probably miss our train as it is." She starts walking and doesn't notice Lucky is not behind her.

"Hey! You could help here, Jennie," he calls and she stops to see her bearded cousin walking with the suitcase in one hand and a knapsack falling over the bend in his arm. She smiles and goes to meet him, taking the suitcase. "As long as we're late anyway, do we have to run? Couldn't we just be content to miss the train?" Lucky asks.
"Why?" Jennie says. "Why not hurry and try to catch it anyway?" She shakes her head. "You're just like Janet that way. She's always late."

"I think you're the reason we're late," Lucky says. "And what's that last part mean?"

"Nothing," Jennie says, surprised that she had said it at all. She doesn't really want Lucky to feel uncomfortable that he's the son of the unsuitable Aunt Janet. "I suppose we can be late though." She checks her watch and frowns lightly. "Maybe we can get something to eat. I don't really feel like getting home in a hurry."

"Why not?" Lucky asks as they start to walk again.

"I just don't like being there these days," she says with a shrug. "They act all guilty, but I know they really wouldn't have ever told me. And they haven't told Judith."

"Let's go in here."

"Oh yeah, the letter. How did you find it again? You were going through Mom's drawers?"

"I was only looking for chapstick," she says and blushes lightly. "I wasn't looking for something like that letter. I
just found it, stuffed under the liner. We haven't heard from Janet in so long, like ten years maybe—"

"That's when she told me," Lucky says and pulls a napkin dispenser to him. "She told me when I was fourteen. That was weird, but I could always tell something was up with me, you know, how Mom and Dad always got nervous around me when people wanted to know why I didn't look like you two. Or when they would ask why my name was so weird."

Jennie looks at him, seeing how he says all of this with only the slightest bit of discomfort, how he is not ashamed to say Janet is his mother.

"This doesn't matter to you then?" Jennie asks him.

He shakes his head and pushes the napkin dispenser away. "I don't know. Sometimes I wonder why she gave me away, you know, why she was so convinced she couldn't do it, take care of me. I wonder how the family coerced her into believing that. But then, why bother with that? It's not like they made her give me up to strangers. I still got to know her some."

"Is it weird then, that you're my cousin?" Lucky narrows his eyes as he looks at her. Jennie suddenly feels like she's said something wrong.

"I'm your brother," he says.

"Biologically--""

"I'm your brother," he says firmly. "Nothing has changed."
"I don't know. I mean, it's not like you're not related; it's just that you're related in a different way. Cousins and brothers are two separate things, Lucky."

"I am not two separate things. I am one thing." He waves at the waitress who finally comes to take their order.

"Why do you think I came here to meet you, Lucky?" she asks him. He pulls a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and lights one. "Do you have to light another one?"

"Sorry," he says. "Do you want me to put it out?"

"No," she mutters. Lucky takes a long drag of his cigarette then flattens it in a glass ashtray.

"Alright. Why did you come to meet me?"

Jennie wiggles on her stool to get comfortable. "I don't exactly know why, or not all of why. But part of me wanted to see what you looked like now."

"Now?"

"Yeah. Now, as my cousin, are you any different than you were as my brother."

Lucky sighs and plays with the cigarette butt. "This is stupid, Jen. I'm not different."

"Well I know. I mean, yeah, it's not that different. But, doesn't a little part of you feel like you understand yourself in a new way now? All the weird things about you are explained. Like, why you hate swimming."

"Why do I hate swimming?" he says without looking up from
the cigarette butt.

"Because, obviously it's inherited. Janet can't stand water."

"Janet just didn't like getting her hair wet. And I almost drowned when I was three, which you don't remember because you were only one."

"Oh," Jennie says softly. She can hear the irritation in his voice and she's sorry for saying anything at all, or at least for saying it the way she did. "I didn't mean to insult you or anything," she says, sliding the ashtray away from him. "Really. I was only trying to explain what I've been thinking about lately, how things are, I don't know--"

"The same," he says and lights another cigarette.

"Doesn't it make you feel any different to know we're cousins? Don't you feel different?"

"Different how?"

"Like, I don't know, like we're almost strangers in a way. I mean, I know you as my brother, but now you're my cousin and I feel like getting to know you that way, as a cousin."

The waitress comes and places two cokes and an order of fries between them. The fries are practically cold but Lucky continues to eat them while Jennie drops the half of the one she was eating.

"I would prefer it if you didn't think of me as a
cousin," Lucky says and wipes his hands on his pants.

"How 'bout a cousin and a brother?"

"No, not that either."

"That's too bad," Jennie says and sips her coke.

"You know Jen, you're getting a weird attitude about this. Like, secretly you're pleased with the whole revelation."

Jennie bites at her straw as she sips and shakes her head from side to side. "I know. The whole dynamic of the thing is so odd. I can't help it."

"Could you keep in mind I'm not a dynamic?"

"Yeah, sorry," she says and finishes her coke.

* * * * *

Lucky remembers how angry Jennie was at their parents when she first called him a month ago. He expected that would be her reaction to the thing, her and Judith forming a joint committee to punish their parents for lying to them. But once she got over that, and he can tell she mostly has, he figured it would all go away, the family strife routine, and things would go back to normal. Normal is not the way things seem now. For one, all Jennie seems to want to talk about is the adoption and his real mother. For another thing, she keeps harping on his smoking when usually she didn't give a damn what he was up to. They weren't so close that she paid that
much attention to him. Especially since he had gone to
college. They didn't speak often, mostly on long nights when
he couldn't sleep with his insomnia and none of his friends
were awake and he knew she was because she was an insomniac
too. Hers had started in high school, the year he was a senior
and she a sophomore. They passed a lot of late nights watching
movies while their parents and Judith slept away, soundly,
easily. Maybe if he reminded her of things like that she'd
quit insisting his every action was like Janet's.

And then there's Janet, he thought while stuffing a fry
in his mouth; they were cold but he didn't care as long as he
got something in his stomach. It had been rumbling since he
got to the airport that morning at. Oh yeah, Janet, he
thought. She had told him all about it when he was fourteen.
All about how she got pregnant by some guy she didn't really
know and didn't want to know and she realized it would be
better for him if he could grow up with a mother and father
who wanted him more than she did.

"Try to understand this, Lucky," she had said, pushing
her auburn hair over her shoulder. She had stood in the
backyard with him for more than twenty minutes as he cooked
hamburgers on the grill. The smoke ran up into her face and
his, nearly choking him but he tried to ignore it and listen
to her, since, afterall, she was his mother and he ought to
respect her enough to listen. "I wasn't about to change my
life for a kid and that's just not fair. I knew it wasn't fair, but I didn't care back then. I don't know if I do now, either," she muttered and poked at the burgers with a long fork. "You're burning them," she had said and Lucky grabbed the plate and shovelled the burgers off the grill onto it. Janet watched and he wondered what was going through her mind; how much he looked like her, or the father she couldn't remember? How much she missed by not raising her son? "No, Lucky, it's not that I don't care about you, it's that I didn't care about that thing growing in my stomach back then. That thing and you are two separate things now. One is a crampy, nauseating, weight gaining thing, and the other is you, a fourteen year old kid who's pretty cool from what I can tell." She broke off a small piece of meat from one of the burgers with her long fingers, tipped with bright magenta nails. His mother, the one who raised him, never wore nail polish. And she didn't break pieces of meat off the burgers while they were on the plate. "So how do you feel, Lucky?"

How did he feel? How did he feel now and how did he feel then? Then, in the backyard with this stranger Janet who he was a part of, and now in this small cold sandwich shop with his sister who he is also a part of, but who wants to separate him into two things again, like Janet had already done.

"I've got another suitcase," Lucky says and drops the fry in his hand. "We better go get it."
"Another one? You pack too much."

"So?" Lucky says. They pay the bill and leave for the baggage claim area where the carousel is still running with the flight's luggage. People crowd around them, waiting for another flight's luggage, probably. Lucky doesn't see his bag anywhere and goes over to the woman checking baggage tickets.

"I don't see my suitcase," he tells her and she stares at him as if to say, so what? "Is there any more luggage coming for flight 204?"

"No, sir," she says in a thick accent. "That all came off ten minutes ago."

"Um, well, was any of it left lying around?"

"Yes sir. One soft sided suitcase."

"That's mine then," Lucky says with relief. "Where can I pick it up?"

The woman rolls her eyes. "I'll have to go get it for you. We put it in the office," she says and walks off while she is still speaking to him. Lucky goes back to Jennie, who is sitting on the floor.

"They have my suitcase in the office. That woman went to get it," he says and she nods. Lucky can smell heavy perfume in the air and he sniffs at it, trying to locate the source of the scent.

"Forget it," Jennie tells him. "Women don't like men who smell like smoke."
"Men don't like women who smell," Lucky says and points to her old jacket, smiling. The traded insults break the tension and Lucky relaxes because this is how it always is, little fights that get resolved easily or are simply forgotten.

A man in a dark suit wanders past, clutching a brief case and he is smoking. Lucky inhales deeply to catch the smoke, wishing for a cigarette of his own, then sits down on his suitcase. It's hard, not soft sided like the one they are waiting for. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out the cigarettes. As he lights one, Jennie watches.

"You never smoked before," she says.

"Could you drop it already?" he says, putting his arm around the combination trashcan/ashtray. It's silver and they can both see his reflection in it, distorted and exaggerated.
"You never gave a damn before."

"Geez, what's with you?" Jennie asks and when Lucky doesn't reply she sighs loudly, exasperated, just like his mother does. He and his father have laughed at how all the women in the family do that when they're mad.

"You sound like Mom," Lucky tells Jennie, grinning.

"Whose mom?" Jennie says and Lucky pauses with the cigarette at his lips. They are slightly parted to take the filter but he can't quite get it there now.

"What?" he whispers.
"It's a joke," Jennies says waving the smoke out of her face.

"It's a bad joke," Lucky mutters.

"I know," Jennie says and takes a few steps away. "I didn't mean it. Really." He can tell she is sorry, that she didn't mean it like that, but he's shaken by it, by her odd refusal to let the whole thing go. He didn't know how seriously to take any of this when she first started with it in the sandwich shop, and he still isn't sure how deep it goes with her, but he knows he has to get her to forget it if things are going to go back to normal.

Lucky gets to his feet and Jennie does too, walking off a bit. She stands at the entrance to the next carousel. Several minutes go by before she turns to see if he is still there.

A loud buzzer goes off over the carousel. Lucky sees it and looks back to see if the woman is coming yet with his suitcase. He waits with one arm crossed over his chest and the other bent up to his face so his hand can hold the cigarette near his mouth. Jennie is waiting with his other things at the back of the crowd. The woman finally comes with his suitcase, wheeling it behind her. Lucky shows her his baggage claim ticket, thanks her and goes back to Jennie.

"Carry this one will ya?" he says, giving her the small suitcase again. She takes it without looking at him and starts to walk away. "Jen, wait up," he says when another man
checking tickets stops him.

"Just a minute; let me see your ticket," he says and a steely hand clamps down over Lucky's arm. Lucky reaches a hand into his front pocket and produces the ragged ticket again and the man smiles, satisfied. "Alright then." He waves him on. Jennie is already far ahead of him and Lucky runs to catch up.

"Jennie," he shouts and she turns, startled.

"I thought you were behind me," she says when he gets to her.

"My ticket," he says.

Jennie frowns. "They hardly ever do that at O'Hare."

Lucky smiles. He is aware of her preference for O'Hare with the crowds and moving sidewalks. She has always liked larger spaces full of noisy, irritated strangers trying to get by each other without using such niceties as "excuse me."

"Let's get out of here," Lucky says and they head for the L platform. He can tell Jennie is starting to feel impatient about missing their train again because she doesn't stop to help when he drops his bag. He doesn't try to catch up again and they miss the L. "We can wait for the next one," Lucky tells her.

"No kidding," Jennie mutters and rummages in her purse for several minutes before producing a piece of gum wrapped in silver paper, which she unwraps and chews quietly. She doesn't
offer Lucky a piece and he knows it's because she remembers he doesn't think it's good for his teeth. He's always had more cavities than she and Judith and he never got braces because their parents didn't think he was responsible enough to care for them and ought to wait a couple more years. He used to wonder why they didn't think he was responsible; when Janet told him who she was, who he was, he thought maybe that was why he wasn't responsible. He thinks Jennie should have guessed, with things like his teeth for example, that he was adopted, since they are straighter than hers and Judith's and he can get away without having had braces. He also thinks she should have wondered about his name. She and Judith were given simple names and Lucky was named Lucky. Whenever asked, by anyone, their parents would only shrug and smile, as if to say, "There is no answer we can give, so don't ask." He knows, though, from his conversation with Janet, that she had asked his parents to let her name him. She came up with Lucky because she was so lucky to have someone to take care of him so she didn't have to pass him off to some stranger. Jennie doesn't know any of this and he had never thought he'd tell her any of it. What did she need to know for? It was his business with Janet. But now he wonders if maybe he ought to tell her some of it. Maybe it'll make her realize it's not a joke, or a curiosity.

"Are you staying at home?" Lucky asks Jennie quietly, not
looking at any of the other faces on the platform. He has never been comfortable in the city, while Jennie lives in the dorms downtown.

"No. I'm staying at school, to work over break; I was just coming home for dinner."

"Are you so mad at them you can't go home?" Lucky asks.

"No," she says in surprise. "I'm not really mad anymore; I just can't stand their guilt routine. They keep apologizing and then they get riled up and start defending themselves and Janet. I'm tired of it, that's all."

The train rumbles at the other end of the platform and they wait silently for it to come. When they get on, Lucky notices the brand new interior on this line. The seats and the walls used to be green and the walls had a yellow cast to them, but now everything is clean and spotless and the seats are a dark mauve color. Lucky smiles at the changes. He hasn't been on the L for a long time. Jennie doesn't smile.

They sit side by side on the shiny mauve seats and wait for their stop. Lucky tries not to look around at the other passengers and can feel himself being obvious about it. Jennie sits and stares off into the space. He leans back against the seat and tries to close his eyes for a minute; he didn't sleep well last night.

"Do you have a dollar?" Jennie asks suddenly. Lucky puts his hands into his pockets and pulls out a twenty.
"How's this?"

"No, no," Jennie shakes her head. "It has to be a dollar, maybe a five but--"

"What for?"

"The guy who sells Streetwise," she tells him and Lucky shakes his head.

"What's that?"

"A newspaper," she says and digs through her purse. "I always get it at this stop." She frowns as she digs. The conductor calls out the stops over a crackling intercom and Lucky can't make out what he said.

"When's our stop?" he asks.

"You don't ride enough, Lucky," she tells him and shuts her purse. "In another minute."

They sit silent again and listen as the intercom tells them to keep their hands and feet out of the aisle. Jennie starts pulling at his bag, which he has dropped on the floor, when a crowd of people suddenly board at the stop before theirs.

"Move your stuff," Jennie says impatiently. Lucky sighs and pulls his bag under the seat. "You don't need all this. You pack too much."

"Enough already," Lucky says and notices people are watching them.

Jennie makes a face and slumps in her seat.
The train lurches to a stop and the standing riders slide smoothly with the movement. Jennie stands and reaches for one of Lucky's suitcases. Lucky stands beside her and follows her to the doors where they wait behind several others getting off. The doors whoosh open and the riders almost push each other to get out onto the platform. Lucky doesn't know where he is, even though he has heard the name of the stop—Quincy and Adams, Union Station. They will walk to the station and take Metra to the suburbs. Lucky reaches up to his shoulder to readjust his bag, but it isn't there. Jennie is about to get off and she doesn't notice him glancing frantically around the car.

"Jennie—" Lucky shouts to her as she takes a step down. "My bag—do you have my bag?" he shouts and she looks at him in confusion. He only sees the suitcase in her hand and pushes his way back into the car where he sees his bag under the seat. He manages to get to it and then panics that he might not make it out on time. Through the window he can see Jennie is talking to a thin black man in faded pants that are too short and a zippered sweatshirt with sleeves full of holes. He doesn't like how close the man is standing to her and Lucky shoves his way back out of the car.

"You told me it was your birthday yesterday," Jennie is saying with a laugh when Lucky gets to her.

"It's my birthday everyday," Bill says. "Would you like
your copy of Streetwise? Only a dollar today, miss. Proceeds help the homeless."

"What's going on?" Lucky asks.

"I'm sorry I don't have a dollar today. I used all my money for the L," Jennie apologizes and smiles at the man who is studying Lucky.

"It's only a dollar," he tells Jennie again, but he is looking at Lucky.

"We gotta go," Lucky says and takes Jennie's arm. Jennie resists lightly and the man becomes alarmed.

"Just a minute there---" he says and puts his hand out to stop Lucky. "Where are you taking her?"

Lucky is startled for a moment, then he smiles. "We're just walking to Union Station."

"I don't have any money today," Jennie says again to the man.

"How you gonna get a train ticket?" the man asks suspiciously.

"I've got a pass for the train," Jennie says.

"Who is this?" the man asks. "Your husband?"

Lucky laughs in a short, loud burst and the man laughs too. This is completely ridiculous, Lucky wants to say to both of them. He wants to walk off and forget this little man, but he can see Jennie's desire to do something to help. She has always been like that, he knows.
"We're gonna miss the train, remember? You were bugging me about it before," Lucky says, because although he understands her desire to help this man, he still feels uncomfortable and just wants to get home.

"Can you just wait a minute," Jennie snaps at him. "Let me check my wallet once more," she tells the man. "Sometimes I have a dollar tucked away."

"Forget it, Jen," Lucky whispers but the man hears him. "Who is this?" he asks her.

"Nevermind who I am," Lucky snaps.

"Would you cut it out? He's my cousin," Jennie says to the man.

Lucky feels himself calming, because he is starting to understands something now. His whole life, as she sees it, is coming clearer to him. He feels himself pulling away from the inside, the way people who have those near death experiences talk about doing, so that they sit on the ceiling and watch themselves below and they are stunned to see themselves and can't take their eyes away. It can't really be them down there and it isn't, while at the same time it is. That's how Lucky feels, watching himself and Jennie and this man who is selling newspapers. He can see himself there, and he can see what Jennie sees, a body with a hairy face, and he can feel the cigarette breath coming from the body's open mouth and he can feel the rumpled clothes against his skin but he can not make
that person be himself for a second and he can tell Jennie
can't either anymore because she has decided to separate him
into the Lucky she knew and the Lucky she thinks he is now,
and she can't see that they are the same no matter how she
separates him. He wants to slip back into himself and feel
normal again, but he knows if he does that, he won't be able
to know Jennie like he does now. This is serious and he will
hold it against her till she can see that and feel it too. He
knows now that this isn't going to be fixed easily for him,
even if he tries very hard. He can see the rest of their lives
and all the little things that will build into big resentments
the way things in families do.

Jennie clears her throat and Lucky snaps back as if he
had his eyes closed and now they are open.

"I found a dollar," Jennie says and pulls a crumpled bill
from her coat pocket. She takes a paper from the man who is
watching them suspiciously, but he takes the dollar and puts
it in his pack. And then it's as if the sale has pacified or
reassured him, and he no longer wonders who Lucky is. The man
smiles and thanks them. Then he goes back to walking the
platform, calling for customers.

"I always get the paper here," Jennie shrugs. "It's not a
big deal but--" she stops. "What?"

"Nothing," he says and shakes his head. She hasn't even
realized what she said and how it hurts. She didn't mean to
hurt him, but still she has and can't see that. "Go back to school. You didn't want to come home tonight anyway," Lucky says and he can't look at her anymore.

"Why? Are you mad at me?"

"Yeah," he says and she frowns.

"Oh God, cause I said you're my cousin? Look, I didn't mean it that way. I was just bugged 'cause you kept rushing me."

"So you thought you'd shut me up?"

"For Godsakes, if this is what you're gonna be like now maybe I will go back to school. Union Station's that way," she says, pointing it out to him. She watches him walk away and he looks like every person on the street today. Lucky knows this because he can see outside of himself and watch them separate and he can watch his body light a cigarette and walk fast so it won't miss the train. He can see outside of himself, cool and detached.
ERIC'S MONSTER

Eric died following the winter of the great blizzard. He saw it come; we both did, predicting it all week long with the lone meteorologist in town who dared to suggest such a blizzard, one that would shut down everything. No one listened till it came, and, by then, Eric and I were holed up in the tight house we lived in then, set deep in a tiny St. Paul neighborhood where the houses had been built in the suburban boom of the fifties. It was like living in a time warp there, nothing having changed for the last three decades, nothing to suggest we weren't living with Eisenhower and the Cold War. But we liked it; it was comfortable for two people.

When the snow came, it was thirty inches in less than 24 hours. The city closed for the entire weekend. We were happy, knowing we had been prepared and it was no great loss. We played in the snow like two kids and took a short walk, which lasted forever in the snow and blowing winds. The sidewalks were hidden, the road barely visible, and we stopped for over an hour to help a woman shovel her truck out of her driveway.

The cancer wasn't too serious to us then, clouded by our certainty that medicine really could fight anything, muffled under a layer of thick white disbelief. Eric and I ran through the snow on those days because he still had the energy and
because we had every right to go on being just as we were when we first married, young and alive and stupid.

By Easter, crumpled remains of scarred black snow still waited to melt on the crushed brown grass stretching out beneath it. The funeral was on one of those early spring days. It was lucky, someone told me, that he had waited till then, till the ground was easier to dig up. I nodded seriously with the speaker and later threw up in the bathroom attached to my father-in-law's room.

That night he yelled at me, telling me he could smell it and he knew what it was and why did the door to his room get left unlocked? People were probably tramping in and out all day, touching his things, knocking over his books, rumpling his bed. Who the hell were they to get that comfortable in someone else's house? Who were they to come here anyway, at the end of his son's life. They sure as hell hadn't been here when he waited on the rented hospital bed to die. I didn't want to admit it had been me that had been sick and made the stench in his bathroom, but I had to, if I wanted to shut him up. I told him no one had touched his things; they were all quite safe and I had only managed to make it to this door before I felt my empty stomach tossing up what was left of my composure and strength.

He didn't say much then, just patted my shoulder and asked me to please look for some Lysol under the sink and
bring it to him. I did and he shut himself in his room for the rest of the night.

We had sold our house two months before Eric died. We couldn't afford it, not if we wanted to pay off the medical bills. And even though Eric was able to work through January, he eventually had to quit and we needed someone to take care of him during the days when I would be teaching. I had no family to rely on, so that left his father as our only choice. In the last few weeks I took time off from school to be home since the work became too much for his father alone.

The man wasn't exactly old at 66, but his health had been deteriorating and Eric worried that no one would be around to take care of him after he was gone. Eric had been an only child and his old man had done his best to alienate every one of his friends. I was surprised by this concern. We hadn't had much to do with the old man at all in the 10 years I had known Eric. In college he had told me how much he hated the man, how one day, after years of loud shouting matches, they had had such an argument that the old man had shoved him backwards into a wall and proceeded to punch him each time he tried to get up. I hated the old man then too. I could feel the wall behind Eric, as if I had been thrown into it with him. I could feel the ground rush up to catch me hard and hold me fast, daring me to get up, and I could feel the bumps of his rough knuckles in my stomach and on my face. When the fight finally
ended, his father had simply left the room, left Eric bleeding and trying not to cry. After hearing that story, his anger became mine, and it got us through the wedding when the old man came and sat in stony silence beside his wife, who died only a year later. We made the final break with him then. It wasn't until Eric discovered the cancer and our insurance and money started to dry up that we went back to him.

Moving into his home, we took the master bedroom, instead of Eric's old room. He had said he couldn't make love to me in his old bed but I knew he wouldn't have been strong enough to make love whether we had been in his bed or out in the middle of a field. I could have cared less though. It was enough just to have him in the bed, lying peacefully next to me, asleep and in no pain. Sleep and nighttime made the daylight hours seem so far away, like none of it was happening at all, there was no cancer. When he could no longer get upstairs and we brought in the rented hospital bed for downstairs, it had devastated me. It was as if he was already gone. I couldn't sleep then; I had started waking every hour or half hour, looking expectantly to his side of the bed, and finding nothing.

I climbed the stairs to the second floor after the guests left and the old man went to bed. It gave me a creepy feeling to be up here, alone in the thick darkness, like someone would be waiting for me behind those closed doors. At the top of the
stairs I flipped on the light, which lit the long hall but petered out towards the end, and that is where my bedroom was, all alone in the semi-darkness.

Going to bed seemed an odd thing to do now. There was no one to wake up with early in the morning, give medicine to, take to the bathroom, try to feed, check the oxygen machine for. I didn't need to get up early; I didn't even have to go into work for a week or so. I didn't think I'd ever be able to sleep that long, past 6:00 am. Maybe even past 7:00.

The staircase shook then groaned loudly and I cracked an eye open, feeling something coming, but who would be up at this hour of the night? The old man was asleep. I reached for Eric, forgetting for a moment he was gone. The hall shook even harder and I slid both eyes open to see the sun up and shining through the blinds. At the same time the door knob rattled.

"Joani!" His voice traveled through the door. "Joan!" he called again and I pulled myself up, surprised to see I was still in my funeral dress and nylons. I got up and opened the door for him.

"What is it?" I asked, adopting the calm, nearly patronizing tone we had used to address him.

"Damnit my bathroom still stinks!" He pounded his fist into the wall. Suddenly he was that man I had heard so much about. He was angry and his temper showed in his eyes. But as
I looked closer, there was more. Despite his appearance, average height and slender, an aging salesman, I could see the small things he neglected, like the stains on his sweater vest, the hair smoothed down with water and combed with fingers. I could see the dirty dentures he hadn't soaked in weeks and I remembered how hard it had been to take care of them both in those last days. It had been easier in the beginning, when Eric was still strong enough to help a little.

"I said I'd clean it up," I told him, wondering if he'd bothered to use the Lysol. I stood in the doorway, not allowing him to see past me, setting the boundaries now before he could shake them and make it his game in his house.

"When are you going to clean it? Do you think I want to spend the day in a room like that?"

"Of course not." I ignored his anger, all too familiar now. It had been such a surprise to me that one person could be so angry all the time, especially with their child, but I accepted it now, for no reason other than it was simply a fact. I sent him back down the stairs, putting a hand on his back, between his shoulder blades, rubbing lightly, a trick I knew soothed him. Eric and I had made a game of finding new tricks to deal with the man. It was a way to get through the day.

Later that day as the old man was napping, Nancy, our next door neighbor, came over. I heard the knock on the back
door and sighed, praying he wouldn't hear and come see who it was.

"Can I come in, or is the old buzzard guarding the fortress?" Nancy said, laughing even though she had been chased out many times. She peered around the corner when she came in, her short curly hair bouncing as her head snapped back and forth, up and down the hall. She turned to me and smiled, her large round face light and free of the anguish it had borne all week. I could tell she was determined to be the comic relief, but she didn't joke with me. Instead she made a pot of lemon tea and we played cards. We hadn't known each other long. She had watched us from her screened porch, moving in and dragging boxes, bags, and suitcases out of the car. Some of those we stashed in the garage, planning to store them there until I knew what I was going to after Eric was gone.

"Is he sleeping?" she asked and I nodded. "That Mr. Fisher is something, isn't he?" And that was his name, which Eric and I seldom used, preferring the "old man". "How much time in the past ten years do you suppose he's spent in there?" Nancy shook her head and dealt the cards again, but I was tired of playing. We quit and she continued to sit at the kitchen table, toying with a cold cup of tea till I offered to make another pot. She accepted happily and set off on another round of gossip about people I didn't know.

I don't think I would have ever thought of Nancy as a
friend; I had so few and almost preferred it that way, especially lately. You can't stay close to people when you have a dying husband to take care of. It doesn't leave much time for the things people usually do, like going to the movies or even the store. But one day Nancy blew into the kitchen with a grocery bag of vegetables and meat and magazines, things I hadn't been able to run out and get easily. She did that for us weekly then, went shopping and picked up whatever we needed. We never asked her to, and she didn't exactly offer us her services. She simply saw an opportunity to take care of us and she went after it. I think it's her nature to take care of people. She doesn't have a job and her kids are all away at school. But she likes it that way, she told me. It gives her time to do the work she finds most fulfilling. I told Eric that, that we were her work, and he laughed. It was nice to see him smile, a genuine smile and not one brought on because I'd made a lame attempt at a joke to cheer him up.

It was nice to suddenly have a friend again too. Eric and I had already grown into a tiny cocoon together, even before he got sick. We spent most of the day at work and at night were too tired to see anyone but each other. We lost touch with our college friends as they found jobs and moved away, or got married or found new friends. The friends we did stay close to found it irritating that we only thought about each
other, although at the funeral they told me how nice it was that we were always so close, that we had more time together than any couple married 50 years. That I laughed at. For the last ten of those fifty years, I wanted to say, my husband barely resembled the man I had known. He had been replaced by a skeleton who was too sick to be embarrassed that he couldn't go to the bathroom by himself anymore.

Nancy stared wistfully into her empty cup, wiping traces of burgundy lipstick off the rim. "You know Helen and I were good friends." She looked up and smiled at me. "So many people gone. So many." She shook her head sadly.

"I didn't know you and Helen were close," I said, taking our cups away, washing them in the stained white sink. I looked around me in the large yellow kitchen, the torn wallpaper in the corner, the wall behind the stove speckled with grease, the late afternoon sun beating through the window in wide orangy beams. How long did Eric's father live here alone with no one to help him care for the house? He didn't know a thing about housekeeping. When we had moved in, the place was well organized on the surface, everything in its place, but underneath were the layers of dust and mildew and neglect that I had scrubbed and fought with to finally eke out some standard that Helen might have expected in her house.

"You never really got to know her?" Nancy asked.

"No," I said simply, unwilling to dwell on the death that
had occurred in this family. I wasn't going to spend the rest of my life grieving; I could leave that to the old man. His deterioration, had evidently started soon after Helen had died and because we hadn't been around, we hadn't realized. He was being chewed apart by his own guilt. He knew he had destroyed his family by the way he treated his son, not apologizing, not admitting remorse. It had even killed his wife, that Eric wouldn't talk to them anymore. No one at the funeral questioned that the old man grieved for his son, even though he hadn't spoken to him since he was a teenager. But they neglected to ask if they had made up. I wonder if they thought I might tell them the truth, or if together, the old man and I, might just lie and tell them all was swell between father and son, that the illness had brought them together. The truth is, it didn't, not once, not even in the very end. They had argued about it all, the treatments, the doctors, the hospitals, the bills, the idea of going to a hospice. They wouldn't agree on any of it. I didn't try to seal the fissure, I admit. But I didn't care for his opinion any more than Eric did.

A door slammed in the hall and Nancy jumped up, hurriedly made excuses, and fairly ran out the door. I couldn't blame her.

"Is that tea?" he asked me softly from the doorway. I turned and saw him dressed in his pajamas, blue and yellow
striped. Eric and I had bought them one day when Eric had felt well enough to go out. The old man had been happy to receive them. We hadn't expected any reaction from him, but he took them out of the cellophane package and wore them that night. It had astounded both Eric and me.

"I might like some tea," he said and went to the kettle, touched the warm side, and turned the gas on under it.

"You're in your pajamas." I said mildly.

He nodded and brought a cup to the table, sitting across from me. I watched him, fumbling with the string on the tea bag, dropping it into the cup and playing with it, not content to let his hands sit empty. He looked tired. I hadn't paid much attention to him the past few days, to how much sleep he had gotten, to how well he was eating or taking care of himself. It had been enough for me to get myself into bed each night and out each morning.

"My sweater smelled," he said, embarrassed, his face turning a bit pink. Here in the kitchen, stumbling around with a tea bag, wearing pajamas, his voice soft and embarrassed, he was not like the man Eric had always described.

"I can wash that for you," I said and stood, walking around him, coming close to putting a hand on his shoulder to ward off the embarrassment, but deciding instead it might make it worse. Eric had warned me long ago to keep any calm, to never think of it as a time to tackle issues, to offer
emotional statements, even those of love, because they were not welcome. Tender moments were not tender in the old man's eyes. Those sorts of things were better welcomed in the heat of fiery arguments, the wild throwing of insults preferred to the nice sentiments. He said his father could best express himself when he was hating you. It had nothing to do with being macho, Eric told me. It was that he had no other way of dealing with his feelings, they were impossible and frustrating to him; he couldn't get a handle on them and hold them in his hand the way he could his bitterness and ire.

I could never understand any of this when I met Eric. I didn't see how it could be more than an exaggeration of a father he couldn't talk to as a young boy. The classic father and son battle where no one would ever win and neither would ever understand the other till it was too late. And at times like this, when he seemed soft and vulnerable because of his creeping age, I still couldn't understand what had been between them and how they could never see each other, just the hardness and hate that sprang between them like something alive and electric.

I went to his bedroom for the sweater. The room was cleaner than I had last seen it and the sweater laid folded neatly on the middle of the bed, which was smooth and wrinkle free. I took a glance around the rest of the room, glad to see him using his energy constructively. It would be easier to
leave if I at least knew he was taking care of himself. Maybe it wouldn't take him long to get back on his feet and feeling well.

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It rained that night. As I lay in bed, I tried not to see it as a sign, Eric speaking to me from beyond the grave. My parents firmly believed in the heaven our deceased occupied and their ability to look down on us and hear our thoughts. I couldn't decide what I believed, so I settled for the easy, "disregard it" theory. Eric had helped me do that. He didn't care for religion or superstition.

I could hear a faint moaning downstairs and I deliberated between going to wake the old man and staying out of it. He was a grown man after all, and could deal with his nightmares. Besides, would he want his daughter-in-law, little more than a stranger, coming to his aid in the middle of the night? I know I didn't want to and so I stayed there, afraid to go to sleep, afraid to be woken later if the moaning got louder. I listened for it, hoping it might end and his sleep would be quiet for the rest of the night. But it didn't stop. He must have been lying in his bed, rolled into a ball or stretched out, I couldn't decide, lifting his head slightly and opening his mouth, baying almost animallike from some place deep inside of him that couldn't be reached in his conscious hours.

I must have drifted off, because suddenly it was daylight
and I wakened exactly as I had yesterday, the old man pounding on my door, only he wasn't shouting this time. It went like this for the rest of the week and by the weekend I knew I had to get out. What I wanted most was to get out altogether, leave the state even. But I had to finish out the school year. Eric and I had talked about what I would do, but we hadn't come up with any serious plans. Both of us, but mostly me, put a lot of effort into believing that the chemo would work and he would recover. It seemed like making plans for afterwards was only asking for the end to be quick and soon, for it to be death; I couldn't afford for that to happen. So I had pushed it out of my mind and figured I'd deal with it if I had to. And now I did.

I sat at the table, my hands wrapped around a cold glass of juice as I scanned the paper for apartment listings. I didn't know where to start. How far away from here should I go? Eric was worried that no one would be around to notice if anything happened to his old man, so maybe I ought to choose somewhere nearby. And then, did I intend to stay here after the school year ended or should I just go back to Chicago where I used to live?

I heard a scuffling noise in the hall and then the old man came into the kitchen. He was wearing a bathrobe, the belt hanging loose and dragging on the floor behind him.
"Watch your belt," I mumbled and he reached for it, flashing me a dirty look.

"What are you reading?" he said, coming to stand behind me, reading over my shoulder.

"I'm looking for an apartment."

"What for?"

I wasn't sure how to answer him. What could I say? So I can get the hell out of your house? So I can get the hell away from you? Because the thought of staying here any longer scares and infuriates me all at the same time?

"What for?" he demanded once more and I stood up, bumping him out of my way.

"Because Eric's gone and I need to get my own place again. We didn't plan to impose on you for this long."

"How are you going to pay for an apartment?"

"I have a job," I reminded him, exasperated. "I can take care of myself, you know."

"All the bills-"

"I can take care of it," I said again and walked out of the kitchen and back upstairs. I took a shower and let the water run hot, so that my skin turned a raw pink and I was uncomfortably warm even after I stepped out. I opened the window in my room and dressed quickly, then rummaged around in the closet for a suitcase. It was only a half-hearted attempt to pack, since I really didn't have anywhere to go yet, but I
wanted to bring the suitcase down with me, to set in the hall by the door, just for him to see, to know I was serious. As I was piling in my sweaters, he knocked on my door.

"Yes?" I asked without looking.

"You're packing," he said and I turned. He had his hands shoved into the pockets of his pants, and I could tell he was careful to keep his shoulders from slumping.

"One of the places in the paper sounded good. I'll probably take it as soon as I see it," I lied. I went back to stuffing my sweaters into the case. He didn't make another sound for about five minutes, just watched me.

"Joan," he said finally, clearing his throat before he continued, "why don't you stay here."

I stopped folding and held a green sweatshirt tightly in my hands. This I didn't expect. I thought he'd have wanted me out of his house and soon as I could go. "Why?"

"Because. Because I don't--I can't, damn," he muttered and sucked in his breath. "I can't live alone. I need someone around to--to help out."

"With what?"

"Everything. Look at me," he snapped and I turned slowly, eyeing him carefully. "Look at me. Do I look much better than he did? Was I able to do anything for him last week?" I shook my head. "Then how can I do anything now?"

I wanted to shout and push him out of my room and the
longer I waited to say anything, the redder his face got, a mixture of embarrassment and anger.

"I'm too old," he snarled and I wanted to tell him 66 was hardly old but he continued, "I can't get up the stairs in less than ten minutes and I can't walk to the curb to get the mail without losing my balance at least once. You haven't noticed these things?"

I had, but really, I thought, he could fix all those things just by deciding that he intended to make something of his life instead of giving up.

"If you noticed these things then how can you go? Who's going to make sure I don't die in the middle of the night and rot away here for weeks till Nancy notices I'm missing?"

"Right there's your solution. Nancy and Ray will look out for you," I said.

"Eric wanted you to do it. You're family. Nancy and Ray aren't." And I knew that was the strongest argument he could come up with: Eric wanted me to. But all he wanted me to do was make sure the old man didn't die alone. He didn't intend that I stay here for an unlimited amount of time.

I looked the old man over. His hands were out of his pockets now, clenched at his sides, the knuckles white. We stood, silently facing off, having a fight unlike the ones he and Eric had had. Whoever was more determined to get their way would win this. I wasn't even sure what I wanted though. I
knew I didn't want to see the old man falling down a flight of stairs one day, all alone. But what did I want for me? And would it really hurt me to stay here?

"Joan," he said softly, "I do need you. You took care of my son. Can't you do that for me now?"

"Just get out," I whispered. "And don't use Eric like that. I'll stay, but only because I want to, not because of him. This is my decision, not his."

The old man backed out of the room and treaded slowly down the stairs. I listened till I heard his door shut and then I dumped the contents of my suitcase onto the floor.

I was glad to get back to school the next week, and away from the house, from my self imposed imprisonment. It was so dark there, all the time, and the air was too stagnant to breathe so that each morning as I left for school, I took long deep breaths of the winter air as I walked down the driveway to my car. I could stand the hard chill the wind would send down to my lungs much more than I could stand the warm, decaying air inside the house.

I spent as much time at school as I could, arriving early and leaving around five, stopping off every couple of weeks to buy the old man a new mystery novel which I had taken to as a sort of bribe to keep the peace just a little longer. I had no desire to have a show down as Eric had been
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determined to do. I could have planned a calendar around their quarrels, they were that regular. And once in awhile I'd hear the old man mumbling to himself as he set the kettle on for tea. He'd be debating one of their old fights, recalling his words and Eric's retorts as if giving himself a play by play of the event. He could never rebattle any of them, but he could always revise them and determine where he had slipped and his son had gained a point or two, or where his daughter-in-law had stuck her skinny neck into things and loused up the balance. This was how he chose to remember his son, revisiting him in battle. I often wondered if he saw that day again, the one Eric could never forget, the one the old man would hardly acknowledge had happened. I wondered how he remembered sending his fist into his son's jaw and nose, then his stomach; how he kicked him in the lower back and ribs as Eric doubled over. But he never mentioned it; he never had, not to me, or Eric or even his wife when she was alive.

Months passed like this and summer entrenched itself, drying the grass and swelling the doors of the rooms in the house so that we could never quite shut one another out completely. We were looking at each other then, every minute, glancing over our shoulders at all times, waiting for the other to sneak up on us. That was our kind of trust.

I made a new routine for myself then. I spent the days cleaning and throwing things away, emptying the boxes in the
garage and moving the old bottles and hospital leftovers from the living room to Eric's old room, or the bathroom. It used to be a routine of hospitals and chemo and coaxing Eric to eat just a little bit and forcing myself to calm down and not cry in front of him, avoiding any emotion at all because then I couldn't deal with the things that needed to be taken care of. I had numbed myself completely so that I even wondered what it was like in the early days of our marriage when I felt that intense excitement and love for my husband. I knew I'd never get that back because once he died and I could let go again, feel something again, all I would find was grief and anger and loneliness, that is, if I could feel anything at all. So now that he was gone and it was summer and I wasn't teaching, all I could devote myself to was cleaning and scouring the house, removing all the traces of neglect and sickness. But somehow, I couldn't manage to get rid of it all together. No matter how raw and red my skin became from the various cleansers and no matter how many air fresheners I sprayed in the air and left in the bathroom, I could not remove the heavy layer of disease and loneliness that hung over the house.

At night I roamed the house, turning off lights and sitting in the darkness. I couldn't stand the thought of sleep, a safe quiet place where I would be tricked into believing things were just as I'd remembered them, only to be forced to wake up every morning, happy for those first few
seconds, till I'd look beside me, see an empty bed and remember I was a widow. Instead, I preferred to stay awake, trying to recall what it was like before Eric died, who he had been and what our life had been together. I could picture him in my mind, but it was the picture of him bald and chalk colored from the chemo, stooping almost as if he could no longer carry his own weight. I'd try harder, squeezing my memory for one picture of him healthy and alive, but if it was there, I couldn't find it. And I couldn't cry over it. I could only sit there, staring into the dark and waiting for morning.

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The old man chewed his dinner and over the music playing in the background I could hear his dentures clicking. I wanted to turn up the radio, but as I watched him out of the corner of my eye, I could see the knife slipping in his hand and the frustration on his face and I knew he felt how old he was. I felt oddly sorry then, sorry that he couldn't control his body enough to make it not betray himself like this to me.

"Meat's tough," he said, grunted really, and I was struck by how absurdly he reminded me of a cave man then, clutching a bit of meat on his fork and grunting at it as if it were alive and sabotaging his efforts to eat it. I couldn't help myself, I started to laugh, softly at first, hiding it under my hand, and then it slipped out and he looked up at me, startled.
"'Bout time we heard that sound around here again," he muttered and went back to his meat.

"I beg your pardon?" I said and stopped laughing.

"It's been so damn quiet around here. All winter. All spring, all summer. As I remember, you were more of a giggly thing when he married you. Couldn't keep a straight face all through the rehearsal dinner."

I put my fork down and took a deep breath. "What have I had to giggle about in the last year?" I asked and knew it was too maudlin of a question so I added, "I'm too old to giggle anyway."

"No one asked you to giggle. Just lighten up-- I guess this is pretty good meat, considering Helen would have burnt it till it was like chewing dry rubber bands."

"Did anyone ever do anything right for you?" I shouted, just as surprised to hear my voice echoing through the empty house as he was. Wherever it had come from, it was reluctant to go back. "Did anyone ever please you? You haven't said one pleasant word since we moved in!"

"I said the meat is good!" he shouted back, dropping his fork with a loud clang on his plate.

"I don't care about the meat or your wife or anything else you have to say."

"No you don't. You care about yourself. I had no idea how selfish you were till you moved in with him, taking up the
whole house with your bottles and pills and IV's."

"Where would you have liked us to go?"

"You must have some family."

"A third cousin in Colorado!" I threw my hands up while the old man made a ball of his paper napkin. "We came here so you could help us, so you could at least spend some time with him before he died!" I yelled.

"Who said I needed that?"

The room fell silent then. His words echoed lightly off the walls and wood floors, like soft bits of cotton floating in the air, resting wherever they fell.

"You don't mean that," I said quietly. He made no movement but I thought I saw a bit of regret in his eyes.

"You don't know what I mean," the old man said. He pushed himself back from the table and the chair ran a loud scrape over the floor. "Finish your damn dinner by yourself," he muttered and left me alone. I heard his bedroom door slam and then not even five minutes later I heard the front door slam. I was curious what that meant but I refused to get up from the table to find out.

The fight had started more than I cared to admit. Was it fair to pick a fight with an old man, withering away because he couldn't deal with what his life had become? Was it fair to hate this man who I only understood through my husband's eyes? I was afraid to see what was really behind his stormy
relationship with Eric, afraid to think my husband was wrong
or at least that his view was one-sided. I wasn't ready to
alter my memory of him yet. I wanted to hold onto everything
he had given me, no matter how unfair.

When I finally went to bed, I could see the light on over
the porch. He must have stayed there all night because I never
heard the door reopen.

I tried to sleep, but instead I laid there, restless, my
feet too cold outside the sheets and too warm under them. I
could hear Eric's voice like a ghost in the room telling me I
could yell at his old man anytime I wanted to as long as I did
it loud enough for him to hear. I must have dozed off several
times, but his voice scared me awake. I didn't want to hear it
like that, an angry monologue in my head. I wanted to hear him
telling me he missed me and loved me and would come back if he
could, but instead all he said was "I hate my old man. Did you
ever see any love in his face for me? Even when you slipped
the oxygen mask off my face and stopped the morphine drip and
IV? Did you ever see anything in his face but himself?"

"Shut up!" I finally yelled into the dark room alive with
creeping shadows. It was closing in on me and I felt like I
was suffocating, like I couldn't remember how to breathe and
the room was pulling all the air out of me. A wind from the
overhead fan blew across me and released my panic turning it
to tears. I cried for an hour before falling back into a deep
druglike sleep that left me feeling fuzzy and hung over the next morning.

As I mulled over breakfast at the kitchen table, Nancy knocked on the door and let herself in.

"He's over at our house," she said, sitting across from me. "Ray saw him on the porch when he went to lock the front door. Ray thinks you're being too hard on him," she smiled lightly, so I did too.

"We had a fight," I said.

"So I gathered. He said he couldn't figure you out. Quiet one minute, then suddenly you're screaming."

"With Eric around they were always screaming," I said and Nancy shifted uncomfortably at his name. "But he and I hardly say anything to each other, just enough to get by."

"It's not a big deal," Nancy said, getting up to pour herself a glass of juice. "I mean, you hardly knew the guy and then Eric told you you were moving in because there was no more money and no more insurance. How could you have been expected to get along?" She sat across from me again and sipped her juice. "Your husband dies and leaves you with your ailing father-in-law...I would have refused to come."

"I had to. He's helpless."

"He's getting there, for sure." Nancy shook her head. "He was a different person when Helen was alive."

"I only know what Eric told me about him, that he
couldn't get along with him."

"That's an understatement," Nancy said frowning. "He hit Eric once—it was a huge fist fit. Did he tell you that?"

I nodded, unsure of what to say.

"Helen told me about it. He never hit her, though."

"Does that matter?"

Nancy sat back in her chair. "Yes it does. What he did is bad enough, but still, it didn't become a --pattern. Did you ever hear his side of it?"

"What other side is there?" I asked frustrated. "What difference does the other side make? Do you know Eric was afraid to have kids because of it? Because he was afraid there was some sort of monster lurking down inside of him, like the one he saw inside his father, that only needed the right random combination to be released? He didn't want to ever turn that kind of anger on anyone else. It didn't matter how many times I reassured him, he still believed it was in his father and it would be in him. How am I supposed to forget that and make up with his father?"

Nancy traced the rim of glass. It was drained now, foam and pulp coating the inside, slipping down to the bottom. "I'm sorry about that," she said. "I'm sorry you didn't have kids and I'm sorry he was afraid, but think about this, would you? Is there another side? Do you only see what Eric told you? Maybe there's something else you haven't seen." She set her
juice glass down on the table and left quietly. I wanted to pick up the glass and throw it in the sink or out the window just to see it fly and hear it smash.

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It was only three weeks later that the old man had his stroke. It was mild, but the doctor kept him in the hospital anyway. I sat sullenly in the hall outside his room, wondering how much his insurance would cover and how much he could afford to pay, simply because I could not let myself care about whether he was all right or not. Nancy and Ray stayed in the room with him, attempting to reassure him that he would be just fine. He never gave any indication that he thought that was true.

When he came home I could see the change in him. He had already decided life had nothing left to offer him except a way out and now that it had come, he would just take it. I honestly didn't know how to feel about that. There was so much left untended between us that I knew I couldn't let him slip away like this because then what would happen to me? Where would I be in a couple of months? Alone in a house full of dead people who talked to me because I couldn't deal with them when they were alive? That thought scared me and I wondered if maybe I could talk him back from the edge. So I tried to be kind and smiling, like Nancy, who spent a lot of time watching soap operas, playing cards and doing crosswords with him, but
I couldn't be like her. I wasn't that forgiving.

We started a new routine then, very similar to the one with Eric. Get up early, go to the bathroom, get breakfast, read the TV Guide for the television programs on that day, breathe a sigh of deep relief at Nancy's arrival or the home therapist, and on and on.

One afternoon, nearing the end of summer, the house was too warm and I was sweating and close to swearing out loud. Instead I walked to his bedroom door, pretending to say what I thought.

"What is this, a rock?" I heard Nancy ask through the open door.

"Yes," the old man responded faintly. "From my son. He painted it in preschool."

"Oh, Mr. Fisher, how precious," Nancy said and I rolled my eyes at the syrupy sadness she was partial to.

"Yes. It reminds me--" the old man stopped and I leaned closer to the door, not wanting to miss what he would say, but certain it couldn't be much. "It reminds me how much he hated me. That I have too much to regret." He coughed and Nancy's footsteps tapped to the bed. He said something else, which was muffled and I moved away before I could hear more.

Too much to regret, I thought with anger and a small amount of sadness. He has his own personal touchstone that symbolized regret. How nice for him. I turned around to look
at the door, and the sadness almost overwhelmed me and I backed into the kitchen. Nancy came out of the room then, shutting the door quietly behind her. She stopped when she saw me.

"I think I offended him," she said softly. "He told me to leave."

"I'm sorry," I said and then his voice filled the hall. 
"Joan!" he yelled and I walked quickly to his room as Nancy left.

"What is it?"

"Is she mad?" he asked and I stood in his doorway, not wanting to go into his room which reeked of Lysol mingled with warm sickness.

"Do you care?"

"Yes, I do. I didn't mean to snap at her." He reached for something on his bedside table which slipped and fell to the floor. It was the painted rock and I stepped across the room to get it for him. As I bent down, I could hear him under his breath. "What the hell did you stay for?"

I looked up at him slowly. He wasn't staring at me but at the TV Guide in his lap. I answered anyway.

"I don't know," I whispered.

"If you hate me so much-"

"No," I whispered again and this time he looked at me. "I don't."
"I know I should have—I didn't tell him. Apologize to him. But he should have asked me to," the old man said and held his hand out for the rock. I stared at it, the hand that had beat my husband, that had never done more than pat my shoulder. I couldn't make him be the same person in my mind that he was in Eric's.

"Did you hate him so much?" I asked. He didn't answer, but slowly his shoulder's began to shake. There was no sound, but he put his hands to his face and covered his eyes. I tightened my grip on the rock and sat on the edge of the bed, feeling it move lightly as his breath came ragged, and I put my arm around him. It didn't feel comfortable, balancing like that, not touching him too closely, but it felt okay to be there, to feel sorry with him and not for him. He took a gasp of air and I put my other arm around him too.

* * * * *

I stood alone in the house after the funeral, after all the mourners had gone, many of the same people who came to Eric's funeral. It was quiet and warm with clean sun that fell into the windows and swept over the dark wood floors. I had slippers on my feet, still in nylons and the same funeral dress I had worn for Eric. Nearly a year since I had come here to watch my husband die. Only months since he had.

I had stayed till the end. I had stayed to watch Eric's father, the old man, die. After all the pain and exhaustion
that Eric's death left me with, I stayed for more, but I knew
I had to. I knew the day he asked me, but it wasn't till that
day in his room that I realized it. There was something I was
waiting for and when he said it, I finally knew what it was. I
needed to hear the old man say he cared about his son, he owed
him an apology, not for Eric's sake, but for mine.

And now the house was clean, and empty, and ready to be
sold. No more ghosts lurking, no more sadness, no more pain.
Just wide open rooms, waiting to be filled.
THE BLUE GLASS BOWL

There is a blue glass bowl that sits on the middle of my mother’s table. It is round and blue light shoots out when the sun shines. It is rough and bumped and holds recipes or sometimes fruit. I sometimes dream about the bowl and the blue light jumping on the table.

My friend Alice is getting married. She says her mother is happier about it than she is, but I know deep inside she wants to. She won't admit to liking anything her mother likes. I live with Alice now, not because I need to save on rent, which I don't, but because she does and because her mother won't let her live with Hal until they are married. Maybe that is the one thing her mother asks of her that Alice respects and does.

Today Alice is sitting on the edge of the couch and painting her toenails a disgusting black red color which she has said has really come into fashion. Alice would know; she reads those fashion magazines. I just read books. Fashion magazines depress me, like I'm not living up to all those articles expect me to be, all the pages of pretty models with nice hair and eyes that look right out at you, not far away or at the ground, which Alice says I have a tendency to do.
"Clare," she says and looks up from her polish, "make some popcorn, will you?" A glob of dark black red hovers and stretches at the end of the tiny brush like it can't decide how long to hang on, when to let go. Alice catches it and returns it to the bottle, brushing it on the rim and then bringing it back to her toe.

"No thanks," I say and continue reading.

"No, I didn't ask if you wanted any---"

"Yeah, I know," I say, "But I don't want to make any and I don't want to eat any. Make it yourself." I'm sorry when I finish saying this because Alice is making a sort of twisted frown like she doesn't know whether to get angry with me for snapping at her, or to start crying cause I'm so mean.

"I think you lived with Kyle too long," she says finally and sighs. "He was never very polite."

I roll my eyes and think she's the one who's not very polite, but I get up and go make popcorn instead, not because she wants it, but because maybe I do after all, and maybe I am too mean.

"Your father called," she says from the other room and I step around the corner to hear her better.

"My father? What for?"

"He says you got a call down there. Someone named um, okay, it was a weird name. I would've written it down but all I had was a grocery list and a handful of coupons at the time."
The name was—"

"Forget the name."

"Okay, so this particular person doesn't know your phone number, but obviously knew your father's and wants to get in touch with you. It sounded like he knew who it was. He sounded mad too, and his words were slurred. Does your father drink? I mean, I know that's personal, but it was all I could think of, here it was ten o'clock in the morning and your father's slurring words like it's happy hour." Alice cheerfully slapped more polish on her big toe and capped the bottle.

"What did he say he was gonna do?"

"Um, call back? What else?"

What else, I thought and rolled my eyes. "Did he give the number to the person?"

"Um, I don't remember what he said. Look, I was on my way out, okay?"

"Okay," I muttered. If he was drunk, and he probably was, that meant he'd never remember and I'd have to call him, which I hated doing and what was worse, I had a pretty good idea who was trying to find me and I didn't want to have anything to do with her.

"Oh yeah, I got the name," Alice said and came into the kitchen, still holding the polish bottle. "Ivy. Who's Ivy?"

"Um, my mother." I dropped the lid on the pan and jumped
There is a blue glass bowl that sits in the middle of my mother’s kitchen table and it has been there forever. I ask where it came from and she says grandma gave it to her. I dream about Grandma holding the bowl and filling it with recipes and fruit.

Alice is a stout girl, very edgy and nervous and she says it is her mother's fault and her grandmother backs her up on this.

"A nervous mother makes a nervous baby," Alice is fond of saying, but I find Mrs. Delasky very calm and organized and her house is warm and clean. There aren't a lot of knickknacks lying around, the surfaces are uncluttered, but it is not stark in any way.

"Well, Hal doesn't want me to work after we're married," Alice says and her mother nods.

"I didn't work either," she says and Alice frowns.

"Mother that is so fifties. Of course I should work. What else would I do?"

"Have children, just like I did."

"Oh god, mother," Alice emphasizes "mother" and sounds
like she is still in high school. I feel edgy just listening to them. "I'm not going to sit around getting pregnant all my life. I want to do something."

"What does Hal say to that?"

"I haven't felt like fighting with him about it. I figure he'll get the idea when I don't quit my job after the wedding. He'll get used to it." Alice gets up and walks out and Mrs. Delasky shakes her head.

"Not a good way to start," she says.

"No kidding, mother," Alice shouts from the other room, "but what else can I do? Find another guy to marry? When you're so happy with this one?"

Mrs. Delasky shakes her head again and I can't think of anything to say.

"Who's your boyfriend?" she asks me and the question surprises me. I'm not used to being included in their conversations or being asked personal questions like this. Mostly I don't have friends close enough to ask and my father certainly doesn't care who I'm with or where.

"Um, I guess I don't have one, not really," I say.

"Not really? Why not? You're a nice looking girl." She smiles and pats my hand. "We need to find you a nice boy like Hal. So smart and sweet." And dull, I want to add, but I don't because I'm distracted by the warmth of her hand on mine and how it feels just like what I thought a mother's hand would
"You do need a guy, Clare," Alice says suddenly. "You spend too much time alone."

I shrug them off. "I like it that way. Besides, there's David. He's close enough."

Alice groans and sits back down beside me.

"Who's David?" Mrs. Delasky asks.

"This awful bore she hangs out with. Really, Kyle was better than he is and he was pretty bad."

Mrs. Delasky smiles at me. "It's alright," she says. "Clare just doesn't want to waste her time with the ones who come in and out of your life, do you Clare? She wants one who will stay, don't you?"

I shrug and sip my water.

The blue bowl is heavy with receipts that flutter when the window is open and there are no more lights on the table in the sun. Mostly the curtains are shut anyway.

My father takes several rings before he answers the phone.

"Hello?" his voice is cool and deep.

"Ty?" I say because I am not sure it is really him.

"What?"

"It's me."
Yeah, well it's me too. Who the hell is me?"

"Clare," you dumbshit, I want to add.

"Clare. Would it kill you to call me Dad so I know who you are?"

"Sure, then you never have to worry about learning to recognize my voice. But then after 23 years, I guess you never will."

"You just knock it off. What's got into you?"

"Nothing." Talking to you.

"What took you so long to call me back? It's been over a week."

"What, are you sober enough now that you can remember that long?"

"You just shut up--"

"Alright, alright, sorry," I say and wish for once I would keep my mouth shut. "What did you call for?"

"Didn't your friend give you the message?"

"Can't you remember?"

"God, you're a brat. You got a phone call."

"It was her wasn't it?" I ask.

"Yeah it was her. It was Ivy. Haven't spoken a word to her in nearly twenty years and suddenly she calls up looking for your phone number."

"Why is she looking for me?" I say and I can feel a breathlessness in my voice that I don't want there. "She knows
my address," since she still sends the checks, I thought but didn't add since the whole money issue was a touchy one with Ty.

"How the hell should I know?" Ty grumbles and then is silent for several seconds. "You gonna talk to her?"

"I guess that depends on whether or not you gave her my number."

"Yeah, I gave it to her. I was either to drunk to care what I did or too sober to be properly angry," he says sort of sheephishly and I feel sorry for him. He was never the same after she left him. He probably would have been a much better person if he had never fell in love and had a kid.

"I guess I don't know what I'll do," I say softly.

"Fine," he says and maybe I imagine it, but I think I can hear him opening a bottle in the background. I don't know why I should think that's my imagination.

"I gotta go," I say and hang up.

"Nice conversation," Alice says behind me and I jump at the sound of her voice.

"Thanks for listening in."

"How could I help it, this apartment is so small."

"You could've gone outside."

"Don't be like that, Clare. Tell me why you have such an attitude with your dad. Why do you call him Ty?"

"What should I call him?"
"Come on."

"No really," I say and start picking at the edge of the phone book. "It's not like he raised me. This kid in the neighborhood did that."

"So you call him dad?"

"No, I call him Ricky," I say and smile but Alice is irritated.

"Fine, if you don't want to tell me, then don't."

"You have a really nice family Alice," I say.

"Don't I know it," she rolls her eyes. "Wanna trade?"

I snort and walk out of the kitchen.

The next couple of days I do nothing but sweat about Ivy. I wonder if she's gonna call for real, if one day I'll pick up the phone and hear a voice on the other end, the one I haven't heard since I was five and I wonder if I'll recognize it. Sometimes I think I can still hear, like late at night when I'm drifting off to sleep and I'm worried about something. She used to whisper something in my ear when she said goodnight and I can't remember what, I just remember the sounds, low and quiet and reassuring. When I'm sick I try to conjure up those sounds and make the pain go away, or the sadness, but sometimes it's those sounds that make me sad, just thinking about her and the way she left me, without even saying
I've been having these dreams lately too, about this awful blue bowl she used to keep on the kitchen table. In the dream I see the bowl on the table, or it's in her hands and she's filling it with something. At one point, on a trip back home, I remember I started searching the kitchen for that awful blue glass bowl. I thought of it all of a sudden and then couldn't get it out of my mind. I pulled open every cupboard and drawer and yanked boxes out of the closets and finally called Ricky to ask if he remembered it.

"Nope," he said and added, "but then I don't have a memory for details. What do you need it for?"

"Nothing. I just thought it might be nice in my apartment." How could I answer that anyway? I couldn't bear the slightest bit of sentimentality about either of my parents and yet here I couldn't get that damn bowl out of my head. I didn't find it on that trip and went home without saying goodbye to Ty.

There is a bowl full of dust on the kitchen table. She didn't take it when she left. She didn't take me either.

I wake up in a sweat, not knowing where I am. The sound of breathing is at my ear and I turn my head softly to see it
is David beside me, his head neatly tucked into my shoulder. I try not to move because he is so perfect, sleeping there, not talking, or moving, just being, and he is warm and solid. I try to breathe shallowly so my own movement doesn't wake him. I want to reach out and touch his sand colored hair, smooth it with my fingertips and wind the edges around my nail and I don't want this moment to end. When it does, I don't know what I'll say to him, how I'll get out of this.

"Where have you been?" Alice asks and there is a smile on her face so I know she is kidding and I smile back, but my stomach is fluttery and my hands are nervous.

"I can't remember," I say and hope my smile is of the cat that ate the canary variety. She has the blinds only half open so the light doesn't attack the room and I settle into a large armchair and close my eyes. It is Sunday morning.

"Well, all I can say is you're early. Why come home so early on a Sunday?"

"I don't know," I murmur and hope she'll go away and leave me alone. "Hey, why aren't you with Hal?" I ask suddenly.

"Oh Hal," she says and waves a hand through the air. Her fingernails are now painted with that black red color and I giggle at them. "Wow, laughing. You must have had a good time."
Haven't you slept with him before?" she asks and flops down on the couch.

I shake my head. "But it won't be happening again."

"No?"

"Probably not. Now where's Hal?"

"I need some time without Hal hanging over my shoulder. I get tired of him, you know?" she says and I get the sense her question is more than a passing one, it's serious.

"When's the wedding?" I ask.

"Two months. God, I'm nervous," she whispers.

"You've been working so hard on it; all the details, spending all that time together, arguing over every little thing," I say and I'm pretty good at this counseling people stuff.

"Yeah," Alice says and flips her hair over her shouler. "That's probably it, isn't it? I'm just tired and nervous," she nods to herself and settles into the couch.

"Exactly," I say softly and watch the expression on her face soften and even out till her eyes close and she relaxes.

"I do love him."

"I know."

"I just hate that my mother pushes this so hard. Is your mother like that? Would she push you with David?"

"No," I shake my head.

"What's she like?"
I can't remember her exactly, but I usually fill in the gaps with what I imagine must be a good mother image. "She's short and blonde and wears a headband all the time cause her hair is sort of thin and flyaway. Her hands are small."

"But what's she like?"

I don't get her question. "What do you mean?"

"What kind of person is she?"

I close my eyes and try to think of this. "She held my hand when I crossed the street, and she liked to pick out dresses for me, white or blue because she liked those colors best, and hats sometimes too, on Easter, but my father laughed at those and she'd pretend to laugh too, but later she'd cry, when he wasn't looking and I would get her kleenexes."

There is silence and I can still see her in my mind, her hand clutching my kleenexes.

"Where is your mother, Clare?" Alice asks in a choked voice.

"I don't know," I say and wipe my eyes.

There is no more bowl on the table and I don't know where he put it. I have dreams about it and they are nightmares.

David calls me nearly everyday and I don't talk to him but still I feel the fluttering in my stomach and my hands are
nervous but it is my stomach that worries me, like the fluttering is something alive and moving in me and it scares me more and more everyday. I curse him at night when I stare up at the ceiling and try to sleep and I curse myself in the morning for being so stupid as to sleep with him.

No one else calls though and I wonder why she got my number if she wasn't going to use it. Every day I come from home work I check the answering machine for a message from her, like it's some invader in my home and I have to be frightened of it. I can't sleep thinking about it and Alice is worried about the dark circles under my eyes.

At work I watch the customers come and go and I am helpful if I can be and my boss does not seem to notice anything and neither do any of my co workers. Mrs. Delasky hovers over me when I go with Alice to discuss the final arrangements for the wedding. She and Hal are happy now and Alice spends a lot of time looking at baby name books and making lists of what she'd like to call a girl and what she'd like to call a boy. She has lists for names of relatives she'd like to pass on, but only as middle names and she has lists of relatives she better not name a kid after because another relative might get insulted. She also spends a lot of time playing records she'd like to hear at her wedding. I convinced her to put on one of my Billie Holiday records and she thought she might use it if her mother and Hal agreed.
The phone rings and Alice answers it because she knows by now I won't. I'm too afraid it's David and I just don't know what to say to him. I'm also scared to death it's Ivy and I won't be able to get the words out with her. It's almost too important to get that call now and I don't want to waste those first moment when she hears my voice. I want her to know how I feel and I want her to hear it in my voice.

"Um, just a minute," she is saying and then she comes into the room and whispers, "It's your dad. You want to talk to him?"

I shrug. "I guess so," I say and take the phone from her. "Hello?"

"Well she called me again dammit. Don't hear from the woman for nearly twenty years and now this."

"I don't know what to tell you, Ty," I say, trying to be light, like it doesn't matter. "What did she want?"

"Hell if I know. Acted like she wanted to chat, but I don't think she really wanted to. She said she hadn't called you yet."

"Is she going to?"

"How would I know. Probably. She said she wanted to, but didn't have the courage. I told her she had the courage to walk out on you, she could find the courage to call you." I didn't know how to answer that.

"You said that to her?"
"Geez, Clare. You think I don't know what it was like for you?"

"No, I don't," I say with some anger and some reluctance. In all my life he has never said anything like this to me.

"I don't exactly, but I did notice you weren't happy."

"I was happy," I protest.

"Yeah, with that weasly Ricky kid--"

"Don't Ty," I say. He never liked Ricky and I didn't figure out till I was older that it was because Ricky could take care of me and he couldn't.

"Whatever. I just told her she can't avoid you forever and she ought to come clean with you. That's it. But I wish the bitch would just leave us alone," he says more mournfully than anything else and after a few more seconds he hangs up.

I wake up in a sweat again and the world is hot with a red light and it is streaming in the windows and I lift my head up wildly, trying to open my eyes wider because I am sure the world is on fire. I look around and see out the window it is red and it stings my eyes and then when they clear, I see it is the sun, rising, a very small spot that out of the corner of my eye grows and keeps me awake till it is high enough that it is out of my line of sight.
There was a blue bowl that my mother held in her hands and filled with candy some days and other it was empty and once it was spilling with grapes from the vines in the backyard and I sat and watched her pull them apart and she fed me some and saved others and made jam. Jars of it were stuffed in the back of the cupboard even years after she was gone and when I couldn't find her damn bowl I smashed the jars and watched the purple ooze among the shards of glass in the sink. I remember crying that night and Ty couldn't figure what was wrong with me, like I was a baby who didn't need to be changed or fed or burped, he just stared at me, crying at the dinner table, till I ran up to my room and sat in the middle of my bed. My tears weren't just because I had no mother and no father, but also because I suspected I had bits of glass caught under my fingernails and how was I going to get them out? Who would get them out for me? Who was even around for me? And I cried some more, just self pity.

Now of course it's different, although it isn't so far off. I wake up in the morning and I think I can feel something inside me; I think I knew it the very morning I woke up in David's bed, like it was a premonition or something. Or maybe it's nothing. I'm a worrier; I know that. Still, I think I can feel it growing by the second and it's like something that doesn't belong there, that I have to get rid of, because what will I do with it? What do I know about mothers, or being a
mother?

I rush into the bathroom and vomit loudly, mostly dry heaving, and I'm wonder if it's just nerves, when I hear the doorbell ringing. I stand in the bathroom for a long time and I'm practically holding my breath. It could be her out there. But then I think, if she can't get up the nerve to call me, she won't get up the nerve to come here. Besides, she doesn't even live in this city.

I stick a toothbrush in my mouth and go to answer the door. Mrs. Delasky is standing in the doorway and she slides her way past me into the apartment, looking for Alice.

"She's not here?" Mrs. Delasky says and seems a little wilted in her denim cowgirl skirt and matching denim shirt. "No, she's been gone since I woke up."

Mrs. Delasky take a long hard look at me and the pointed violet ends of her lips frown deeply. "You look peaked," she says as if it is a decision she has just made. "You haven't had breakfast, have you?" she asks and I tell her no, but I'm not hungry. But Mrs. Delasky takes me into the kitchen anyway and makes tea which I want to push away, but take. It is hot enough to burn my tongue, but I hardly notice.

"So, Alice and Hal's wedding is only a few weeks away," Mrs. Delasky says and winks her overly made up eyes at me. She pats her hair lightly. "I have to get the color done soon or it'll be too bright. Most people don't know I'm not really a
blonde," she says and winks at me again. "Maybe you'd like an ice cube for that tea, since it's so hot," she says and when I shake my head she sits down and holds her own cup.

I don't know what to say to her, or how long she plans to stay, so I try chatting about the wedding, which is all she and Alice have done for the past year. It depresses me to hear about it, but I listen politely as she tells me about her dress.

"Of course, the size was too small. Honestly, I've turned every store in town upside down looking for a nice dress that didn't make me look too matronly, you know? Afterall, I'm not that old," she smiles. "I don't think Alice likes it though," she sighs and turns her cup in a circle. "She's clearly tired of my interference, but I can't help myself." She glances at me. "I suppose your mother is like that."

"Not really," I say politely, but I know she is curious because Alice must have told her what I said about Ivy.

"Mothers and daughters," Mrs. Delasky laughs. "The worst part of it all is when you have a daughter of your own and hear yourself sounding like your own mother. Flashback, deja vu," she laughs and waves a hand through the air. "Spooky."

"Yeah," I say mildly. "My mother--" I clear my throat, "she left when I was about five or six."

"Yes. Alice mentioned something about that. Tragic."

"Yes," I say and narrow my eyes. "I don't know where she
I get checks from her every month. Have since I was in junior high."

"Child support?" Mrs. Delasky asks and the curiosity in her voice makes me sick.

"Unofficially. Ty never had to go to court or anything, never would have thought of it," I say wryly. "We just think of it as guilt checks. I think she waited so long to make sure I would be able to keep the checks away from him, so I'd understand the money wasn't for him and his drinking." I stare into the depths of the table, slightly embarrassed by this, the lengthiest explanation I have ever given anyone about my mother. And not even because I want to, but just because I have a sick desire to satisfy this woman's curiosity.

"That's too bad," Mrs. Delasky says and she doesn't seem to know what else to say.

I shrug. "I'm used to it. It's nice to get the money."

"You don't know where she is? There's no return address on the envelope?"

"A post office box," I say. "But it's not like I even want to know where she is or anything. What would I do, go and see her?"

"You could."

"And say what? Thanks for the checks?" My voice starts to rise now and because I'm tired of Mrs. Delasky. "What else should I ask? Why'd you leave? Where'd you go? I hate you?" I
am nearly shouting now and I stop to take a deep breath before I really get out of control. Right now I'm doing it for her benefit, but I am close to losing it for real. My hands are shaking and my throat is constricting. "Sorry," I mutter. "It's so stupid. Why should I care? I did fine without her."

"You like fine to me," Mrs. Delasky says brightly and I look up at her face. She is watching me with a smile, a reassuring smile but her eyes are worried and sort of glazed over like she doesn't know what to do or say and she wishes she could get out of here. "Well. I suppose Alice will be out for a while. Why don't you just tell her I came by? Alright?" she says and makes a hasty exit. I watch her and think if this is a mother, what have I missed? And if this is a mother, I don't want to be one.

I come home from work early one day and my stomach is churning. I must look green, or white or some unnatural color because my boss commented on it and sent me home. I walk in the door and the phone rings just as I do. I feel too sick to think anything of it so I just answer.

"Hello?" I say and there is a pause at the other end and I can hear an intake of breath and at that moment I know I have made a mistake.

"Hello?" says the voice and it is low and quiet. "Clare?"
she says and I clutch the phone harder and my stomach pinches and twirls.

"Yes," I whisper.

"This is, um, your, well, this is Ivy," she says softly as if she's embarrassed to be calling herself that, as if she knows she should be calling herself my mother but she can't bring herself to do it. "Are you there?" she asks. "Clare?" But I can't answer her. I'm breathing heavily and my stomach is wild and alive. I put my hand on it and wonder if this is how she felt with me, before I was born, and I wonder if she hated it as much as I do right now.

Just then the door opens and Alice walks in. I look at her, panicked, and thrust the phone into her hands and rush into the bathroom.

"Hello? No this is her roommate, Alice. Oh, Ivy, hello."

There's a blue glass bowl on my mother's table and I can't make it go away. I wish she had taken it with her.

I see an old woman waiting outside my apartment by a garbage can the next day and for a horrible moment I think she looks like me and I want to run away. I know it's ridiculous and it seems even more so out in broad daylight, in front of all these people to have such paranoia. So I walk right past her and study her face, controlling myself, hoping I don't
belong to her. But then I think of all that money and how nice Ivy must have it now, wherever she is and I know this is not her. I know she may never call again after the way I acted yesterday.

I start to feel sick during dinner with Alice and Hal, so Hal orders me tea and Alice holds my hand on the cab ride home. I want to tell them what is wrong, because they still think it is only about Ivy, but it's also that the feeling settling in my stomach is a little different.

We get back to the apartment and I go to bathroom while Alice and Hal talk in the kitchen. It doesn't surprise me to see dark red globs swirling and melting down the toilet when I flush and I think to myself I really wasn't that late and it happens to a lot of girls; I was just nervous, probably because of Ivy and it made me sick and late. It's just me melting away in there and not a part of someone else, a someone else I would never even get the chance to take care of, a chance I'd really be too afraid to take anyway.

I lie down on my bed and turn on the little overhead lamp. It falls over me like a dim spotlight and I curl up, wrapping my hands over my stomach. I try not to think if it feels any different. I just close my eyes and listen for those sounds, low and soft and quiet, till I fall asleep.