1994

Intimacies

Carol Godfrey Finke

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Intimacies

by

Carol Godfrey Finke

A Thesis Submitted to the

Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department: English
Major: English (Creative Writing)

Signatures have been redacted for privacy

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa

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INTRODUCTION:
MY FATHER'S DAUGHTER

Three women, two of them wearing hats, sit at a small table at a New York sidewalk cafe. Across the street are city buildings, a canopied doorway, but the women look at one another, talking. The one with her back to me, whose auburn head is bare, holds a cigarette in her gesturing hand; the one across from her, the only one whose whole face I can see, leans forward to listen, her elbows on the table. The one between them, whose angled hat conceals her eyes, rests one hand against her cheek, the other around her glass. I don't understand how it is possible, but all three of these women are my mother.

"I could never be a Sunday painter," my father says, and his words take shape somewhere inside me; later, I will turn them over and over like a stone or a piece of broken pottery. For I am convinced that, if I look at these words long enough, they will help me understand. All children know, in some vague way, that their parents had a life before them, but it's never quite real, never quite means anything. The real meaning of their lives, after all, lies in the fact that they are your parents, nothing more. Yet I grew up surrounded by artifacts, hard evidence that my parents had had a life -- a real life
before my brother and I came along. And somehow I developed a conviction that that life was more real, more meaningful, more, than the one I saw them lead. They certainly never said so. They would, I'm sure, have been shocked to hear me say so. They would have denied it. But, knowing from my own life what it means to let go for a long time of a vision that defines you, I believe in my heart that this has to be true. My father was Robert Godfrey -- and the fact that his name means nothing to you is proof that what I say is true.

My father was, in 1936, the youngest painter ever to sell a painting to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The painting is a portrait, three-quarter length, of my mother, wearing a plaid jacket. My father was 25 years old, poor, self-taught, working for the WPA, a middle-Westerner living in a Greenwich Village walk-up, newly married. My mother convinced him to submit the painting to the show. When he first came to New York from Grand Rapids, Michigan, he was so poor he slept on the subway. When he sold the painting to the Metropolitan (he would never tell how much they paid because he didn't want any other buyers to think they could purchase his works so cheaply), he got a full-page write-up in Time magazine, as well as articles in art journals and the New York papers.
There is a self-portrait; it hangs now, unframed, against a rough brick wall in the house where I live. My father wears a short-sleeved yellow shirt. His face, always thin, looks gaunt; his cheekbones are prominent, violet shadows ring his eyes, but his grey gaze is clear. He is twenty-five years old.

It was a start. He had some exhibits, some commissions, a one-man show in Bronxville, another mention in Time for some theatrical sets he designed. He and my mother were still poor, but it was the Depression; everybody was poor. At one point, they even bought a Packard, abandoned in a garage by its owner, for the storage fees. With it, they could escape the city so my father could paint landscapes. They couldn't afford to keep the car very long.

In 1939, my grandfather had a stroke and seemed to be dying, and my parents, who had been talking of leaving New York for San Francisco, left instead for Grand Rapids. My father painted, taught painting classes, helped found the Grand Rapids Art Gallery (which would become, nearly thirty years later, the Grand Rapids Art Museum). My grandfather, though damaged, survived, but my parents stayed on. Was it simple economics that kept them in Michigan? Was it filial duty, or was it some failure of nerve?

The war came; a friend barely survived Pearl Harbor; my father enlisted in the Navy. In the next four years, he saw
my mother only on a few short leaves. But at the end of the war, when my father was discharged, their first child, my brother Rob, was a year old. They were a family now, not just a couple, and decisions had to be made. Should they return to New York? Everything had changed. They stayed in Michigan.

They bought fourteen acres in the country, began raising chickens and my brother. But a henhouse and an artist's eye would not support a family in western Michigan in the forties, would not pay for doctors and hospitals, appendicitis, miscarriages, rabies shots. My father had to work, and painting had to be a part-time thing.

Late in 1950, I was born. One of my earliest memories is of people and easels in our backyard, my father teaching a painting class. But he wasn't really painting anymore, and by the time I was four or five years old, even the classes had stopped. My father designed and built our house, designed and built much of our furniture, but he did not paint. "I could never," he said to a new friend who looked around in astonishment at all the paintings on our walls, "be just a Sunday painter."

All my life, I too have looked at those paintings, and at the photographs of paintings sold and gone. The three women on lower Fifth Avenue who were all my mother. The woman looking in the mirror, trying on a new green hat, my
mother. My mother naked in a wine-red Victorian chair. My
great-uncle's Greek-revival farmhouse. My grandfather, who
died before I was born. The old train station in Lowell and
the line of tilting telephone poles. Quan Yin. Abandoned
Childsdale. The Jamaican sculptor Richmond Barthe standing
with a bust he has just finished, hanging on the wall behind
the sideboard that holds the bust itself, a gift to my
mother. The paintings are, to me, beautiful and true and
strange. "Why did you quit?" that stranger, that new
friend, asked. My question is not quite the same. "How
could you give this up?"

The father I knew built things, fixed things, read
books, argued politics, drank martinis, went trout-fishing,
taught me to ride a bike. He was, although he had no de-
gree, an engineer. He made things I didn't see and couldn't
imagine, like gyroscopes. The father I knew did not paint.

Except. When I was about thirteen, my father lost his
job when the company he worked for merged with another
larger engineering firm. He was nearly fifty, and it would
be almost a year before he, the engineer with no creden-
tials, would find another job. To economize, my parents
quit smoking, and I gave up my piano lessons. My father set
up an easel in the basement and painted there when he was
not sending out resumes. Our house smelled of turpentine
and oils. He joined a group of local artists who were
setting up a small gallery, tried to find good things to say about their work. My mother worked at the gallery a couple days a week. Some of the paintings disappeared from our walls to help fill up the walls there. My father began teaching a class, and I actually got paid to model, sitting very still with a hat on my lap while a dozen middle-aged men and women painted my picture.

I am wearing a blue-green dress that I don't remember. In my lap, my hands rest on something round and tawny, the woven suggestion of a hat or maybe a basket. My figure too is incomplete, suggested; only my face is finished, my grey eyes looking out, young and unshadowed, waiting. The painting remains unfinished until it is destroyed.

The gallery sold a few paintings before it folded, and my father gave my brother and me each twenty dollars to spend as we pleased. My brother went to the hobby shop for model railroad kits; I bought books. Finally my father was offered a job. The only painting he kept from that time, the only painting he liked, is of a pink Victorian townhouse standing alone and faded between board fences in a San Francisco neighborhood that’s being torn down. He called it "The Relict." When I graduated from college, he gave it to me, the final artifact of his strange, unsettling vision, a beautiful and frightening painting. After he died, I could not look at it, and I gave it to my niece.
I am sixteen, a freshman at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, a thousand miles from my parents' new home in Mississippi. I want to be a writer when I graduate, when I grow up, but it is awfully hard to say so; usually, when people ask, I say that I want to be a teacher. Besides, already I know the odds against being able to support myself writing; a teaching certificate, my parents say, will give me something I can always fall back on.

For almost as long as I can remember, I've wanted to be a writer. I wrote my first poem when I was six, and I still remember its last lines: "It can be soft, or it can be loud./ People who make music well should be proud." Then there were more poems, then stories. In fifth grade, I wrote my first novel; it was 156 pages long, and I borrowed heavily from Louisa May Alcott and Laura Ingalls Wilder. (Later, in a rush of adolescent embarrassment, I burned it.) For my eleventh birthday, my parents gave me a subscription to *Writer's Digest* and a rhyming dictionary, although by then my poems rarely rhymed. I talked our local 4-H club into including creative writing along with animal husbandry, ceramics and sewing; I brought home blue ribbons, school prizes, talked my senior advanced-composition teacher into
letting me write a novella instead of the required critical analysis.

In Ann Arbor, notices go up in my dorm announcing the Hopwood Awards. The big ones, the prestigious ones that pay big bucks, are for graduate students; they are won by people who will later become famous, like John Ciardi and Arthur Miller. But there are undergraduate awards, too. "You should enter," my best friend tells me. She goes out and buys me a box of the twenty-pound bond on which manuscripts must be submitted. I revise my novella, think up the required pseudonym, enter, win.

Second semester I take a creative writing class. The first time I have to read my work aloud, my head swims and the room grows dark and distant. "That was fine, Miss Godfrey," my teacher smiles when I finish and rubs his red beard. "But now," he goes on, "could you read it again so the rest of the class can hear it?" I want to disappear. But the teacher and the other students are patient. I want this, and before long I am bringing things to read all the time.

The next fall I sign up for another creative writing class. The instructor is a visiting poet from Ireland, white-haired and handsome as an actor. We will begin, he says, by writing couplets, first in iambic pentameter, then hexameter. I drop the class. I will, I decide, have to do
this on my own. I take my required literature classes, surveys, criticism, theory, analysis. I am finding it harder and harder to write.

As seniors, we all have to write theses. I want to work on my fiction, but my advisor shows me the rules: the thesis must be a critical work; creative writing is unacceptable. (Writing, the university reminds me again, has nothing to do with literature.) But I am in luck, my advisor tells me; a friend of his on the faculty has been assigned a creative writing class for next fall and is in a panic; he will probably jump at the chance to let me take an independent study, since it will give him the opportunity to have a dry run before he has to face a roomful of freshmen.

So I spend a couple hours a week that last semester sitting in the office of a young professor whose marriage is falling apart. All he wants to talk about, it seems to me, is sex. "Your generation," he tells me once, for no apparent reason, "thinks you've got it all figured out. You think sex solves everything." Sometimes he uses my stories as springboards for little life lessons and has me revise them from the points-of-view of minor characters or to emphasize parallels with classic fairy tales. I spend a lot of time staring at his office floor, memorizing the pattern of the tiles. I cannot wait to get out of Ann Arbor.
In 1971 when I graduate, there are no teaching jobs; I only know two people who are hired as teachers, and they both have relatives on school boards. For a while I write teacher's guides to accompany social studies textbooks, and then I move east and work as a bank teller in Boston. It is a long way from my dream of a farmhouse, a typewriter and a dog. I cannot finish anything I write.

One night I sit down at my typewriter with a tall glass of gin and write a letter to my red-bearded creative writing teacher, the one who taught me to speak up. Closing my eyes, I remember the Russell Bird-Shooter boots he used to wear with his suits. I need, I tell him, a kick in the ass, and I figure he's the one to give it. It takes a long time for my letter to find him, for he has left the university, and I am afraid he has forgotten me. But he does write, finally; he does remember me. Gradually our letters become less writerly, more personal. They become courtship.

I am twenty-four when we marry. I have quit my dead-end job and decided against going to graduate school. I read novels, bake French bread, plant perennials, knit sweaters. But, despite my husband's encouragement, I don't write. "When you're ready, you will," he finally says when I have run him out of other things to say.
Before I know it, I am almost thirty years old. Four years ago my mother died; three years ago my father died; two years ago we had an anencephalic baby who died at birth. I could not even look at her, but my husband said she looked like a beautiful broken doll.

Now it is January in northern Michigan, there has been another blizzard, and we are snowbound; I sit down and begin to write. Three hours later, when I hear the snowplow coming down our hill, I have written the opening section of what I think will be a novel about losing a baby. I can feel my husband's relief, a match for my own. By spring, I have almost half of it written in rough draft. "I can't do it," I tell my husband one day. "You can," he says. But I don't. I am just another English major with half a novel in a drawer, and I hate myself. "Maybe if you tried something less autobiographical," my husband says. So I write a funny story as a birthday present for a friend. He never reads it. Whenever I walk down our hall, I carefully avoid looking at my father's self-portrait. It seems to me that I think about writing all the time.

****

Then I am thirty-eight years old. We have a four-year old daughter, and I have begun teaching part-time for our local community college, first on campus, then in a men's
prison. Mostly I teach remedial writing, although I also teach composition and then creative writing. They are so brave, some of my inmate students. With almost no skills, clearly the victims of the worst kinds of educational neglect and abuse, they write. Faced with their courage, how can I not?

I have made a friend on the faculty, another part-time teacher who also writes. "Come on," she says. There is a group called Peninsula Writers, a group of Michigan teachers who write, and every summer they hold a week-long "retreat" at some cabins on Glen Lake. We can, she says, probably even convince the college to pay our way. After all, people who teach a skill ought to practice it. What have we got to lose? Our dean agrees, and we go. I am terrified. A whole week with no responsibilities except to write. What if I can't? What if I can and it's no good?

Our cabin is tiny, the beds narrow and lumpy and soft, the weather cold as I sit on our screened-in porch with a lined notebook. But I write. At the end of the week, I have written a story and a half. More important, I have a routine. When I go home, I write every morning until my daughter, a blessed night-owl like her father, awakens. By winter I have four or five stories. On good days, I even think they are publishable.
My teaching load grows; my daughter, starting school, begins to rise early; it is harder and harder to maintain a routine. Weeks slip away with nothing written. Everything, I fear, may be slipping away. I see an ad in *Poets and Writers* for a fellowship to Iowa State. My husband and I debate the possibilities, changing sides. Going to Iowa would mean a total disruption of our lives, but an M.A. is a chance at a way out of the exploitation of part-time teaching. And the fellowship is a chance to have a year to write. The deadline draws close. Go for it, my husband urges. What have I got to lose? I won't win anyway, I think.

But I do get the fellowship. The call comes while I am at the prison, getting ready for class. I am staring at the guard's brown shirt as I listen to the voice on the other end of the telephone line. "This is Neal Bowers at Iowa State University. The committee has just reached its decision, and we wanted you to know . . ." I stammer my thanks and hurry to class.

Everything changes. My father's paintings go into storage before my husband decides to stay in Michigan for the duration, and my daughter and I come to Ames. Where I write.

*****
I am, no mistake about it, my father's daughter. So I need to know. Am I, as I sit at this cardtable in my half-basement apartment writing, my father as he stood in our basement in Michigan, painting pictures of things he could only see in his mind's eye?

My father had, everyone agreed, a short fuse. An artistic temperament? He was quick to anger, but quick to forgiveness, too. Did he, someone asked me recently, see himself as a failed painter? Was that the spark that ignited his fuse? I don't know. He never said. We never, in our family, talked about ourselves. Cause? Or effect? "You children," my father once said, "don't know anything about my life."

I don't. I don't know if I will ever understand why my father gave up painting, how he could. Sometimes I am sure it was economics, pure and simple. Children, who he may or may not have wanted before they came, did come, and by his lights, his first duty was to provide for his family. Usually, I think it was more complicated. He was not the sort of man who could have easily done the things he would have had to do to be really successful, who could have said the right things to the right people, kissed the right asses. My mother, I think, would have been the perfect artist's wife, charming the right people with her intelligence and her cooking. Or did she push too hard? Perhaps
it all stressed their marriage too much. Perhaps my father wanted her to be able to be more than charming. Maybe his success wasn't big enough for him. Or maybe it was too big, came too soon, stood between him and the way he saw the world. Or perhaps (and I think this may be closest to the truth, but I will never know, except that it will never be this simple) -- perhaps his vision, the peculiar twist in how he saw the world, was just too painful and too scary. His best paintings are disconcerting, at the very least; something is askew.

I think I do know now why I stopped writing for so long. I call my silence by a lot of names. Sometimes I blame the university, and I am not entirely wrong when I do, for it endorsed my lack of courage. Literature, my professors told me, was something dead. Sometimes I blame my family; "if you can't say something nice, say nothing at all" is death to good writing. Sometimes I blame modesty, sometimes reticence, sometimes ego. Sometimes I blame my father, whose life told me art was something that could only be sacrificed or be sacrificed to.

But all I really have to blame, ultimately, is my own fear. Fear of failure, fear of success -- they're the same fear, really. To write and tell the truth is a dangerous and ugly business sometimes; you have to confront a lot in
yourself that is unlovely and unlovable. It's disconcerting, at the very least; something -- everything -- is askew.

Oh, yes, I am my father's daughter. I make no mistake about it. Yes, I am writing now. But every time the words don't come, every day that I don't write, every time I have to revise and I close my eyes and say, "I can't; I just can't," I am afraid. Afraid of being my father's daughter. Afraid of quitting again.

Now I look at my own daughter, who is about to turn nine. As a baby, Anneliese had my father's stare. She loves to draw, to paint, sometimes she even loves to write. I don't know what she will want to be when she grows up. But I never want her, thirty years from now, to sit in some apartment remembering a mother who said, in words or deeds, "I could never be a Sunday writer." The mother Anneliese knows, the mother she will remember, will write.

Three wooden buildings stand at the edge of a deserted dirt road. Two were once stores, their false fronts weathered, paint peeling. The third is a small house, its windows hidden behind the bare blackened branches of a twisted tree. Shadows loom; the wind whips the dark clouds into strange swirls overhead. Below the print, near the edge of the matting, the title is neatly lettered: Abandoned Childsdale. When I was a little girl, this picture terrified me; I thought that it was the place where abandoned children
were sent to live, and I was afraid to go there. Now, I go there all the time; it is where I most want to be.
THE APPLE OF HER EYE

After her doctor's appointment, Joan drove across town from the Medical Arts Building to the mall to pick up Robin. As she moved along with the surge of summer afternoon traffic, heavier than she'd remembered, she imagined her daughter asking what the doctor had said. "Oh," she could hear herself answering, her voice light, "it's no big deal. Nothing life-threatening." That part was true, and she felt sure she could say it easily enough. She thought she could even manage the awkward medical phrase of its name, chondromalacia of the patella, in an amused-sounding way; the very fact that its syllables were so cumbersome, so pompous and obscure, robbed them of power. No, it was the next part, the part where he'd explained that the backs of her kneecaps were degenerating, that seemed hard to Joan. "Degenerating." She tried the word out loud. She pictured cells, like big flakes of dandruff, sluffing off the dry bones of her knees. She knew that picture wasn't real since, in fact, it wasn't even bone but her cartilage that was breaking down, and Joan wasn't even sure she knew what cartilage looked like. But still she imagined loose cells, like the motes of light she sometimes saw when her eyes were closed,
and she felt a sudden chill that made her reach out and switch off the fan on the car's air-conditioner.

As she waited at the traffic light by the mall, she glanced at her wristwatch; she had five minutes before she was supposed to meet Robin in the food court. Joan had hoped there'd be time to run into Hudson's, to look for a shirt for Mark's birthday. But the doctor had been running typically late and then the pharmacy downstairs had been crowded, the lone pharmacist slow and deliberate. And now she was tapping her thumb impatiently on the steering wheel, waiting yet again. Finally the traffic light changed to a green arrow. Before Joan could move her foot to the accelerator, the driver behind her laid on his horn. Startled, she stomped on the gas, sending a quick jolt of pain through her knee, and her car jerked forward. As soon as she had crossed the street into the mall parking lot, the car behind peeled out to pass her, honking again. Joan looked at the grinning boys in the other car; she felt like giving them the finger; in fact, she was already raising her hand when she decided not to give them the satisfaction. Instead, she smiled and brought her fingers to her lips and blew them a big kiss. She saw the startled look on the sunburned face of the boy in the front passenger seat, and she laughed. As she searched for a parking place, she began to worry that one or another of those boys might be someone Robin knew.
Robin was late. Joan sat at a little white formica table in the food court and waited. She glanced at her watch and frowned; she'd have had time to go to Hudson's after all. She watched the children riding the big antique merry-go-round that stood behind a low white metal fence at the center of the food court; white horses and black ones, camels, a tiger, a panther, swirled by as the loud carousel music whirled in her head. Joan felt a little sick to her stomach and wondered if it was the noise or the pill she'd taken when she had her new prescription filled. Her knees were still aching, and she leaned forward and rubbed her knecaps. It didn't seem to help, and after a moment she dug her fingertips into her knees and then sat up straight. She scanned the crowds again, the little knots of teen-agers ordering fries, the mothers balancing trays and steering their small children toward tables, the pairs of old women in summer pastels, a lone older man clutching a bag from Sears and an ice-cream cone. This time, finally, she spotted Robin.

The girl was standing near the entrance to the food court, holding her packages against her chest and talking to a couple of boys Joan didn't recognize. The boys looked older than Robin's fourteen; in fact, one of them was twirl-
ing a set of car keys around his index finger. As Joan watched, Robin tossed her head and laughed, and one of the boys, the taller one with the slouchy shoulders, stepped closer and touched her arm just above the elbow. Joan saw her daughter glance down at the boy's hand and smile.

Joan jumped up, grabbed her purse and began weaving her way through the maze of little tables. "Robin!" she called, lifting her hand to catch her daughter's eye. She saw her daughter look at her, then turn back to the boys. She was saying something, and then both boys were moving away. The taller one, the one who had touched Robin's arm, turned back toward Robin and said something, and Joan watched as the girl waved her fingers at him and smiled a wide smile. Then Robin turned to Joan. Her face was smooth, her smile gone. "Oh, hi, Mom," she said.

"You're late," Joan heard herself saying before she could stop herself. She'd promised herself not to make an issue out of it.

Robin dropped her eyes to the floor. "Sorry," she said in a tone that made it sound like she wasn't sorry at all.

Joan shrugged. "No big deal," she said. "You want to get a Coke, or shall we get going?"

"Let's just go," Robin said. "I promised Amy I'd call her when I got home." Not waiting for a response, she turned and began walking. Joan watched her daughter's hips
moving beneath her jeans, her long legs swinging effortlessly, the joints moving as smoothly and easily as if they were lined not with cartilage but with warm water. Joan was sure the boys were beginning to love that walk. "Hey," she wanted to -- but did not -- call out, "my joints used to move like that too, you know." Robin walked a pace or two ahead all the way to the exit, as if Joan had nothing to do with her at all.

*****

They were half an hour out of the city, out of the traffic, and still about forty-five minutes from home, when Joan felt the car lurch a little and try to pull to the right. "Shit," she hissed through clenched teeth as she steered onto the gravel shoulder and braked. She sat for a moment with both hands gripping the steering wheel. "Shit," she said again.

Robin pushed the headphones of her walkman back from her ears. Turning off the engine, Joan caught the faint staticky pulse of her daughter's music. "What happened?" the girl asked.

"We've got a flat," Joan told her as she pulled the key from the ignition.

Robin rolled her eyes. "Way to go, Mom," she said.
Joan got out of the car and walked stiffly around to the passenger side. Someone in an Isuzu Trooper rolled by on the two-lane highway without slowing down as Joan braced herself and stooped to stare at the deflated black radial. Straightening, she looked around. On the other side of the ditch was a big open field scattered with daisies and harebells. At the back of the field stood a house with an old blue pick-up in the yard, but Joan could see an outdoor light was on. No help there, she thought; if anybody was home, the porch light certainly wouldn't be burning in the bright middle of the afternoon.

Robin climbed out of the car and came to stand next to her mother. She stared at the flat tire. "So now what?"

"So now we change the tire," Joan replied with more confidence than she really felt; it had been nearly twenty years since she'd changed a tire. But she moved to the back of the car, unlocked the trunk and folded back the carpeting that covered the spare-tire compartment. Ignoring a twinge in one knee, she heaved the tire out of the trunk and stood looking down at the jack. She had, she realized, no idea how to use it.

"Go in the glove compartment and get the owner's manual," she told Robin briskly, "and see what it says about jacking up the car." Meanwhile, she dragged the jack and a lug-wrench out of the compartment and set them on the gravel
next to the car. She watched an old woman in a big Buick cruise slowly past on the far side of the road.

"Here." Robin came back and thrust out the little blue owner's guide, then went to sit in the grass at the edge of the ditch. She'd slipped the earphones back into place.

Joan was standing next to the car, her knees locked, paging through the manual, when a red pick-up came over the rise in the road behind her. When it drew close, it slowed abruptly, veered onto the shoulder, and came to a stop just a couple feet from the trunk of Joan's car. It was an old truck, old but clean, and something was written across its front, where the hood turned down above the grille. But the white letters were painted in script, backwards, and Joan didn't have time to decipher them before the truck door opened and the driver stepped out.

He was a man of about thirty -- what Joan, since her fortieth birthday last fall, had found herself thinking of as a young man. He shoved his hands deep into the pockets of his faded jeans and smiled. "Need any help?"

Joan gestured toward her car with the hand that still held the owner's manual. "Flat tire," she said. "I'm trying to figure out how to use the jack."

"Let's have a look." The man hunkered down and inspected the tire. "No sweat," he said, pushing his dark blond hair back from his forehead. "We'll have you back on
the road in no time." He glanced around. "Here, just shove
that jack over here, would you?"

Joan bent awkwardly and pushed the jack across the
gravel. "Thank you for stopping to help," she said, brush-
ing dust from her hands.

Robin got up and walked over. She broke off a long
blade of grass and chewed on the end of it, watching the man
work the jack until the back corner of the car was clear of
the ground. "Who's that?" she asked in a low voice.

Joan didn't like her tone. "Someone who's being nice
enough to help us," she answered.

The man glanced up and wiped sweat from his forehead
with the back of his hand. Somehow the gesture reminded
Joan of someone in an old cowboy movie. "I'm Larry," he
said. "Larry Lukovic." He reached for the wrench and began
loosening the lug nuts. The tendons stood out on his fore-
arms like twists of rope beneath the skin.

"I'm Joan, and this is my daughter Robin."

Larry squinted up at the two of them. "Hey, Robin," he
said. The girl fiddled with the volume control on her
walkman and turned to walk away. Joan was trying to find
the words for an apology when Larry said, "Teen-agers." He
shook his head and grinned at Joan. "I got a niece and
nephew about that age. My sister says they're driving her
to an early grave."
Joan laughed. "Mark -- that's my husband -- well, he says I take it all too seriously."

He pulled off the damaged tire and replaced it with the spare. "Probably," he said. "It seems to me women take most things too much to heart." He was deftly cranking the lug nuts back into place, and he didn't look up. "Maybe it's just human nature."

Joan stood quietly and watched him finish tightening the nuts and then let the car back down. He stood up, picking up the jack in one hand and rolling the old tire around to the back of her car with the other. Joan opened the car door and took out her purse, then picked up the wrench and followed Larry. He stowed the tools neatly in her trunk, then lifted the tire and slung it in. "Now, look," he said, brushing off his hands on the seat of his jeans, "when you take that in to be fixed, you be sure and tell them to patch it, not to plug it. They'll try to tell you plugging's better, but the truth is, those plugs are apt to blow out of the tire on you just when you least expect it."

Joan smiled, trying to imagine when you would most expect it. "Patch, not plug," she said. "Thanks, I'll remember." She was opening her purse. "Now, let me give you a little something for your trouble." She wondered if ten dollars was too little.
Larry shook his head. "It wasn't any trouble," he said.

"But it would have been for me." Her hand was fumbling for her wallet. "Really, I'd like to pay you something."

He placed both hands on the trunk lid and pushed it shut. "Well, I tell you what." He turned and looked at Joan. His eyes met hers and he smiled, and she noticed that his smile went up higher on one side than the other. For some reason she liked that. "If you really want to pay me, you can buy me a beer."

Her fingers closed on her wallet and she looked down. "That doesn't seem like much," she said doubtfully as she pulled her billfold out of her purse.

He put out his hand to stop her. "No," he said, "I don't mean give me the money for a beer." He brushed away a deerfly that had settled on his arm. "I mean, come buy me a beer." He pointed with his thumb in the direction her car was facing. "There's a place about a mile and a half up the road. Roy's Tavern."

Joan was suddenly conscious of how hot the sun was and how narrow the space was where they stood between her car and his truck, and she reached up and touched the damp hollow at the base of her throat. "I . . . I don't know," she said. She felt her face flush. "I don't think -- "
She looked at her watch. "I mean, well, my husband will be expecting us, and --"

"Mother." Joan looked up to see Robin standing with one hand on the door handle and the other cocked against her hip. "Can we please go home? I mean, Mr. Whatever is finished, isn't he?"

At the "Mr. Whatever," Joan felt her shoulders stiffen. "Just a minute, Robin." She didn't look at Larry. "First," she said, "we're going to go buy Mr. Lukovic a beer."

"What? Mo-ther!" Robin yanked open the car door and flung herself inside. Joan walked around and climbed into the driver's seat. "God, Mom, what do you think you're doing? We don't know anything about that guy."

Joan swiveled the rearview mirror and looked at her reflection as she ran her fingers through her windblown hair. She saw the lines around her eyes, the strands of grey like highlights in her hair. She felt foolish for having thought, even for a brief moment, that there had been something special in the way the young man looked at her. "We know he was nice enough to help us," she said. "That's what we know about this guy." Robin groaned and slumped down in her seat. "And frankly," Joan added, feeling a twinge in her knee as she pressed on the accelerator and started up the car, "I think I could use a beer myself."
She heard Robin sigh. As she readjusted her rearview mirror before she shifted into Drive, she saw that she could read what was written across the front of the red truck behind her. “Lucky Larry,” it said. Joan laughed and pulled her car out onto the blacktop.

*****

Roy's Tavern was dim and fairly empty. The woman behind the bar had a portable radio tuned to a country station and was swishing a damp rag across the bar in time to the music. Joan had hesitated in the doorway, looking at Robin and remembering how awkward she'd have felt, walking into a bar at her age. She'd touched her daughter's arm then, about to suggest they turn back, but when Robin pulled away, Joan had stepped quickly inside. Now they sat at a wobbly little table, and Robin stirred the ice cubes around and around in her Coke with a straw while Larry and Joan talked. He told her he'd been out in Washington state, working in a sawmill, when he'd suddenly got homesick for Michigan. He was standing in the produce section of a supermarket, he said, looking at a big pyramid of Washington Delicious apples, thinking how beautiful and perfect they looked, like models of fruit. "But you know," he said, "when you bite into a Delicious, it just goes to mush in your mouth. And all of a sudden, I wanted an apple like we
used to pick in my uncle's orchard down near Paw Paw, all hard and crisp and tart and juicy. I was damn near drooling, right there in the supermarket, just thinking about it. So I just walked away from my grocery cart, went back and cleaned out my place, threw my stuff in the back of the truck and lit out for home." He smiled his crooked smile and picked up his Stroh's. "Sounds pretty ridiculous, doesn't it? Leaving a good job on account of some apples."

Joan told him it sounded kind of nice, actually. She reached for her glass of beer. Even though she was wondering if she really believed him, she thought she wanted it to be true. He told her he was working construction now, until something better turned up, and she talked a little about her own job, teaching second-grade, and about Mark, who taught American history at the community college and was working this summer as a faculty negotiator for the new master contract.

"Sounds like you've got some pretty smart genes there," he said to Robin with a wink. "You planning on being a teacher too?"

She shrugged and lifted the straw from her Coke, watching the drops that ran back into her glass. "Actually," she said, with a glance at her mother, "I think I want to be an architect."
"An architect? Really?" He shook his head. "That's really something, isn't it?" He looked across the table at Joan. "That's something to be proud of." Robin colored a little and picked up her glass.

Joan reached out and let her fingertips rest on the cool smooth base of her glass. "So," she asked, looking across the table at Larry, "have you visited your uncle's orchard since you got back?"

He shook his head. "No," he told her, "that's long gone. Uncle Len sold out to some developers years ago. It's all subdivided now, nothing left but a few of the old trees and the name. Orchard Estates."

"Oh." Joan sat back in her chair. "Oh, what a shame," she said, but he just shrugged and said, "Things change."

Joan nodded, and after a moment she took a sip of beer. They seemed to have run out of things to say. Robin was swirling her straw through her Coke again, and Joan watched the ice cubes going around. She thought of the days when she and Mark used to come to bars sometimes and she would nurse her gin and tonic, stirring the drink to release the sharp scents of juniper and quinine and lime. She remembered the sharp smell of rubbing alcohol in the doctor's office, remembered sitting on the crackly paper of the examining table that afternoon while the doctor explained that her joints were degenerating. Her eyelids fluttered,
and she pushed her beer away, even though it was not quite empty. "We really should get going," she said, starting to stand. Larry jumped to his feet. "I really want to thank you for your help," Joan told him. "I truly do appreciate it."

His voice was as formal as hers. "It was my pleasure." Then, with a slight lowering of his head, he added, "Ma'am." Joan felt slightly off-balance, and she smiled stiffly.

He started to walk them out. They were close to the door and Joan had just said, "Well, thanks again," when she heard Gordon Lightfoot's voice on the radio behind the bar, an old song she remembered from when she was in college. She stopped walking, caught for a moment in recollection, and when Larry looked at her with raised eyebrows, she hesitated. "I haven't heard this song in years," she said. She paused before she added, "I used to love this song." Without meaning to, she began to hum a little, remembering.

She felt Larry's fingers on her wrist. His fingertips felt hard and rough, warm against her skin. "Well, come on, then," he said. "Dance with me."

She saw him bending his head near hers and smiling; his eyes seemed very close to hers, the pupils large and very dark in the dimly-lit tavern. "Oh, no," she said, "I couldn't." She took a half-step backwards, but her shoulders were swaying a little to the song.
"One dance?" His fingers slid down her wrist to the back of her hand.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Robin standing with her back against the door frame. Joan pulled her hand back, away from Larry's touch, shaking her head. "We have to be getting home now," she said.

*****

By the time they got back to Roscommon, it was after six, so Joan stopped at the supermarket and bought cold chicken and salads for dinner. Mark met them at the back door. "Where were you?" he asked as he took the grocery bag from Joan. "I thought you said you'd be home about four?" He set the bag on the kitchen counter and turned to look at her. "I was starting to worry."

"I'm sorry, hon; I should have called," Joan told him. "We had a flat tire." She began lifting the plastic deli containers out of the bag, then moved to get some serving dishes from a cupboard.

"Yeah, Dad," Robin chimed in. "And then Mom was flirting with the guy that changed the tire."

Joan shut the cupboard with a bang. "I was not flirting with him," she said.
"Oh, yeah?" Robin turned and looked up at Mark. "Well, we went to some bar with him. After he changed the tire."

"Oh?" Joan saw Mark raise his eyebrows and lean back against the kitchen counter, his arms folded across his chest.

"It was nothing," Joan said quickly. She snapped the lid off the potato salad and began spooning it into a bowl. "This man in a pick-up stopped and changed the tire for us." She explained how he'd refused her offer of payment. "I guess he just didn't want to take money for being a Good Samaritan."

Mark nodded. "Yeah, it's sort of a matter of pride, I think." Robin sniffed and opened the icebox to get a can of soda. "But, so what's this about a bar?" Mark asked.

Joan walked past him with the bowl of potato salad and began stacking up the negotiating papers he'd strewn across the kitchen table. "Well, like I said, he wouldn't take any money. So finally," she tapped the stack of papers briskly against the table to straighten their edges, then looked across the kitchen at Mark and smiled, "he allowed as how we could buy him a beer. And, since I figured that's what you'd do if you'd been there," she stood up straight, her eyes on Mark's face, "that's what we did." She held out his papers. "Where do you want these?" she asked.
Mark's face relaxed, and he came to take the papers from her. "In my briefcase, I guess," he said. "Wherever that is."

Robin shut the icebox and looked from her father to her mother. "God, Mom," she said, pulling the tab on her soda can, "you know he was coming on to you."

"Robin," Joan snapped, "he was not -- " She heard herself putting quotation marks around the words -- "'coming on' to me. Not really." She began piling the pieces of supermarket chicken onto a plate. She glanced at Mark. "He must've been at least ten years younger than me. A construction worker or something." She smiled.

"He was so," her daughter insisted. "He was, Daddy." She set her can down with a thud on the counter. "And it was sickening. It was gross."

"Robin! That's enough!"

The girl snatched up the packages she'd bought at the mall and stormed out of the room. Joan started to take a step after her, then turned and leaned against the counter. Her knees were throbbing. After a moment, she looked up at Mark. "I am so damned tired," she said, "of feeling like I'm having one long bad first day of class with her."

Mark looked toward the doorway where Robin had vanished, then turned to look at his wife. "I know," he said. "I know."
After dinner, Robin went to a friend's house. Joan sat on the screened-in porch, going through catalogues of teaching supplies while Mark stretched out on the chaise, slowly sipping a glass of Scotch and watching baseball on the portable TV. Joan could hear the low murmur of the sportscasters' voices over the sound of the dishwasher in the kitchen. Occasionally the ice cubes clinked delicately in Mark's glass. Finally, when it became clear that the Tigers weren't going to do anything right that night, Mark stood up and switched off the set. "I'm going up and have a long hot soak," he said. When Joan murmured in reply, he looked down at her, half smiling, and carried his drink inside.

Joan finished filling out her order forms and put the catalogues aside. The dishwasher had stopped, and she could hear a light breeze set the poplar leaves whispering and a mourning dove calling in the woods behind their lot. She closed her eyes, breathing deeply, and thought she caught a hint of dampness beneath the sweet smells of grass and ferns and her night-blooming stocks; she wondered if it would rain, and she hoped Robin would get home before it did. Her knees were beginning to hurt again, but she spent a long time stirring and resettling her legs before she admitted to herself that she should go upstairs and take a pill.
It hurt to climb the stairs, and she grasped the banister with every step. She paused a moment at the top, then went down the hall to the bathroom. When she opened the door, the hot steamy air almost took her breath away.

Mark lay in the tub, his eyes half shut, every part of him submerged except his face and the top of his head and the hand that held his glass of Scotch. "Hi there," he said. His voice was low and sleepy. Languorous, Joan thought.

"Hi." She went toward the sink.

"Come to keep the old man company?" he asked. He shifted so that his shoulders rose out of the water.

She shook her head as she opened the medicine cabinet. "Come to take a pill." She'd told him at dinner about the doctor's diagnosis, and she'd found she'd even been able to say "degenerating" without stumbling over the word. In the tense shadow of Robin's mood and her own failure to call and tell Mark they'd be late, it hadn't seemed very important. Now she felt Mark watching her while she took out the bottle of pills and ran water into a cup.

"Is it bad?" he asked, and the concern she heard in his voice felt like someone taking hold of her hand.

"Not really," she said, and for the moment it felt true. "Not too bad." But she quickly popped a pill into her mouth and washed it down. And when she put the bottle
away, she stood for a moment leaning forward, letting one hand help support her. She stared at her hand, bent back against the door of the medicine chest, stared at the way the skin was loose and lay in tiny ripples, like an apple that had been left too long, forgotten, in a corner of the produce bin. "My God," she said, trying to keep her voice light as she turned to face Mark, "if I were an apple, I'd throw me on the compost heap."

Mark laughed softly and turned his head to look at her. "Oh, I don't know," he said. "I think there's some juice in the old girl yet." He lifted his drink toward her in a sort of salute. "Come on," he said, gesturing with his glass toward the thick bathmat on the floor by the tub, "come sit here and talk to me a while."

Joan remembered the soft deep warmth of the bathmat against her back, the times they'd made sudden, impatient love there. "I can't," she told him sharply, but when she saw his eyes flick away, she realized her pain was still an abstraction to him. "I'm sorry," she said quickly, and she glanced ruefully down at her legs. "But even if I could get down there -- which I doubt -- I'd never be able to get back up again." But he looked at her in a way that made her turn and shut the toilet lid and sit down carefully there. "Just for a few minutes," she said. She heard the water make a gentle sloshing sound as Mark moved a little in the tub.
She leaned forward. "You want to talk about the negotiations?" she asked him.

"No. Not really, no."

"Oh." Joan straightened.

"No, I mean it's okay." He waved one hand slowly through the bath water. "When I came home today, I was really feeling like I was in over my head, you know? But I've been thinking, and I think it's okay now. I really do."

She nodded.

"And it's not just the Scotch," he added. "It's -- oh, I don't know what it is. But it's okay."

"Good," she said. Then neither of them said anything. Joan could hear the birds outside the window and a soft rustle of leaves that made her think again of cells quietly falling away inside her knees. She sighed. "Listen, I'm sorry about today -- sorry you were worried."

"Forget it," he said. "It's over."

Joan looked down at her hands lying loosely in her lap. "That guy?" she said. "The one who changed the tire?" She paused a second, but Mark didn't say anything. "I suppose maybe he was kind of flirting a little, part of the time," she offered. She looked at Mark; his face seemed very still, shadowed. "But it was nothing."

"Okay," he said quietly.
Again they sat in silence. Mark took a sip of his drink. Joan shifted uncomfortably and thought about going back down to the fresh air of the porch. One hand circled round and round on her kneecap as she tried to think of something conciliatory to say.

"You know," Mark began then, and Joan leaned toward him, although she continued to rub her knee. "You've really got to go easier on Robin," he said.

Her hand froze in mid-circle on her knee. "I --"

"She's a good kid," he said. "We've done a good job." He laughed softly. "Dumb luck, probably, but you take what you can get." He sipped his Scotch.

"I guess she's a good kid." She sat up straight, inhaling slowly. "But --"

"But?"

"But I never get to see it anymore." Her throat felt dry and she swallowed. She didn't know if she could find the words to make him understand what she really meant. "It's never directed at me."

"Well, you know what they say about mothers and daughters."

"I don't give a damn what they say." She could feel her jaw tightening. "Damn it, Mark, it hurts me. It hurts."

"So take a pill -- "
She laughed. But when she said, "I wish I could," her voice cracked.

Mark sat up in the tub then and looked at her. "I know it's tough, Joanie. But we'll get through it."

She looked at his face and shook her head. Everyone's advice sounded so pat, even Mark's. And it all seemed to circle around the edge of what she really felt. It wasn't "getting through" that worried her. "I remember when she was a baby and we used to go in her room sometimes and just look at her. Just the wonder and the -- oh, the possibility of her. I loved her so much." She pressed her hand against the base of her throat. "Now -- hell, now, half the time I don't even like her." Her palms and her scalp were sweating. She couldn't believe she'd actually said it. "I feel like such a terrible mother."

"You're not a terrible mother." Mark's voice sounded so reasonable and earnest it seemed to go right through her. Why didn't she believe him?

"Maybe." It was all she could think to say.

"You know you're not." He ran a hand over his wet hair. "If you'd just back off a little -- "

"Oh, you," she snapped. "You make it sound so easy."

"Oh, come off it, Joan," he said, his voice suddenly harsh. "Grow up. -- I'm not saying it won't be hard; I'm just saying it's something you've got to do."
She felt her shoulders sag. For a moment she sat very still, feeling her chest rise and fall with each breath. "Maybe," she said again. When she saw him start to open his mouth, she suddenly knew she didn't want to hear what he had to say. "Oh, hell, Mark," she added hurriedly, "I don't know. I just want things to be -- different."

"They will be," he said. "Remember that: they will be." He leaned back and let his shoulders rest against the back of the tub again. "But try to go easy on her, would you?" He turned his head and looked at her again. "And go a little easy on yourself while you're at it."

Because she couldn't think what else to do, Joan laughed at that, just a little. She sat quietly then, breathing in the close humid air. Outside, the light was beginning to fade; the dove started up again, then silenced. Finally Joan took hold of the edge of the vanity and pulled herself up to her feet. "I think I'll just go sit on the porch for a while," she said. She had just started to move when the back door slammed; instinctively she felt herself tensing a little. "There's Robin," Mark said, and she nodded.

"Just remember -- " He reached up and brushed her wrist with his wet fingers as she walked past the tub, and she nodded again, but she didn't look down at him, and for a moment what she remembered was the feel of Larry's rough
fingers that afternoon, his voice suggesting it was still possible for her to dance.

She had just reached the landing when Robin started up the stairs. "Hi, Mom," the girl said, pausing a step or two below her mother. "It's starting to rain," she said, "so I put the cover on the grill."

Joan blinked. "Thanks," she said. She tried to keep her voice as light as Robin's had been, but she couldn't keep from saying it a second time. "Thanks."

Robin shrugged. "It's okay." She hurried on past her mother, moving easily up the stairs. "G'night," she said over her shoulder.

"Night." Joan gripped the railing and went on down the stairs.

*****

She sat on the porch for a long time after Mark had gone to bed, listening to the rain in the poplars, feeling the night air growing damper and cooler. The shapes of sheltering moths made dark-winged shadows on the screens up under the eaves. The cool breeze began to raise goose bumps on her arms.

Finally she got up and walked through the dark house to the stairs. She wondered what would happen if she went back to Roy's Tavern and asked Larry Lukovic why he was called
Lucky Larry. She wondered what would happen if she really let herself get angry with her daughter. She wondered what would have happened if she had just climbed into the bathtub with Mark. She knew she wouldn't -- couldn't -- really do those things; she knew they were just the things a person thought of while she did the things she had to do. Her hand closed tightly over the curved top of the banister, and she thought she would make French toast with cinnamon for breakfast. Robin and Mark loved French toast with cinnamon.
AN UNDERSTANDING

"Does this salad taste funny?" Rachel's father asked. She felt her stomach tighten, and she laid her table knife as quietly as she could across the edge of her dinner plate. She was twelve years old, and she tried to sit up straight as she glanced sideways at her father's drawn brow and then followed his eyes to her mother's face at the foot of the table.

Her mother looked very calm as she swallowed a bite of fish. "It tasted all right to me, George," she said easily.

Rachel's eyes shifted back to her father, and she saw him press his lips together and heard him sigh through his nose. "It's bitter," he said. "Taste it again, Ellen."

Her mother's sigh was more audible as she stabbed her fork into her wooden salad bowl, piercing lettuce and cucumber. Rachel bit the inside of her lip as she watched her mother lift the fork to her mouth. She could feel the intensity of her father's gaze as her mother slowly, deliberately chewed. "No," her mother finally said, setting down her fork and looking across the table at her husband's expectant face. "It seems just fine to me, dear. Unless it was the tomato?"
"It's not fine; it's bitter." Rachel's father's face flushed. "And I'm not talking about the tomato. You know I'm not talking about the tomato." He struck his plate with the tines of his fork as he spoke. "It's either the lettuce or the dressing."

Rachel saw her mother draw her chin in a little against her chest. "It is," she said in a measured tone, "exactly the same lettuce and the same dressing we ate last night. It's just the same, dear."

His other hand slapped the table flatly, rattling the silverware and the ice in the water glasses, and Rachel startled. She tried to stare down at her plate, at the rice and roll and asparagus, and the paprika-flecked whitefish fillet, but her eyes stole toward the head of the table again. "Just the same, is it?" he said, laying down his fork. "Then I must be crazy." He leaned forward over his plate, glaring at his wife. "I must be crazy, is that it? Old crazy George again. Is that it? Is it?" His fists clenched. "Are you saying I'm crazy?"

Her mother's voice was soft and gentle, the voice Rachel especially remembered from the time she'd broken her collarbone falling off her bike two years ago. "I didn't say you were crazy, George. All I said was that the salad tasted fine to me."
"But you mean I'm crazy." He turned in his chair. Again he slammed the table, this time with his fist, and again, Rachel jumped. This time she jarred her plate; her knife jangled off the rim and clanged against the earthenware. Her face grew feverish as she felt both her mother's and father's eyes turned toward her.

"Rachel -- " her father said, and she ducked her head. He turned in his chair again, facing her with his whole body. "Rachel," he said, his voice becoming lower, slower, quieter, as he leaned forward and rested his arms on the table between them. "Is your salad bitter, Rachel?"

She closed her eyes and licked the middle of her upper lip. "Well, Rachel?" she heard him say. She took a deep breath. "I don't -- I don't know," she mumbled, and she heard him snort.

"It's not that difficult a question, really, Rachel," he mocked, and the back of her neck tingled and her eyes felt precariously hot. "Does it taste bitter, or does it taste 'just fine'?"

"Don't, George," her mother said, but her father said again, "Well, Rachel?"

She managed to look into his face for a moment. "I don't know, Dad," she said once more, and she hated the desperation she heard in her own voice, a match for his.
"Then taste it again," he said through closed teeth. She felt her hand reach, slowly, for her fork.

"George -- " Her mother's voice had a rising inflection, warning, but Rachel was already sliding her fork under a ruffled piece of pale green lettuce and a darker sliver of pepper. She shoved them into her mouth, feeling her father's stare, forcing back a gag as she felt the gritty slipperiness of lettuce and dressing against her teeth and tongue, then the waxen crunch of green pepper. She choked them down and reached quickly for her glass, gulping water.

Before she could put down her empty glass, her father was asking, "Well, Rachel? How does your salad taste?"

The glass slid the last quarter-inch through her damp hand to the table. "I -- I think it tastes like always, Dad," she said, glancing toward her mother and seeing the lines in her forehead smooth away for an instant.

"Jesus Christ!" He pushed his chair violently back from the table and stood up. "Jesus H. Christ!" He looked up at the ceiling, then back at the food on the table. "So I am crazy, huh?" He snatched his salad bowl off the placemat. "Now you're ganging up on me, you and your mother, to tell me I'm crazy?" He looked from Rachel to her mother. "I might have known she'd side with you against me." He nodded fiercely. "You're quite a team," he said. "Quite a pair."
Her mother sighed and rubbed her forehead with one hand. "George," she murmured. "If it tastes funny to you, don't eat it." She sighed again and shook her head. "Just don't eat it. But sit down and eat your dinner, please, George."

He stood, holding the bowl as if he wanted to throw it. "'If it tastes funny, don't eat it,'" he mimicked. "Sweet Jesus, Ellen. Don't humor me. I will not be humored."

Rachel felt frozen, watching. He walked around the counter that divided the dining area from the kitchen, jerked open the cupboard door under the sink and slowly dumped his salad into the trash bin. "Don't tell me I'm crazy; don't tell me I'm imagining things." He turned to face the table. "And most of all, don't humor me, you bitch." He slammed the cupboard shut with his foot, so hard that the door bounced back open again. Then he threw the bowl at the kitchen window. The spider plant on the sill tipped, wobbled and cracked into the sink. For a moment he stood by the sink, looking down at the mangled leaves. Potting soil crumbled through his fingers when he tried to lift the plant, and he turned toward the dining room again. His eyes blinked, and something in the way he looked at them made Rachel feel he was looking at people he didn't recognize, strangers. She looked away, toward her mother, and tightened her jaw. When she faced her father again, his
shoulders were slumped and his head had drooped forward. He walked past the table into the living room, to the foot of the stairs. "I'm going to bed now," he said leadenly.

Rachel watched her mother cover her face with her hands, and she listened to the slow heavy footsteps climbing the stairs. Tentatively she reached out her hand, gently touching her mother's arm just above the elbow. "Don't cry, Mother," she whispered.

Her mother took her hands from her face. "George, honey, please -- " she called, starting to stand.

"No, Mother, don't," Rachel pleaded. "Let him go."

Her mother looked down at her. "You don't understand, Rachel," she said. "You don't understand at all. Maybe someday, when you're grown up, you will." She shook her head. "But don't even think you understand, because you don't." She turned, and Rachel sat shivering, watching her walk toward the stairs.
There was something he ought to be doing, but he couldn't think what it was. Walter looked at the little brass ship's clock on the bookshelf and tried to remember how long he'd been sitting on the couch, just sitting there, but he couldn't. Long enough for his joints to stiffen, that much he knew. Then he had to look at the clock again because already he'd forgotten what time it said. Sunlight slanted in through the picture window, highlighting the arrangement of yellow and white tulips next to the stack of library books on the coffee table in front of him, the one bouquet they'd brought home. Walter blinked at a few dust motes caught in the lines of daylight and tried to think.

Maybe it was something in the kitchen. He put his hands on his knees, feeling the thin fabric of his summer suit pants beneath his palms, and gradually straightened up from the couch. His knees ached as they took his weight, but he barely noticed. Now what? Oh, yes, the kitchen.

The kitchen was clean, quiet except for the soft hum of the refrigerator. A foil-covered pan of coffee cake and a plate of Saran-wrapped oatmeal cookies sat on on the counter in front of the microwave. He wasn't hungry, but his mouth had the thick nasty taste he associated with waking up from
afternoon naps, even though he hadn't been sleeping. He took a glass from a cupboard, then opened the icebox. On the shelf above all the foil-wrapped casseroles, behind the pitcher of kool-aid he'd made for his granddaughters, was the old wine carafe Virginia used for ice water; he took it out, filled his glass and gulped it down. As the cold water moved down his throat, he felt goosebumps rise on his arms beneath the sleeves of his white broadcloth shirt. He looked around the clean quiet room again. Not the kitchen. What, then? There had to be something.

On his way back through the living room, he checked the thermostat, squinting to adjust the little lever so the air-conditioning wouldn't feel quite so chilling. Then, with one hand on the banister, he slowly climbed the stairs. The carpeting absorbed the sound of his footsteps, but near the top one stair gave its characteristic creak. He always told Virginia it was really the sound of his knees protesting the climb, and she always smiled when he said it.

At the end of the upstairs hallway, the door to their bedroom stood open, and as he walked toward it, he caught the sound of his daughters' voices, a pleasant, memory-laden, meaningless rise and fall. He started forward, then stopped, feeling a constriction in his chest as he let the sound carry him back for a moment to the days when the girls both lived here, in this house, with them.
"I don't remember this bracelet, do you?" The sounds asserted themselves as words, Meg's clear voice. "'My darling, I love you,'" he heard her say, and his eyes suddenly felt hot and very dry. Closing them quickly, he could see the little cheap silver bracelet that must be lying in Meg's soft firm palm, his first anniversary gift to Virginia. He could picture it so clearly, he could almost feel himself holding the light silvery circle in his fingers. He remembered laying it, unwrapped, on Virginia's dinner plate where it would surprise her when she'd finished cooking dinner in the cramped little closet of a kitchen in their apartment in married student housing. Thirty-eight years ago . . . but the brief memory was so vivid that for an instant he was startled when he heard the low answering murmur of Sarah's voice and discovered he was still standing in the middle of the upstairs hall.

He stopped in the bedroom doorway and looked in at his two daughters. Meg was perched on the edge of the bed, one leg folded beneath her, still wearing her dark linen dress. Sarah had already changed into jeans; she sat cross-legged on the quilted bedspread, leaning forward across the open red-leather jewelry box to look at the bracelet her sister held out to her. A spill of bright beads and earrings glittered on the spread, and for a moment Walter saw their
little-girl faces again as they tried on their mother's jewelry and make-up.

It was Sarah who noticed him first, just as her fingers were closing on the silver bracelet in Meg's outstretched palm, and he could see her face grow suddenly soft and worried when she looked up and saw him standing on the threshold. It was the same look of terrible interest and concern all their friends had worn at the services that morning. He watched Sarah's back straighten as her eyes searched his face, and although he clenched his teeth, he was careful to smile at her. "Oh, Daddy," she said, and her use of the old childish name made him fearful of just how much of his loss he must have let them see.

Before she or her sister could say anything solicitous, Walter nodded his head toward the bracelet. "That was your mother's first anniversary present," he said. He could see the small flowers that twined around the thinly-etched lettering. "She only wore it once, because it was so cheap it turned her wrist green for a week." He really smiled then, remembering how Virginia had tugged her sweater sleeve down to try to cover the stain. "I had no idea she'd kept it all these years." Despite himself, he heard his voice thicken, and he saw the two girls -- women now -- look at each other.
"Are you sure," Meg asked, "you don't want us to wait and sort this stuff out later?" Although she turned her face toward him as she spoke, he saw her glance slide toward the beguiling brightness of the jewelry heaped on the bedspread.

"No," he said, and he was dismayed to hear how angry he sounded. He inhaled sharply. "No," he tried again. "I want it done now." But, although he managed to make his voice milder, he found he had to turn his back and leave the room.

He stood in the dim hall again, looking at his wrist-watch and trying to figure out what he should be doing. It was nearly time to take some more Empirin for his damned arthritis. He could hear Meg and Sarah whispering in the bedroom. Then their voices began to rise to a more normal level again. "The pearls and the opal ring should go to your girls," he heard Sarah saying, "but I'd really like to have this bracelet -- if that's okay?" Then, in a moment, "Did you ever see Mother wear this?" Meg's voice asked. He was smiling as he stepped into the bathroom to take his pills. He couldn't wait to tell Virginia how the girls were enjoying going through her things. She'd get such a kick out of it.

He was reaching for the bathroom glass when he remembered that he couldn't tell Virginia, that in fact if he
could tell Virginia, they wouldn't be here, in this house, sitting on her bed, sorting through her things. Suddenly his knees felt not painful but weak, and he pushed the bathroom door shut, then flipped down the toilet lid and quickly sat down. His throat tightened painfully. He couldn't tell Virginia. He pressed the heels of his hands hard against his closed eyes, pressed and rubbed until he saw swirls of cloudy light, but he could not make himself cry. He didn't know how long he sat there, but after a while he became conscious of the sharpness of his elbows bearing down against the bones above his knees. He began to feel ridiculous, an old man sitting on a toilet in a dress shirt, trying to will himself to cry. He thought Virginia would laugh at him, though not unkindly, if he told her. Taking a long steadying breath, he stood then and went to the medicine cabinet for his Empirin.

When he came out of the bathroom, he could hear sounds downstairs, and he realized Meg's friend must have brought the grandchildren back. He hesitated in the hallway for a moment, listening to the childish voices, before he turned and moved to the staircase. In the living room, he found that Meg had come downstairs and was listening to the little girls tell about their day. Actually, it was six-year-old Lucy who was doing all the talking; her younger sister Ginger was sitting on the couch swinging her thin legs and
watching. "And there were lambs we could pet," Lucy was saying. She looked up at her mother. "But I've seen lambs before. I've never seen a funeral though. Why couldn't I go see a funeral?" Meg looked at Walter apologetically, but he shook his head.

"I told you, Lucy," Meg said. "Funerals aren't for fun. Grown people feel very sad at a funeral, and they don't want to make the children sad too."

"But I felt sad 'cause I couldn't come," Lucy insisted, and Walter heard her mother's exasperated sigh. "Who wants kool-aid?" Meg asked, and the diversion worked; Lucy ran into the kitchen, followed by her mother and her younger sister.

Walter stood alone in the middle of the living room, looking around the neat quiet room. Balancing himself with one hand against the back of a chair, he leaned down stiffly to pick up the stuffed elephant one of the little girls had dropped on the rug. As he put the toy on the coffee table, he noticed the library books. Virginia's library books. He hesitated a moment, then picked them up, feeling the clear heavy plastic that covered their bright jackets crackle in his hands. The square tip of a bookmark stood out between the pages of the top book, and without thinking, he opened it and stared at the dark type of a chapter heading. She hadn't even finished reading it. Angrily, he pulled out the
marker and snapped the book shut. He was shaking, just a little, and for a moment he lifted the books as though he wanted to fling them across the room. But instead he took a deep breath and waited for the feeling to pass. As he lowered his arms, he realized that here, at least, was something he could do. Gripping the books tightly in both hands, he took another long breath and walked to the kitchen. "I'm going to take your mother's books back to the library," he told Meg.

"Sarah or I could -- " she began to offer, but he cut her off with a sharp shake of his head.

"Can I come?" Lucy asked, lifting a red-kool-aid-rimmed mouth from her plastic glass. Walter shifted his grip on the books and tried to think of the right words for his refusal. "I don't think -- " Meg was beginning. But then Walter noticed the clock on the microwave. It wasn't even quite three yet; there was still a lot of the afternoon to fill up. His eyelids fluttered as he suddenly realized how much time there would be, now, to fill up. He pressed his dry lips together. Then, "Sure," he said, hoping his voice sounded natural. "Maybe we could go to the park afterwards."

"Are you sure, Dad?" Meg asked, and he nodded.

"Please, Mom -- " Lucy began.
"Come on, chickens, wipe your mouths and we'll go,"
Walter said.

He was lucky and found a parking place near the library, half a block from the town park. The children were out of the car and waiting on the sidewalk before he'd swung his legs out awkwardly and pulled himself to his feet, and his back twinged as he bent to get the books out of the back seat. Then he squeezed Ginger's warm little fingers in his, while Lucy held onto her other hand, and he clutched the library books against his chest as they waited to cross the street.

Safely across, they climbed the concrete steps, still holding hands. He could see their reflection in the glass of the library door as they drew near, and he stopped a moment, surprised to see how normal he looked. Through the glass, beyond their reflection, he could see a young woman struggling to manage a stroller and a toddler and a carry-all; he let go of Ginger's hand and stepped forward quickly, feeling his shoulder protest as he pulled the heavy door open and held it. "Let the lady through, honey," he said to hold Lucy back as she started to dart forward, and the child waited, shifting her weight from one sneakered foot to the other.
The woman smiled at Walter as she maneuvered the stroller across the doorsill. "Thanks," she said. "I keep wishing they'd put in one of those automatic doors." His cheeks felt stiff as he tried and failed to return her smile, and he nodded, not saying anything.

"Come on, Grandpa," Lucy was saying, but the tightness in his face made him feel then that he couldn't go inside. He knew he couldn't face a greeting from one of the friendly librarians at the check-out desk when he handed over Virginia's books, couldn't give an answer to the familiar "How's it going?" or the smiling "How'd you like them?"

He let go of the door handle, let it swing slowly shut. Taking a deep breath and straightening his spine, he looked down at his granddaughters. "Let's not waste this nice weather," he said. He pointed at the big red metal book return box. "Let's just put the books right in here." He pulled it open like a mailbox and laid the books on its tray. "This way we can go straight to the park," he told them, and with a shout, Lucy bounded back down the steps to the sidewalk. Ginger waited with him while he clanged the box shut, and he heard the books fall with a hollow echoing thud before he took hold of her hand and carefully started back down the library steps.

In the park, Walter sat on a bench and watched as Lucy and Ginger swung on the swings and slid down the slide and
climbed on the play fort. After a while, Ginger came and sat down beside him, her four-year-old legs sticking out straight in front of her. "Are you tired, chicken?" he asked, and she shook her head, then nodded. He smiled as she leaned warm against his side. "Pretty soon Lucy'll be tired, too," he said. "And then we'll go." She nodded again and they sat quietly together.

"Know what, Grandpa?" she said after a while, her voice serious. He turned to look into her small face.

"No. What, honey?" he asked her.

"My Grandma's dead," she said. He pulled back a little, recoiling from the levelness of her small voice. He looked down into grey eyes that caught flecks of green from the leaves of the trees in the park around them, and he saw that they were Virginia's eyes. "I know, chicken," he said. "I know." His own eyes stung with tears then, and she reached up and touched his cheek. She was looking up at his face and then down at her wet fingers, and her eyes were Virginia's eyes.
"You know what I dreamed last night?" Fran asked Kevin, deftly twisting a section of her hair around the curling wand and holding it in place beside her temple. It was their third anniversary.

Kevin held the toothbrush still inside his left cheek for a moment. "Uh-uh, what?" he said around a mouthful of minty white foam. Leaning forward, he spat into the sink, then shifted the toothbrush to the back of his mouth on the other side and resumed scrubbing.

"I dreamed," she said as she released the curl and began quickly winding another lock of hair, "that you brought home a macaque."

He turned on the cold water full blast, rinsed his mouth, winced as the icy water hit a sensitive spot, and spat again. Rewetting his toothbrush, he rubbed it gently against the tender area, then checked the bristles for traces of blood. They were clean. He rinsed again, grimaced again, and filled a glass with water to wash away the residue of toothpaste and saliva from the glossy white porcelain of the sink. When he looked up, he met Fran's eyes in the mirror. She was holding her hairbrush, waiting. "Why a macaque?" he asked.
"I don't know. It's some kind of monkey." She bent forward to brush her hair from underneath. The back of her arm brushed against his side, and he stepped quickly away, his tongue probing along his gumline. "I know it's some kind of a monkey," he snapped. His tongue found the gap where his filling had fallen out, and he inhaled sharply as he felt a sudden throb. The damned tooth was going to bother him all day.

He reached up, slid open the medicine cabinet, and pulled down the aspirin bottle as Fran straightened and began brushing her short curls back from her face. He missed the long generous sweep of her hair before she'd cut it, and as he shook three white tablets into his palm, he thought again how sharp and pinched her nose looked. Her lips, pressed tightly together as she concentrated, looked thin, stingy. He gulped down the chalky pills.

"Anyway," she said, crowding against him to check her make-up in the mirror once more, "I don't know how I knew it was a macaque, but it was." He was moving away toward the doorway as she pinched a tiny clot of mascara from her corner lashes. "And you just brought it home here, without even asking. Without even telling me." She plucked a tissue from the box on the vanity. "I mean, you just walked in and set it down on the floor like it was nothing. Nothing at all." She was wiping her fingertips on the kleenex
as she followed him into the bedroom. "What do you think it means?"

"How should I know?" He watched the white tissue fall from her fingers and drift down onto the carpeting next to the wastebasket. He dropped onto the edge of the bed and began pulling on his shoes. "What do you think it means?"

She shrugged, tilting her head to one side. "I don't know." She pulled open the top dresser drawer and began fishing out a pair of pantihose; they caught on something in the drawer and then snapped loose, arcing through the air like some absurd black banner, and she laughed. "Maybe," she said, turning to look at him for a moment, "it means you don't love me anymore."

He paused, hands on his shoelaces. The whole side of his face was pulsing. "You dream that I do something you don't like, and that means I don't love you?"

She laughed again. Perching on the other corner of the bed, she began scrunching up one leg of her hose. "Well, you know, maybe I dreamed you'd do something that major without consulting me -- " she slid her toes in and began unrolling the stocking up one slender calf -- "because I sense that you want to do things without discussing them?"

He pressed his palm hard against the side of his jaw, rubbing slowly to counteract the pain. "That's nuts."
She wriggled her toes into the other stocking foot. "Well, all right, then; what do you think it means?"

He yanked his shoelaces tight, tied the knot and pulled hard again. "How the hell do I know?" he asked. Angrily he formed the loop, wrapped the other end around it and made the bow. He tried to think of the most far-fetched interpretation he could. "Maybe it means you want to have a baby."

She was standing now, working the pantihose up under her dark skirt, bending her knees to help stretch them into place, and she paused in mid-squat. "A baby? Where'd you get that?"

He watched as she awkwardly twisted and flexed her legs, smoothed her hands along them, then rearranged the waistband at the top of her flat stomach. It looked, he thought, like she was performing some sort of ugly modern dance. "Well, monkey -- small animal that looks kind of like a person; baby -- small person -- " He looked at the familiar curve of her hip sheathed in hazy black nylon and felt no desire.

Fran slid her feet into black flats. "A baby -- that's ridiculous," she told him. She didn't laugh.

He stood, went to the closet for his suitcoat. "Well," he plunged one arm into a sleeve, "it's your dream, Franny. Don't ask me." He tugged at his cuffs, then glanced at his
watch. "Shit, we're running late." Crossing to the door, he stooped to pick up her discarded kleenex between his thumb and forefinger, depositing it neatly in the wastebasket where it belonged.

Downstairs, he gulped the cold remains of his coffee and wedged the empty mug into the dishwasher rack while she scooped up the folder of papers she'd been grading the night before and dropped it into her book bag. He grabbed his briefcase, held open the door for her, turned the key in the lock behind them. "Happy anniversary, sweetheart," she said, her voice low; she laid her hand flat against his chest for just a moment before she climbed behind the wheel of her car. As he started up his own car and backed it out of the driveway behind hers, he realized the aspirin had finally begun to kick in; it hadn't hurt when she'd pressed her quick kiss against the side of his jaw.

By eleven, his jaw had begun throbbing again and he'd known it would be impossible to eat any lunch. The numbers on the trust report in front of him had become a blur. He dreaded the thought of their anniversary dinner, feeling sure he wouldn't be able to chew a bite. But his dentist had agreed to see him during her lunch hour, and he'd arranged to leave the bank for the day. Now, laid back in the
leatherette dental chair with a white napkin clipped around his neck, he stared up at the ceiling at a Sierra Club poster of waves foaming around granite rocks off the coast of Maine; he felt his pain begin to subside into blessed numbness as the novocaine started to take effect. One cheek and half of his lips seemed to be growing impossibly large, and then suddenly it felt like they had disappeared.

The two women, the dentist and her assistant, talked together as they worked, talked as if he weren't even in the room, and he let the rhythm of their voices and the soft background of an FM jazz station lull him until his eyelids drooped. Even the whine of the drill and the tugging of steel picks and probes seemed somehow distant and removed, a part of his reverie. The dentist's voice sounded far away, as if she were in the next room working on some other patient. "We're going to need more amalgam," he heard her say. "So, was he surprised, Monica?"

The assistant laughed. "He loved it," she said.

Monica said. Monica -- it was, he thought, a pretty name. Her voice was pretty, too, surprisingly pretty for such a plain woman, and Kevin thought it was a voice that would make her seem beautiful in the dark.

"But didn't it hurt?" he heard the dentist ask as he felt the gentle pressure of filling material being forced into his tooth. "I'd be afraid the needle would hurt."
"Not really, not much." He heard the rattle of tools on Monica's tray. "Just pinpricks at first, and then not even that. I guess I must have gotten used to it." Again her soft laugh. Gradually he realized that the two women must be talking about a tattoo. His eyes opened and he looked at Monica's face, broad and strong-jawed behind her clear plastic protective shield. He saw that her breasts were very close as she leaned toward him with a little strip of blue paper; if he shifted just a little, he saw, he could brush his arm against them, as if it were an accident. He held himself very still. "Just bite down normally," she told him. He clamped his teeth against the paper, moved them side to side when she told him to. Her breasts looked full and curving, heavy, beneath her pastel smock, and he pictured a small red rose, intricately petalled, its stem curving to point the way to the larger rose of a nipple. He felt his face grow hot and he squeezed his eyes shut again. He tried to recapture the dreamy feeling of the music and the women's voices, but it was gone.

Then they were done; Monica was unfastening his bib and his dentist was tearing a prescription for Tylenol with codeine from her pad. "You may not even need it," she told him. "But get it filled just in case. We were awfully close to the nerve." As his chair hummed its way slowly back upright, Monica's feet came into view, and he felt a
small quick rush of disappointment when he saw the little
tattooed circlet of hearts between the cuff of her white
pantleg and the top of her white shoe. He blinked. They
would never, he realized, have been talking in front of him
about anything as intimate as he had imagined. He managed a
small clumsy novocained smile as he swung his legs out of
the chair.

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The bottle of Tylenol rattling in his pocket, he walked
up the strip mall sidewalk from the pharmacy to the florist
and bought Fran the bouquet she'd be expecting, a bouquet of
white gardenias like she'd carried at their wedding, with
three blood-red roses for their anniversary. Later that
night, after they'd eaten their anniversary dinner of trout
and salad, after he'd followed her upstairs to their bedroom
and watched her put on her new nightgown for him and slip it
off again, he would begin to imagine a small red rose. But
even as he leaned down to kiss her, the rose would change
shape and begin to rearrange itself into the small face of a
monkey, its long tail curving down, down, and circling her
breast.
ARE YOU LONESOME TONIGHT?

"Look out for that deer -- " Gloria's hand flashed out to grasp the steering wheel, but Dan pushed it away and jerked the pick-up back across the center line, away from the reflected light of animal eyes. "Why the hell can't you slow down?" she snapped.

"Relax, Glo. I saw it in plenty of time," he said. His hand reached down and found the beer can propped between his thighs; with thumb and two fingers he circled the damp smoothness of the aluminum, distractedly stroking its silky coolness for a moment; then his grip tightened, he brought the can to his lips and drained the last swallows of beer.

"You're going too damn fast, and you can't even stay in your own goddamn lane." He could hear his wife's voice rising in pitch. "Don't you think maybe you've had enough to drink?"

He tossed the empty can onto the floor of the cab and pulled his foot back from the accelerator, watching the speedometer needle drop back to fifty-five, then forty-five, thirty-five; when it reached fifteen, he eased his foot back to the pedal, holding the truck steady at that speed. "This slow enough for you, Glo?" he asked.
He heard her sigh and shift her weight on the vinyl seat. Jesus but she's being tight-assed tonight, he thought, clenching his hands on the steering wheel, glancing at her rigid outline in the dark cab. What the hell's the matter with her lately, anyway? Miss High-and-Mighty, Miss Fridigaire. He focused on the road ahead, watching the curving blacktop flow under his headlights, under the truck, as if the roadway were moving instead of themselves, and gradually he felt his hands relaxing. The truck's speed began to climb again.

His thoughts slid back to the bowling alley, what Gloria had called his "boys' night out," Eddie and Buck and him, drinking beers and strutting a little for the ladies at the bar, sighting the ball just a little longer than necessary, quickening the three steps to the line, sharpening the gesture -- pow! the quick jerk up and in of the right fist -- as the heavy black ball rang against the pins. Man but he had been hot tonight -- three strikes and six spares in the last game, even picking off that tricky split in the last frame. Why, even Eddie, who had once tried out for the pro tour, had been impressed. And that redhead at the bar, the one with the furry white sweater and all the fruit salad in her drink -- Almost unconsciously, he tensed muscles, drawing in his stomach, just as he had, consciously, when he'd turned and seen her watching him. He wondered how that
sweater would feel, soft and warm against his fingers proba-
bly, oh, yes, nice. He felt his body responding again, as it had at the lanes, looking at the downy knit stretched across the redhead's chest, hearing again her lush voice -- Again he glanced at the passenger side of the pick-up. Yeah, Gloria would look pretty darn good in a sweater like that herself; she could certainly fill a sweater all right. He slid forward in the seat a little, trying to ease into a position where his jeans didn't pull so tightly against his crotch.

He thought he heard Gloria make a soft little catching sound in her throat, and somehow it reminded him of how she'd sound when she'd been laughing, laughing hard -- those irrepressible little gasps as she brought herself back under control, like after he'd tickled her until she had to wipe tears from the corners of her eyes. Jesus, how long had it been since he'd made her laugh like that?

"You all right, Hon?" His voice came out low and gentle. She didn't answer, but he could hear her fingers fidgeting against the seatcover. He slipped his right hand over and brushed hers lightly with his fingertips. "You should've come bowling with us, Glo. You'd have had a great time." His hand rested over hers, and he felt the stiffness of her fingers. "I was really on tonight," he told her.

"You know I couldn't not go to Marilyn's shower."
He winced, biting his lip. For a moment he remembered the tiny casket, the tiny headstone carved like a lamb, but he pushed the picture away. "Aw, Glo," he whispered. He stroked her fingers, wanting to ease the tight and measured sound of her voice. "Aw, honey, some things just aren't meant to be," he said.

She pulled her hand out from under his, placing it carefully in her lap. "Maybe not," she hissed.

Suddenly it seemed very important to him to hear her laugh again, to make her laugh. "You really should've been there, Glo," he ventured again. "You should have seen it. There was this gal at the bar, kind of older-looking -- " He raised his eyes, calculating an extra fifteen or twenty years onto the redhead's age. " -- Maybe fifty-five or so, I guess. And she's had a few, you know. And she's watching us; she's sitting up there on this barstool watching us bowl, you know, and -- I tell you, I was on; I threw some strikes you wouldn't believe. But anyhow, I turn around after the pins fall down and she's looking at me and -- you'll like this, Glo; it was so funny -- she kind of raises her glass like she's toasting me, you know? So then, after my next frame, I look and she's walking over. You know, kind of swaying over, tippy-tip on her high heels."

He paused a moment, seeing again the swing of hips in a spike-heeled walk, the brushing of breasts inside white
angora. Blinking, he brushed a strand of hair back from his forehead. "Like I said, I kinda think she'd had a few. But, so, she comes up, real close, and I'm wondering, and the guys are all looking, and she says -- " He pitched his voice higher, squeaky, away from the rich sound he'd heard in the bowling alley. " -- She says, 'Say, honey, did anyone ever tell you that you look a lot like Elvis?''' He chuckled. "Eddie and Buck were just cracking up, Glo. You should've been there. Jesus. 'Anyone ever say you remind them of Elvis?'''

His eyes left the road for a moment as he slowed for the turn into their driveway, and he sat smiling, watching for a reaction from Gloria. "Hey, come on, Glo," he insisted as he swung the truck onto the gravel. "Don't I kind of remind you of -- " He dropped his voice, trying to make it slow and sexy and Southern. " -- El-vis?"

Some light from the porch bulb shone into the cab, and he could see Gloria turn to look at him. "Yeah, right; you sure do remind me of Elvis, Dan," she said, her voice thick with sarcasm. "You surely do. You've both been dead for years."

Uh-uh, he thought, shaking his head, shifting into park. Oh, no, you can't spoil this mood, honey. I feel too good tonight. And you will, too, by Jesus. He switched off the ignition and, before Gloria moved, took her hand from
her lap, pulling it toward him. He pressed it against the bulge in his jeans, rubbing slightly against her palm, loving the pressure of their two hands together. He laughed softly, longing to feel her fingers reach for his zipper, and whispered, "Hey, could a dead man do that?"

Abruptly she jerked her hand away and pushed open the pick-up door. "Probably," she said, "probably," and she left him alone in the cab to watch her run, crying, through the lights of the headlamps to the front steps.
I'd just got back from work and changed my clothes when I heard the knock on the door. Normally I go straight from work to the baby-sitter's and pick up my daughter, but just before my shift ended today, one of the patients at the nursing home, old Mr. Aikins, took a turn, and while I was helping Maureen, the LPN in charge, to restrain him, he'd managed to crack me one right across the bridge of my nose. And so there was blood on my uniform top. I thought it might upset Laurel, seeing it, so I decided to come home and change first before I went to get her from the sitter's. She's had enough upsets lately, what with her Daddy's accident and us having to move into this little apartment and her changing schools and all. The blood stains didn't mean anything bad, really, just a nosebleed, but still, I wanted to protect Laurel if I could. She's only seven, after all.

I was standing at the bathroom sink, running cold water and scrubbing at the stains with a bar of Fels Naphtha soap, hoping against hope that I wasn't going to have to shell out for a new tunic, when I heard the knock. It was loud and abrupt, three sharp raps, and I thought it might be the UPS man with a package for the people across the hall. So I rinsed the soap off my hands and turned off the faucet,
leaving my uniform top on the bathroom counter and grabbing a towel to wipe my cold hands as I walked to the door.

It wasn't UPS, though. It was a woman, barefoot in jeans and an inside-out sweatshirt, holding a video cassette in one hand. "Hi," she said. She stuck out her free hand for me to shake, and I noticed she was wearing a big diamond cocktail ring. "I'm Rennie. From up in 3-C."

I shifted the towel into the hand that still rested on the doorknob and then reached out to shake hands. She had a real strong grip for a small woman, strong but brief, like she'd practiced shaking hands like a man, I thought. But then, most of the women I know don't go in much for handshakes. "I'm Lynn," I said.

"Oh, wow, really?" Her eyebrows rose. "What an amazing coincidence. -- The woman who lived here before you was named Linda." I couldn't think of anything bright to say about that, but this Rennie was going on anyway. "She used to be my best friend. So I guess I just naturally find my way to this door when I need something." She gave a little laugh then, a warm syrupy sound that made me smile.

I felt a little awkward standing there holding the doorknob and the damp towel. "So, uh -- Rennie? -- what do you need?"

She lifted the hand with the cassette box. "Listen, this'll probably sound crazy, but -- well, do you have a
VCR?" I nodded, although the way she was looking past me into the living room, I was pretty sure she could see the TV and VCR on the cart across from the hide-a-bed. "Listen, I'm going to ask you a favor, Lynn, but don't be afraid to say no if it's a pain in the ass, okay?"

She seemed to be waiting, so I nodded again, trying not to seem impatient.

She nodded, too, and her blonde hair, pulled up into a kind of a lank pony-tail on top of her head, bounced a little. "Okay. Good. Well, look, The Misfits is on cable tonight." She didn't ask if I had cable, but then I guess she probably knew it came with the apartments. "It's my all-time favorite movie, and I hate to miss it, but I've got to go out. And my damn VCR's on the blink. It'll play, but the stupid thing won't record. So what I was wondering was, if I gave you this cassette, could you tape it for me?"


"Great." She handed over the cassette. "It's on eighteen at eight," she said. "I wrote it down -- "

I saw there was a yellow Post-It note stuck on the box. "Okay," I said. "Well -- " But she stayed in the doorway, looking in, and I suddenly felt bad about not inviting her inside, offering her a coke or something. "Listen," I said,
"I'd ask you in, but I've got to go pick up my daughter from the sitter and I'm already running late."

"Oh, you've got a kid, huh? That's nice. What's her name?"

"Laurel," I said. I snuck a glance at my watch.

"Laurel? That's pretty." She laughed. "Sure beats the hell out of Renata, anyway. -- Shit, the things people saddle their kids with." She shook her head. "So, what, your husband took off and left you with the kid?"

I felt my chest stop moving in the middle of a breath. "No," I said after a second or two. I didn't want to go into a long song and dance, but still, I thought I had to say something. I looked down at the carpet. "He died," I told her.

"Oh." She was quiet for a moment. But then she blinked and said, "Oh, well. Same as."

It wasn't, but I didn't feel like going into it, so I just shrugged and shook my head. I let her see me check my watch. "Well, listen, I've really got to -- "

"I know, I know." She cut me off with a wave of her fingers. "You've gotta pick up your kid. That's okay, Lynn. I've gotta get going, too."

I started easing the door around a little.
"Listen, thanks a bunch, really." She started to turn, then swung back. "I'll come pick up the tape tomorrow, okay?"

"Okay." I shut the door, dropped the cassette on the coffee table and carried the towel back to the bathroom. I picked up my wet tunic and stared at the rusty outlines of blood on white nylon for a minute before I wadded it up and shoved it down into the wastebasket.

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It was nearly eleven, and Laurel was finally asleep. It's weird to think of a kid her age with insomnia, but some nights she just can't seem to let go of being awake. Maybe it's all the changes. I don't think it helped, either, that her Grandma Corey'd said her Daddy's dying was just like a very special sleep. Laurel's old enough and smart enough to know that sleep isn't the same as a coma, isn't the same as death, but I wonder if sometimes, when she's had a hard day, some part of her mind doesn't forget that she knows. Anyway, on those nights, she likes to have me sit in her room in the rocking chair and just talk. I talk to her about anything, about when her Daddy and I were first married, about camping trips my family took when I was a kid, about what things will be like when I start nursing school, about stuff she did when she was littler. Just whatever comes to
mind. I stare across the room at the light coming through the little windows of her Magic Castle nightlight and just talk. And if my throat gets dry or I snag on some memory for a minute, she murmurs, "Don't stop" in a soft tired voice. "Keep talking, Mama," she says, and so I do, knitting her a blanket of words until finally she can sleep.

So now I pulled the covers up over her shoulders and brushed her hair back off her cheek, and then I crossed the hall to the bathroom. A nice hot bath would have been relaxing probably, but I'd put on some weight in the four months since my husband died and I didn't really feel like seeing my new round belly rising up in the bath bubbles, my plump soft breasts. It seemed like such a useless, unneeded thing now, my body. So I took a quick hot shower where I could tell myself my eyes were squeezed shut to keep out the sting of shampoo and the sharp hot needles of water. Then I zipped myself into my long quilted robe and went down the short hall to the kitchen to get a diet coke. But at the last minute, my hand reached past the cans of soft drinks and picked up a bottle of beer instead. Oh, well, I thought as I rummaged in a drawer for the opener, maybe it would help me to relax so I'd sleep better.

I carried the beer to the living room, turned the TV on low, and curled up on a corner of the couch to catch the end of the local news. I'd just taken my first cold sharp sip
of beer when there was a knock on the door, the same three quick raps I'd heard earlier that day. "What the -- "
Sighing, I got up from the couch. No wonder Linda had moved out, I thought as I opened the door the few inches the chain would allow. And sure enough, there was Rennie. I couldn't believe she'd come traipsing through the halls in what looked like nothing but a terry-cloth wrap-robe that came down to the middle of her calves, but there she stood. "Oh, good, you're still up," she said.

I sighed again. "Just a second," I said softly. I shut the door enough to slip off the chain, then opened it again and invited her in.

"I just know this is one of those nights when I'm not going to be able to sleep," she said. "So I thought if you were still up, I'd get The Misfits so I could watch it later on. I hope you don't mind."

"No, it's okay," I said as I went to get the video tape. When I turned back to Rennie, I saw her looking at my beer bottle. "Drinking alone," I said, with a laugh that sounded off-key in my ears. I gripped the cassette tightly. "Do you -- would you like a beer?"

She fingered the lapel of her robe. "You wouldn't have any wine, would you?"

I shook my head. "Sorry."
"Oh, well, beer's okay," she said as she reached out for the video tape. "Yeah, a beer'd be good."

When I came back from the kitchen, she was standing by the shelves looking at my books. "You a nurse?" she asked.

"Nurse's aide," I told her.

"Wow," she said, shaking her head as she took the beer. "No kidding? God, I'll bet that's a shitty job. What's it pay?"

I tried not to look startled. "Not enough," I said. I clicked off the TV and sat down on the couch, reaching for my beer. Damned if I was going to tell her just how much not enough it was.

Rennie smiled and took a long pull on her beer bottle. Then she set down her cassette and picked up the picture from the shelf. In the picture my husband was holding up a big Coho salmon he caught in Lake Michigan and grinning like he was a little boy and this was his very first fish. There was a studio picture of him, too, on the dresser in Laurel's room, but this was the photograph where he looked like himself to me. Although mostly I'd been trying not to look at it much these days. "Cute," Rennie said. "This your husband?" When I nodded, she mumbled, "Too bad," and set the picture back down. Then she smiled and lifted up her beer bottle like she was making a toast. "Well, to better
days, huh?" She took another long drink, her head tipped way back. I could see her throat working as she swallowed.

"Better days . . . " I started to shake my head, but then I thought about going back to school and I raised my bottle of beer, too.

Rennie looked around the living room. I knew there wasn't anything very special to see. "So," she said, "I take it your husband -- " She nodded her head toward the picture. "What was his name?"

"Royce." I said it soft, tasting his name like the beer.

"Royce." She nodded, glancing at the photograph again. "I guess he didn't have any insurance?"

Somehow I couldn't decide if she was being nosy or just concerned. I guessed it didn't really matter. "Not much," I admitted. "Not enough to keep the house. We'd just bought it last year, an old place on a couple acres out in the country near Baldwin -- that's where we used to live -- and we were fixing it up together."

I closed my eyes and saw the old pine floors we'd sanded and refinshed, the smooth planks stained the color of dark old honey. "I couldn't keep the house." I opened my eyes and ran a finger across my upper lip, wiping away a fine line of sweat. "But there's enough so I can go back to college this fall. That's why Laurel and I moved here, so I could go back and
get my LPN." I lifted my chin a little and looked across the room at Rennie. She was turning her ring around and around on her finger. "Then I'll be able to take care of us both just fine."

Rennie nodded. "It's smart to have a plan," she said as she walked over and sat down on the other end of the hide-a-bed. "So -- " She looked toward the shelf where the photograph stood. "What happened to ol' Royce? He looks so young to be -- you know -- "

"Dead?" I gave her a hard look, and at least she had the good grace to shift around on the sofa cushions and look away. I took a deep breath. "He was a lineman," I said, "for the county electric. And he was up on the cherry-picker one afternoon and somehow -- I don't know, somehow he slipped and fell and his head came down on the corner of the truck. He was in a coma for three days, but he never came to." I didn't say how his eyes snapped open at the end and stared right through me there in the ICU, right through me like already I wasn't even there. Instead, I lifted my beer and drained the bottle.

"Jesus."

I saw that Rennie was leaning forward, stretching out her hand toward me, but I was too quick for her; I stood up fast, moving out of reach. "I don't know about you," I said, "but I'm going to have another beer. -- How 'bout it?"
She hesitated a minute, leaning down and rubbing the muscles in the back of her calf. "Sure, why not?" She got up, and I saw her go over, squinting at Royce's picture again and twisting that ring of hers, before she followed me into the kitchen.

We decided we were hungry, so I got out some crackers and gave Rennie some cheese to cut up. We took our snack and our beers and sat at the little round kitchen table. "So, Rennie," I said, watching as she put a chunk of Muenster on top of a saltine, "what do you do?"

She shoved the whole cracker into her mouth and held up one finger while she chewed. Then, after she took a swig of beer to help it down, she said, "I'm writing a book."

I leaned forward. "A book? Really? I never met a writer before." I hesitated. "I mean, Royce used to fool around with the guitar a little, try and make up songs. I remember, he tried to write a lullaby for Laurel when she was a baby. But he said he couldn't come up with a rhyme for 'Laurel.' He said he couldn't figure out how to work 'moral' into a lullaby. He -- " I caught myself. "But a book -- that's really something -- "

Rennie was holding another cracker halfway to her mouth, but she cocked her head. "Hmm -- Laurel," she said. "There's 'coral.'" She shook her head. "Or maybe 'quarrel'? Or . . ."
"It's not a damned contest," I snapped, and then I felt my face flush. "I'm sorry," I said quickly. I reached out a finger and pushed the crackers around on the plate a little. "Well, so tell me about your book. What's it about?"

She leaned back in her chair, crossing her legs. "I guess you'd say it's kind of a how-to book. I'm calling it," she said as she rearranged the folds of her robe, "Marrying Smart. Because that's what it's about -- how to marry smart."

"What's marrying smart?" I asked her.

"Oh, you know, it's -- well, it's not just falling for some cute guy with nice buns and big plans and then waking up ten years later with stretch marks and screaming kids and a guy with a paunch sitting on the sofa sucking up Budweisers and Doritos." She leaned forward, wrapping both hands around her beer bottle. "I mean, marriage is a big investment. You gotta know what you're buying."

"I don't know." I reached for a little square of the Muenster. "I don't really think . . ." I let my voice trail off and took a bite of cheese.

"Take me for instance. When I was nineteen, I didn't have a clue. I was working in a bank, making scut wages, dating all the wrong guys. But then, one of those guys -- his name was Jimmy -- well, his mother dies, and shoot,
before you know it, I'm standing up in front of a judge with ol' Jimmy's daddy."

"But -- " I swallowed hard. "But, what happened to him?"

"Phil? Oh, he had a heart attack last January."

I blinked in surprise. So that was why she'd asked those questions about Royce and the insurance and all. "Oh. Oh, Rennie, I'm so sorry -- " I'd heard the words often enough to know how hollow they sounded. But still.

But Rennie just said, "Don't be. He was in pretty bad shape after his first attack. And you'd be surprised at how little I miss him." She shrugged. "I mean, he was a sweet enough old guy. But -- "

Before she could see me staring, I looked away, picking up a saltine and breaking it in half, watching the crumbs shower down onto the table. "But Jimmy?" I said. "What happened to him? Didn't he -- wasn't he upset when you married his father?"

"Well, sure. I mean, at first he was. But he got over it. Moved out west to Arizona, got a job on a fire department, married some girl he met out there. They've got three little kids, and she works as a dog groomer." She shuddered. "That could've been me, up to my ass in poodle clippings."

"Well, but -- well, I mean, you're here -- "
She knew what I meant. "These aren't bad apartments, you know. Besides, it's only temporary," she said. "While I work on my book." Her diamond caught the kitchen light and glinted as she straightened her lapels. "I mean, I've got a new Mercury Marquis and two rental houses on the east side and some nice stocks and C.D.'s. And a nice insurance check in the bank." She looked at me a moment. "Not a bad return for ten years. -- We had a nice house, too, but I decided it'd be smarter to rent it out and stay here for now. I'm probably not going to stay in this town forever anyway, you know."

Nodding, I picked up a few cracker crumbs with one fingertip and flicked them back onto the plate.

"Anyway," Rennie said, "last time I was lucky. But next time, I'll be smart." She tapped her thumbnail against her beer bottle. "So what about you? You seeing anybody?"

"What?" I felt myself flinch a little. "No," I said quickly. "No, of course not."

"Yeah, I suppose it's too soon for you, huh?" She nodded to herself. "Well, when you're ready, you just let me know. I'll find you somebody." She narrowed her eyes and tilted her head to one side. "In fact, there's this guy I know, Allen, who'd be perfect for you. He's in real estate. Divorced, one kid in college, one married." She
ran her hand down her long slim throat. "Yeah, Allen'd be perfect for you. I should call him."

I pushed my chair back from the table. "No. Look, Rennie, I'm not interested. Okay? Not interested." I could feel my whole body trembling. "My God, it's only been four months."

She held up her hands. "Okay, okay. I didn't mean to be pushy."

I just stared at her.

"I'm sorry." She paused and licked her lips, and then she smiled, just a little. "You can probably tell, tact is not my strong suit. I just meant -- well, you're pretty and you're alone, and you won't be getting any younger, and -- " Her hand flew up to her mouth. "Oh, God, I'm doing it again, aren't I?" she gasped.

Suddenly, I don't know why, I felt my shoulders relax and I began to laugh. For a moment, Rennie looked at me, not saying anything, and the expression on her face, all wide-eyed and startled, just made me laugh harder. She began to grin. "The first time I met Phil's sister," she said, "she had all this gorgeous silver-blond hair. She's fifty, and she's got these long gorgeous blonde curls. And I said to her, 'Oh, Marcia, where'd you ever get such a great wig?' How's that for tactful, huh?"
I laughed even harder, even though it wasn't really that funny. And every time I'd start to sober up, she'd give another example of a time when she'd really put her foot in it, and I'd be whooping again. I couldn't help myself. And Rennie's own laughter joined in, rich and mapley. I wrapped my arms around myself and laughed until there were tears in my eyes.

Finally I was just too worn out to laugh anymore, and we sat there at the kitchen table, panting and grinning and shaking our heads. "Oh, God, Rennie," I gasped, "I'm exhausted." I dabbed at the corners of my eyes with a paper napkin.

Suddenly, I straightened. "Oh, shit -- Rennie -- I've got to get up and go to work in the morning -- "

She stood up right away. "See," she said, "I can be tactful."

"Yeah, sure," I chuckled. "Listen, don't get me started again, please."

Rennie was smiling. "Look, you want to get together and go out for pizza or something later on this week? You and me and your kid?"

I was fighting back a yawn. "Yeah, okay, sure. That'd be nice."

"Great." She was starting to move toward the kitchen doorway. "Well -- "
Laurel's voice came, breathy and urgent, from her room at the end of the hall. "Mom? Mama!" A bad dream.

I drew in a sharp breath. "Oh, damn --"

"It's okay," Rennie said. "You go on. I'll just get my tape and let myself out."

She made a shooing motion with her hands. "Go on."

"Thanks," I remembered to murmur, and I hurried down the hall to Laurel.

****

Thursday night we all went out for pizza. The restaurant was one of those family places with a little playroom for the kids; business was good, even though it was a weeknight, and we got the last booth, next to a couple whose baby sat in a high-chair pulled up to the end of their table. It wasn't exactly the kind of place I'd have expected Rennie to like much, but in fact she was the one who'd picked it.

Laurel was all excited about a field trip her first-grade class was going to take the next day, a visit to a fire station, and she spent more time chattering than eating. I didn't mind, though. She was having a good time.

"Do you think they'll have a Dalmatian dog, Mom?" she asked. She turned to Rennie. "I just love Dalmatian dogs," she confided. "They are so cute."
"I don't know, honey," I said. "I'm not sure if many firehouses have mascots anymore."

"Well, they sure ought to," Rennie said. She leaned her face down close to Laurel's. "I mean, who wants to visit an old fire station that doesn't have a cute dog? And a pole for sliding down, right?"

Laurel grinned and finished her milk. She swiped her napkin across her face and asked if she could go ride the little carousel in the playroom. When I said sure, she slid out of the booth, and I watched her run off, her long braid bouncing on her back.

"Cute kid," Rennie said. "Who's she take after?"

I reached for a third slice of pizza, even though I didn't really think I wanted it. "Royce," I said. "She looks a lot like Royce."

Rennie nodded. She sat and twisted her diamond while I took a bite of pizza. In the booth behind her, the baby was beginning to make some fussy little cries. "Oh, listen; I've got to tell you what happened to me today." The baby was getting fussier, and Rennie cast a quick look over her shoulder, like someone in a theater working up to shushing the people behind her the next time they made a noise. "I had to go the dentist this morning. And you know how doctors and dentists always keep you waiting forever. Well, so I was sitting in the waiting room, and in walks . . . ."
The baby was really beginning to cry now. Rennie kept on talking, but I couldn't really hear her very well, and my eyes shifted from her face to beyond it. I saw the young father stand up and swoop his child out of the high-chair. He held the baby against his shoulder, bouncing gently up and down and talking softly with his mouth pressed close to the baby's ear. It made me think of the time when Laurel had an ear infection when she was six months old, how Royce had held her and walked with her, whispering in her ear, then pausing to kiss it, then whispering some more. I could almost see him again, pouring the medicine of his crooning and his kisses into her ear until her crying stopped and she fell asleep against his shoulder.

"Can you believe that?" Rennie was saying. I realized I had no idea what she was talking about. The young couple and their baby were gone.

My throat felt tight, and I let the piece of pizza I'd been holding drop down onto my plate. "Could we please go now?" I said. "I'm sorry, but could we just please go?"

Rennie blinked. "Are you okay? Are you sick?"

I shook my head. "I'd just like to leave," I said, and I heaved myself up out of the booth to go get Laurel.

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Rennie came around quite a bit over the next couple weeks. I never went up to her apartment, but two or three times a week she'd knock on my door, late usually, after Laurel was in bed. I got used to her coming. I even bought some white wine and kept it in my refrigerator for her, since I knew she'd rather have that than beer.

Rennie did most of the talking; she'd curl up on the end of the couch and gossip about people she knew or dates she'd gone on or things she'd bought. Once she admired the old copper tea kettle that used to be my grandma's, and the next time she came, she told me she'd found herself one just like it. "Only bigger," she said. "And without the dent." I didn't really mind that I didn't know any of the people she talked about; it just felt nice to have another person, another voice, in the room.

One night, I made some popcorn and set it, in a big wooden bowl, on the couch between us. Rennie picked up a kernel and bit it in half. "God," she said, "I haven't had popcorn in ages."

"We used to make it every Sunday night," I found myself telling her. "It was sort of like a tradition -- we'd rent a movie and make a big bowl of popcorn with loads of butter, and the three of us would all snuggle up on the couch together."
"Did you ever have popcorn and milk?" Rennie asked.

"When I was little, my father would put popcorn in little bowls and pour milk over it, and we'd eat it with a spoon, like cereal." She saw the look on my face and laughed. "I know, I know -- it sounds revolting. But it was great. Really." She picked up another kernel and held it between her thumb and forefinger. "In fact . . ." She put on a wistful look and let her voice trail off.

I rolled my eyes. "Okay, okay. Just don't expect me to try any."

I carried the popcorn back into the kitchen and scooped some into a cereal bowl while Rennie got the milk out of the refrigerator. I was opening a drawer to get her a spoon when I heard her sniff and say, "Whew." When I turned, she was holding the milk jug out at arm's length. "Lynn, your milk's gone sour."

"What? -- Damn -- " I shoved the silverware drawer shut with my hip, took the milk from Rennie and sniffed it. "Damn," I said again.

"It's all right," Rennie said. "I don't really need it."

"But I do," I snapped. "I need it for Laurel, for her breakfast. And it's late and she's sleeping and I can't wake her up and haul her out to the store and -- " I clamped my teeth together and shook my head. Finally, I let
out a long breath. "How could I be so stupid?"

"Hey, relax," Rennie said. She reached her hand out toward my shoulder, but I swung away and emptied the jug into the sink, muttering "Stupid, stupid, stupid," as I rinsed out the plastic container and snapped on the disposal to take away the sour smell. Even though I knew I was overreacting, I felt like I wanted to cry.

"Come on, Lynn, it's not that big a deal," Rennie said. I shot her a look. "Really, it's not." She nodded. "Look, you just get your keys and run down to the store, and I'll stay here with Laurel until you get back."

"You wouldn't mind?" I'd gotten so worked up that it seemed like a big favor somehow.

"Hey," she said, laughing lightly, "what are friends for, right?"

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When I got back from the store, Rennie said she couldn't stick around. The idea of popcorn and milk had lost its charm. "Besides," she said, "while you were gone, I had a great idea for something I want to put in my book. So I want to write it down before I forget it."

I nodded. It was the first time she'd mentioned her book since that first night, and I'd begun to wonder if she was really writing one, but now I felt ashamed of having
doubted her. "Listen, thanks for staying with Laurel," I told her. She didn’t linger at the door, just hurried away.

Before I carried the milk into the kitchen and stowed it away in the icebox, I tiptoed into Laurel's room, just to check, and stood a moment, watching the quiet rise and fall of her breathing. Then, after I took care of the milk and folded away the grocery bag, I dumped the popcorn into the trash and washed out the bowls. I went to the living room for Rennie's wine glass and washed it out too. I looked around the kitchen, but there was nothing more that needed doing. Even though I wasn't exactly tired, I still felt worn out somehow, and I decided to just put on my nightclothes, finish my beer and go to bed.

In the bathroom, I quickly undressed, and as I turned to reach for a washcloth, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I noticed a dark red line across my chest, just under my breasts, and realized I must have gained enough weight that my old bras were getting too tight. I wanted to see how bad the red weal was, wondering if I should put some ointment on it. As my hand cupped under one breast and carefully raised it, I felt my nipple lift and tighten. I snatched my hand away like I'd been burned; I grabbed my nightshirt, yanked it down over my head, pulled on my robe and jerked the zipper closed.
I hurried to the living room. I was sweating as I moved the cushions from the hide-a-bed and hauled it open. Then I dropped down on the edge of the bed and picked up my beer, but I just held it without taking a drink. "God damn it, Royce," I said softly and lifted my head to look up at his picture on the bookshelves in the corner of the room.

But I couldn't see it. It wasn't there. I sat very still and squeezed my eyes shut, sure my nerves or the beer must be playing a trick on me. But I'd only had half a beer. And when I opened my eyes, the picture still wasn't there.

I remembered that first night, when Rennie'd been looking at it. Maybe, I thought, she hadn't put it down quite right and it had fallen over. But I was sure I'd seen it since then. And besides, even though the bookshelves were in shadow, I still could see that there was nothing lying in the spot where Royce's photograph should have been.

I walked slowly across the room, as if my being careful and deliberate would somehow make the picture materialize where it was supposed to be. But the space on the bookshelf stood empty. I looked down at the floor, to see if it could have fallen there, but the only thing on the carpet was a plastic Barbie shoe that Laurel must have dropped. I went through the whole bookcase, looking between and behind and on top of every volume. My heart was starting to beat
faster, as if I'd been running. I circled the living room, checking the coffee table, the TV stand, under the hide-a-bed, every place I could think of. It wasn't that big a room.

Shakily I walked back to the bookcase to look once more. This time I began pulling the books off the shelves and piling them on the floor. I didn't really think I'd find anything, but I had to look. Soon I was surrounded by teetering stacks of books, staring at the bare wood of the empty shelves.

I searched through the kitchen, even though I knew I wouldn't find it there, and then I got the flashlight out of the utility drawer and slipped into Laurel's room. All I could think of was that maybe she'd awakened while I was at the grocery store and that for some reason Rennie had brought Royce's picture into the bedroom for her. But when I moved around the room where Laurel slept, shining the light across the dresser and the night stand, I didn't find the picture. As I turned to leave the room, my flashlight banged against the back of the rocking chair, and I stood very still for a moment, trying to quiet my ragged breathing. Then, when Laurel stirred but did not awaken, I crept as noiselessly as I could across the carpet and back into the hall.
My hands were shaking; the flashlight beam jiggled along the baseboards until I managed to switch it off. I leaned against the wall, and I couldn't think of anywhere else to look. The sensible thing, I knew, would be to just go to bed and look again in the morning. But I couldn't. I pushed my hair back from my forehead with a trembling hand, and I knew I wouldn't sleep.

And so I thought of Rennie. Maybe she'd noticed the picture; maybe it was in some perfectly obvious place that I'd just been too upset to think of. I could ask her. I should go ask Rennie.

My hands were clumsy on the doorknob as I let myself out into the hallway, and by the time I'd climbed to the third floor and knocked on her door, I was breathing hard again. I tried to think what I would say.

The door swung open. "Lynn," she said. "I didn't expect -- " Instead of asking me in, she stepped forward into the doorway.

"I'm sorry, Rennie; I know it's late. But -- " I took a deep breath and tried to steady my hands. "Did you -- well, did you happen to notice Royce's picture tonight?"

She smiled blankly. "Royce's picture?" she asked. Over her shoulder, I could see that her living room was jammed with furniture, like she'd tried to pack a whole houseful of stuff in there, wing chairs, end tables, a big
white leather couch. Every surface was covered with vases and candlesticks and fancy glass birds. "What picture?"

"You remember," I said. "You were looking at it the first time you came over. The one with the fish? Remember, you said you thought he was cute?" I pressed my hand against my forehead. Rennie's face hadn't changed. "I know it's crazy, but it's missing. I've looked everywhere and I can't find it, and I was hoping maybe you'd noticed it someplace."

"I'm sorry, Lynn. I don't remember -- " She paused a moment, narrowing her eyes while she thought. "No." She shook her head. "I don't remember -- " She was moving the door a little, narrowing the opening. Behind her, in the far corner, the TV was going, and I could see Clark Gable's face flickering on the screen. "I wish I could help," Rennie was saying. "But I'm sure it'll turn up -- "

But then, over her shoulder, I saw it. It was standing right out in the open on a little table wedged in next to the TV. I closed my eyes and then looked again, sure I must be imagining things. But I wasn't. "There it is," I gasped.

Rennie stiffened and turned to look where I was pointing, and I slid past her into the room. I banged my shin on a coffee table; a pair of crystal doves tipped over onto the Oriental rug that lay atop the carpeting, and the tail of
one bird snapped off. I stepped around the sharp fragment of glass, got to the corner, and grabbed the picture. I wasn't wrong; it was Royce. I turned and looked at Rennie. "Why?" I said softly.

"I didn't think you'd -- I mean, I wanted -- " She hesitated; I saw her clear her throat. "I just wanted to -- to surprise you," she said. She nodded, and I could tell from the way her body seemed to relax that she'd thought of something to tell me. "Yeah, that's right. I wanted to surprise you," she said again. "I was going to get you a nice silver frame, something really nice to replace that Walmart special of yours. I thought you'd like that." She sighed and thrust out her lower lip a little. "But now, now you've spoiled my surprise."

I shook my head and started to brush past her to the hallway. She tried to catch hold of my wrist, but I shook off her hand.

"You do believe me, don't you?" I turned to face her, angry words stinging on the tip of my tongue, waiting. "Lynn, you've got to believe me," she said.

I looked at her, standing there surrounded by all that furniture and all those expensive glass birds. Her eyes were wide and she was cranking her ring around and around her finger. I thought there was no point in saying anything. "Sure," I told her, "I believe you, Rennie." I
turned and started down the hall. It wasn't until I pulled open the stairwell door that I heard the door to Rennie's apartment click shut.

Back in my apartment, I sat for a long time in the rocker in the bedroom, holding Royce's picture in my lap and watching Laurel sleep. I didn't really think about anything. After a while, Laurel sighed and rolled over toward the wall. I got up quietly and rearranged the quilt around her shoulders. As I turned to leave the room, I looked at the Magic Castle nightlight, and for some reason it made me think of Rennie with her apartment crammed full of so much stuff. I stood and ran one finger over the roof of the ceramic castle; then, shaking my head, I walked back to the living room and put my husband's photograph back in its place in the bookshelves.

I stood looking at the picture for a moment, at Royce's dead smile, and then I looked down at the stacks and piles of books on the living-room floor. Sighing, I crouched down and began putting the books back onto their shelves. The first shelf was half full, and I'd just told myself I should get some sleep and leave the rest for morning, when I heard Rennie's knock on the door. I froze, clasping the book in my hands against my chest. It was definitely her three quick raps, although they didn't sound quite as sharp and sure as they usually did. I couldn't believe she thought we
had anything to say to each other; I couldn't imagine what she could possibly want now. I slid the book I'd been holding onto the shelf and reached for the next pile.

She knocked again, and I ignored it and went on refilling the bookcase. But "Lynn?" I heard, and another knock. The next thing, I thought, she'd be waking the neighbors. Or Laurel.

Slamming down the book I'd been holding, I stood up and marched to the door. Leaving the chain on, I opened it a crack. "Go away," I said. "What the hell do you want? Just go away."

She didn't say anything at first; she just held out her hands toward the opening in the doorway. I saw that her thumb and one finger were smeared with blood. "I'm sorry," she said. Her voice seemed small. "I wouldn't have come and bothered you, but I cut myself on some broken glass. And I don't have any band-aids or anything."

It didn't look like it was a very bad cut. But her face was pale and wide-eyed. "Just a minute," I said. I had to shut the door to unfasten the chain, and I thought about just not opening it again. But I slid the end of the chain out of its slot, turned the knob, pulled open the door. "Come on," I said to her. "Let's get it cleaned up and see how bad it is. I've got band-aids and Neosporin in the bathroom." And I let her back in.