Highway 50 pink motel and other stops along the way

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Highway 50 pink motel
and other stops along the way

by

Stacy Michelle Thieszen

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Department: English
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My father was a spy. That's why the blinds were always drawn, why sometimes when he came home from work he did not look like himself. He might have a mustache or not. He might have blue eyes or green or hazel. He might be ruddy or pale, gray- or black- or blond-haired. Not even his height remained constant. I felt we were in danger. Now, I always wear long sleeves. I prefer hats with wide brims that sag over the face. I will not eat potatoes. There must be an explanation for such behavior, and of course it stems from childhood; all fears do.

My mother tells me my father was a man who worked in a bank. Since my father died fifteen years ago, he cannot say one way or another. Unfortunately, it was only last week that I was able to access my memories through the help of a famous therapist who has written numerous books on the childhood
adults cannot escape. My mother tells me my father always looked the same. He was always clean-shaven with brown hair and hazel eyes and grey suits. And yet I remember it clearly. My mother was certainly there. She certainly kissed these men, didn't she, leaving potatoes half-peeled with the paring knife in the sink in order to kiss these men, these fathers?

"I really only wanted to learn to stop fearing potatoes," I tell the therapist. When I go to the supermarket I wear my navy-blue trenchcoat. I wear a fuchsia canvas hat that covers my forehead and ears. I wear dark glasses and carry a newspaper which I hold up to shield myself from the potatoes' gaze. This works as long as the potatoes are all displayed in one spot. If they have been piled on two sides of the produce aisle I must go without fresh vegetables for I cannot ward the danger off from two sides. It is tiresome, taking all these precautions, not to mention the way people look at me. It is clear from their darting eyes that they think I might jump at them, scream at them, pelt them with kiwi fruit. Kiwis have skin the color of potatoes. They are like small, evenly shaped potatoes, except they are safe because they are furry and have no eyes.

I've been told I do things like that, the screaming and throwing, but I cannot remember it. In fact I am compelled to go to this therapist because of such alleged events. I find the situation acceptable because I do hope to overcome my
problem with potatoes, but I don't believe I did the things they say. I am a calm person.

The therapist says she has a plan. "I will set you three tasks," she says, "and when you have successfully completed those three tasks, you will no longer fear potatoes."

To this I eagerly agree. She says she will contact me when the time is right, and so I anxiously await her call.

Days, I type and file and answer the phone in the office of the salt distribution company where I work. Nights, I sit on my cherry-red couch in my turquoise-walled apartment with all the lights on. The bright colors form an intimidating barrier to any potatoes that might wish to infiltrate my domain.

Fear of potatoes is not like fear of falling. It's much easier to avoid high places than to avoid potatoes. I once dated a man named Trent who was afraid of heights. No one could tell it by looking at him. Trent avoided ladders, closed his eyes on the escalator. That's all. I thought things might be different with Trent, since he had a fear of his own, but he left just like the others, unable to see the seriousness of my defense system. I carry a big purse with me wherever I go. In it I keep gloves, various dark glasses, wigs, false noses, and, of course, a folded newspaper. Newspaper is the best shield because of all the words. The potato eyes get preoccupied by the words, wrapped up in trying to read the smudged black print, and they forget about me.
Also potatoes and newspapers have a natural affinity. I remember my mother sometimes spreading a sheet of newspaper on the table before sitting down to peel. The discarded potato pieces, eyes and all, were wrapped in the newspaper and thrown away. This was when my mother was too tired to stand at the sink. Even then, I would rather do any other chore than peel potatoes, and my mother accommodated me in this, though not without a click of the tongue. My sister Paula could always peel the potatoes if it came to that.

In fact, I am quite sure it must have been Paula who screamed at the people in the grocery store. Also in the cafe, the bookstore, the laundromat. I stand accused, but Paula and I look very much alike and Paula is the mean one. She once put potatoes in the centerpiece just to see me quiver with fright under the dining room table. Paula, however, is unwilling to acknowledge her problems and see a therapist, even a very famous one who has published books. I scanned the indexes of these books and there is no mention of potatoes, so I wonder how authoritative she is regarding my specific problem. That is just as well. If there were any mention of potatoes in the books, I would be unable to read them.

***
"You seem uncomfortable today, Kristin. Why don't you tell me what's bothering you."

"Potatoes."

The therapist waits sternly, disappointed by my habitual reply.

"My mother says my father was not a spy," I explain. "My mother says my father never wore a mustache."

"I see. What do you think this means?"

"Just when things were beginning to make sense, my mother is spoiling everything," I say.

"Do you think your mother is lying to you? Do you think your memories are false? Do you think perhaps we have misinterpreted these absolutely valid memories? Or are these memories your latent child-mind's insidious roadblocks obstructing the road to truth?" The therapist often gives me such lists of choices, claiming it is the only way to avoid leading me down paths I have not myself chosen.

"My memories seem quite real. My mother does not lie."

The therapist raises her eyebrows, forcing me to consider that maybe my mother really does lie. Perhaps my mother was a harlot all those years ago. That would explain the men, also the fine linen table cloths, the brocade sofas, the giant, fake-oak-cabinet TV that my father said we couldn't afford and my mother claimed she'd gotten cheap.
When I tell the therapist this, she sighs. "I feel that all this focus on your mother is your attempt to avoid the issue. I will not let our session come to a close before we've discussed potatoes."

I feel that the therapist is not being altogether consistent. "I can't afford to pay for extra minutes."

"Not to worry. I have an assignment for you. My assistant has gathered articles on the potato. You will study these articles and write an essay for me. You will see you have nothing to fear."

I personally already know potatoes on a far deeper level than facts could account for and I have everything to fear. I once loved the bright lights and wide aisles of the supermarket, so different from home, but I've learned too much about what grows where light can't reach. I'll never again be that child, clinging to the skirt of my beautiful and blameless mother, touching whichever vegetables I please. Yet the therapist is very famous, and very expensive, and I do want to be able to shop like any other person, at ease in the produce aisle, or nearly so. I agree to the task after stipulating that all pictures of potatoes as well as the word "potato" must be blackened out. Also the word "spud." And I am allowed to wear gloves while handling the photocopied articles.
These are some of the most popular varieties: Russet Burbank, Norchip, Kennebec—which is best for making chips, Katahdin, Irish Cobbler, Red LaSoda, Red Pontiac, White Rose. These are some of the ways they might be prepared: mashed, baked, boiled, fried, hash-browned, French-fried, converted to alcoholic beverages, to flour, to starch for almighty industry.

I have made an error in judgment. The worst part turns out to be all the blackened spots in the articles. I know what is there underneath, and I can feel the subtle tug trying to pull me into the darkness. Potatoes love darkness. Perhaps my request has only served to provide a fertile place for the potatoes to grow, there in the dark spots on the page, to grow their tender green sprouts like mold of a pointy kind.

"I'm reading about them now," I tell my mother.

"It's that therapist, isn't it? Getting you to do this stuff? I don't trust therapists. No different from magic spells, don't believe in them either." She is folding clothes fresh out of the dryer, shaking out towels from between her thick, knobby fingers. I had never before noticed how awkward
my mother's hands are and I wonder if this stubbiness is an
effect of aging. My mother looks at me, her eyes dull and
protuberant. "You've got to help yourself, my girl. Quit
looking for magic solutions, wanting someone to rescue you.
Stand on your own two feet." My mother's own two feet are
short and clublike. She has trouble buying shoes to fit, is
always growing bunions and other strange swellings on them
which doctors have to cut off. She has become unusually
unattractive as she ages, though she was pretty when she was
young. I often wonder what I might do to prevent myself from
growing to look like my mother.

I discuss this with Paula over lunch. We are eating in a
little lunch place that might serve potatoes in vegetable
soup, but at least does not threaten with French fries or
potato chips, the more ferocious forms so prevalent in
American restaurants. Eighty percent of U.S. grown potatoes
are used in processing plants which produce these forms.
Potatoes have been successful in their attempts to infiltrate
industry, which is to say America itself, is it not?

Paula laughs. "Look at me," she says. "I'm two years
older than you and I still look good." Paula teaches aerobics
classes at World of Health, so her body is trim and muscular,
but Paula's hair is not so shiny as my own. It seems to me
that Paula's hair is turning the same drab brown as our
mother's.
What I really want to talk about is spies. "Mom claims father wasn't a spy."

"Dad wasn't a spy," Paula laughs. "Dad was a banker."

"You don't have to pretend, Paula. No one is listening."

"Honestly Kristin, what are you talking about?"

"Fine," I say, folding my arms over my chest. I don't know why Paula always has to be so difficult. "Okay then, if Dad wasn't a spy, who were those men Mom brought home all the time? Don't tell me you don't remember that?" I tap my foot.

"I think there's something wrong with my sandwich."

Paula looks up from her food, her lips curled back whitely in that ugly look she gets before things get out of control. She picks up her plate. "I'm going to talk to the person who made this sandwich." Her voice rises on the word, and I leap up and take her by the arm.

"Potatoes," I say and it causes my stomach to quiver, but it calms Paula. It pleases her when I utter the name of my enemy for her sake. She wants to feel loved; neither of us has many friends. "Potatoes." We leave without the launching of food or silverware at the unwary, but the two young women working in the cafe cower behind the kitchen door until we are safely away. They've no doubt heard stories about Paula's temper.

***
The enemies of the plant include aphids, flea beetles, leafhoppers, psyllids, and below ground, cutworms, grubs, tuber worms, wireworms. These do not greatly concern the because it has the human to do its fighting. The human farmer sprays chemicals to fight the insects and worms. The human farmer forms special hills over the, and sometimes strips the leaves from the plants to protect from frost or disease. The is not interested in the stripping of leaves. The tuber contains all that matters of the plant. It contains the will, which the farmer only feeds with all this interference. The farmer is subservient to the.

I was sixteen the time I was helping my mother clean the kitchen, my head and shoulders deep in the big bottom cabinet, when my hand brushed something alive. Out of the darkest corner, I pulled two potatoes that had sprouted vines entwined and contorted in their determination to grow and propagate. My mother told me to throw them out and finish scrubbing. But I had felt malignant life vibrating in those vines, and I knew my fear was justified.

I do not expect to lose sight of the very real threat of potatoes in my life; I just want to be able to ignore it the way other people do. Paula has explained to me that other people ignore it because they don't see it in the first place. There is nothing to ignore, she says. I nod, as I must when
Paula talks, because Paula has a nasty temper, but Paula is not as intelligent as I am.

The therapist makes me read the finished essay aloud. This is not as hard as I expected. My words are like audiotapes of an earthquake. The first hearing may startle, but after that it's only sounds, it's only audiotape, not the real thing. This is progress, the therapist says, but it does not seem like progress to me because I see that my words have nothing to do with potatoes at all.

When baking or cooking with the skins on, use a vegetable brush to scrub them well. Remove any sprouts and green areas. For baked, prick with fork tines . . . cook with skin. Or, wash and peel. Cook whole, quartered, or cubed in boiling salted water till tender. . . . History of potatoes, important potatoes through time, the chemical make-up of potatoes, yet something is left out. Potato soul. The facts will not explain what I fear. Eyes at the windows. Eyes in the produce shelves. There is no security.

***

"For your next task you must eat potatoes," the therapist announces. "I have decided you will begin with processed potato products. I believe you will find them least threatening."
It is the sort of task I've been expecting. I must get Paula's help. This will be tricky. I cannot always trust my sister Paula. Perhaps my mother would be better, but I am not sure I trust my mother either, not after my recent revelations regarding all those men. My mother is not exactly who she seemed when I was a child. My mother denies my calm accusations even now, so I cannot believe her. Perhaps my mother is not even my mother. I raise the issue with the therapist.

"You are not here to talk about your mother. You are here to conquer your fear of potatoes. You are avoiding the issue. Potatoes. That will be our subject, Kristin." The therapist can look very stern with her brown hair all pulled back into a bun. A bun the size of a potato. She has brown--small, dark-brown eyes.

I wonder just why the therapist should always be so eager to talk about potatoes when her specialty is supposed to be the persistence of childhood. For potatoes to have become as powerful as they are in this world, they must have human emissaries. Their network of power is vast, linking agents in banks, corporations, grocery stores, educational institutions. My father needed disguises to hide from it or else was not my father at all, but merely men, which might explain how rarely they spoke to me, my mother always standing between us in her brown polyester dresses. I am highly suspicious of the
allegiance of this therapist, yet I am not altogether sure, and I am also frightened of what might happen if I let the therapist become aware of my suspicions. I decide I will attempt to complete the second task, but I will be wary.

I go to Paula's house. The therapist did not say that I had to bring the potato products into my own apartment. Obviously it is safer this way. Paula brings home the instant mashed potatoes. She cuts up the paper shopping bag and tapes it around the box so that I do not have to see the pictures on the box. I mix the powder inside with water and stir it myself. I think the spirit has been killed in this potato product. I feel no vibrations. I do not feel I am being watched, except by Paula. Paula has no fear of potatoes, yet swears she will not eat the instant mashed potatoes. In the end she has some after all because she's made gravy from the pot roast and they are the only potatoes there to put it on. They are not really potatoes anymore, I realize. They do not taste good, though, and I cannot sleep for two nights after I eat them.

More than 400 years ago the Inca Indians grew these plants in the valleys of the Andes and made chuño, a flour for bread. came to North America indirectly. The Spanish and then English explorers brought them to Europe, and settlers brought them back. Probably. How can we know for sure? have their underground ways, sending sprouts
out forward and back from the eyes. Eyes that not only take in rays but send them out, more powerful than human eyes. Have you considered this? What can we do with our own eyes but take in? Shoot forth roots and stems and leaves and flowers and small, strange berries full of seeds which they do not need because they have those eyes with which to propagate.

The frozen hash browns Paula brings me next are much more difficult to eat. I notice that I can see better in the dark than I used to and that is how I realize that the potatoes have not completely lost their influence, even processed as they are. Perhaps they have lost their will, but their essence remains and is made manifest through my enhanced night-vision. I don't understand how other people don't notice such a thing.

Paula laughs at me. "Let's go out and scare little kids," she says. "I'm tired of eating these lousy things." I think that Paula is only joking about the little kids, but I'm not sure. We go out to the park. It is dark, but I can see the colors of people's shirts from blocks away. In the dark, the green and the red and the purple should only be different shades of gray, but to me they are vivid.

"The colors only seem bright to you because those kids are so loud," Paula says. They are playing with a florescent
glowing frisbee. "Those kids are really obnoxious. I'd like to go give them a piece of my mind."

I should have known Paula wasn't joking. She has always been this way. At our father's funeral she didn't drop her handful of dirt on his coffin. She flung it at our mother. When we were little she would jump from behind the drapes or out of dark closets wearing an ugly mask and calling herself Repoman, a mysterious enemy we'd heard our father speak of. My mother always laughed at him, unconcerned, and Paula laughed at me when I cried. She told me we were having fun. But I am an adult now. I suggest to Paula we go home and eat chocolate ice cream instead of chasing children, but she argues with me. The kids are soon frightened away by our shouting, and it is only when Paula realizes there is no one but me left to give a piece of her mind to, and she's already given it to me, that she agrees to go home.

While we are eating the ice cream, I notice that Paula's skin has begun to turn a strange grayish-brown shade. "Your skin seems rather dark," I say tentatively.

"It helps me look more athletic. It attracts women to my exercise classes."

"Just how many potatoes have you been eating?"

"Only the ones I've shared with you," Paula says blandly. She keeps her eyes on her ice cream.
The outer skin is known as the periderm. Within it is the cortex which stores protein, and within that the vascular ring, that great center of transportation which carries the power—the starch received from leaves and stem, to the parenchyma cells, perhaps the brain. Do not let these terms fool you. They are only words for what we humans do not fully grasp. I must protect myself. I wear long sleeves. I wear gloves when I buy produce because I never know which vegetables might have come into contact with a potato in their long journey from farm to store. One cannot be too careful. I watch the news nightly.

***

"I believe you are ready for your third and final task." The therapist beams at me, but her face has grown round and lumpy. "You will plant, grow, and harvest your own potatoes."

I remind her that I live in an apartment and have no garden space.

"Your mother and sister both have back yards," she says cheerfully. "You'll be eager to complete this third task because I have a special reward for you. My friend has agreed to give you a job in the produce department of his grocery store."
Now I know my suspicions are valid. First of all, to work in the produce department would in itself be a horrible trial, and so there would be four rather than three tasks, and that would not be fair. Second, working in the produce department would be a huge step down from being receptionist for a nation-wide salt distributor. Though it is true salt is a preservative and there is no telling what evil I am helping to perpetuate, such passive participation is difficult to avoid in the structure of our society. Third, to work in the produce department would put me in the position of actively pushing potatoes on the world. I would be no better than a drug lord or a manufacturer of bombs. I would be serving the potatoes, and of course this is what the therapist wishes. She wishes all the world to fall under the spell of potatoes, simply because she has done so, and being famous, cannot admit her failing.

I look at her quietly while I think it over. She is a changed woman, as are my mother and my sister Paula. "The time for planting potatoes is more than two months past," I remind the therapist. "I have read enough to know that it is quite senseless to plant potatoes now." I deftly convince the therapist that working in the grocery store must serve as my third task. I have a plan.

***
I am filled with horror as I enter the loading area, where the produce is received and stored in readiness to fill the shelves. Potatoes lurk on all sides, piled high above my head. But I am ready. I wear a special dress made of newsprint full of words. I wear dark glasses. My manager is not pleased, but he has been warned about me, and he says he will allow it for the first week. Then I will be expected to dress in the store smock. I wonder whether I would be less conspicuous to the potatoes in the store smock. Perhaps they would not even notice me as a stock person. But no, this is unwary and weak thinking. I must carry out my plan if my world is to be safe.

I pick up a crate of potatoes. The potatoes are overjoyed to be so close to me whom they have targeted for so long, and the whole cratefull quivers ecstatically in my hands. I carry the potatoes into the produce aisle. When I get there I am not surprised to see the therapist, my mother, my sister Paula. They are all here to see me successfully complete the third task. That is what they say. I know they are here at the will of the potatoes. I can hardly tell one woman from another anymore. Their hair is all the same dingy brown. Their skin has gone grey and dusty, except for the insides of their arms and undersides of their chins, which are pasty white. Their eyes are small, dull and widely dilated. This is because potatoes are a member of the nightshade
family. Belladonna was once used by women to produce widely
dilated eyes and pale faces, hence its name. Of course it is
also a poison. These are the potato's cousins and yet people
are not suspicious.

My therapist, my mother, my sister Paula are surprised
when I pick up a potato in each hand. I have gloves on, but
my skin throbs at the firm fit of potato to palm. I begin
throwing potatoes at these women, now my enemies. The
potatoes fly, dropping bits of dirt, and hit the women's
chests as surely as if radar-guided. High-pitched squeals
erupt from a small, pink-faced boy. His father swoops him up
and flees. My enemies soon recover from their surprise and
run to the back room for more potatoes. They bang through the
swinging silver doors and waddle forth with the full pine
crates, legs bowing under the weight, their drab dresses
catching on their knees. They hurl potatoes at me.

The potatoes hurt when they hit my chest, but this is not
the worst part. The worst part is something none of us
anticipated. The potatoes hit the floor with hushed
explosions of white potato flesh. Each potato bursts into far
more white pulp than the skin could have contained. It is
like the instant potatoes I mixed up, but fluffier, with veins
running through it, narrow lines of communication.

The manager appears at the head of the produce aisle, and
the redness of anger drains from his face when he sees the
potato flesh rising round our ankles. "My god," he cries, "these are no normal potatoes!" He turns and runs, shoes slipping in tendrils of potato growth, herding open-mouthed customers before him, leaving us to our private fate.

He is wrong. These potatoes are ordinary potatoes, only exerting their powers in unprecedented ways. I finally realize why I have become their special target. It is because I have remembered my father was a spy. His mustaches were worn to conceal kind smiles, his hats to hide the warmth in his eyes, his silence to prevent friendly words, all of which his enemies would have attacked as weakness. I have been foolish. I have learned nothing from watching my father, have trusted my therapist, my mother, my sister Paula, all links in the vast menacing chain. The potatoes have come to silence me.

The pallid flesh creeps up our calves. It is warm and insidious, pushing beneath my newsprint dress. Not distracted by the words there, it cleaves to my flesh, soft as a cat, impeding my movement. The potato fluff is as high as my hips now and rising. I grab the edge of the banana table to keep from toppling forward as I try to move my legs. We have stopped throwing potatoes. We struggle to move, to find a way out, all of us uttering shrill cries of horror as the erupted potatoes rise round our throats, smothering, and full of secret eyes.
"You know Jackson had me watching cartoons half the night? I hate Tom and Jerry."

"Tom and Jerry?" Laura says. "I didn't think they were on in the evening."

They are sitting at one of the turquoise and purple painted tables in the empty coffee shop, taking their mid-morning break, each with a cup of coffee and a cranberry muffin which they split. Though Lucille will split a muffin with her most mornings, many days that is the only thing Laura sees her eat.

"He has them on tape. Can you believe that? I've had about enough of his shit."

"You're not going to dump Jackson? I thought you liked him."
Lucille rolls her eyes. "You know I'm not tying myself to any man who thinks watching Tom and Jerry is a meaningful bonding experience." She laughs and turns sideways in her chair, leaning against the wall, one arm draped gracefully over the curved back of her chair. "Besides, you should see the man I met at the Y over the weekend."

"Lucille, I don't believe you! If I even met as many men as you date I'd be worn out."

"I keep offering to introduce you to somebody. You should get yourself a man." Lucille shakes her head slightly as she speaks, bronze eyelids lowered, then her lips tip up at one corner. "Or two."

Laura looks at Lucille's perfectly made-up face, perfectly shaped head emphasized by closely-cropped black hair, and holds her tongue. She has made two friends in the nine months she's lived in the city, Lucille and Garrett, and both of them think a man is just what she needs. The only person in Chicago who knows Laura was married to a man who beat her is the therapist she sees because she is required by court order to do so.

"I know, I know, you don't need a man." Lucille holds up a hand. "But I tell you girl, the man I met Sunday was so fine he convinced me to join his volleyball team. Me--volleyball!"

Laura leans forward.
"It's not my game." Lucille giggles.

"I was captain of my high school team. I had a volleyball scholarship to college."

"Hey, you should come play then. Meet you some men!" Lucille winks. "Seriously, come with me. You're always saying you never meet people." Lucille emphasizes meet the same way Laura does when she's complaining.

"I would really love to play. If you think it would be alright."

Lucille says she will bring her to practice Thursday night. Laura feels excited and nervous about the upcoming volleyball practice like she hasn't about anything in a long time, and Dr. Carter is pleased with the news. Nevertheless her Tuesday therapy session is uncomfortable. Her two-year wedding anniversary would have been the Sunday before, and Dr. Carter insists she express feelings about this. Laura has no feelings about it. It is a day just like any other. The marriage is over. Dr. Carter does nothing but stir up trouble because that is what a therapist is paid to do. Laura sees the weekly sessions as atonement she must pay for the poor decisions of her past. It's better than jail, but makes her feel she'll never leave her past behind as she intended when she moved away from her hometown, her family and former friends to start a new life in the city, anonymous as a fish.
She leaves Dr. Carter's feeling down, but Garrett calls as soon as she is home and convinces her to get Harold's fried chicken with him. They meet on 53rd Street, outside Harold's. The man with the dirty dreadlocks and shopping cart piled with stuffed garbage bags is pacing the corner as usual, ranting incoherently at any passersby who catch his eye, but they slip past him and join the customers waiting inside, a black woman holding a whiny child and two white college students discussing Foucault. Harold's is nothing but a hallway with greasy paneled walls and a window customers holler through to black women with faces shiny from standing over the fryers. The chicken comes with fries piled on two slices of white bread and smothered in the best barbecue sauce Laura has ever tasted. This is where Laura would bring her father if he would visit, but it doesn't seem likely that he will.

At Laura's place they set their food and a six pack of Guinness on the coffee table and eat sitting on her futon couch--the only real furniture she owns. "Cheap food, expensive beer, the only way to live," Garrett says. He flips on MTV and does grotesque impersonations of the performers, running his hand through his short brown hair to make it stick out, pulling her up to dance with him. He always knows when and how to cheer her up. Lucille tells Laura that she only likes Garrett because he's gay so Laura feels safe with him. Dr. Carter agrees. Laura doesn't care.
She's never known a gay man before so she thinks it was this that first drew her, that he seemed exotic to her, a friend she'd never have had if she'd stayed in her tiny hometown. Now she likes him because he's someone she can laugh with.

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Wednesday after work, Laura goes for groceries to the Co-op Grocery Store. It's next door to the coffee shop, only two blocks from her apartment, and she recognizes many of the other shoppers, but no one nods or smiles at her. It is as if she emanated some dangerous, radioactive aura. People feel the vibrations and know to stay away. She's felt this way ever since she left Marc, in Cordelia because everyone stared at her, and here because no one notices her. Lucille and Garrett are the only ones who don't seem to be affected.

She has studied anatomy in her pre-med classes, so she knows as well as anyone that there is no physical location designated to hold a person's true self, the good or evil within, but she also knows she carries inside her a core, a long tube of darkness, of anger and hate and violence. It is, she imagines, lodged in the spinal column, concealed within the bony case. With all the nerves connecting there, the core would have outlets impossible to seal off.
Lucille picks her up and drives her to the Y. Lucille is wearing a shiny red and white Lycra exercise outfit that reveals a bit of the brown, smooth skin of her stomach as well as her fantastic figure. In her ballooning white t-shirt and running shorts Laura feels dowdy, but when they walk into the gym and the men's gaze catches on Lucille, Laura is glad. She doesn't want their attention, doesn't want to see lust in any man's eyes. It is too close to the look in Marc's some nights, like the first time he hit her and blackened her eye, and afterwards he was so tender and there was such longing in his eyes she couldn't turn away. Not that first time anyway. She thinks she has been striving for the right look in men's eyes too much of her life, beginning with her father, but then she doesn't know if she believes this herself or if this is just another of Dr. Carter's notions.

The team is a surprising mix of black and white, men and women, most of whom have played together before. There is lots of noisy teasing and nicknames and cheerful predictions of another losing season. The man Lucille is smitten with is tall with muscular shoulders and steady, dark, long-lashed eyes, and he can't seem to take them off Lucille. Laura stands awkwardly watching Lucille and Bennett flirt until a guy named Phil gets them organized to practice.
From the first time she hits the ball Laura begins to relax. She concentrates on her body, focuses on the ball and on bringing her hands up to meet the arc of the ball precisely. The sting of it against her wrists exhilarates her. She was always a strong server and she shows some of the women how to get more power behind the ball, helps Craig and Phil improve their control. She finds herself talking and joking with them, even touching Craig's wrist, Phil's shoulder as they practice, and it all feels normal enough.

During the short drive home Laura teases Lucille about the way the men were looking at her. "Especially Bennett. What kind of name is Bennett? Must be rich."

Lucille rolls her eyes. "Listen, those men might have been looking at me, but you had them all listening to you. They knew which one of us knew what she was doing!"

Laura laughs and gets out of the car. Her body feels light. She knows her shoulders will be sore tomorrow, but now she is bubbling over to tell someone about her evening and decides it is still early enough to call home. Her father came to every home volleyball game she ever played. "My daughter, captain of the volleyball team," he'd say proudly.

"I joined a volleyball team at the Y," she says, still breathless. "I went to my first practice tonight."

"Volleyball!" her father says. "Well, that's fine. How's the old serving arm?"
She laughs. "It was alright. I'll probably be sore tomorrow, though."

"You've got to get yourself back in shape," he says, and she thinks she even hears a little pride in his voice again.

"I do. But I tell you, I'm way ahead of the rest of the team. They're not exactly championship material."

"So you're star of the show?"

"Hey, I was coaching everybody, giving them pointers. Dad, it felt so great to be back on the court again. It felt like home. I can't believe I stayed away this long."

"No," he says, but his voice has flattened out. "It's good to hear you're playing again."

The muscles in her back begin to quiver, and she sits down on the end of her futon. She's tired. "It made me think of when I really played. That university team, wow, we were good, weren't we? Probably could have gone to the championships if I'd stayed on it."

"Yeah."

"I guess maybe I haven't let myself think about it. I mean, I don't think about it. But Lucille mentioned volleyball and I practically jumped on her. I didn't realize how much I wanted to play. I miss it."

"You could still go back."

She swallows. "I don't think so. There's too much . . . well, you know I couldn't."
Her father doesn't answer. "It's good you're getting some exercise again." It is her mother, so quiet while Laura was growing up, who carries the conversation now, talking about the neighbors, her garden, Bob and Julie and their baby. Her father was always the one Laura talked to before. They talked about volleyball and track and her plans to be a doctor, but since that night at the hospital, he's barely been able to talk to her at all.

"This team will give you a chance to meet some more people," her mother says.

"Yeah, that's why I told Lucille I wanted to join. It's been so hard meeting people here." She summons back her enthusiasm and goes on about the people she met, parents and programmers and secretaries, a teacher. "You should have seen the way some of those guys served, Dad. Enough power to hit the ball across the court and back, but their aim—crazy! We had balls flying all over the gym." She laughs, but her father only grunts.

"They obviously didn't have a father who drilled home the importance of learning the basics, like you did," she says.

"Yeah," he says. She's sure there's things he's been thinking that he hasn't said to her. She can see it in the way his eyes fix stubbornly on some distant point when she tries to talk to him, the roughness in his voice when he does respond. He won't tell her what it is, but she thinks she
knows. It's the ugliness she showed, the angry, dark core. He can't love a daughter who could stab her husband.

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The next morning during their break, Lucille says Laura has to eat the whole muffin; she is feeling fat. It is clear to Laura that Lucille doesn't have an ounce of fat on her body, but she doesn't say anything. She has read somewhere it is mostly white women who get eating disorders and have unrealistic body images. But then she has also read that it is women who come from abusive homes that end up with abusive husbands.

Lucille leans over her coffee, smirking, one perfect eyebrow raised. Her face has the symmetric delicacy of an open walnut shell. "So, you dream about Phil last night?"

Laura takes a breath. "Do you ever stop?" she says quietly.

Lucille leans back.

"All you ever talk about is men. I can't stand it anymore." Laura stands up and has to grab the back of her chair because her legs are shaking and her heart is beating so hard it makes her rock. "You and Garrett, you're always on me about finding myself a man. I don't need a man!"
Lucille crosses her arms. "You're alone too much."

"Yes." She is crying now and Lucille is still looking at her in that flat, slightly startled way, and so she shouts it at her. "I was married! I was married and my husband broke my arm. I nearly killed him." She doesn't wait to see how Lucille reacts, to see if she is horrified or even afraid of her now. She runs out of the building, out of the courtyard, runs as far as the park and sits there under a tree facing away from the sidewalk.

There are things that happen, that change what is seen; certain truths can no longer be ignored. She could make a diagram. On the way to work at the pool where she was lifeguard that summer, Laura hit a cat with her car. She pulled over and ran back to look, but it was dead. When she stood up, a little girl came running out of the house. She began crying as soon as she saw it was her cat. "I'm so sorry," Laura said. The girl looked at Laura and began screaming, wouldn't let Laura come near enough to comfort her. She stared and screamed as if she could see something in Laura's face that terrified her. Laura could do nothing but walk back to her car and drive away.

That night Marc came home while she was getting supper ready. "No one knows you like I do," he said. Part of her knew when he said that what it meant was he'd flunked another anatomy quiz, but knowing that didn't stop her from believing
him. She was failing as a wife after years of success at everything else. "Why are you fixing corn when you know it irritates my stomach?" he said. "Everyone thinks you're so perfect. But I have to live with the truth, Laura. The truth is I was at the top of my class until I married you." She could not deny that was true. And he turned from yelling to shoving and slapping, finally swinging the skillet that waited on the stove. "No one has to know you like I do," he said and she grabbed the counter with her right arm and pulled herself back to her feet, her left arm hanging broken. She picked up the knife still sticky with onions, determining that everyone would know.

In her diagram she would draw an arrow from the cat to the knife. That girl had seen what she thought was hidden. The girl could see her core. Now she tries to decide what she should do: move away again, kill Marc, kill herself, or tear the grass out in handfuls, show people the roots so they finally have to see.

She doesn't go back to work. She walks to the Co-op, going the back way to avoid passing by the coffee shop windows, and she buys three plants, as big as she can carry, all with flowers blooming. She sets them on the wood floor of her apartment in front of the window and sits in the middle, examining their leaves and flowers, and she stays there all afternoon.
Right after the fight and during the hearing her parents' house was filled with flowers. Some of her old schoolmates would cross the street to avoid her, a woman even spit at her as a lesson to her children, but not everyone blamed her. People she didn't know sent plants so that the living room was a garden. Plants bloomed on the coffee table, the windowsill, the floor, all along the back of the piano where they would vibrate when her mother played. When she played, her back curved over the keyboard like a wishbone, and her grey sweater was pearly in the light beside the piano, her head down as her fingers followed paths over the keys that she knew by heart. Those afternoons listening to her mother play were the closest moments she's ever shared with her mother. Her mother's music filled the silences that her father once filled with talk.

She stands and paces through her apartment from the bathroom with its rust-stained sink and chipped white-octagon-tiled floor, through the main room and into her little kitchen, where she peers out at the grey back stairs and barred doors of the building across the alley, then paces back. Her walls are blank, eggshell white. Garrett has offered her old movie posters, which he collects, and rugs and batiked wall hangings, saying her room cries out for color, but anything more than the trees and sky and sun at her big front window would make her feel too crowded. Even these plants make her restless, though they also comfort her. She
turns on the radio, but after two commercials turns it off and puts in a tape of piano music.

The first her parents knew about the problems in her marriage was when she called them from the hospital. They posted bond for her and brought her home to live in her old room again. She never went back to the house; her mother and Bob packed up all her things. Her father didn't help them and couldn't seem to talk to her anymore. He couldn't even look her in the eye because to do that would mean accepting that the woman who hunched in front of the T.V. for hours or burst into tears in the silence at the dinner table was the daughter he'd raised.

She pulls the phone over so she can sit on the floor again and dials. It is nearly seven, so her parents will have finished supper and her mother will be washing the dishes while her father reads the paper in his easy chair, phone on the stand at his elbow. Her father answers as she expected.

"Dad," she says.

"Laura."

"Dad, remember when you used to take me pheasant hunting?"

"Of course."

"Dad," she says. "I was just thinking about it. I remember waiting in the cold for hours. But the next time I'd never remember. You'd tell me to put on extra socks and long
underwear and I always argued with you. You were always right."

He makes a little sound that might be a laugh. "Of course I was," he says.

"We made good hunting partners."

"We-ell." He draws it out, teasing. "You're a good shot, but I have to attribute that to my teaching skills."

"You were a pretty good teacher," Laura concedes. "But I was an excellent student." She squirms back till she's leaning against the futon leg, the setting sun warming her face. "Dad, remember how Bob always cried when we picked up the dead pheasants?"

"Never could take Bob along," he agrees. "You were the tough one."

She taps her fingernails against her cheek, thinking about this. "Dad, am I . . . do you think that's why . . . " She cannot finish.

"Laura, I never cried over any dead birds either. We were there to kill them and you understood that." His voice dips and catches. Her eyes tear up. "Thanks Dad."

He is quiet.

"Dad?"

"Mm."
"Hey Dad, maybe I'll come down and we can go hunting again this fall."

He is slow to answer, but says maybe so.

"It would be a good chance to talk, out there in the woods. We could talk like we used to," she says.

After a moment he says, "Bob would probably want to come, too. Make a family weekend of it."

"Sure." She can picture him sitting in his brown plaid recliner, paper folded in his lap, eyes on whatever he can see through the front window, thumb rubbing at his jaw. It is obvious to her that he doesn't want her to come. He must be wondering whether it is prudent to allow this daughter to carry a rifle. He's afraid of what she's capable of doing with a weapon in her hands, and maybe he's right, because right now she wants to scream at him, make him answer her. But she can't scream at her father. It would only prove what they are both afraid of.

"Someone's at the door," she says. "I've got to go."

She wants to break something. She wants to slam the door and throw her new plants across the room and grind the torn leaves under her feet. She makes herself sit still.

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She wakes up angry. All day long she serves people and has to concentrate so she does not shove their coffee at them, slopping it over the sides, does not scream into their faces, does not throw their change at them. Her muffins come out tough because she mixes them with anger. She has broken three cups because she washes them with anger. The floor is polished till it's slippery with the anger of her mopping.

While they are working she tells Lucille the rest of the story of her marriage.

"My god! A butcher knife." Lucille stands very still, her floured hands lying limply on the dough she has forgotten to knead. "Was it real bad?"

"He had to have a few stitches is all." Ninety-seven. She adds more flour to her batter. "It wasn't like some big thing you'd see on T.V. or anything." But of course it was on T.V. It was all over the T.V. and the front pages of the local newspapers so she couldn't walk around even in towns twenty miles away without people staring.

"Oh Laura," Lucille says. "I'm so sorry. Why didn't you tell me sooner?" She starts toward Laura, but Laura stays behind the big mixer. Sliding the bowl into place she shakes her head and turns on the motor.

After work she calls Garrett and asks him over. He has to know the truth, too. Everyone has to know. She picked up that knife because she was tired of hiding, tired of
pretending. It was a mistake to believe she could put it down again.

"Things were different after we got married," she explains. "He had all these little ways of trying to control me. Okay. For instance, that Thanksgiving after we got married, we were with my family. Bob and Marc and my dad were watching the game in the living room and I was in the kitchen with Mom and Julie, Bob's wife. That was weird already, because when we were kids, Bob and I would both spend some time helping Mom and some watching the game. So after a while I went out to watch the game. I sat on the arm of Marc's chair, and he put his hand on my back. But then when I'd been there awhile he whispered to me I should be helping in the kitchen. I knew they were just fine without me. I wasn't being selfish. I really don't think I was. But he started pushing on my back, not hard enough to push me off, but pushing, you know? So I went back to the kitchen. And no one said anything."

"Did they see it? Did they know what was going on?"

She shrugs. "Maybe not exactly. But they were sitting right there. I think my dad had to know. I didn't come out of the kitchen again till we ate. He had to know something was wrong, and he didn't say anything."

Garrett reaches over to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. "Sometimes people don't realize the implications."
"Maybe that's it," she says, but she thinks her father could have called her back, could have told Marc she was fine where she was. Maybe he thought she was selfish, too, not a good daughter or a good wife. Maybe he thought it was time she was more quiet and giving like her mother, not that he pushed her mother around, but her mother was a woman who always did everything that needed to be done herself and never raised her voice. Laura hadn't wanted to live like that. She'd intended to ask for what she needed and say so when she was angry. She'd thought a little yelling now and then would be healthy for a relationship. The occasional loud arguments she and Marc had while they were dating, even his sudden outbursts of frustration—throwing books down, slamming doors—hadn't worried her. But her marriage taught her that yelling was only the uncorking of a fury that wouldn't stop before it spilled tears, broke plates and spewed food across the floor, blackened eyes, vented blood.

She goes on and she tells Garrett how it was, how it kept getting worse, how it ended. "I'd been making supper. He hit me with the frying pan and I grabbed the knife off the counter," she says and Garrett sits back. His eyes fill with tears. "I just charged in slashing," she says.

He takes her hand. "Good for you."

"No." She pulls away and stands up. "I got the femoral vein. He could have died. I'd be in jail now. I had to call
an ambulance while he lay there screaming at me."

She goes into the kitchen and gets them each another beer, comes back out when she can look in his face again, but in his face is not horror or disgust as she expected, only sadness. He is quiet for a long time, his beer bottle twisting back and forth between his fingers. They sit together on her futon couch, half-empty pizza box on the coffee table in front of them. It is just one thing, just one thing in her life, and she's been sentenced to revolve around it forever. "It's just that for too long that's all anybody was willing to know about me, the scandal in the paper. I didn't want that to follow me here."

"You're not giving us much of a chance."

"I had good friends back home, Garrett, friends I'd known for years, and they couldn't get past it. Every time we talked, no matter what they were saying, I could see it in their eyes." Even her own father cannot get past it.

She feels drained, as if finally she is only a pipe that the story will flow through and be gone, not a well that must bubble up the old story over and over, the water table supplying an endless trickle of memories. But she is a well. She can remember every separate black eye and bruise Marc ever gave her, and the excuses she made to her professors and her friends and her parents. They all believed her. She doesn't understand why they believed her, or why they pretended to,
but she's here in Chicago and they're all behind her, in Cordelia, where she thought she'd left her anger, too.

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She plays her first match with the volleyball team. When she serves the ball with all her strength no one gives her worried looks. They cheer her on. They lose all three games by seven or eight points each, but Lucille tells her afterwards that they only scored eight points total the first two matches. "I didn't tell you that, because I knew you'd never join us then," Lucille says.

"I would have," Laura protests, "just so I could be on your team." When she is with these men and women she feels at home in her body again, blood pumping and skin sweating, voice hoarse from yelling encouragement and friendly insults and laughing. She sees her world returning to normal size, reaching toward the kind of world she liyed in before the marriage. She tells Dr. Carter she's found what she needed.

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She is walking home with more plants and she is not expecting it when he blocks her path. The man is tall but skinny and wears reflector sunglasses. He grabs her purse,
just a little coin purse with a cord for a strap and it rips free, though the tug wrenches her forward and she drops her plants and screams. He's already running and she runs after him. "You give it back!" she yells. She can still run fast. She once won state in the half mile.

The man swerves around an old woman on the sidewalk and stumbles on something in the grass and it slows him just enough that Laura catches him. She grabs his arm. She is too angry to be afraid. "You give me back my purse!" She yells it right into his face. Up close she sees that his skin is a sickly watery brown and he is not very strong.

"Let go, bitch!" He smells of cigarettes. He jerks free, but Laura has grabbed the purse and he runs without it.

She is trembling as she goes back to her plants. She kneels on the sidewalk and carefully pats the dirt back into place, tamping down the roots that have torn loose. People inside the big glass windows of the corner deli and those standing on the sidewalk stare at her, but no one says anything and she holds her head high as she carries her plants home.

She calls Lucille. "Lucille, I just got my purse back from a mugger!" she says exultantly. When she's told Lucille the story, though, Lucille is upset with her.

"You could have been hurt, Laura. My god, girl, don't you know he could have had a gun?"
"But he didn't, Lucille. It turned out alright." She explains it as if to a child.

"What did you have in that purse? A couple dollars? That's not worth your life!"

"It didn't cost me my life! I won. Are you listening to me?"

"All I'm saying is that was a risky thing to do."

"That's not the point." She takes a deep breath, then she goes ahead and yells. "Listen, I'm fast. I caught him and I got back what was mine. God!" She picks up the phone book and throws it on the floor, kicks at it. "Shit." Her throat clogs with tears. "Lucille, no one is going to tell me I can't defend myself."

Lucille is quiet now. "No," she says. "No, I'm not gonna tell you that." They listen to each other's ragged breathing for a very long time. "Laura?"

"Yes."

"I'm proud of you, girlfriend."

Laura hangs up and blows her nose, examines her coin purse. The cord is snapped. Next time she will buy something that isn't so easy to grab, maybe a fanny pack. Her apartment is so quiet and still, the plants near the open window barely vibrating in the breeze that slips in. She puts the phone book back on the shelf, picks off a few African violet leaves that were damaged in the fall.
There are certain stories she tells herself. There is the story of when she won her first two-mile run and the story of when her track team won the state championship. There is the story of the day she finally made the varsity volleyball team and all the games she played with her father watching from the bleachers. There is the story of her graduation, when she and another girl tied for valedictorian. When she crossed the stage and took her diploma there was a flash and then as she turned to come down the stairs there was another and there was her father, squatting down with the camera in his grey suit, head shining under the lights, in the same gymnasium where he'd watched her compete, and he stood and hugged her before she went back to her seat. There is the story of her acceptance to college, and her scholarships, and her engagement, and all of them, all of them are about how proud her dad was. She was her daddy's girl alright. Isn't he the one who taught her to stand up for herself? Didn't he teach her to fight? She goes back to the stories. Once upon a time there was a girl named Laura and she could run like the wind.

But the stories always end at the night her father and mother came to the hospital to get her. Her left arm was in a cast. Her face was swollen, one eye blackened shut, and she stood stiffly because of her bruised ribs and back. Her mother wrapped her thin arms round Laura's shoulders and cried.
on her neck. Her father turned on his heel and went out to wait in the car.

Catching a mugger is not enough to change her life, but she realizes that it wasn't driving over some girl's cat that changed her life before. It was the accumulation of so much that had happened to her until one last detail tipped the balance. She picks up the telephone receiver again, and her fingers shake as she jabs at the buttons so that the phone jumps under her hands, but her voice comes out firm.

"Dad," she begins. "We need to talk."

He is quiet.

"Godammit Dad! Don't you know how much I miss you? I am so angry at you." She doesn't let herself yell. "I'm coming home tomorrow."

He clears his throat, and then clears it again, but doesn't speak.

"Dad? I won't wait. I'm coming home. I want you to tell me what you've been thinking all this time. If you hate me I want to finally know it."

She hears him take a breath, hears it catch in his throat. "I don't hate you," he says, and the sound he makes is something she's never heard before. She thinks he is crying.
On the corner by the carwash the boys stand with jutting hips, hands in pockets, that sullen, appraising look. Though they barely turn their heads, their eyes follow me when I ride by on the far side of the street. Their skin is sallow and thin under the yellow, insect-heavy glow of the streetlight which they cluster below. I know the name of the one with the sandy straight hair that pokes out of the sides of his backwards baseball cap. His name is Tommy, a little boy's name, but his shoulders are wide and his face is difficult to approach. I wonder if I called to him if he would come to me. I wonder what it would take to make him smile.

I ride by again but one of their friends has pulled into the car wash and they have clustered around his Ford pickup, cigarettes lit, Pepsis raised, even laughing. Just boys.
Mom sits in front of the T.V., her eyes following the weatherman's hand as it sweeps up and down the map. The rotating fan blows over her on the cream-colored couch we brought with us. The fan stirs up the smell of the brown shag carpet, which is a smell like it's been in a stagnant pond. We took what furniture would fit. When Janet moves in with Dad, she'll want new anyway. She likes bright colors.

In my room I kneel on my bed at the window. Rosie is standing on the sidewalk, her baby balanced on her hip, and she talks to Augie, smiling up into his face, teasing him with pouting lips. "Come on, Rosie," he says. She holds her baby on her hip in one arm, reaches up round his neck with the other and pulls him in for a long kiss. He says her name but she laughs and sways into her mother's house, leaving him to slam into his pickup and drive away. Children run screaming past the window, part of the sugar-sticky army of children that swarm the block daily on bikes, on foot, with waterguns, with shouting.

"What are you doing in here in the dark?"

"Nothing, Mom."

"Come out and watch David Letterman. I think the band is someone you like."

I think she has made this up, but it doesn't matter. "Pam, I had a nice talk with my manager, Mr. Spicer, today. I really like him. He has twin boys, four-year-olds, and his
wife works part-time at the library, so I bet you've seen her there." Her eyes are too bright, like they've soaked in the light waves from the T.V., a simulated blue liveliness. "He was saying they should have us out for a welcome-to-Franklin barbecue."

The couch prickles under my sweaty legs and back, but the weight of the air holds me down, still, watching, and the monologue begins. Watching David Letterman together is one of the things that hasn't changed since we've moved from Lenora, in western Kansas, to Franklin, just north of Wichita. All spring I sat up nights talking to my mother, telling her about the movies I'd seen, repeating my friends' conversations back for her. She was too ashamed to talk to her old friends, ashamed even if it was nothing she'd chosen for herself. Here the air clings like a damp velour skin. She is right about the band. "You have their CD," she says. Michael gave it to me. His letters ask me to write soon, but I have nothing much to say.

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I wake to potato-flesh walls, close my eyes, picture the pale blue morning walls of my old room, the fractal posters, the sky chart, the singing bird curtains. My sheets are damp beneath me. Showered, I sit down with my guitar and
instruction book. E, F, G, first string notes. Again. Who can practice with screaming children, the roar of Caldwell's window air conditioner, Rosie's mother's T.V.? I can hear them all from here. The guitar Dad gave me before we left, that and a subscription to Scientific American, a charge account at the Gap, a CD player. Dad and Janet took me to Garden City for Chinese food and shopping. They had wine with dinner and Janet's face turned red. Her hair was straight, black, slippery, and her shoulders were bare. The clothes she picked for me to try on looked better on me than I expected, but I said no to everything. Dad' got me the charge account. He didn't ask me to stay.

The heat is an expanding balloon, filling the house, pushing me up against the walls, out the door. Rosie sits on her porch, leaning against the grimy white stucco, balancing her baby on his feet between her outstretched legs. "You talk to those boys last night?"

"No." Monday, walking to Sonic for limeades, she said those were guys to watch out for. From the curve of her voice, I knew she meant they were guys to watch rather than be careful of. She singled out Tommy. Though I like to think I'd already picked him out for myself, I don't really know. I don't know which things I've done because they seemed the things to do, which few things I might have done because they came from inside me, because they were what I wanted. He
caught my attention just from the way he looked. He didn't have to say anything smart or clever, and it never happened that way before. Michael made me laugh; Shawn knew all the answers in physics.

The peeling, grey paint of the wooden porch sticks to the backs of my thighs. I have eight mosquito bites on my left leg. Rosie says Tommy is too young for her, but she's the same age as me. A few months older. She's already turned sixteen, and I will next month. I was surprised when she told me, sitting on her porch like we are right now, her year-old baby sleeping on her legs, black hair plastered damply to his forehead. I hate this neighborhood. Our house in Lenora had the best porch. Charlene and Michael and I would sit there drinking Cokes in the afternoon heat even though we had the whole air-conditioned house to ourselves. From that porch we could see, past the front-yard trees, over the shallow slope of a wheatfield, all of Lenora stretched before us. We could see all there was to see and we knew where we fit in the picture.

Rosie has Augie, but she thinks he might be running around on her. She holds her blue metal cup of iced tea against her cheek, and condensation runs into the neck of her t-shirt.

"You ought to talk to Tommy. But not while he's with all those other guys."
"Why not?"

"Give them ideas!" she laughs. "Some of those boys I don't trust." Fabian starts to cry and she heaves herself up. "Gotta go change him. We walking to the pool this afternoon?"

Inside, the soaps are on, but the fan drowns out the voices, blowing fishy air over me. With my thumbnail I mark X's on all the bites.

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Our feet rest in the babies' wading pool and she holds onto Fabian as he splashes his little fat hands in the water. He is a cute baby with lots of black hair and a smile big as a pear. We look through the wire fence that separates us from the big pool and Rosie points out kids I will meet when school starts next month.

"That's Lisa Palmer, there, the one with the red bikini. She's so full of herself. Don't even try to talk to her. You know when I got pregnant she was so snooty, looking down her nose at me." Rosie splashes water over Fabian's round tummy. "That Lisa acts like she wouldn't know what to do with a dick if it bit her, but she's going out with half the football team. Carmen Perez's younger sister is friends with Lisa's sister and Carmen told me Lisa had an abortion a year ago. Just who should be looking down their nose at who? Tell me
that." Rosie turns her head so her dark hair snaps around definitively, then has to reclip her red barrette. Charlene has very straight, wheat-blonde hair. If she'd let it grow she'd look like Jan Brady, but she keeps it shoulder length or shorter. Charlene and I would be right now looking at the fall Vogue. Picking out new hairstyles for each other.

"That's Val Miller and Tracey Hogan. They can be pretty nice." Rosie knows who everyone is, but few people talk to her. Some of the other mothers. Her best friend, Carmen, sits with us sometimes. She has a pointy nose, purple-tinted sunglasses, a sarcastic edge to her voice. I think Carmen doesn't like it that Rosie has someone besides her to hang out with, even if Carmen is busy with a summer job at Dillons half the time. Sometimes men who must be ten years older than us hang on the outside of the fence and Rosie hands me Fabian while she goes over to flirt. She always ends by warning them she'll tell Augie about them, so they better watch out.

"Augie might be running around on me, but I'm not going to give him anything to accuse me of. Not until I'm sure." She relieves me of Fabian and holds him against her stomach. "Sometimes I think I should forget him. There's plenty other guys interested." She laughs now, but she looks sad.

Charlene wrote she thinks she's in love with Leon, a senior who moved to Lenora last winter. Her whole letter is about him. He's a good kisser, she says, and he takes her
riding on his motorcycle and he's going to be a doctor, just like our fathers. The water in this pool is too warm. Toddlers lumber through it sluggish as bears.

For supper, I buy hamburger and buns and ears of corn. When Mom gets home, she showers and I cook the hamburgers on our little grill behind the back door. The grill stands in the weeds since there is no porch or deck or even a cement patio behind the ugly yellow house. This house is a child's square of four rooms with a bathroom wedged between the bedrooms. The kitchen table is fake wood, but we eat off our best China. Packing, she said he can buy his own goddamned plates.

Mom talks about work, about the women in the office. She touches my hand. "It will get better when school starts," she says. When I join a class three times bigger than in Lenora, and don't know a single person there. I pull my hand away and pick up my corn on the cob.

I just wanted to sneak by, that first time I saw her that way, huddled on the couch, her face red and mashed from crying. Charlene's car was backing out of the drive and my mother looked up at me. She looked up and saw me and I couldn't walk away even though I was afraid. I've learned to rise to the occasion. I held her while she cried.

"You went to the pool this afternoon?" she asks. "Did you meet any girls your age?" Her face is filmed with sweat.
"I went with Rosie."

"That boy she sees isn't even the father, is he?"

"No, Mom."

I was ten the first time I kissed Michael. Playing post office, I kissed all the neighborhood boys. Charlene and Angie did too. Only on my bike can I feel the movement of air on my skin. The boys watch me like lizards on a rock. It isn't my imagination. It may be because of my yellow tank top and cut-offs that I roll higher after I leave the house, or because they've seen me with Rosie, or maybe there's nothing else to look at. The second time I ride by, I slow down and look right at them and Tommy nods at me.

It is the next afternoon when he comes up to the outside fence of the baby pool. "Hey," he says.

"Hi."

"Go on," Rosie whispers it so urgently that there's nothing else I can do. At the fence the smell of asphalt melting in the parking lot is stronger than the chlorine and cocoa butter of the pool.

"You a friend of Rosie's?"

"We're neighbors." I turn and look at the children splashing in their red suits. "You're Tommy. Rosie's told me about you."

"What did she say?"

I shrug.
"You're new here."
"Yeah."

He nods at this for a long time, then twists around to look behind him. One of his friends leans against the stop sign on the corner. "Well, see you around," Tommy says, and he slouches away, the sides of his unlaced shoes flapping.

The soles of my feet have burned flat against the hot cement. He didn't smile at me the whole time, and that is what I keep thinking of, how he didn't smile and what he would look like if he did. Only if I saw him smile would I really know him. Good or bad, friend or foe.

Michael smiled all the time. Even though we were going together for a year it wasn't much different from being friends. The day before we left, August first, he came to see me. He sat on the plaid sofa in the basement rec room where he'd sat one thousand times before, where we'd sat and watched T.V. and worked crosswords and talked and kissed, and I told myself I would hold that picture in my mind. It is only weeks old but it is already as old as the row of teddy bears I kept by my bed when I was five or the day in second grade when I came home from school and saw my parents in the kitchen kissing, my mother on my father's lap, the buttons on her blouse undone and when they saw me they began giggling and Dad lifted me up and swung me around till I laughed too, and his shirt was crayon blue.
Rosie asks me what he wanted and I shrug. In Lenora, Charlene is impressing Leon with her perfect dives from the high board. She's better than anyone, but I'm afraid of the high dive. Only Charlene knew why I always kept to the sidelines, watching. Mom said I had a choice but it was all settled that night in Garden City. I did not smile when Janet took my father's arm or teased him. I would not take the clothes she picked out. I knew if I stayed I'd find them together at any odd moment, kissing, giggling, touching each other. They could barely restrain themselves in a public restaurant. Anyone could see that. They didn't want me and Mom needed me. There was no choice even if for the judge I pretended to make one. Sign on the line. There. It is sealed, and I am inside it.

I make tuna casserole for supper and more corn on the cob. Mom seems cheerful again. "Pam, you know I've been so proud of you the way you've been fixing supper and all. You're behaving like such a young adult. I feel like we're partners in this household." Her face looks soft and relaxed. She has corn stuck between her teeth. My body is an envelope of sweat.

"Rosie thinks her boyfriend is cheating on her," I say. Your father moved out, she said, he came for his clothes this evening. I had known he was going to do this, but did not tell my mother so. I had told her about Michael, told her
we'd kissed and everything, as if we were girlfriends, but I
didn't tell her how my father talked about the beautiful
Janet. Marvelous Janet.

"If she thinks so, he probably is." Her mouth pinches
shut.

"All kinds of guys stop to talk to her at the pool. She
can get another just like that."

She goes to the counter and leans forward over the sink
to look out the window. "Some people live that way." She
doesn't want to hear I admire Rosie for being able to land,
always, on her feet. Sometimes I can deal with it all day
long, she told me once, but when the dark comes on it just
seeps away. I'm sorry about it, Pam, I am, she said. Then
she asked me if Paul and Angie had gotten back together. I
myself was involved in nothing I couldn't tell her about.

Rosie's face and shoulders have turned pecan-shell brown
from the afternoons at the pool, but the insides of her arms
remain creamy as almonds. Her dark hair has lit red-brown at
the ends. Janet is Japanese-American, exotic in Lenora, a
radiologist at Dad's hospital. She is tiny, with glossy black
hair, black eyes, red lips, and she took my father dancing
while my mother cried on the cream-colored sofa.

Mom faces me, leaning back on palms stretched white on
the tan formica. She's the color of sand, her hair faded
blonde and her face pale. "Let's go for ice cream," she says.

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Tommy comes by the pool the next afternoon and I stand by the fence to talk to him. "Didn't see you riding your bike last night," he says and there's almost a smile on his lips, but it's more like a smirk, like there's some kind of secret he holds in his head about me riding my bike, or me not being there, like maybe something might have happened if I'd been there instead of at the Baskin Robbins with my mother. Tommy's face isn't cute at all, as Rosie had claimed, but ugly in a way that draws you in. He looks a little like Tom Petty.

"Some of us are going out to Harvey Lake tomorrow afternoon. I'll take you along if you want."

I look over at Rosie, but she is talking to Carmen.

"Who's going?"

"The guys, you know."

"No other girls?"

"Sure, there will be other girls." He sort of laughs at this without actually changing the shape of his face. "Bring Rosie along."

My hands have found a place to rest on my stomach. The fabric of my swimsuit stretches taut between my palms and
stomach, like a shield of fish scales, hard and impermeable enough to protect me. It is the bubble inside which I am propelled through the world, sealed. "Okay."

"We'll come by around two."

I wait till after Carmen goes back to the big pool to tell Rosie what Tommy said. "Huh-uh, I'm not going out there with those guys," she says without the slightest hesitation.

"I thought you liked Tommy. You're the one who pointed him out. You told me to talk to him." My voice gets louder and higher till I shut my mouth. I put my hands on the surface of the water and feel it cool my palms. I can smell the sugar of the red licorice whip two little girls are eating.

"Tommy's okay. It's when you get boys into groups that you have problems. They're like pack animals." She laughs now. Little crooked pearl teeth. "But you can look out for yourself. I'm glad Tommy likes you."

"So you won't come along?"

"I got to watch Fabian. You know I can't leave him with Mama all day long. I'm going out with Augie tomorrow night."

I get a Coke from the refreshment stand, and find a puddle to stand in where the water splashes out from kids cannonballing off the high dive. No one can dive as cleanly as Charlene. Once we went to a party at Michael's cousins in Burrton, twenty miles away. The guys were mostly older,
goodlooking, witty, drunk. Michael was waiting in the car, and a guy who'd been making us laugh earlier was standing in the doorway. He got two girls who walked through ahead of us to kiss him. Charlene walked past and he leaned in for his kiss but she gave him such a look and just the littlest push with one hand and he backed right off, then turned to me and grinned. I hesitated. Maybe I was curious, maybe already restless for something to happen. I hesitated. But Charlene said, come on, Pam, and so I did.

Tommy and his friend are sitting on a picnic table in the park, shirts off, smoking and looking this way. My stomach clenches up. I toss my Coke in a trash barrel and join the line below the high dive. I don't look up or around, but just climb until I get to the top, and there I look straight ahead. I can see over the top of the bath house and what is there is just plain blue sky with nothing to obscure it. The pure color of it hurts my eyes. The board is vibrating from the shaking of my legs, and then I walk straight off the end. The water smacks my feet hard and I go down forever, and then I feel the smooth bottom and shove off and up and I am out. It only takes seconds. The cement is hot beneath my stinging feet again. I allow a quick glance to make sure Tommy is still watching. No one pushed me off that board.
We cut up vegetables and chicken and have stir-fry for supper. The linoleum is torn in front of the counter and I run my toe over the shaggy edge. I tell her about going to the lake.

"Are these kids you met at the pool?"

"This boy Tommy asked me. Rosie knows him."

We sit down. She licks her lips, spoons chicken over her rice. What can she say? I am mature. I am responsible. She just said so yesterday. "I wish I could meet this boy before you go somewhere with him, Pam."

"There's not going to be time. Don't you want me to make friends here?"

"Of course I do." She stands up and fills her glass with water from the tap, letting it run over her fingers until it is cold. "But you have to be careful. What do you know about these kids?"

She slept in the guest room or on the couch, anywhere but the bedroom where my father's absence smothered her like a pillow. They didn't fight much, and almost never where I could hear them. What happened was just more and more silence.

"How am I going to get to know them if I stay home?"

"It's not that I want you to stay home."

I know that. What I had imagined was that once the divorce was over things would be like they were except that
Mom wouldn't cry every night anymore. But things aren't what they were. I can't just keep riding by those guys on the corner forever. It's got to be taking me somewhere.

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The afternoon is hot, the sun so white that the sand reflects like a tin shed and all I can see is people's surfaces, flat papery shapes of bodies and faces, no shadows. There is one other girl and she wears a bikini made of crocheted white thread that you can see through. Five of them, two of us. Except I can see she doesn't want to be an us with me. She hands me a beer, but doesn't say anything, and gets this snotty look when she sees my swimsuit, a plain black one-piece, covering me where she isn't covered. I think that I will probably never write to Charlene about this and I cannot decide if I am sorry about that. Like is it good or bad that a leaf gets swept downstream. The question doesn't make sense anymore. The boys go right into the muddy water in their cut-offs and I take a few sips of my beer because I am nervous. I hate the taste of it, and even though we are the only ones out here I'm afraid of getting caught, all of us underage. It's really just a little sandpit, like the sandpits in Lenora, which I never swam in because Dad said people drowned there.
I go into the water. At first, I stay a little away from where the boys are playing keep-away with a plastic football, but then the game changes. They are ducking each other and coming after me. Then I feel hands touching me under the water, and it is different. We are all swimming around and I cannot connect hands to faces but they are touching me, sliding their hands up and down my suit and up my bare legs, over my chest. I remember how I thought my swimsuit was like a shield, hard as fish scales. It doesn't feel like that now. I pretend like I don't notice, pretend nothing unusual is happening, laugh when someone else gets ducked. My heart is beating very fast and I don't know what to do. There are hands and my heart is beating fast from fear, not only fear, but mostly, and I decide I'd better get out.

Rita is still sitting on her towel, glistening now with a thick coat of suntan oil, sipping her beer. She smirks at me. "What's wrong?" she says. I think she must have seen what was happening, even through the dirty water.

"Nothing. I'm thirsty," I say and am then forced to take a swallow of beer.

I think of the people who are at the swimming pool right now. Rosie is there with Fabian, and the people she has pointed out to me are there, too. If I could just wait the two more weeks until school starts maybe I would meet those people and we would become friends, and they would not be very
different from my friends in Lenora, and I might meet a boy just as sweet as Michael. Maybe there is a choice to be made, but I am here, with these people, at this lake and it felt inevitable ever since we moved into that little house in that neighborhood and I met Rosie and then I saw Tommy and his friends standing on the corner and it was them I wanted to know. Charlene and Michael, Dad and Janet, they're only photographs in the mind. Mom is real, and Rosie and Fabian, and Tommy, he is the most real of all. It was Tommy, even before Rosie pointed him out to me, I'm sure of it now. It was my own idea from the beginning and those sweet boys wouldn't interest me anymore anyway because I am a different girl.

Rita gets up and strolls into the water. She swims into the middle of them, coming up next to Tommy, so close their skin must be touching below the surface of the water, but another guy, Cody, grabs her from behind and pulls her away. I think she is Cody's girlfriend. Pretty soon Tommy comes out of the water and he sits down on my towel, and his arms look very strong. He must be lifting weights. Rita is shrieking in the water and the guys are laughing. Tommy pulls a pocket knife out of his shorts pocket and uses the bottle opener on the beer.

"Let me see it," I say and he hands me the knife. I pull out the longest blade. It is only a couple inches long,
but it gleams where it has been sharpened, and I hold the handle in my fist. "I could make you do just what I wanted now." I show him the knife and the sharp edge flashes.

He almost smiles. "I could take it away from you."

I think it won't take much more to make him smile for real. "Come with me," I say. I lead him up the hill and down the other side to where the pickup is parked and we can't be seen from the water. I lean against a tree in front of the pickup and he doesn't hesitate. He kisses me and pushes against me so that I can feel how hard his chest is and the roughness of the bark on my back.

"So what are you going to use that knife for?" He thinks he can do anything he wants to me, because he is bigger and stronger and more experienced, but I can rise to any occasion. I show him what I will use the knife for.

I run it across my stomach, slicing through the fabric of my swimsuit, and it splits open showing pale skin beneath. I have to saw at the sides where the edges were bound, but now I have a two-piece suit and a few pinpricks of blood across the quivering white surface of my stomach. Folding up the knife, I push it into the back pocket of his jeans. I see him smile as he moves his hands up beneath my swimsuit onto bare skin, and I can see he is no one I can trust, but I am not afraid.
A little before nine Carol takes the box of Cheerios she keeps in their room, gets a Coke from the machine, and sits in a lawnchair in the shade of the motel office. As long as there is shade, she will watch the highway. Most of town lies on the other side of the highway, only the motel, a gas station, and a Dairy Queen lining the south side. Between the motel and endless wheatfields to the east is an abandoned rollerskating rink with giant pink pompommed skates fading on the wall.

Traffic is low this morning. She counts three cattle trucks. There is one thumb-sized cloud in the perpetual blue sky that can capture her eyes forever. The Bailey boy across the highway circles the block on his dirtbike twelve times. Two workers in orange swimsuits clean the city pool across the street from the Bailey boy's house. A fly keeps biting her
ankles, and when she shuffles her sandals to shoo it away she gets gravel under her toes. Seven customers pull in and out of the Gas Stop next door. With the sun at this angle the Gas Stop windows reflect back at her, and she cannot see whether Nathan's friend Jack, who owns the Gas Stop, stands at the counter inside. Thirteen trees are visible in her immediate area, all but three of them in the park behind the swimming pool. The night before, two truckers and a young, desperate-looking couple checked in, and the couple's car, a dusty, green Olds with Colorado plates and a back seat heaped with clothes, is still parked in front of door number four.

Over the rattle of the fan in the office window she can hear the jingles of commercials, and sometimes Nathan's and Alice's voices come to her chopped up by the blades of the fan. "Business would quadruple," he says. They are talking about the restaurant Nathan wants to start next to his mother's motel, another of his grand stories. He'd make this story real, he'd open the restaurant and happily throw himself into the whole business, if Carol would agree. It had seemed possible. People everywhere need to learn math, and she would have found a teaching job or she would have finished her textbook and gotten a contract for more. But with one look at this place she knew she could never live here.

The first month she spent mornings in a corner of the couch in the office, plate of toast and cup of coffee balanced
on the wide, frayed arm, watching Nathan and Alice watch *The Today Show*, watching them eat poptart after poptart and bicker about the so-called news. Then, last week in the middle of her morning tirade about the idiocy of Willard Scott, Alice suddenly turned and looked at Carol and stopped, waiting.

"You're right. He is inane," Carol agreed.

Alice snorted. "You wanna sit there and turn up your little nose, you don't have to sit on my couch to do it."

After seven mornings in the parking lot she has grown accustomed to the rhythm of the highway, the smell of exhaust and hot dust and tar that constricts the nostrils as the sun rises.

Nathan comes whistling around the corner from the office. "You're up," he says cheerfully. He squats beside her chair and kisses her ear and she kisses him back. As they often do, they made love early this morning, when he got up to join his mother, who seems to need no sleep at all. These morning interludes are the only good part of Carol's days here. She pretends they are home in Chicago. Nathan is still dressing in stylish, serious suits, taking the train downtown to the investment firm where he's likely to be promoted soon. She is working on her mathematics textbook in their airy apartment, surrounded by the herbs Nathan grows in small pots along the window sills, Mozart on the CD player. Nothing will ever change.
"I'll make you French toast if you come inside," he says, running his fingers up and down the inside of her arm.

"Nathan."

"You're not happy out here in the sun."

"I'm in the shade."

"Sweetheart, she's not going to yell at you again. I talked to her. We all had a good time last night, didn't we?"

"It was fine," she says. Of course Jack was there to play tag-team storytelling with Nathan, to keep them all laughing.

He stays beside her chair, munches a handful of Cheerios from her box, tells her about a four-car pile-up which was the highlight of the morning's local news, then waits for her to tell him something. His eyes are wide and dark and kind, his black hair neatly slicked back. He looks like the same handsome and considerate man she married, but out here she has nothing she wants to say to him. He kisses her again. "Only one more month," he reminds her and goes back inside. She knows he is saying she could try harder to make this summer work.

She thinks that Nathan must have been a different person before he moved to Chicago, and she probably wouldn't have liked the person he once was. In a way she has Jack to thank. Nathan told her that their senior year in high school Jack
went home with the girl Nathan brought to a party. They made it up, but Nathan's disappointment in what had been his dearest friendship is part of the reason he went as far away as Chicago for college. Even so, he is not suspicious when he comes upon Jack and Carol laughing together. Until her shameful afternoon with Loring she wouldn't have seen the danger either.

She extracts a handful of Cheerios from the box and delicately pokes her tongue into them, pulling those that stick into her mouth and washing them down with Coke. The single row of white doors which Nathan keeps toothpaste-bright stretches behind her to the west in the pink, flat-roofed, cement-block building, and beside her, Alice's apartment and the office jut out toward the highway. She scrapes her chair closer to the office to stay in the narrowing band of shade that will disappear by the time she finishes her Coke. Behind her, in the corner between her and Nathan's room--room number one--and Alice's apartment, the pop machine hums.

"If we put booths here and here, the corner booth can wrap around and seat six or seven people," she hears Nathan say.

"Who says I want seven people in one booth?" Alice says.

A jingle on the TV is louder than Nathan's reply and Carol focuses again on the highway. The rumbling trucks squeal and hiss as they slow to forty mph to go through town.
She imagines the ugly crash if the Bailey boy should swing his dirtbike out onto the highway in front of a cattle truck. She and Jack would be the ones to see it, always watching the highway as they are, and they'd run out onto the road together, shoulder to shoulder.

At the click of a door shutting behind her, Carol turns to see the girl who checked in last night squinting back at her, her hand still on the doorknob. She is short and skinny in a faded navy t-shirt that hangs past the bottom of her cut-offs. "Well, it isn't any cooler out here, is it?" she says softly. She slips over, blue thongs whispering against her feet, and squats down between Carol and the office. Her hair is a very pale blonde and hangs in limp strings from an uneven center part. The neck of her t-shirt is stretched out and reveals most of a tanned, bony shoulder.

"You live here?" She looks up and her skin is tight and hard-looking, her narrow lips slightly pulled down at the corners, as if holding back laughter. She can't yet be twenty.

"Just for the summer." Carol leans forward, pretending profound interest in the activity of the pool workers.

"The summer?" She picks up a bottle cap from the gravel between her feet and holds it up. Coors Light. She tosses it. "This isn't exactly a summer resort."
Carol sighs with irritation, but then she sees the girl's lips quivering at the corners. "It sure as hell isn't," she says, and they laugh. She relaxes back into the bands of her chair. "It was sort of an experiment."

The girl lowers herself to sit on the gravel, arms hanging over her bent knees, palms up, as if she were waiting for money from passersby. "Name's Lorissa, but I go by Riss," the girl says. Carol doesn't want to call her Riss. It rhymes with piss. She had the same problem with a friend of hers in college who was called Buck. She picks a Cheerio off the skirt of her blue sundress. "Your name?" Riss demands when Carol doesn't answer.

"Carol." She is both irritated and drawn in by the smirk that remains on Riss's lips. It makes her feel that Riss finds her somehow amusing, but then again maybe she is, having Coke and Cheerios in the dusty parking lot in her neatly braided hair and sundress. She goes on. "My husband's mother owns the motel. Nathan grew up here. He started hating his job in Chicago and then he thought maybe the three of us could run this place together. He loves it out here."

"But you don't."

"No. Nathan promised me we're going back in August. I'll go back to my old job. I'm a part-time math instructor at a very good private high school. Nathan will have to look for a new job, but he's a brilliant businessman. He'll
certainly find something appropriate." Just saying it out loud makes her feel better. She has led a successful life so far, the life she imagined for herself.

"You sure about that? He's a brilliant businessman?"
Riss tilts her head so she's looking up out of the corners of her eyes, blonde eyebrows raised.

"Yes," Carol snaps.

"And he wants to run this motel? Way out here?"

"It does seem crazy doesn't it? It is crazy."

"You're gonna get rich quick out here, no doubt about it," Riss says, and Carol has to laugh with her. "Okay, but other than the easy money, why don't you like it here?"

"It's so ugly." Carol waves an arm at the obvious.

Riss lets out a snort. "You ever leave this spot? Or're you stuck in that lawn chair?"

Carol remembers she was sitting here last night, escaping another game of Scrabble, when Riss's car pulled in. "Why bother?" She shakes her head. "I do have some work. I'm writing a mathematics textbook. I work on it in my room every day."

"If your room looks anything like ours that's not gonna help. I mean this motel does not exactly offer an uplifting decor."

Carol nods agreement. At least Riss can understand where she's coming from, that this whole scheme is crazy, that she
has no reason to be happy here, which is more than anyone else has done. The sun is at the right angle now that if she turns she can see Jack behind the counter in the Gas Stop, just beyond the west end of the motel. She allows herself a quick look, so quick that Jack surely could not notice, and will not be able to tease her later that she was watching him. Then she resolutely faces the highway. Three pickups, five cars. The Bailey boy doing a wheelie in the parking lot of the pool.

This floor is like the land in Kansas, Nathan had told her and she'd closed her eyes beneath him, imagining herself and Nathan as giants making love on a pasture bed, naked limbs brushing a blue sky. They had danced in the living room that night as they used to. He'd put on the old grey tuxedo coat with tails and danced in that and his boxer shorts, grinning and singing "Shall We Dance?" along with Yul Brynner. Even with Nathan quitting his job and even with what had happened that afternoon with Loring, at that moment she wasn't afraid that this life with Nathan was something she could lose. She said she'd try Kansas for the summer.

Riss is tossing stones and looking up at the big sign. "Highway 50 Pink Motel" it says in tall, narrow, hot-pink letters.

"My husband put that up last week," Carol says. It is part of his effort to bring in more business. He also repainted the building in what he considers a more cheerful
shade of pink, but she's made him promise not to spend any more of their savings on this motel. Riss tosses a handful of pebbles in that general direction, and the gravel scatters a few feet in front of them. "It's a hideous sign, isn't it? It's all hideous."

"Not if you look around you. See the countryside," Riss says impatiently. "This spot, I can see why you think it's ugly." She licks her narrow lips and thrusts her head emphatically forward. "But there is beauty here. This prairie is a beautiful place."

Carol laughs and then realizes that Riss isn't joking.

"There are things I could show you." In Riss's eyes Carol sees sincerity, sees passion. She also sees that Riss's eyes have dark circles under them, and there is a yellow mark, maybe a fading bruise, on the side of her jaw. "You shouldn't leave before you see how beautiful it can be here," Riss says more quietly. "I know a place I could take you. I could show you something really special."

Carol would like to get up and go, away from this motel, away from Jack's teasing green eyes which she imagines watching her through that big Gas Stop window, away from Alice sneering at her, away from Nathan who trusts her. "What is it?"

"It's no good to talk about it. Like telling the end of a movie." She looks behind her at the door to her room.
Everything is still. "It's a long ways. About forty miles," she admits, then grins. "Course it would mean getting out of that chair, disrupting your whole busy schedule watching the parking lot here."

Carol purses her lips.

"It would mean a lot to me to go. I mean we're leaving and I don't know when I'll see it again." Her eyes are like magnets. "Carol, it'd have to be better than sitting around this dump. I think you'd really like it."

Carol sits, considering what she would lose by going. She can't think of anything. And wouldn't it please Nathan if she got out and did something? "Okay," she says. "My car has air conditioning. I'll cool off a little, if nothing else."

Riss scrambles up, and Carol tells her she'll get the keys.

Nathan looks up from the paper as Carol comes into the office. "Carol!" He is so clearly glad to see her, willing, it seems, to take any small action as an attempt at reconciliation with this place. "Getting hot out there, huh?"

"It is hot." She gets the car keys from their hook behind the counter. "I'm going for a drive." She looks not at her husband but at her mother-in-law's skeptical face. Alice sucks at her cigarette, and Carol feels inexplicably guilty.
"I'll come with you." He stands, dumping the cat, Pansy, from his lap. Pansy shakes her head at the indignity and runs to hide behind the couch.

"I just want to get away for awhile." She gives him a peck on the cheek, but avoids his eyes and hurries out, letting the screen door slam behind her.

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Riss directs her to head west on Highway 50, and for a while they are quiet. Carol is thinking again about Loring, inevitably, trying to think of other secrets she's kept from Nathan. It's not really so much, she tells herself yet again. She hasn't changed. It only seems that way because there's so much space here. The incident with Loring was an anomaly, like writing $5 + 5 = 11$ on the blackboard, a slip of the chalk, not a change in her view of arithmetic or in her precepts of suitable behavior.

She sees that Riss is watching her. "What will your husband think when he wakes up to find you gone?" Carol asks.

"Kurt? Oh. He's not my husband." She leaves her thongs on the floor and pulls her feet up onto the seat. "Might as well be, though. Been living together almost a year."

Carol keeps quiet. She doesn't know why she had the idea that people lived by stricter moral standards here than in the
city. Because she wanted them to, maybe. Or because of all the churches.

"Anyway. He had plenty to drink yet last night after we got in. He's not waking up anytime soon." She pauses, watching a farmer in his pickup parked in a field road, corn waving green and wet from irrigation behind him. He is waiting for them to pass before pulling onto the highway, and then they are past. "So where you from?"

"New Jersey." Carol doesn't know why she says this. Maybe because New Jersey is the furthest place that comes to mind. She grew up in St. Paul. "But I've been living in Chicago more than five years now." She has picked up Nathan's habit of telling stories, she thinks, and smiles, settling back into her seat. "My husband Nathan likes to make up stories. He tells people we met through personal ads in the newspaper. His began I'll make you waffles in the morning, and mine said Mornings with Mozart. We're both morning people. When he read my ad he wouldn't rest till I agreed to meet him."

"You don't seem like someone who'd do that. Place a personal ad," Riss says. She has been twisting a strand of hair between her fingers and she points it at Carol as she speaks.

Carol stops smiling. "You're right. I wouldn't do that." She wonders that no one has pointed this out before.
She feels foolish, and yet it was his storytelling, his romanticism, that drew her to Nathan. Doesn't that make the story partly true after all?

"Well, how did you meet?"

"We'd both gone alone to see the Music Man and happened to have seats next to each other."

"The Music Man?" Riss laughs. "A musical? No wonder he doesn't want anyone to know."

"That's not it," Carol snaps. She'd gone to musicals alone until the night she met Nathan. During intermission he told her that he worked all week with people who cared about nothing but money. By Saturday the yearning for a little romance was like a hole in his chest. She knew what he meant. A world with balance, with joy, movement, music in a perfect structure and an expected ending—-that's what they both were looking for.

"Where did you and Kurt meet?"

"A party."

"And you live out here?" They have crossed the Kansas-Colorado border by now, but everything still looks the same. Carol had always thought Colorado equaled the Rocky Mountains, but there is no magic line. She imagines they could drive for days on end and never see a thing but wheat, corn, cattle, bobbing gas drills and ominous white grain elevators. No lakes, no airports, no quick escapes.
"Like I said, Kurt and I are headin' out. Kurt likes to move around. I met him right after he came here, almost a whole year ago. He's ready to move on." She puts her bare feet on the dashboard in front of her.

"Are you?" Carol stares at the long, dusty toes on her clean dashboard and clamps her lips together.

"Might as well," Riss says. "Like Kurt's always saying, time to see something new. I've lived here my whole life."

"God, I can't imagine it," Carol blurts, then rubs at her cheek with her thumb, embarrassed.

"Living your whole life here?" Riss stares between her feet at the road reflecting silver under the sun, stretching perfectly straight ahead. "I guess, for someone like you. You've probably seen about everything."

Carol has not even seen New Jersey. She watches the fields, trying to find the grandeur Nathan claims for this land. Dull yellow pastures or ripening wheat stretch endlessly to either side. The only other thing is sky, far too much of it. Growing up here, a person would never doubt infinity, never imagine a boundary to the universe. Carol doesn't know how to say that it is this very endlessness that feels most like a trap, as if she might grow to fill it and never be able to get back inside her body, her usual life. As if she might forget what real numbers are and how to use them, how to change the language of mathematics into a language of
words that anyone might understand. There is no feeling of control. "I haven't seen that much," Carol says carefully. "It's just so barren out here. No trees, nothing beautiful."

"That sky is beautiful," Riss says. "Look at the color of that wheat. Brighter than my hair." She is twisting a piece of it again. Carol can see why it looks so stringy.

"In fall the ditches turn gold and brown and rust-colored, all different shades. You gotta know how to look."

"I guess." Nathan is obviously happy here. He reminds her of the way he was when they were falling in love, sweetly buoyant. It frightens her.

"If you hate it so much, why don't you leave?"

"My husband. I mean, we knew we'd have to make compromises when we married. That's what commitment is all about." She stops herself, hearing the preachiness in her voice. Nathan, with his high-paying job, provided most of the income while she worked on her master's. She owes him the chance to pursue his own dreams, but she hadn't expected them to change, to diverge from her own plans so sharply. "He wanted to come here so badly. I don't teach during the summer, so it only seemed fair. If it was working out, I was going to go back to teach fall semester, and then we'd move everything out here."

"Turn off here," Riss tells her. She is looking at Carol in a way that makes Carol nervous. Carol turns off.
She wants to ask Riss why she hasn't washed her hair or her feet, why she doesn't take care of herself. There was a shower in the motel room, after all.

"What if he wants to stay?" Riss asks. "How do you know he'll leave?"

"Nathan won't stay if I'm unhappy. He wants me to be happy." The road they are now on is gravel and narrow and bumpy and she has to slow down and concentrate. She is not used to driving on gravel roads, the banging of rocks thrown up against the bottom of the car.

"You're pretty lucky if that's how he is."

Carol thinks this is naive. She would be foolish to have married a man who didn't want her to be happy. "What do you do, Riss?"

"For a job? I was working at the Stop-n-Go. For awhile. But Kurt was doing pretty good at the feed lot. Mostly I've just been sitting around our trailer house. We were way out of town and I'd sit there watching the wind blow the topsoil away. Some farmers don't have the sense of a goat. I've been reading these books on the environment." She sits up straighter. Carol nods vaguely, and Riss's shoulders drop again. "I'd sit at the window and wait for the coyotes to show up."

"Coyotes?"
They'd come 'round sometimes. Skinny dogs dancing around, lighter than air." Riss is not looking at her and nothing in her expression tells Carol how she should feel about these coyotes.

"Turn left." Riss lets her head lay back against the seat. "God, I'm tired." They are bumping down a narrow road with patches of thick sand that suck at the wheels and billow dust they can barely see through. "Slow down," Riss says. "Here. Stop here."

Carol turns the car off and they sit and listen to the engine tick and wait for the dust to settle. Riss is looking intently out her window and so Carol does too. There is a grassy field pocked with craters of mounded dirt, like mosquito bites on a broad back. At the far edge of the field grow a thin line of cottonwoods. "Is there a creek back there?" Carol asks.

"Yeah. There's no water in it this summer." Her voice has dropped to a whisper.

They roll their windows down because the car heats up quickly, but the air that pours in is hot and dry, a relief only because it is moving. Carol sits, waiting for Riss to tell her just what it is they have driven all this way to see, and, waiting, she lets herself see it as it happened again, how she kissed Loring, unbuttoned his shirt. She hadn't intended to do more than have lunch. They'd dated in college
and they often had lunch together when he was in town on business. They'd gone up to his hotel room so he could show her pictures of their friend Sarah's wedding. They were sitting on the bed, looking at the pictures, shoulder to shoulder, and then leaning in and leaning in. She kissed him. She started it. They slipped her dress over her head and as Loring ran his hands down her sides and over her hips, she looked down and saw herself, the brown waistband of pantyhose across her belly, the seam like a worm twisting down toward her crotch. She looked ugly and ridiculous to herself and she got herself dressed and out of there. That night she prepared Nathan's favorite baked salmon and wore the little yellow dress he liked and the silk panties he'd given her for Valentine's Day, and they danced. "With the clear understanding that this kind of thing can happen, shall we dance? Shall we dance? Shall we dance?" She sang along and she meant it.

She didn't expect anything like what had happened with Loring would threaten again. But here there are no limits. She looks around her and there is nothing to see but a single white grain elevator in the distance. Jack is attractive and funny and flattering, but it's not him so much as the space around them all that draws her to him, some function of gravity in a near-void. Only another month, Nathan says, as if a month were nothing. She's afraid of what could happen in
a month. So much could be lost without it even making a speck on the horizon.

She hears a series of sharp noises, like the barks of a toy dog, and when she looks at the field she sees things poking out of the mounds. Little tawny brown heads.

"It's a prairie dog town," Riss says finally.

They watch and the animals begin to come out. One sits on its haunches, its front paws dangling over its chest, and it watches them. Some of the others also sit upright, nibbling at grasses they hold between front paws, and some seem to be digging. There are at least twenty of them.

"Used to be thousands of prairie dogs out here. Before my time. Farmers killed them off."

"That one is still watching us," Carol says.

"He's like a sentry. They do that. Some will just stand and watch, and they bark warnings. They're a cooperative kind of animal. Not like people." She laughs without changing expression. She looks at Carol. "I heard once that prairie dogs'll bury dead prairie dogs. Even other small dead animals if they find them in their territories. I don't know if that's true, but they are very organized animals. I've seen diagrams of their burrows. Very organized. Little prairie dog communities." She looks back out at the prairie dogs, and she looks as though she's about to cry. "That's why we left Celine here."
For a moment Carol thinks she is talking about some kind of chemical, saline, saline—what would it do to the prairie dogs? But then she realizes it is a person Riss is talking about.

Riss breathes deep. "We buried my baby out here."

"Your baby?" Carol stares now, as if she will soon see more, see cemetery stones rising gray and smooth out of the waves of sun-faded grass. Something solid.

"She was miscarried. Five and a half months, born dead. Hospital's almost an hour away. We didn't have any money, and she was dead anyway." Her face is soft as if the muscles there no longer worked.

Carol is quiet. Sometimes the little prairie dogs grab at one another with their front legs and touch noses.

"Kurt said the hole was deep enough, but I keep worrying. I'm afraid the coyotes dug her up. I thought I'd check, just to make sure, you know." She stops. "I don't think I want to anymore."

No. Carol doesn't want to either.

"We had to leave after that. I couldn't stay here."

Carol knows Riss has seen enough. She starts the car and turns around, angling back and forth several times because the road is edged in deep sand and she's terrified at the idea of getting stuck out here, being circled by coyotes. But it's wolves that attack people, isn't it? Riss's voice is tired as
she tells Carol where to turn. Her head is tilted awkwardly back against the seat, her face turned away, her fingers the only thing moving, wrapping up and down, round and round a strand of hair.

They don't talk until they've crossed the Colorado-Kansas border. Carol wants to tell her something, something to fill the silence. "I like to play piano," she says. "We have one, in our apartment in Chicago. Here, Nathan talked to the minister of the Methodist Church and they gave me a key. I go in and play on the piano in the sanctuary afternoons except for Sunday. Usually there's no one else in the building."

The empty church reverberates with footsteps of people who are not there and Carol plays forward and forward, the pieces in the book one after the other, rattling the pages when she turns them so she won't hear noises, keeping her eyes on the pages and the keyboard so she won't see shadows move between the pews.

Riss nods, not looking at her.

"It's a lovely piano. Sometimes I just pound on it as loudly as I can, trying to fill up the empty sanctuary. It's eerie, all those rows of pews, all those places someone could hide."

Riss sighs, rubs her hands up and down her crossed arms. "Nobody'd bother you."
Carol turns the air conditioning down. "I've always loved music. When I was little I dreamed of being a concert pianist. I guess we all have big dreams when we're young."

Riss leans forward, face close to the windshield where the sun comes through and washes her features to white. "You're from New Jersey. You have no idea about my life. Celine. Kurt." She rubs her palm over her face. "You think people can just go wherever they want, do what they want."

"I'd leave now if I thought that."

"You want to?"

There is a note of hopefulness in Riss's voice that keeps Carol from looking at her. She thinks of the way Riss slipped out of her motel room so cautiously, quietly, without even showering, like running away, and wonders just what sort of man Kurt is. Maybe it would be the right thing to take Riss away from this place and away from that man, but this is no more a possibility than living her life in this place is. She can see a tiny pink glow on the horizon now. She speeds up, keeping her eyes on that pink glow, Nathan's sign.

As they come into town she spots Nathan and Jack leaning against one of the pumps at the Gas Stop in their white t-shirts, shading their eyes to look across the highway. She can't imagine why they're standing around in this heat, but they are there, solid, ordinary men. Just the sight of Nathan allows her shoulders to relax a little. That man standing
there on the shimmering cement is the man she married, the very same man, still intact in the bounds of his skin.

She can't think of anything to say that will change Riss's life, but she knows she could change Nathan's life and her own with a word. She pulls into the drive of the motel. Nathan sees them and waves. She will tell him how welcoming and bright his sign was. She can tell him that much.
September 19

Her fingers snag there on her right side, just below the place the cup of a bra would meet the strap, and she stands in the shower, rubbing over it, first gingerly and then harder, as if she could massage it away. It doesn't move and she knows that is a bad sign. Small and hard as a shirt button stitched securely into her tissues, it must have been there for some time, though she's never noticed it before. She stands in the shower until Conrad begins pounding on the door, yelling that he has to get ready for class.

While Conrad is in the shower, she finds the section on breast cancer in *The New Our Bodies Ourselves*, a birthday gift from Rita two years ago, the same day they signed an agreement to work out together twice a week. They did it, too, until Rita and her husband moved to Texas last month. The book says
that lumps are rarely cancer in women under thirty, and that many doctors recommend watching a lump in young women for a month. Non-cancerous lumps often change along with the body's cycle. Ann wishes Rita hadn't moved; Rita would know what to do.

She shoves the book back into place just as Conrad comes out of the bathroom, and she hurries out to the car. Driving around, running it through her mind, she comes to a decision. She will wait one month exactly, and then if there's no change she'll go to a doctor. Until then, she'll tell no one. She'll put it out of her mind.

Car Ride

When she was a baby and her parents lived in California, her father was rushing about one morning, getting ready for work in his usual panicked way. Her mother had the stomach flu and so Ann's father was taking Ann to a babysitter on his way to work. He rushed out and set Ann in her carrier on top of the car while he got everything arranged, and then he drove off, ten straight blocks to the freeway entrance ramp, and it wasn't till he merged into the flow of speeding traffic that the honking began. All around him horns blared and people rolled down their windows and pointed and yelled. "Well, you can imagine what I felt," her father always says at this point in the story, grinning sheepishly and laying his fingers
to his chest. "I'm driving along, seventy miles an hour, and my firstborn child is balanced on the roof of the car." But he did it. He got into the right-hand lane, and he slowed down--"steadily, steadily," he always says, moving his flattened hand evenly through the air--and he took the next exit and Ann was safe. She was still there, red-faced, little arms flailing, screaming, until her father took her in his arms. "She always would stop crying for me," her father says.

Ann's mother took her and fled to her parents in a fury when she heard the story, but Ann's father soon persuaded her to come home. He can charm anyone into forgiveness. He remains absent-minded, runs late for everything, forgets the tickets or the place he was to meet someone or the papers he worked on all night. Nevertheless, Ann is more wary of her mother, all worries and tidy preparations, seemingly passive and clearly unhappy. It is her father Ann admires, but it is her mother she sees in her own organized efficiency at work, in their spick and span apartment, in the way she waits for Conrad's free time.

Telling

She shakes her bag of microwave popcorn into a bowl and sits down at the table across from Conrad, putting the bowl where he can reach it too. He has his notebook computer open
and is staring at the screen, frowning. When she sits down he glances up, smiles for just an instant, and his eyes return to the screen. He types a few words, then picks up a notebook that is full of his sprawling handwriting and pages through it, types again.

She wonders what he'd do if she told him right this moment about the lump. He'd stop typing. Would he still finish this paper in time for the deadline, which she's sure is still two days away anyway? Would he pick her up and carry her . . . carry her where? She doesn't know. Would he order her to see a doctor first thing in the morning, or would he hold her and cry?

She says, "I heard this great joke at work today. This guy is having trouble starting his lawn mower, the kind with the pull cord--" 

"Ann, please." He doesn't look up from the screen.

Work

Her first patient is a woman in her mid-forties with frosted blonde hair who chatters on about her daughter as Ann gets set up. "--but she's so worried about having to wear glasses. All she cares about is being a performer. How many dancers do you see in glasses?" She laughs. "You know how important all that can seem at sixteen."
Ann nods politely. "Put your chin on the black chin rest and stay very still."

Ann does like her job, but as the months go by, she wishes more and more often that she'd stayed in school, wishes that she was the doctor now, the one in charge. She can't believe her life with Conrad has turned out to be so utterly typical. Conrad has one more year of classes, a year to write his dissertation, and then when he's hired by some university, it will be her turn to go back to school. They couldn't afford to both be in school at once, but they should have done it the other way around. She'll make more as an ophthalmologist than he will as an English professor. It didn't happen that way, and it seems to her these days that it is because they lacked imagination, because she spent too much time watching her mother put her father's needs first and so Ann learned to do it herself. She thought by not getting married they could avoid falling into these patterns, but it's happened anyway.

"Do you have children?" Mrs. Hart asks before Ann can leave the room. Ann tells her she doesn't. "Well, but you're still young enough to remember what sixteen was like, though. Sheila comes home with brochures from special performance schools in New York and Chicago and Los Angeles. London! Anything to get out of Iowa, she says."
"Teenagers are like that." Ann touches the woman's shoulder. "My boyfriend's sister--she was so determined to be an actor, she ran away to join the theater scene in Chicago when she was seventeen." When she sees the panic that rises on Mrs. Hart's face she is sorry she said it, but Mrs. Hart's Sheila brought the story to mind.

"Oh dear. What happened?"

The truth is Conrad and his family never heard from Shelley again. Ann bends down so her face is level with Mrs. Hart's. "She was home in two weeks. She missed her family."

Shelley

She lies on her back in the dark, staring up at the ceiling. Conrad scoots toward her, slides his hand under her shirt to rest on her stomach. "Do you ever think about Shelley?" she says.

"Shelley? Well, yeah. I mean it's been, what, it's been ten years now. But I still think about her." He pulls away and crosses his arms behind his head.

"I wonder if I'd feel that way if it had been one of my brothers. I think we just never have been as close as you and Shelley were."

"We were," he affirms. "It makes me angry, you know? I mean she was important to me, but she just left without a
word, like I was nothing. Just like that. She could have called, even just once."

"I want to know what made her leave. How bored would you have to be to just take off that way? I mean, I'm bored."

He puts his arm round her again. "You're not going to run away. I'll liven things up. I'll get a black cape and sword and perform Zorro for you."

"What?" she laughs.

"I'll even get us a couch. That'll make you happy."

It would, too—without a couch their living room looks to her like a kid's hang-out rather than a home, but Ann laughs. "Since when does getting a couch count as excitement?"

"How'd you get to be such a hard woman to please?" He nuzzles into her neck and she laughs, but then his hand moves up and over her breast and she grabs it, her body stiff.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

"I'm tired." Her body is as rigid as an iron rod and she feels the lump smoldering, a red-hot stone on her chest. It would burn his fingertips.

The Body

It is inevitable that she be affected by such a close call so young and so spectacular. She used to believe that all her luck had been used up in that one car ride, and really she hasn't been very lucky since. She's never won first place
in anything, she broke each of her arms and one leg in the
course of her childhood, and she's been dumped by guys far
more often than she's dumped them. On the other hand, she
isn't afraid of accidents; that isn't the way she expects to
die.

Her death has been stored and waiting in her own body
since she was a baby. The lump will be cancer and the doctor
will find it spread throughout her body, inoperable. As a
girl, the insides of her arms, bland as the bellies of fish,
disturbed her, as did her feet with the two little toes curled
like the ends of stunted branches, the one toenail like a
chicken claw. She never wears sandals, can't stand to see
that mutant claw staring up at her. She used to lie in bed
and stare at her foot, watching, waiting for the mutation to
continue, for her body to consume itself from the inside out.

Letter from Mom

Her mother writes that they'd like to come visit for
Thanksgiving since both of Ann's brothers will be busy
elsewhere. She sits at the kitchen table and holds her
mother's letter in her hand and looks at the neat, even
handwriting. Thanksgiving might be too late. She's heard of
people being diagnosed with cancer and dying within a week.
It's not common, but neither is cruising the freeway on the
roof of a car and living to tell about it. She wants to call
her parents and tell them to come right now. If they are all very lucky, it won't be too late. She throws the letter down and gets out the Comet and a sponge and starts working on the kitchen sink.

Once Ann and her brothers and mother were dressed up, waiting in the car, ready to go to a dinner party celebrating the 25th anniversary of her parents' friends. Despite her mother's many reminders, her father did not show up at the appointed time, and the family finally went without him. Halfway through the meal, Ann's father burst in, dapper and funny and loud, interrupting conversations, telling about the crazy cop who'd stopped him for speeding. Her father had the whole place laughing before he sat down. Behavior that would have been socially unacceptable from anyone else somehow looked good on her father. Everyone liked him. It was impossible to sustain anger at him.

Ann suddenly stops scrubbing, aware of an ache coiling itself tighter and tighter in her shoulders.

Carpenter Ants

They have carpenter ants in their new apartment. Ann has never seen ants so big, some a full three-quarter inch long, their bodies three hard, fat beads. They come individually, one in the bathroom, one teetering across the living room carpet, one veering up the wall behind the TV. In her
experience ants swarm or they follow one another, marching in unbroken trails from food-find to anthill. Ants are not supposed to be independent entities like these are.

They have no living room furniture except the TV and stereo on their stand, and Conrad has laid out quilts and pillows in the empty space. He is lying there now, reading, pen in hand, while she does the crossword puzzle at the dining table. When she stands to stretch, he reaches for her, trying to grab her leg. He growls.

"What's with you?" she laughs.

"Why don't you come find out?" He wiggles his shoulders at her.

She picks up his book and tosses it aside, sitting down beside him. "If it will get your nose out of those books for an hour."

"Ooh, she's feeling mean," he teases.

In a moment they are rolling around, giggling and undressing each other. When he pulls her shirt off, she moves quickly to pull off his shorts, a tactic to keep him away from that breast. They are naked and lying side by side on the quilt when she feels a tickle on her leg and looks down to see a huge ant crawling up her calf.

She jumps up. "I thought you said you put out ant baits."

"I did. Just sit down again. It's okay."
"No, it's not okay," she says. "Get up. I need to vacuum."

"Ann, it's almost midnight." She stands over him, glaring at him. "Come here," he says gently. "Believe me, we have better things to do than vacuum right now." But she goes to the closet.

"Ann, I swear, if you get that vacuum cleaner out, I'm going to hide the noisy beast. No more vacuuming for a month."

"Fine. Forget it. We'll live in filth."

"You vacuumed yesterday. It's clean." He stands up and comes to her, grabs her arms and holds her still. "Ann, they'll disappear when the weather changes. We just have to wait."

Looking

Dr. Parker takes her aside to scold her for not concentrating on her work. The tops of his cheeks are as smooth as a telephone receiver and they flush pink as he speaks, the tiny white hairs along his temples quivering. "Charts half-done," he says, and something about misplaced files. She watches the tiny bubbles of spit that appear in the corner of his mouth. He is such a grouchy bastard, she thinks. He knows she's doing a good job; he does this in
order to feel he's the boss. She doesn't say a word, just leaves the room when he's finished.

In the restroom, she combs her hair and washes her hands. Her eyes are steady, her color is good, her hair is lying down dark and even and smooth. The mirror reassures her that she is still herself. Maybe her mouth is set just a little more firmly than usual. She turns the hot water on again and holds her hands under it, warming them, thinking of the trips she's taken to Chicago. She knows some of the theater districts. She could go look around. If the cops and Shelley's parents couldn't find Shelley ten years ago, Ann knows she can't expect to find her now, but sometimes people can do amazing things in times of crisis, like when they're about to die. She dries her hands and picks up the charts for her next patient.

Widowed

He's studying at the table when she gets home. She changes clothes and washes her face and gets herself a Sprite from the fridge and he still hasn't taken his eyes from his books. "Conrad," she says. "I feel like we're some old married couple."

At least he's looking at her. "Can we talk when I finish this chapter?"

"Sure. Fine. Why should we talk at all?"
He blinks slowly, gathering patience. "What's bothering you, Ann? You've been acting kind of strange."

"What do you expect? You're always studying."

"And this is a surprise?" He really sounds angry, which is unusual for Conrad. "You've lived with me while I'm taking classes for how many years now?"

"Three."

"Okay, then."

"Conrad, that doesn't mean anything. I'm bored. Why are we like this? All we ever talk about anymore is the papers your stupid students write. We used to have fun." It is exactly the way her parents were, her father bringing work home from the office, her mother waiting for the few free moments when he'd make her laugh.

"As I recall," he says slowly. "I wanted to have fun the other night, but you said you'd rather vacuum."

She stares at him, tears welling up. "That's not the only kind of fun, Conrad."

He stands up. "No. No, it isn't." He comes out from behind the table and around her, being careful not to touch her. "I really don't know what it is you want from me."

Muttering, he goes to slouch against the living room wall, legs stretched out on the quilt, fingers twisted in his hair so his arm shields his face.
She watches him, but he doesn't look at her so she goes into the bathroom and splashes water over her face until she has stopped crying and then she sits on the closed toilet for a long time, hand at her breast. There are two separate problems here, she decides, and Conrad can't really solve either of them. She should call up Rita in Texas, should force Sandra to spend just one evening away from that man she's seeing, should find some new friends. She's got to take action before she becomes like her mother, resentful of everyone's time and pleasure. She's got to be responsible.

When she comes out, Conrad is just where she left him. He's fallen asleep. She stretches out beside him, leans her head on his chest and holds onto him. She's got to do something. If she finds Shelley, then at least he won't be left alone when she dies.

Northwestern University

None of the faculty or students in the drama department have ever heard of Shelley Simons, but in a nearby coffee shop right below the el where every ten minutes it shakes with the rattle of trains, she finds an old man who thinks he's seen her. He sits on a big stool with a wood-spoke back, reading Nausea in between serving customers, his mug resting on a scarred wooden counter. Though it's late October, the heat hasn't been turned on yet, and in the shade of the tracks the
room is dark and chilly. He wears a ratty gray sweater. He says he thinks he may have seen Shelley years ago. "I sit here every day. Every day new people come in. But I watch. I get to know the regulars. She was here. Sure, she was here."

He keeps nodding like some battery-powered toy.

"Did you ever talk to her?"

"Not that I'd remember what we talked about. Books." He holds up his battered paperback and shakes it at her. "This is an intellectual sort of place." The skin of his cheeks hangs in pale grey folds, quivering with seriousness.

Ann almost laughs. "How about her friends? Are any of the people she hung with still around?"

He thinks for awhile and tells her to come back around four. He thinks Coda Bob knew her.

"Coda Bob?" It sounds like something right out of one of her father's stories. She is smiling, waiting for the punchline.

He glares at her with watery, pale eyes. "That's right."

Bike Ride

Ann remembers the time she ran away. She can't have been more than ten, and she can't even remember why she did it. What she does remember is pedaling down a dark gravel road on her bike with the pink streamers that fluttered from the handlebars and her Muppets backpack which she'd packed with a
shirt, a pair of jeans, two pairs of underwear, two pairs of socks, and an apple. It makes her laugh now, how carefully she packed, but the bike ride was terrifying. She rode down gravel roads that were edged in thick wallows of sand and gravel that sucked her tires in until she had to get off the bike and wrench it free. She must have been gone two hours; it was nearly dark, and she was pedaling and crying and pulling her bike out of the sand and riding on again because she had it in her head that if she stopped, coyotes would come get her or else a crazy man.

She thought her father probably hadn't even noticed she was gone. He was probably still absorbed in work at his desk. That's the way he was, never paying attention, and it would be his fault when she died out there alone on some country road. It would serve him right. She thought about how it would finally teach him to pay attention.

And then she heard the rumble of a car, and headlights came from behind her, and it was her father. He swooped her up in his arms and she held on tight and let him wipe her tears away.

The Girl at the Heartland Cafe

She tries the cafe up the block. Inside to the left is a shop with eco-trendy, colorful clothing and vitamins and artsy things for sale. A girl with yellow spiked hair and a calico
dress sits on a stool behind the register. Ann figures the girl would have been about eight when Shelley first hit the scene, but shows her the picture anyway.

"Who's looking for her?" The girl squints at Ann suspiciously.

"I'm doing this for her brother. He hasn't heard from her in ten years."

"You some kind of detective?"

"No."

"So why does he want to see her now?"

"He's always wanted to see her. There was just nothing he could do."

The girl makes a face to show she's not buying it. Hearing herself say it, Ann wonders too. What does that mean, nothing he could do? What kind of man would just let her slip through his fingers that way? A stuffed monkey hangs from its tail high above the girl's head, a hideous grin stitched on its face, and the girl's smirk is equally infuriating.

"Her brother is my boyfriend," Ann says crisply. "I'm dying of cancer and I don't want him to be left alone."

The way the girl's eyes widen and her breath sucks in makes it worth saying. She runs her hand through hair so daisy-yellow that Ann expects the color to come off like pollen on the girl's fingers.
It's true, she tells herself, she's doing all this because she loves him, but love means nothing to this girl, this child in her childish getup. Ann snatches back the photograph. "Never mind. You wouldn't know her. She's my age."

"Wait a minute." The girl stands up. "I might know something." She turns and walks away. Ann waits.

She comes back. "Nope."

"Nope? Where did you go?"

"I went to use the phone," she says, exasperated by Ann's slowness. "I called up my sister. That picture looked like a friend of my sister, but her friend's name is Valerie and she doesn't have a brother."

"She could have made that up."

The girl lifts her nose. "I thought of that. My sister's been to visit Valerie's parents in Milwaukee and everything. Sorry." She runs her hand through her hair again. "You're really dying?"

Ann shrugs. "It's for my boyfriend," she says again. A couple comes in, arms around each other's waists, and Ann slips past them, out the door and away.

Dunkin Donuts Gang

Squatting all along the edge of the parking lot, scrawny asses in ripped-up jeans resting on cement parking blocks, are
the heavily-pierced teenagers of the city in their black leather jackets and scuffed black boots. Pale and still, they seem anaesthetized by the constant crawl of traffic, and though they lean their heads together to talk, it is without animation, without enthusiasm. One emaciated boy smokes, and she can see how thin his wrist is. His shaved skull glows pallid and cold beneath the street light, and his dark eyes, rimmed in black, are the only part of him which hold life and they fix on her where she stands across the street, dark and knowing and scornful even through the interruption of cars. She knows what is in that look, maybe because she remembers thinking it once herself, thinking that adults like her don't know how bad the world is, thinking adults like her are oblivious. He's the one who doesn't know. She'd like to go over there and shake him, tell him to look alive, damn it, look alive. She's the one who's dying, and she doesn't look half as sick as he does.

She turns and hurries up Belmont, walking energetically, smiling at people even though they don't meet her eyes, concentrating on the burn of the chilly, polluted air in her throat, the hardness of the concrete under her feet, noting the new pang in her stomach. She sees a sign proclaiming "Hamburger!" and walks into a black- and white-tiled hamburger place where the skinny man behind the register calls out continuously. "Fries are to go! Fries are to go!" no matter
what customers order. It's frightening. She pays for her fries and gets out fast and walks west, away from the teenagers on the corner, but the sidewalk is crowded with women whose skinny, bloodless legs are exposed by short skirts and flint-faced men with silver chains at their hips.

She wishes she were home with Conrad, lying on their bright patchwork quilt. Even if he were studying and she were reading, she'd rather be with him. More than that, she wishes he were here with her. His eyes would be warm and alert, his hand firm around hers. Together they would have laughed at the cadavers on the corner, and they would have laughed at the fries guy, and they'd be getting wild, roaming the city, having adventures they'd talk about for years to come. If she had years to come. It is getting colder and she crosses her arms to hold onto the solid feeling of her own flesh beneath her jacket.

Taxis

She closes her eyes. She doesn't want to see where she's going, doesn't want to see the harsh lights and dying people and red and blue beer signs flash by. When the driver hits the brakes and blares the horn she jolts forward, and then they are swerving around a slow driver and away. She remembers her first taxi ride. Her father was investigating a job in Chicago. This was just before they moved from
California to Iowa, and he couldn't have taken the Chicago job very seriously, because he brought Ann along to show her the city, her first plane ride, first taxi ride, a trip to the top of the Sears Tower. Her brothers worked themselves into a tantrum over it. Her father said it was because she was older. She was seven, and they were three and four, so there was something to that, but she also knows her father favored her, the oldest, the only girl, his miracle baby.

Riding in the taxi with the new red jacket and red cowboy boots her father had just bought her—and which her mother threw a fit about when they got home—she felt like a princess, like the rich people on TV who had chauffeurs, even though the seats were ripped and the car stank of smoke. They rode in the taxi through the downtown, and stopped at an ice cream parlor. They shared a sundae at a little glass table next to the window and watched the people walking by. Her father made up stories about them, what they liked to eat and how they acted when they went home, and Ann felt special in a way no one but her father ever made her feel.

Calling Home

The cab lets her out in front of the Music Box Theater. It turns out to be a movie—rather than drama—theater, but it doesn't matter anymore. She's not finding Shelley. People are milling around out front under the overhang that is dotted
with a million little lightbulbs. She doesn't pause to mingle or to see what's playing, but when she sees a phone stand on the corner of the Jewel parking lot across the street, she has that feeling of certainty and calm that makes her think this is what she's been looking for all night long.

"Conrad," she shouts into the phone because now someone is leaning on their horn at a car that is blocking traffic in front of the theater.

"Ann, where are you?"

"Chicago."

"Are you alright?"

He is worried. She can hear it and she sags against the phone box, plugging one ear with her hand and leaning in as if the little metal phone cubby could block the noise.

"Conrad?"

"Yes."

"I found a lump. I found a lump in my breast. I don't know what to do."

After a long silence he asks what the doctor said. She tells him she hasn't gone to a doctor yet, but she knows it will be bad. It was destined for her the day her father left her on top of the car and headed into traffic. Damn him.

"We'll be alright," he says firmly.

"We?" she screams. "We?"
He says her name and it calms her. "Where are you?" he asks again.

"I'm here. I'm in this parking lot of a Jewel grocery store."

"Okay. Where is that?"

"I can't read the street sign. It's twisted around. South-something. There's the movie theater."

"Look, I'm going to come get you."

"It's a seven-hour drive, Conrad."

"That's okay. I'll come get you."

"You don't have time for this!" She yells it into the phone and starts to cry, but he sounds so calm that she stops.

"Just tell me where you'll be in the morning."

But she knows this is ridiculous. "In the morning I'll be in my car driving home, Conrad. I'm not a little girl that needs rescuing." Conrad is not her father. He's actually very little like her father, and Ann is glad.

She can't hear his response because two guys are yelling at each other from across the street. "I love you," he says and she tells him not to worry, that she'll be home tomorrow.

Music Box

The sign at the Music Box says the midnight show will be Singing in the Rain, part of a Gene Kelly series. It is a quarter till and they are not sold out, so she buys a ticket
and goes in. She takes a seat halfway up the big old theater and gazes at the gilt awnings and gold and white rococo decorations. Down front, a man in a black tux plays the organ, rocking and lifting his arms with a flourish at the end of a line.

The ceiling high above is dotted with tiny white lights like stars and some trick of light makes it appear that clouds float gently over a deep night sky. Throwing her head back, Ann watches the sky go by, and, watching, she knows that this is what it must have been like when she was a baby. Her father says she was screaming till he took her in his arms, but that can't be how it really was. She can't have started screaming until the horns started honking, or her father would have heard her. Right now that car ride is so clear in her mind that Ann knows she is remembering it, the rush of warm air over tender baby skin, the amazing blue sky overhead—so big her eyes can't get enough of it, the comforting rumble and motion of the car. She knows at once that it wasn't only her father's driving skills that saved her. It was her own serene weight that kept her from flying to her death.

All these years it's been her father's story; it was all her father's doing. She didn't choose to be on that car and she didn't have the power to get herself safely down. It's the same with this lump in her breast, but no one's going to say she went crying and flailing her arms, waiting to be
picked up. This is her ride, her story, not her father's, and if she has to take it, she's going with her eyes wide open, thinking, feeling, telling. She does not know what the doctor will say. She does not know how long she has left, but she will watch the sky fly by above until the movie starts.