

ABSTRACT

LENNON, COLLEEN ELIZABETH. Like a Terrible Fish. (Under the direction of Dr. John Kessel)

“Like a Terrible Fish” is a collection of nine original short stories, exploring feminine issues from girlhood through womanhood. The collection begins with “Chrysalis,” the story of a ten-year-old girl who is doing her best to accept and escape from an inflexible mother, nearsightedness that now requires corrective lenses, and the first boy who has ever taken her breath away. “Burn the Witches” and “Jungle” explore the daily remorse and reward of single motherhood.

“June, Twenty-Two” is a candid account of a young woman experiencing her burgeoning sexuality. “Vertigo” tells the story of a young unfettered woman trying her best to have an affair with a married man; and “Radio Flyer” is the story of a similar unencumbered girl who doesn’t quite belong anywhere on Christmas, but tries to salvage the day for herself and a young dinner guest. “Pink” and “Anathema” take a darker look at femininity, dealing with abortion, and suicide in the form of starvation. Finally, “Revival,” told from a first-person point of view, embraces four generations of women whose connections to one another are loose and fleeting, but like a snapshot, are frozen in time.

LIKE A TERRIBLE FISH

by

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
North Carolina State University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

ENGLISH

Raleigh

2003

APPROVED BY

Chair of Advisory Committee

DEDICATION

This compilation—all of the stories, sentences, words, ideas, late nights, early mornings, love for life and writing, and faith in the restorative powers of education—is dedicated to Ryan. With little arms, he brings together creativity and responsibility in a continuously evolving creature he calls Mommy.

PERSONAL BIOGRAPHY

Colleen Lennon earned a B.A. in English in 1994, another B.A. in Psychology in 1998, and her M.A. in English in 2003. She now lives in Raleigh with her four-year-old son.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to the tirelessly dedicated faculty in the English department at North Carolina State, whose praises too often go unsung. I owe special thanks to Wilton Barnhardt and Dr. Lucinda MacKethan for offering me such valuable feedback, and most importantly for signing their names to this endeavor. Above all, I am thankful for the guidance, patience, encouragement, and uncomplicated truth of Dr. John Kessel, who, like a lighthouse, has brought so many ships like me, safely to shore.

I would, of course, like to thank my family and Christian, who patiently witnessed the tumultuous life that fed these stories; my friends, who accepted me whether I made it to class or not; and David, who is, fortunately for me, a gentler friend than editor.

Mirror

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.
Whatever I see, I swallow immediately.
Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike
I am not cruel, only truthful –
The eye of a little god, four-cornered.
Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.
It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long
I think it is a part of my heart. But it flickers.
Faces and darkness separate us over and over.

Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me.
Searching my reaches for what she really is.
Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.
I see her back, and reflect it faithfully
She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.
I am important to her. She comes and goes.
Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.
In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman
Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.

Sylvia Plath

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
CHRYsalIS	4
BURN THE WITCHES	20
JUNE, TWENTY-TWO	41
VERTIGO	48
PINK	69
ANATHEMA	73
JUNGLE	84
RADIO FLYER	93
REVIVAL	108

INTRODUCTION

I wish I had a memory of myself as a little girl, chin squared and eyes shining, stating confidently, "I want to be a writer." Perhaps it would be at a birthday party with colorful streamers, sugary pink cupcakes and cameras poised in the hands of adults, anxious to catch a rare and memorable birthday moment. But all I ever wanted to be was a princess or an astronaut or a ballerina with magic powers. It was decades later, in fact, that I made my decision. It may have been at a party—empty beer cans for streamers and smoldering cigarettes instead of cupcakes. "When I grow up, I want to be a writer." My naively hopeful college friends responded favorably to my decision, "Ooh, you should do that. That would be a good job for you." So, it was decided.

As a little girl, in moments of clarity or weakness, I sometimes concluded that the astronaut-ballerina career track seemed too daunting. In those moments, I redirected my ambitions toward becoming a famous artist. I would smooth my hands over a clean, white piece of paper and line up all of my colored pencils in front of me. I would look out the window, at my shoes, under the couch cushion. I would practice whistling. I stared at the promising white sheet in front of me. "Mom!" I would yell. "What should I draw?" If not for the clog in my idea pipe, I surely could have been the next Picasso.

Realizing that in order to be a writer, I had to actually write something, I found myself (and still sometimes find myself) sitting down in front of a blank sheet of paper with an overwhelming urge to yell, "Mom! What should I write?" I was getting older, falling in and out of love, getting married and having a baby. People around me were changing, the

world was changing, I was changing. But in my pristine bubble of "writing," nothing was happening for fear that it would go wrong. This was my world to create—I couldn't just run in helter-skelter and make people screw up, get lost, get hurt, feel sad and die. That would be just as chaotic and dismal as real life.

With actual assignment deadlines and expectations from patient teachers, I had some fast decisions to make. Every writing instructor I've ever known has counseled me sagely, "Write what you know." After briefly cursing myself for not knowing more interesting and astonishing things, I took their advice and just wrote. I wrote what I knew.

I know what it's like to be a girl—a little girl, a teenager and a woman. I know what it's like to be a daughter, wife, ex-wife and mother. I know what it's like to be a sister, friend, and lover, and I know how to cook. I know what it's like to feel as though you don't know anything. Girls and women came spilling from my head like so many Aphrodites tumbling out of Zeus, and I wished them all the best of luck. I watched their every move and then wrote their stories. I fancied myself a mirror—silver and exact, with no preconceptions. These girls and women faced an array of disappointments and got hurt frequently. I just lifted my hands in innocent resignation—I'm not cruel, only truthful.

But I came to realize that the art of fiction isn't simply about precision or scrupulous accuracy. It requires the depth of reflection that is afforded by a lake—dark hiding places that a mirror can't provide, as well as a bit of silver exactness. It needs the opportunity for diving, drowning and resurfacing. So I am a mirror and I am a lake. This collection of stories is a meditation on the pink speckled wall opposite my blank page, the four-cornered god; and a

report of my surprising discoveries after dragging the lake. In me, I have drowned countless little girls, and day after day, women rise toward me like terrible fish.

CHRYSALIS

The day after Catherine Copeland made her most impressive effort to run away, she fell in love. She was ten that summer, and her world was expanding and contracting in ways that made her stomach hurt. That was the summer she had begun to suspect there was more to life *out there*. On the playground Shane Lawson told Catherine that she couldn't be an astronaut because she was a girl. When Catherine got home and relayed this horrifying insult to her mother, her mother agreed that she probably couldn't be an astronaut because it takes a lot of discipline, and, besides, Catherine already needed glasses for nearsightedness. Think of how bad your eyes will be by the time you're twenty, her mother said; it's just not practical.

Catherine didn't have a dog because it wasn't practical. She didn't have a canopy bed because it wasn't practical. Who needs two ceilings while they sleep, her mother asked, shrugging and shaking her head.

Catherine stood in the middle of the kitchen the day Shane Lawson delivered the distressing news, looking around for something to say to her mother. "I can have discipline," she said finally, squinting at the refrigerator.

"We'll see," her mother said, opening a can of tomato soup.

Catherine hated tomato soup. The red and white can filled her with resolve. She would not be having tomato soup for dinner that night or any other night. She would find people who at least allowed for the possibility that a nearsighted girl could fly to the moon and who didn't eat practical orange paste from a can. She turned and left the kitchen with her back straight and her chin in the air. She was feeling quite dignified until she tripped on the

carpet in the foyer. She knew she'd be getting glasses as soon as school started, and, in the meantime, she took her chin out of the air to pay closer attention to where she was walking.

Catherine locked herself in her bedroom and got out her suitcase. She didn't really consider where she would go or what she would do when she got there. She only knew that she would find a place where people didn't shoot down dreams so quickly and then turn around and make tomato soup, ignoring the dead dream twitching on the floor. Catherine figured that she might also hurt her parents' feelings in the process of running away, and that would be a nice bonus.

With Shane Lawson's mean smile and her mother's disappointing words floating in her head, Catherine yanked down every piece of clothing in her closet, leaving the hangers to rattle on the rod, swinging back and forth from the force of her pulling. Then she emptied the drawers of her dresser. Catherine didn't want to fold the clothes to put them in the suitcase—after all, folding was a sure sign of being practical, but, at the same time, it did work better for fitting lots of clothes into a small suitcase. Catherine didn't like practicality, but she didn't like extremely wrinkled clothes either. She compromised with herself and half-folded them.

The methodical ritual of packing eventually softened Catherine's anger. Thoughts of Shane Lawson, rusty soup and bad eyesight gave way to sweet, comforting thoughts of The Monarch, Catherine's imaginary spaceship. She wondered if she would wear a new change of clothes every day underneath her silver spacesuit. She hadn't thought of it before, and this seemed like a good time to consider it. She supposed that she could, but it really wouldn't matter, and she hoped that someday spaceships would be so technologically advanced that

the occupants wouldn't even need to bother with the puffy silver suit. She much preferred to think of herself careening through space in her madras plaid shorts-set. She hoped, too, that someday she could hang curtains in The Monarch—the heavy kind that you tie back with a rope—and perhaps have carpet installed. In her mind, The Monarch had begun to look more and more like a normal home—little trinkets on shelves, pork chops for dinner and maybe a little dog. Certainly a TV, there was no question about that. The difference would be the windows. Outside each window would be blackness with stars hurtling toward her and past her like horizontal rain. She would see some galaxies and planets, and she knew to steer clear of black holes. For Catherine, The Monarch was the safest place in the world—a home where nothing outside the window was ever the same.

By the time Catherine had half-folded all of her clothes and stuffed them into her suitcase, she had almost forgotten why she was leaving. She sat alone in her bedroom and looked into her empty closet with satisfaction. She looked around at all of the things that she would have to leave behind—a big bed with a yellow bedspread, a dresser, a desk, two windows and the feeling of it being her room. She sighed and kicked her toe lightly on the suitcase at her feet—she really had nowhere to go.

Catherine decided to be mature about the whole situation. She would calmly explain to her mother that she had intended to run away, but that she had thought better of it. Her mother might be so relieved that she would make cheeseburgers for dinner and throw the tomato soup down the drain. Catherine could practically smell sizzling meat. She walked downstairs with her overstuffed suitcase, trying to look confident but squinting all the while,

and told her mother that she wanted to run away, but that maybe she could be convinced to stay. Her tone and demeanor held an implicit, “if you play your cards right.”

Catherine's mother turned her head slowly from the Velveeta she was slicing for sandwiches and raised her eyebrows.

Catherine coolly told her mother that she had packed all of her clothes – all of them. She attempted a challenging look, but she knew she wouldn't really be able to perfect her 'looks' until her eyes were fixed.

Her mother looked at Catherine with what she guessed was horror. It was hard to tell.

“You put all of your clothes in that suitcase?” her mother asked incredulously.

"I did," Catherine said, nodding.

“You go right back upstairs and put all of those clothes back where you found them,” her mother said through clenched teeth.

“I can't reach the hangers,” Catherine said defiantly.

Catherine's mother threw down the cheese slicer, grabbed her daughter by the elbow and marched her back upstairs. She took down all of the hangers from the closet and threw them on the bed.

"I want you to put every one of your hanging clothes back on a hanger and neatly, Catherine, *neatly* fold all of your other clothes and put them back in the drawers." There was not a hint of worry in her voice. Not a hint of cheeseburger.

Catherine folded her arms across her chest and stared out the window. Her eyes were hot and stinging. She would not let her mother see her cry. She stared at Mr. Hope's house

next door until the white trim around his second-story window swam. Catherine tilted her head up so the tears wouldn't fall.

"Don't give me that sassy posture," her mother said, pulling Catherine's chin down. Catherine spun away quickly and faced the wall to wipe her tears. "Get to work."

Catherine waited until she was sure that her mother had left the room and she began slowly putting all of her clothes back in their proper places. She vowed that next time, she would have a better plan—at least a clear destination in mind, so that when her suitcase was packed she could simply say goodbye. She could barely comprehend the immense indignity of it all. She had just wanted someone to say that it was okay to be an impractical girl with glasses and okay to want to fly in space, and that, simply, everything was okay, but now she was in trouble because of clothes.

After she was done unpacking, Catherine sat at her desk and began making a list of things she would need for The Monarch. She figured that if she started collecting them now, by the time she was an adult, she'd only need to go to astronaut school and get her rocket. Everything else would be ready. She wrote:

Fruit Punch Kool-Aid

A canopy

Make-up

A record player

Ground beef

Catherine stopped at ground beef because she knew it wasn't something she could get now and save for fifteen years. Besides, she could ask for the other things on birthdays and

Christmas. She couldn't ask for ground beef as a present. She wondered if she could ask for ketchup. Ketchup could last a long time—maybe not fifteen years—but she was more curious to see if anyone would get her a bottle. She made a separate note:

Ask for ketchup for Christmas

She folded it and put it in her pencil can. Christmas was still four months away. She might forget.

Catherine's Dad poked his head into her room. "Kitty Cat, it's time for dinner."

"Hi, Daddy. I didn't know you were home." Catherine hastily folded her list and put it in the pencil can with the other note.

"I just got home. Your Mom told me about the clothes."

Catherine kept her back to her father and scowled.

"Kitty, you know better than that. Your Mom's busy and you're old enough to help, not make things harder for her." His voice was gentle and practical.

Catherine wanted to say it so badly—Would you miss me, Daddy?—but she didn't. She slid out of her desk chair and squeezed past her father, who was still standing in the doorway. Her dad followed her down the stairs, and when she misstepped and nearly tumbled down the remaining flight, her dad threw his arm around her waist and scooped her up. She dangled above the steps like that for a moment before he carried her the rest of the way down.

"My little girl is growing up," he said, carrying her to the dinner table like a bag of sand under his arm. "She's getting glasses."

The only thing that could have made the afternoon worse for Catherine was tomato soup, and there it was, slick and orange, and flanked by two triangles of a grilled cheese sandwich.

"Do I have to eat my soup?" Catherine asked weakly.

Her mother shot her a warning look. "Catherine," she said, "what you did this afternoon was silly and immature and frustrating for me. Not to mention impractical. There are consequences for all of our decisions, and the consequence of your decision today is that you'll be grounded for three days. No playing outside."

"But the summer is almost over!" Catherine protested.

"Well," her mother shrugged. "Consequences."

The next day, Catherine was delighted to wake up to rain. It was a small triumph after her previous day of defeats. She spent the day coloring, reading a little bit of Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator (Charlie wanted to escape too) and dressing up as a princess in her rhinestone tiara and her grandmother's old frilly nightgown and robe. At four o'clock, she settled in the living room to watch TV.

Just as she reached the perfect spot on the floor where she could see the TV and not get in trouble for sitting too close, her mother called from the kitchen. "Catherine, come and set the table."

Catherine carefully licked the peanut butter off of her graham cracker and pretended not to hear. She wondered if Yogi would get the pick-a-nick basket this time. She didn't think it was fair that he never got it, and, besides, that was predictable. She felt sure that someday he would get it, and this kept her watching. When Yogi and Boo-boo walked through the

park, music matched the rhythm of their footsteps. When they tiptoed behind trees, the music was quiet and tinkling. When the forest ranger chased them, the music was loud and confusing.

Catherine knew she was probably too old to watch cartoons. She didn't watch them to be challenged or even entertained. She watched them to be lulled. Something about cartoons made her feel safe. There were no variables, nothing was unpredictable. She liked the thick black outlines. She could tell where the grass ended and the sky began. Smooth brown Yogi, a fetching yellow pick-a-nick basket, and Boo-boo, a lighter shade of brown. It all made sense.

"Catherine!"

Catherine frowned at her graham cracker and placed it neatly alongside the others on a paper towel. "I'm coming," she sighed.

As she pulled three forks and three knives from the kitchen drawer, she peeked over at the stove. Mashed potatoes. Mashed potatoes always went with either meatloaf or Shake-n-Bake chicken. She looked around the kitchen for another clue. Corn meant chicken, green beans meant meatloaf. Her mom pulled a box of Green Giant niblets from the freezer as Catherine got three napkins from the rooster shaped napkin holder on the counter.

Chicken.

Her mother had certain ways of doing things. There were no surprises and it was all practical. Catherine folded the napkins into neat triangles and set them on the table. On top of each triangle, she placed the fork on the left and the knife on the right, facing inward. She didn't have to put plates or bowls on the table when she set it. Her mom dished out all of the

food in the kitchen and brought the plates to the table already full. Daddy got the biggest portions and they all ate everything on their plates. Catherine was happy about chicken, especially after the tomato punishment last night. Chicken was one of her favorites.

After she set the table, Catherine went back into the living room and found a commercial on TV. She would never know if Yogi got the basket that time. She wandered over to the front door. A mist from the rain tickled her bare legs and cooled her. She looked up at the sky, hoping to see the clouds falling apart. It never looked that way, but she thought that it ought to. Catherine reasoned that if the clouds were just water vapor, and that's what she learned in school, then as it rained, you should be able to see the cloud shrinking.

A moving shape down the street caught Catherine's attention. The rain made seeing even more difficult, but she caught glimpses of skin and hair. The forsythia bush in the front yard was in the way. The shape moved closer and then stopped and held its hands up to the sky. She rubbed her fingertips lightly on the screen as she watched. For a moment, it seemed like nothing was moving, and then there was a loud clap of thunder. Catherine gasped and jumped backward but quickly lurched for the door again, afraid that the shape might be gone. It was still there—a boy, certainly taller than Catherine, and probably a little bit older, although it was hard to tell.

"Mom, I'm going to sit on the porch," Catherine called, still looking out the door.

"It's raining and you're grounded."

"It's just the porch," Catherine hedged. Her eyes were fixed on the boy.

"Dinner is almost ready, Catherine."

"Just until Daddy gets home." Catherine slowly turned the handle on the screen door.

Her mother's voice disappeared behind Catherine as she slipped outside. She hid behind the forsythia bush and pushed back the branches in order to look at him. She squinted fiercely and almost wished she had the glasses now. He wasn't wearing a shirt or shoes, just shorts. He had made his way up the street, stopping frequently to jump or splash or throw something. Across the street from Catherine now, he lifted his arms up and jumped up to a tree limb. His back was to her. Water slid in paths down his back and Catherine breathed differently. She frowned at a little yellow flower next to her face. She had no name for what she felt. The boy dropped from the tree limb and landed on the balls of his feet, like a cat. Catherine was fascinated by the boy's body. It was so useful to him—he moved around a lot and touched things and doubled back and got wet, and all of these things seemed to become a part of who he was. Lost in her thoughts, Catherine kept leaning forward, wanting to see better, wanting to hear if he was out of breath, wanting to be closer to him. As if someone had called his name, he looked up quickly at the forsythia bush. Catherine panicked, her arms buckled and she fell.

The boy was suddenly right there, on her front porch step, looking down into the bush at her. She debated—she could pretend that she was unconscious and avoid an embarrassing conversation altogether, she could pretend that tangled up in a bush was her favorite way to relax on a rainy day, or she could tell him that she fell. He didn't ask, though. He just put out his hand to help her up. She stared at his hand for what seemed to be hours before she reached up to touch it. She had never held a boy's hand before. He stood patiently with his arm extended and Catherine noticed that his eyes were brown. He had been looking at the sky, and Catherine wondered if he had the same idea about the clouds falling apart. When he

looked back down at her, she was staring at him, and their eyes locked. She felt something in her stomach, again, something she couldn't name. She wished for peanut butter and safe black outlines, dry clothes and the rooster that held the napkins. The boy leaned over and took Catherine's hand and pulled her up out of the bush.

"I'm Matthew."

Catherine and Matthew. Catherine and Matthew. Matthew and Catherine. She whispered the chant in her head and didn't let go of his hand right away. She held onto it loosely, so her fingertips could feel the lines and bumps of his hand. Finally, he pulled his hand away—politely—but it still left Catherine feeling devastated. She felt suddenly lonely, as if she had lost something. Something that had been hers for a long time. She sat down on the porch, out of the rain. Matthew stayed in the rain.

"I'm Catherine," she said, wondering what her name sounded like in his head.

"What were you doing?" he asked.

"Watching TV," Catherine answered nervously.

Matthew laughed. "From the bushes?"

She looked away quickly. He had a dimple. It made her nervous. More nervous. "I . . . I was . . . I . . ."

He laughed again. "Picking flowers? That's the only thing that makes sense."

"I was picking flowers."

"What were you watching on TV?"

Catherine panicked. She couldn't tell him that she was watching a cartoon. It would seem ridiculous. More ridiculous than falling into a bush. "Well, I wasn't really watching, but Yogi Bear was on."

"Yeah, cartoons are okay sometimes. I like Yogi. He's really tenacious. He never gives up."

Matthew looked down at a worm on the sidewalk and Catherine mouthed the word. *Tenacious*. She wondered how old he was, how smart he was, and how tall he would be if he stood right next to her. He crouched on the sidewalk and picked up the wet, pink worm. It dangled from his forefinger, occasionally flinching and curling. Catherine had never touched a worm.

"I'm just visiting here," Matthew said softly, as if he were talking to the worm and not her.

"Visiting who?"

"One of my Dad's friends. I live in Charlotte."

Catherine picked at a splinter of wood on the porch. "How far away is Charlotte?"

"Pretty far. About three hours, I guess."

Catherine had no clue about the things that happened three hours away. All of the fifth grade girls there might be beautiful. They probably swish their long hair around while they laugh, she thought, and they don't fall into bushes. They watch Matthew jump from trees all the time. They smile lovingly and shake their heads and murmur, "That Matthew" Catherine wished that she had known him for a long time.

It suddenly occurred to her that someone else had already seen the things she had just seen. The thunder, the skin, the dimple—she didn't discover them; they had already been out there in the world, three hours away. Catherine desperately wanted something of him that no one else had. She wondered if she should keep the worm.

Her father pulled into the driveway. The rain had stopped. Her father walked past Matthew and onto the porch, "Hey, Kitty," he said and winked at her.

"Hi, Daddy," she whispered.

"Mom's going to want you to come in for dinner soon."

"I know." Catherine lay her head down on her bent knees.

Her father cleared his throat and went inside.

"Kitty?" Matthew asked, smiling.

He said her name. Her Dad's special name for her. She felt like she did yesterday when she almost fell and her dad caught her. "He calls me Kitty Cat. You know, Cat, short for Catherine."

Matthew nodded and continued to smile. "Your dinner smells good," he said.

"Chicken." The word was thick in Catherine's throat. She felt like she might cry.

"Well, I guess I'll go. My dad and I are leaving soon anyway. To go back to Charlotte."

Catherine nodded with her head still on her knees. Her stomach hurt. Matthew put the worm down and reached into his pocket. "I found this cool rock today. You want it?"

She could think of nothing she wanted more. She picked her head up and held out her hand. Matthew dropped a smooth oval rock into her open palm. His fingertips touched hers.

The rock was lavender with white spots. Catherine turned it over and over in her hand. It looked like an egg.

"It kind of looks like an egg," Matthew said.

Catherine looked up, startled, and smiled. "That's just what I was thinking."

"Are you going to name it?"

"Name it? A rock?" Catherine tilted her head to the side and wrinkled her nose.

"Sure, why not? Or you could name whatever's inside of it. You know, while you wait for it to hatch." He looked at her and smiled. A secret smile. They had a secret.

Catherine looked up at the sky, aware of her heart beating. It hurt. It was too hard, too fast. Hot and cold. Like someone else's heart. These beats were too big for her body. The rain had stopped, but the clouds remained. Catherine remembered science class - cumulus, stratus, nimbus.

"Nimbus," she said. "That's its name."

"That's a great name," Matthew said, his eyes wide and his dimple emerging.

Catherine stared at him. He stared back.

"Catherine, dinner," her mother called through the screen door.

She stood up slowly and slipped the rock into her pocket. "Thank you for saving me. You know, from the bush."

"Just doin' my job, ma'am." Matthew laughed. "I'm a superhero."

"Lucky for me," Catherine laughed too.

"Well . . . bye." Matthew held up his hand, but didn't shake it in a wave. He just held it up, his palm facing Catherine.

She turned the rock over and over in her pocket. She didn't want to look back at him. She knew it would hurt. Catherine turned the door handle, took a deep breath and looked back. "Bye," she whispered, trying to smile. The shape of his hand stayed in her head. No thick, black outlines, no flat, bright colors; just an open hand, and the mingled smell of chicken and rain.

At the dinner table, her dad winked at Catherine again and teased, "You have a boyfriend, Kitty Cat?"

"No," she answered, too quickly.

"Who was he?" her mother asked.

"His name is Matthew." It was the first time she said it out loud. His name had a shape in her mouth, she could feel it, smooth and heavy on her tongue, and not like other words that only feel like sticks and air.

"He lives around here?"

Catherine warmed at knowing things about him that her parents didn't know. She was the keeper of information on Matthew. Of the three of them at the table, she was his keeper. She would decide what to tell and what not to tell. She could keep some of him all to herself. "He's from Charlotte," she said, pushing piles of corn into the sides of her mashed potatoes. The corn stuck to the potatoes, and Catherine kept trying to pile it higher to make a little stone wall.

"That's a ways," her dad commented. He peeled back the chicken breast with his fork, and steam rose from the exposed meat.

"About three hours," Catherine said to her plate.

"Why aren't you eating, Catherine?" her mother frowned. "It's all those peanut butter crackers before dinner." She sighed and shook her head.

Catherine didn't look up. She kept her hand cupped on the bump in her pocket. "May I be excused?" Catherine asked softly.

"Do you feel okay, pumpkin?" her father asked.

"I'm not sure."

Catherine slid her chair backward and took her plate into the kitchen. And she even liked chicken. She gave the crispy drumstick one last look and went to her room, her hand in her pocket. She thought about The Monarch, the thought that always comforted her, and, for the first time, she realized that she might be lonely on that ship by herself. She sat down at her desk and pulled the list from the pencil can. She crossed out ground beef, not feeling hungry anymore and forcing herself to admit that stockpiling ground beef was too impractical, even for her. She added another item in its place:

Someone else

BURN THE WITCHES

Football makes me want to be a wife again. Sundays spent watching a man watch a TV give a girl a feeling of *belonging*. Mama would make little beef pies for Daddy on Sundays, because a cheese ball wasn't rough enough. I used to make seven-layer taco dip for Truman—rough enough, but not as threatening as a platter full of beef pies, since everybody has high cholesterol these days.

That Sunday in October, I watched a game for a little while by myself. The whistle was soothing, and even the "ugh" during a particularly violent tackle made me smile a little. But it wasn't the same. I flipped the channels and found an infomercial for the Turbo Cooker. I was immediately taken in. A jolly little woman made pot roast, pasta Alfredo, and chocolate cupcakes *in the same pan*, and in thirty minutes. *And*, she reminded me, the roast was frozen when she started. I didn't have four easy payments of \$39.95, but I sure would have liked to mess around with a Turbo Cooker. The woman used Diet Coke instead of oil to make the cupcakes. "Cuts down on fat!" she yelled, throwing her hands up in the air. I was intrigued by the substitution, but she looked as if she hadn't used Diet Coke in place of oil often enough. I turned to a different football game, one with real grass. It looked dismally brown and crunchy. I preferred the shocking, uniform green of fake grass.

Jack came out of his room, crestfallen, holding two red Legos.

"What's up, baby?" I watched the football bounce off of the goalpost on a 36-yard field goal attempt. It was ugly and ungraceful. Footballs don't always fly or bounce right. They're not even really like balls. They're like big clumsy boots, flying through the air,

except, of course, those smooth spiral passes. Those are like rockets. That's what Truman used to say. "Yeah, baby! That one's a rocket!"

"I'm trying to build a farm for my tiger."

"That's good."

"He keeps running away." Jack tossed the Legos on the floor.

"Tigers'll do that," I told him. "Every time."

His shoulders slumped. "But I like tigers."

"Me too." I looked out the window beside the TV and saw two flowered dresses billowing in the front yard. I turned off the TV and the lights, and dropped to the floor. I crawled to the front door, locked it, and then crawled over to Jack and tackled him. There was no time to get up and hide in the bedroom. I dragged him over to the recliner and sat behind it with him in my lap.

"Shhh," I whispered. "It's the Jesus ladies."

"What's a Jesus lady?"

"Shhh! You have to whisper! They want to come in and read the Bible with me."

"Why?" Jack whispered.

"I don't know. Maybe they want more Jesus ladies."

My head was bent, my cheek against his. We were whispering out into a little bubble of silence in front of us.

"You can't be a Jesus lady."

"No kidding."

"You're my Mommy."

A voice sang into the open window beside the front door. "Hello? We're here to share a scripture message."

"What's a—" I clamped my hand over Jack's mouth.

"It's the Lord's day, sister. A good day to get you some God!"

I had already taken two pamphlets from them, while giving rushed and vague excuses for why I couldn't sit down and read scripture right then. The first time was easy. I was holding the front door open, not inviting them in, when Jack came out to the living room naked. "I missed. I pooped on the floor."

"Oh my!" I said, putting my hand to my cheek as if I were embarrassed. "I'm afraid I have to go tend to that!" I waved and started to close the door.

"We'll come back, sister," one of the women said, smiling.

"Sure!" I went to clean up the bathroom.

The second time, I was sitting on the front porch, drinking a beer.

"Sister, we've come back to share our message."

"Um, yeah," I hedged. "I'm kind of busy."

They looked around.

"I'm . . . I'm expecting company." I stood up. "Dinner party," I whispered, as if we were sharing a funny secret. "You know how it is. I have to go baste the turkey!"

"We'll come back," they promised as I opened the door. I went inside and made two hotdogs—one for me, and one for Jack—and as a special treat, I put American cheese on his.

"Jesus saves!" a voice called through the window.

I breathed in the smell of Jack's No More Tears shampoo.

"Who does Jesus save?" he asked.

"Everybody. Nobody. I'm not really sure."

"We'll come back, sister!"

Jack rubbed his hand softly along the hairs of my arm. "Tell me again about Daddy."

I leaned my head against the back of the recliner. "He had to go find something."

"Is he coming back?"

"I don't know."

"Tell me the part about running."

We kept whispering into our little bubble, even though it seemed that the Jesus ladies had gone.

"I met him when I was fourteen, and after one look into those blue eyes, I should've run. I should've turned around right then and started running. I should've run to Wal-Mart to buy new running shoes so I could keep on running."

"How far?"

"I should've run for a thousand miles, for a thousand days, and kept going."

"Then what?"

"Then I would've run into him again, somewhere, somehow."

"And his blue eyes?"

"Oh, yes. I would've been tired by then, Jack. I would've looked into those blue eyes, and I would've wanted to rest."

"And he would buy you a heart necklace."

"He would buy me a heart necklace, and I would be in twelve shades of love."

"And I would get born."

"Yes."

"And then what?"

"Then it would be his turn to run."

"And when he's done, he'll be tired, too."

"Probably."

Jack was silent for a while. "Maybe he'll find my tiger that keeps running away."

I wrapped my arms and legs around him. "Maybe."

"Can we stop hiding now?"

"I suppose we should."

Jack went back to his room and I turned the TV on again. The Turbo Cooker infomercial was over, and a new one was on for a Total Body Fitness System. I admired great abs as much as the next person, but I had no inclination to stretch big rubber bands every day in order to get the same results in my own home. I turned to the fake grass football game. Number thirty-two was lying on his back on the forty yard-line, breathing heavily. Would he need a stretcher, or would he walk? Either way, the crowd would cheer.

Jack came back into the living room with his tiger. "Are the Jesus ladies mean?" he asked, hopping his tiger on the wall, making scratches in the paint.

"No, they're probably nice."

"Maybe they could be our friends."

Number thirty-two got up and walked off the field. The crowd cheered. "Please. They wouldn't know heaven from hell if they got an embossed invitation."

Jack squinted at me. "But you know?"

I flipped to the other game. The Bengals beat the Saints 24-7. "Oh, I know."

"Because you're my Mommy."

"That's right. What do you want for dinner?" I thought about pot roast, pasta Alfredo and Diet Coke cupcakes.

Jack jabbed the tiger's face into a potted plant and made munching sounds. "Not broccoli."

"No way."

"Waffles."

"Good choice."

After dinner it started to rain. Jack and I sat on the porch in our pajamas, and the breeze blew a mist onto our bare legs. I should have been writing the paper that was due in my Early American Lit class. When Truman left, the only way I could think to get a bunch of money fast was to go to college and get student loans. Sure enough, they gave me a pile of money, and I felt like I ought to use it the right way. I was writing a paper on *The Scarlet Letter*. Everyone in my class thought Hester was either right or wrong for having sex with Reverend Dimsdale, but for me, it wasn't really about the sex, it was about Pearl.

"Pearl kind of makes it okay, right?" I said one night in class. I had brought a twenty-ounce coffee from Fast Fare because Jack kept me awake the whole night before, coughing.

"No," someone behind me said quickly.

The teacher held his hand out to me and nodded.

I continued. "Okay, so everyone thinks that Hester had sex with the wrong guy. She loved him, he loved her. So really, why was that wrong? People can't help who they fall in love with. And then she's got Pearl. So whether or not the guy was a prince or a dirt bag, and whether or not you can really love someone you're not supposed to love, which, by the way, I think you can, there's Pearl. She's kind of an answer to the big question. Was it right? Yeah. Because of Pearl." I had run out of energy and words, but the whole class broke out in an argument. I sipped my coffee and wondered if the babysitter knew not to let Jack run around a lot. I wondered if she would mind if I were a little late to pick him up, so I could stop off at the pharmacy and get some pediatric cough medicine.

The teacher called me up to his desk after class and said I should consider writing my term paper on Pearl. I yawned. "Okay." So that's the paper I should have been writing that night, but Jack's little boy smell held me captive. I wanted to hold him until he fell asleep, outside, to the sound of the rain. People don't get to do that often enough. I vowed to work extra hard the next day.

The next day I found half of a tree in my yard. The top half. The storm that night had knocked it down. The branches were nearly hollow and looked like they were loosely packed with brown paper bags—it had been dead for a while. I supposed that a dead tree had to wait for the wind to put it out of its upright misery. I didn't know how I was going to clean up all of that tangled bark and paper bag filling. I couldn't just leave in the yard—the neighbors would complain about its “unsightliness.”

By nine o'clock, and I had cleaned the house, put in a load of laundry and given Jack his breakfast. By ten o'clock, the house would be messy again and Jack would be hungry

again. He'd want potato chips, and I'd give them to him, because I don't want to argue with him, because there's really no reasoning with a four-year-old about good nutritional habits, and because I don't have to answer to anybody anyway. I sipped my coffee and stared out the front door. It was a conundrum, for sure. I made extra coffee that morning because of the tree. Coffee helped me think.

I moved a lot of stuff around in the laundry room and finally found a pair of gardening gloves that Truman left behind. They were way too big—if I just shook my hands at my sides, they fell off. I walked through the living room like a surgeon, hands in the air, fingers spread, and stopped to see what Jack was watching on TV. He was dropping Fruit Loops on the rug during his back-and-forth trips from the table to the TV. I watched a little cartoon boy try to dress himself. He had a very round head and complained about the difficulty of the task. His cat, also with a very round head, sat on the boy's bed and watched the child flail around the room with his arms in the air, his shirt apparently unwilling to stretch to accommodate such a head. I wondered if this scene was supposed to make children laugh, or fear dressing themselves. Jack wasn't laughing, but didn't look particularly worried, either. I wondered if he was even really paying attention. I couldn't help but think that Jack's and my life was kind of like a cartoon—flat and episodic, and an imitation of reality with forced, faulty animation. But so easy to watch. The boy bumped into a wall and a lamp fell, scaring the cat.

Jack frowned. "Should we get a cat?"

"Right after we get our flying pig. Look Jack, I'm going out to the yard for a minute. Knock on the front door if you need me, okay?"

He ground Fruit Loops into the carpet with his Winnie-the-Pooh sneaker and licked his fingers. "Okay, Mommy."

"Maybe clean up some of these toys, too," I added hopefully.

Jack stared at the TV. I knew he heard me, but he wanted to pretend that he didn't. I sighed and went outside.

I stood in front of the gnarled thing, squinting. I thought it might look nice draped in wildflowers or Christmas lights. Maybe I could just cover it with a tarp. No, the neighbors would complain about a tarp, too. Maybe I could make a giant paper mache bird and set it on top of the branches. And some smooth blue paper mache eggs. If I did it right, it would be beautiful. If I did it wrong, it would be terrifying. The longer I stood there contemplating adornments for the tangle, the fonder I became of it. By the time I saw Mr. Faircloth coming up the street, I had already decided that I would miss the thing.

"Hello, young lady," Mr. Faircloth called, waving.

"Hi, Mr. Faircloth. How are you?"

"Oh, fine, fine. Where's that boy of yours?"

"In the house, watching TV."

Mr. Faircloth frowned. "A boy ought to be out of doors, getting fresh air."

I knew Mr. Faircloth had his suspicions about me. One minute there was a husband living there, and the next minute there wasn't. There was also the fact that he sometimes found me drinking beer on the porch, sometimes wine, and sometimes smoking cigarettes. One summer day, I had dragged Jack's little inflatable pool onto the porch and lay in it all

afternoon, listening to a little clock radio, and reading a Rolling Stone magazine. The question that time, too, was, "Where's your boy?"

"My Mom's babysitting!" I had yelled back, waving a Miller High Life. "Pretty hot, huh?" I added, to be polite. But he was already on his way past me, shaking his head.

I flipped the floppy glove fingers back and forth and squinted at Mr. Faircloth. "Yeah, I'm in favor of the outdoors and fresh air and all that, but see, I've got this thing . . ." I kicked the giant nest of branches for emphasis, and one of the dead branches fell on my foot. "Dammit!"

Mr. Faircloth squinted at me. "You take that boy to church?"

"Oh yeah, every Sunday." I gave him a thumbs-up and the tip of the glove thumb flopped over.

Surely he noticed that my car never left the house before noon on Sunday.

"You might should have a man around the house to help you with these things."

I wasn't sure if, by 'these things,' he meant the tree or my heresy. "Yeah. I might should." I nodded gravely, hopefully giving Mr. Faircloth the impression that I was thinking seriously about it, but really, I was thinking that I could build Jack a little tree house in the thing, and if the neighbors complained, I could say, "It's a tree house. See? Tree. House." They couldn't really argue with that.

As an afterthought, I said to Mr. Faircloth, "You know, 'might should' is a double modal. I just learned that in my linguistics class. It's characteristic of southern speech. You don't really find it in other parts of the country." I suspected this would get Mr. Faircloth moving along. I didn't think he believed in other parts of the country.

“It’s just the way people talk, young lady.” He paused and nodded, apparently agreeing with what he had just said, and then walked away.

I reached down with both hands and snapped off one of the larger branches. I could have done it with one hand. It broke away from the trunk with a hollow pop. I thought I even heard a little puff, like a sigh. It was too easy. That made me sad. I held the branch, not sure of what to do next. I counted. There were twenty-seven small branches, eight bigger ones, and four even bigger ones coming off of the main trunk, plus a bunch of twigs. I didn’t like the thought of all that hollow puffing, only to end up with a more orderly pile of branches. And even if I broke them all off, then what would I do with them? I could put Jack in the car and drive the branches away, maybe four or five at a time. But where? I could drop them off, one by one, in random places, but that would take all day. Maybe several days. Jack wouldn’t stand for it.

A banging on the front door interrupted my thoughts. Jack was holding up his cup and his mouth was shaped into an O. He was calling for more juice. “Joooooocce.” I pulled off the floppy gloves and trudged back to the house. The gnarled thing would have to wait.

I delivered Jack’s juice to the table and watched him for a minute. He was watching Winnie-the-Pooh careen around his house with a honeypot stuck on his head. I took note of the fact that crashing into things while unable to see was apparently a popular theme in children’s programming.

I went back into the kitchen, crouched down on the pantry floor beside the potatoes, and dialed the cordless phone.

"Jenny? Hey. Listen, I've got a question. Do you think it's wrong to drink wine at 10:30 in the morning?"

"Probably. Why?"

"Because it's 10:30 in the morning."

"And you want wine."

"Something, Jen. I feel like I'm losing it. I'm trying to keep the house clean, and work on my Pearl paper, and Jack keeps coming at me with all of these questions."

"Questions about you and Truman?" Jenny clicked her tongue and sighed.

"No. Questions about tigers. Like what do they eat and how fast do they run. I don't know that stuff!"

"Just make something up."

"Well, I would, but my brain's so addled right now." I stared at the Ajax bottle across the room. In bright pink letters, it promised Tough on Grease! "Oh, and there's a dead tree in my yard. Half of one, anyway."

"That's a drag, but I don't think wine is the answer," Jenny said. "And you know what else I think? I think you miss Truman."

"Well, of course I miss Truman, but I can't wallow."

"What's drinking wine at 10:30 in the morning?"

"Therapy."

"Wallowing."

"I wasn't really going to do it. I just needed someone to talk to."

"I'm always here for you, honey, but listen, I've got to go. I was making candles when you called, and the wax on the stove is starting to smoke. I don't think that's good."

"You're making candles?"

"Yeah, Martha Stewart did it yesterday on her show. She made it look easy as pie. It's really not."

"No, the things she does rarely are. I tried to make a flan once—"

"I gotta go. Good luck."

I clicked the phone off and stared down at the potatoes. Most of the eyes were growing sprouts. Thinking I was being thrifty, I had bought the ten-pound bag, which was on sale. As it turns out, Jack and I can only eat so many potatoes.

Jack poked his head into the pantry. "Mommy, what are you doing?"

"Counting the potatoes."

Jack squinted at the mesh bag. "What are those things sticking out?"

"Eyes."

Jack backed away from the potatoes, and his jelly-stained mouth turned down. I shook my head. I knew that when bedtime came tonight, Jack would refuse to sleep in his bed alone, on the grounds that the potatoes were watching him. I would relent and let him sleep in my bed, because voyeuristic potatoes are a scary thing, and because I didn't like to sleep alone either.

Since I already had the phone in my hand, I decided to take some initiative. I got out of the pantry, got the phone book, and flipped through the Yellow Pages. I was a little surprised when I found a heading called Tree Removal, but not really. Flipping through once

before, I had actually found a heading for Beads-Rosary. I called A-1 Tree Removal since they were the first ones listed, and apparently a little more clever than Aardvark or Ace Tree Removal when it came time to naming the company. A man answered, and I asked him how much they charged to remove a tree.

"Depends on the size," he drawled, "but round about two hundred and fifty dollars."

"Ha! You're kidding right? Are you serious?"

"Well, ma'am, first we got to cut the thing down, sometimes in parts, and then cut it up and take it away. It's a big job."

"Oh. See, this is different. It already fell. Well, half of it did, and it's really, really dead, so it's not heavy or anything . . . How much for that?"

"We don't do that."

"Why not? It's still Tree Removal."

"No. We just cut down trees and take them away. That's what we do."

"Well, does anybody do Already-Dead, Fallen-Down-Tree-Top Removal?"

"I wouldn't know anything about that, ma'am."

"No, *I* don't know anything about that. It's *your* business. That's why I called you."

"We cut down trees, ma'am. Two hundred and fifty dollars."

"Ha! Joke's on you. I got mine cut down for free!" I hung up. I figured that Aardvark and Ace and even Busy Beaver Tree Removal would probably say the same thing. Rosary beads were one thing, but I didn't think I'd find a heading for Guys With Chainsaws and Spare Time. I peeked out the window to see if the mess was still there. It was.

If Truman had been there, he'd have had the whole thing cut up and hauled off before breakfast. I might have never even known about it. But I probably would have heard the chainsaw and gone outside to look. I would've pulled my robe around me and stepped carefully over the debris to get close enough to touch his back and smile at him. He would've yelled, "Get back in the house, silly girl! This won't take but a minute." I would have gone back to the house, fixed him a cup of coffee and waited for him to come inside. When he did, I would have sat down at the kitchen table with him and mentioned that the branches had a fluffy, paper-bag quality to them. He would have laughed, shook his head and said, "Baby girl, you and all your ideas! Where do you get this stuff?" He would have kissed me goodbye and gone to work without ever acknowledging how sad it was that the thing had died a long time ago and no one had noticed.

I couldn't get anything productive done with so much on my mind, so I turned on the TV. Jack had fallen asleep in a pile of stuffed animals. It was naptime anyway. I turned on Martha Stewart to see if she was making candles again. Or soufflés. I've always wanted to learn how to make a soufflé. Martha was cleaning silver-plated candlesticks. She sprinkled them with baking soda and then poured vinegar on them. Sure enough, they came out as shiny as mirrors.

I pulled an old pair of candlesticks out of the kitchen cabinet. They weren't silver plated, but some variation or imitation of brass. Whatever they were made of, they definitely looked like they could use a cleaning. I chipped off several colors of old wax, trying not to remember the nights spent with Truman, burning that wax, and threw the candlesticks into the sink. I found a box of baking soda in the back of the refrigerator—the same box I'd

bought five years ago, in my last month of pregnancy. I had been seized with a desire to clean and deodorize everything, so along with twenty-three dollars worth of Windex, Lysol, Drano, Clorox, and all of the necessary accoutrements, I bought a box of baking soda for the fridge.

Just like Martha, I sprinkled it all over my candlesticks. I got a bottle of apple cider vinegar out of the pantry, uncapped it, and braced myself for something spectacular. I poured the vinegar on the candlesticks. They hissed and bubbled, and the smell immediately threw me back to fourth grade. It was the smell of a volcano.

I rubbed the candlesticks with a Brillo pad, trying to match the enthusiasm of the bubbling foam, but they didn't get any cleaner. They weren't silver plated, though, so I couldn't really blame Martha for this particular failure. Not like the flan.

I gave up and left them in the sink. I still had some time before Jack would wake up. I was trying to think of a good way to make the argument that Pearl was the product of love and not sin. Her name seemed obvious enough to me. If Hester had been ashamed, she would have named the child Coal or Blackheart or Mistake. I didn't think I could stretch that point out for a whole paper, though.

I thought about Truman's eyes.

I thought about Mama saying, "Y'all were too young. I always knew you'd get saddled with a baby and no husband and no job. You should've listened to me."

I thought about Daddy, who never said much of anything. "Don't count on him coming back, baby," he said, flipping through the bills when I came over to tell them that Truman had left.

"He loves me, Daddy," I insisted, shifting Jack, just a baby then, from hip to hip, and trying not to cry.

Daddy nodded and squinted at the electric bill. "He might, princess. He might love you a heap. But sometimes it's harder to leave than it is to stay. I don't think he's coming back."

I thought about Jack, and his blue eyes. The heart necklace and running shoes that he had turned into a fairy tale. His Daddy was a fairy tale. I thought about the night I got pregnant in the back of Truman's Daddy's Buick. Truman apologized that night and said that such a pretty face, such a pretty girl, didn't belong in the backseat of a car. "I'll take care of you, Baby Girl, if you'll always lie there like that and look at me with those sweet eyes."

"I'll do other things too, Truman," I said, hitting his arm and laughing. "But I'll always look at you with sweet eyes."

"Because you're my girl," he said, sliding himself between my legs.

"Because I'll always be your girl."

Truman nodded and slipped inside of me. He kissed my nose and smiled. "You're a funny, sweet little girl."

"I'm yours," I promised. "Forever."

Pregnant as I was on Prom night, I still went, a corsage of yellow roses taking up half my arm. Truman and I slow danced to REO Speedwagon's *I Can't Fight This Feeling*.

After the dance, Truman drove me to a little house about eight miles from my parents' house. He took a key out of his pocket and unlocked the door. "This is the little house for my

little girl."

"You bought a house?" I yelled.

"I'm renting it. I got a job at Jimmy's Auto Finishing and Repair, full time." He loosened his tie and smiled.

"Truman!" I threw my arms around him. My belly got in the way of a really good hug, but he caught me before I toppled over.

"Your laugh makes it all worth it, Little Girl."

I laughed again, just for him, and he kissed me.

I guess at some point I quit laughing so much.

#

I gasped when my alarm went off at 2:30. Jack stirred. I put my head on his little shoulder. I didn't want to get up. He smelled like cookies and blankets. Before I went to bed, I had put everything I would need out on the kitchen counter, and filled the coffee maker.

I crept out to the kitchen in the dark and flipped the coffee maker on. I started taking supplies out to the front yard—lighter fluid, matches, a folded piece of paper, and a dried corsage. I went back in for the coffee and cigarettes. I peeked in on Jack one more time to make sure he was sound asleep. I couldn't imagine how frightening it would be to wake up, thinking your Mommy is right beside you, and then find her gone. Then how frightening it would be to get up and look around the house for her, and not find her anywhere. And then the ultimate fright—opening up the front door and finding your Mom standing in front of an unruly, flashing conflagration, dousing it with lighter fluid, a cigarette hanging out of her mouth. At that hour, she'd look a mess, and, perhaps overcome by the ridiculousness of it,

she might be cackling a little bit, too. Jack would never recover from such an experience.

Who would?

I went back outside and sipped my coffee. I lit a cigarette. I figured I'd get that out of the way before I started messing with the lighter fluid. I reread the last thing Truman ever wrote to me. Well, the last thing that Truman left me, actually written by REO Speedwagon. The top of the paper read,

Baby Girl, remember the prom? I loved you the minute I saw you. I always will. The song says it better than me. Then Truman had copied the words to *Time for Me to Fly*. At the end, he had signed it, *Love, Truman*.

When I got that note, I was kind of glad he'd ripped off song lyrics to say goodbye to me. Anything in his own words, from his own heart, would have hurt too much. I folded it up and threw my cigarette into the middle of the tree-top and let it burn. I squirted lighter fluid on it, just for fun. It exploded in flames, then went out quickly. I squirted the lighter fluid all over the tangle of branches, and the smell reminded me of picnics in Mama and Daddy's backyard—hotdogs and Kool-Aid. If I closed my eyes, I could almost smell the lightning bugs. They have an odd smell, almost metallic, but like a bitter green, too. When I felt that it was sufficiently wetted, I lit a match and threw it in. I grabbed my coffee and backed up quickly, expecting an explosion. Some of the branches on the ground caught, but it wasn't the caliber of fire that I was hoping for.

I squirted fluid directly into the flame. That was more like it. Branches started to fall off as they caught fire, and soon it started to look like a real campfire. I held the folded piece of paper in my hand for one last minute, and then threw it in. The note burned faster than it

took him to write it. I threw the prom corsage into the fire. I had thought about throwing the heart necklace in too—the one Truman gave me on my fifteenth birthday—but I couldn't do it. I couldn't let go of everything. I wanted to get rid of the things that hurt. The necklace would always remind me that once, somebody loved me. I supposed that Jack was a better reminder of that, but, still, I couldn't part with the necklace. Besides, if Truman ever did come back, that might be the only way he'd recognize me.

I heard a siren in the distance. It had the slow whine of a fire truck. Admittedly, I panicked. I didn't know what the penalty was for starting a fire in your yard in the middle of the night, but I knew it would be humiliating to get Jack up out of bed so we could ride downtown in the back of a police car. I ran around the side of the house and crouched behind a bush. I didn't want to leave the fire unattended, but if it looked like no one was here when the firemen pulled up, I could run around from the back, as if I had come out the back door, waving my arms and yelling with the controlled panic of a protective and conscientious mother. I thought about the can of lighter fluid and the coffee mug. The coffee! If they came in the house, they'd see that I still had a full, hot pot, and they'd know I had been awake and was the most likely culprit. The coffee would give me away. I leaned my head against the side of the house. Wasn't I too old for this kind of thing? No, I wasn't too old, but I was a mother, a student, a girl trying to do things *right*. I shook my head. Didn't I know that setting fires wasn't *right*?

The siren got weaker, farther away. I pulled my head up from between my knees and looked around. Nothing. I thought about how absurd I must look, hiding in the bushes, and from what? I stood up and peeked around the corner to find my own fire dwindling. The tree-

top was still an eyesore, still a legitimate yard problem, but I had tried something. I poured my coffee over the crackling branches and listened to them hiss. I could hear crickets and, far away, a dog barking; but I could barely hear the siren anymore.

JUNE, TWENTY-TWO

June had more lovers than she could count. Her Daddy was a preacher and her Mom made pies. Her little brother played baseball and told her that Jesus would save her someday, if she asked. June bought lipstick and nail polish and spearmint gum at the Wal-Mart and told her brother that she didn't need to be saved. June's Mom never stopped smiling, wiping her hands on her apron while June was fucking in the backseat of a Chevrolet, a Mazda, a Pontiac, a Volvo and even a Cadillac. June had lovers in April and May and several in June, when she would ride around in fast cars in her bikini, up and down dirt roads, singing along to Led Zeppelin and the Eagles. June could get a ride anywhere, anytime, rounding out every evening by kicking her pants off her ankles.

The boys would ask, what about your parents?

June would laugh and say, let me see your cock.

June had a reputation.

They all said they loved her, though, or something like that. Ricky told June that her eyes were prettier than Moon Lake and Dale told her that her eyes twinkled like stars, because only stars twinkled, not planets.

June laughed and said, I love the way you say twinkle. Kiss me with that mouth.

Andy told her that she had a body like a goddess and could he just sit and look at it for a little while. The other Ricky told her that her mouth tasted like candy and he wanted to feel it on his . . . you know.

When June was small, her grandmother clicked her tongue against the top of her mouth and shook her head. Girl, you've got a mouth just like a ripe strawberry. Boys is gonna get hungry looking at that mouth. Be careful.

June licked her little fruit lips and smiled.

Alex told June that he didn't know girls in high school had such perfect tits.

They don't, June giggled. Just me.

Bobby had sex with June on a blanket in the back of his Dad's pickup truck and then told her she was a whore. June dressed quickly, put on a fresh coat of lipstick, and told Bobby that she never wanted to see him again. She went into her house that night and fell weeping into her mother's arms.

He called me a bad name, June sobbed.

Her mother pulled away and looked at June. Do you do bad things?

June's eyes liquefied like Moon Lake and her strawberry mouth bent into a pout. Her blonde hair fell around her face like corn silk.

Of course you don't, her mother said. How about some pancakes? That'll make it all better.

June nodded and went to put on her nightgown. She sat at the kitchen table with Snappy, her favorite stuffed animal, a turtle. She mopped up a lake of maple syrup with bits of fluffy pancake.

Some girls get blemishes from so much sugar, her mother said over her shoulder. You're lucky, June. Your skin's as smooth as milk.

June's little brother sat on the couch glaring at her, flipping through his baseball cards.

One Sunday after church, June's Daddy mentioned that she might should start looking for a job since she would be graduating from high school in a month.

A job, June said, wrinkling her little nose.

That's what adults do, baby. You're an adult now.

Jimmy's Mom owned a beauty salon, and while Jimmy was perched on top of June at the baseball field one night, June asked him if his Mom might need any help. Jimmy grunted. June arched her back and wrapped her legs around Jimmy's back. Daddy says I have to get a job, June whispered.

June got up at eight o'clock every morning to be at Klassy Kuts by nine-thirty. They opened at ten. June was the shampoo girl. Jimmy's Mom hadn't really needed any help, but when Jimmy brought June by to fill out an application, all of the women getting their hair done commented on how pretty June was and asked what were her beauty secrets, so Jimmy's Mom felt like she should hire her. June listened to all of the women talk about their husbands. They were all too fat and too tired and too lazy and too bossy. They drank too much beer and watched too much TV. They talked about women too much. They were terrible in bed. June decided that she never wanted a husband.

Ron was twenty-five and took June to the pool hall even though she was only twenty. The bartender looked the other way when Ron gave his beer to June. Ron told June that he thought he could love her for the rest of his life.

June laughed and said, no you can't. That's way too long.

Jake told June that she had a heart-shaped ass. Frank said she smelled like honeysuckle in the summer. Chris told her that her back arched like a rainbow. June always slept in her bed at home with her eyelet lace bedspread and her parents sleeping soundly across the hall. They never asked where she had been. They trusted her. June had pancakes whenever she wanted them.

When she was twenty-one, June's father left. He had saved one soul a little too hard. That young church-going soul ended up pregnant and wanting to run away with June's Daddy. He said he was sorry, and checks came in the mail every month. June's mother never stopped smiling.

Barry said that June was like honey—sticky, sweet and forever. Honey's the only food that never goes bad, he said.

Never? June asked.

Never.

Jason gave June a ring called a promise ring and June licked her lips carefully before she said, Jason, you know I don't make promises.

Ross wrote a song for June called "June" and said that falling in love with her would be the worst thing that could happen to a man. June spent too much time talking to Ross and not enough time fucking him. She felt things. She would crack her gum absently as they talked, and when his questions got hard, she spit out her gum and smoked his cigarettes.

Are you mad at your Dad, he would ask. What do you think about your Mom?

I want you to kiss me, she begged shamelessly.

Yes, he whispered, in just a minute.

Their minutes were like hours.

Ross said that she couldn't be a shampoo girl her whole life, so what did she want to do? Get married?

No, June said, that's not what I want.

Well, what are you good at, he asked.

June looked out the window. Fucking.

Come on, we're all kind of good at that.

Not all of us, June laughed.

Really, he asked, what would make you happy?

I never thought about it, June said, turning her strawberry mouth into a little pout, hoping the conversation would end and something fun would begin.

I think you could do anything, Ross said.

Clyde said that June could get anything she wanted. Bobby said that she didn't play fair. Ben said that she had a pussy like a buttercup. Jay said that she was the scariest woman in the world.

Why do you think that, June asked Ross.

The world fucking stops for you, he said.

Not the world. Men

Same thing.

On her twenty-second birthday, June went to Western Sizzlin' with her Mom and her little brother, who was now seventeen and still saved. His church group was his real family; he only remained loyal to June and her Mom because it was the good Christian thing to do.

He hated his Dad for a while and then he forgave him. June's brother forgave everyone. He was a counselor at summer camps where he sang Jesus songs and maintained that someday everyone would be saved. If they asked. He gave June a Bible for her birthday. Her Mom gave her a silver watch. You should always know what time it is, her Mom said. Know when it's time to stay and when it's time to go.

After dinner, June went to the pool hall to meet Ed. Ed said that sex with June was like finding manna. My grandparents are Jewish, he confessed. Manna is God's food for the starving people in the Bible. June hadn't even wanted to be there and wondered how she could be so indifferent and still be manna. She waited until Ed fell asleep to sneak out. She drove to Ross's house and hoped that he was alone.

Do you love me, she asked him when he answered the door.

Do you love me, he asked.

I don't know. She brushed the hair from his forehead with her fingers. But maybe.

Maybe, he said.

Today's my birthday.

Ross took June's hand and led her to the couch. He told her to close her eyes. He made some noise in the kitchen and then she could feel him close to her again.

Okay, you can open your eyes.

A votive candle was smashed into a hamburger bun. Make a wish, he said.

June made a wish and blew out the candle.

Ross kissed her on the forehead and said that he hoped all of her wishes would come true. June left, hoping the same thing.

June walked into her front door and found her little brother watching TV. Mom took a bunch of pills, he said. She's in the hospital.

Why aren't you with her, June asked.

I was waiting for you.

On the way to the hospital, her little brother told June that he was going to live with Gary's family until he finished high school. They're good people, he said.

Is Mom going to die, June asked.

Probably. Because she wants to.

June's Mom went to live in a quiet place with doctors. She talked about pies at great length. June's Dad sold the house and split the money between June and her little brother. June packed all of her clothes and Snappy into her car and left a note taped to Ross's door.

He was the only one who either would or wouldn't wait for her.

VERTIGO

Sylvie sat in the stall, shaking. No one knows me in Newark, she told herself. I can throw up in Newark, it's okay. But she couldn't. There were women coming in all the time—talking, laughing, sighing, frowning, peeing, washing, brushing, examining, admiring, yawning, then leaving. None of them was puking or shaking or losing control of their bowels. So what the fuck is my problem, Sylvie scolded herself. A wave of nausea hit her and she stared at the hook on the stall door. She breathed deeply. The bathroom smelled like cheap soap and too many people. She pressed her face against the cool metal wall. Her jaw was stiff. She swallowed the saliva that kept filling her mouth. When the wave passed, Sylvie took her overnight bag off of the hook and opened the stall door. She wobbled over to the sink and washed her hands and face. She looked at herself in the mirror. A woman wearing a Yankees jersey and an overstuffed pink fanny pack brushed back her feathered hair and commented, "You look a little green."

Sylvie cleared her throat. "I don't usually get motion sickness." She tried to laugh, but her mouth was too thick.

The woman raised her eyebrows and poked Sylvie in the ribs. "Are you late?"

"I have an hour layover."

"No! Your visitor!"

"I'm the one visiting," Sylvie said feebly. She was tired of the woman.

"Your period!" the woman shouted. She shook her head.

"Oh. No. I'm not late."

"Well . . . good luck." The woman waved dismissively and walked out.

Sylvie knew she didn't mean it. She didn't care if Sylvie had good luck or not.

Sylvie stood up straight, threw her bag over her shoulder and walked out of the bathroom. Her stomach lurched with the smells of pizza, hot dogs, sushi, pretzels, chocolate and humanity. On top of everything else, her feet hurt. She stopped at a newsstand and scanned the pharmaceutical selection. She felt the sweet relief of the placebo effect just looking at the word—Dramamine.

#

Sylvie had been keeping in touch with Richard by telephone for six months. She hadn't seen him in years, but he called her one night around 11:30 to see if she had Beverly Hyatt's phone number. Sylvie had been asleep with the TV on. A man and woman on stage were screaming at each other about a child's paternity, not to mention that the woman was a worthless skank and the man was a dog. Nothin' but a dog. The host of the show jumped between the couple as they started swinging at one another.

"Sylvie, it's me, Richard Fraiser. I'm trying to get in touch with Beverly Hyatt — do you have her number?"

"Why do you want Beverly Hyatt's phone number?"

"Oh, I heard she worked for a big pharmaceutical company in Chicago, and I'm looking for a new job"

"Well, I don't have it." Sylvie turned the volume on the TV down. "How are you? God, I haven't talked to you in years."

"Yeah, I'm good, good. Wife, kids."

"You're married?"

"You're not?"

Sylvie got out of bed and walked around the dark apartment with the cordless phone.

She opened the freezer and took out a Popsicle. Orange. "No, I'm not."

"Huh."

"How long have you been married?"

"A good while."

"Yeah, well . . . Sorry I couldn't help you with Bev's phone number. Good luck with that."

"Speaking of Bev, do you remember that time in eleventh grade when we found that couch out in a field near the orphanage? We thought that was so cool. Remember how we used to get beer and go up and sit out there?"

"Yeah, I remember."

"I mean, it was just a couch, like we all had in our houses, but a couch in a field, now that's a whole different matter."

"Yeah, and I remember that Scott Eli brought a coffee table and an ottoman from his dad's furniture store. An ottoman . . ."

"Do you remember the night we were there alone?"

Sylvie licked the Popsicle stick. It tasted like wood. "I remember."

"That was our first time."

"And, as I recall, pretty close to the last. You dumped me three weeks later to go out with Angie Rosengarten. I never knew what you saw in her. She went through, like, two cans of hairspray a week."

"I married Angie."

"Oops."

"Her hair is tamer now."

"Well, that's good. Listen, I've got a meeting early in the morning, so I should really get back to sleep." Sylvie didn't have anywhere to be the next day. She could have an extra long conversation with the guy at the Zip Mart when she stopped in to get coffee and that would be kind of like a meeting, so it wasn't really a lie.

"Okay. So, can I call you again sometime?"

Sylvie looked up at the TV. An obese woman was parading around the stage in a purple bra and underwear. Her bellybutton was huge—proportionate to everything else on her. A sign popped up across the bottom of the screen announcing, 'I'm a stripper and if you don't like it, you can kiss my ass!' Sylvie had thought the show was about skanks and dogs and fatherless children, but, it turns out, it was about strippers. Several other large women filed onto the stage in their underwear. Some of them gyrated. The audience was on its feet. Sylvie looked away. "I guess."

"Good. It's nice to catch up, you know?"

"Yeah, catch up."

"Okay, well. Sweet dreams." Sylvie felt the words in her ear, soft and curious. She shivered.

"Sweet dreams," she murmured, thinking that even her own voice sounded sexy saying those words.

The next time Richard called, three days later by the calendar where Sylvie made coded marks for important events (a dot was when she got her period, a star was when she had sex, a question mark was when Richard called), Sylvie thought to ask him where he was.

"Pittsburgh."

"Wow. That's funny. You're far away, but on the phone, I mean . . . you just can't guess where someone is over the phone." Sylvie frowned. That sounded stupid. "I'm in North Carolina. Still."

"I know. I called you."

"Right." Sylvie laughed and frowned.

"So, what do you do?"

"Freelance design. I mostly work with one publishing company, designing dust jackets for their books."

"Interesting. Really, that's interesting."

"You would think. It's not bad, but the authors have all of these ideas. They want their book to look so astonishing that people will walk into the bookstore, stare hypnotized at the cover, and simply have to take it home. It's unrealistic, and besides, a lot of the time, the writing is just crap."

"No wonder they want amazing covers."

"Exactly. I can say with absolute certainty that you can't judge a book by its cover."

Richard laughed, and Sylvie felt like she had won a race.

"Are you dating anyone?"

Sylvie's tongue tingled and her neck got hot. "Not really."

They seemed to have run out of things to say, and after a silence that had become as painful as a migraine to Sylvie, she said, "I think I feel a migraine coming on, I'd better go."

"I didn't know you got migraines."

"Well, it's been a long time since you've seen me. A lot has changed. I didn't know you got married." There was a tinge of spite in her voice. "Whoa! My cat just knocked over a plant—I gotta go!" Sylvie hung up.

She didn't have a cat.

#

At a newsstand in Newark International Airport, a small cylindrical vial containing twelve Dramamine tablets cost six dollars and ninety-nine cents. Sylvie would never have known this if she hadn't been the one buying it. She bought a Diet Dr. Pepper to wash it down and hobbled back to her terminal on uncomfortable shoes, which she was sure made her ankles look as lovely as they ever had. She sat down in a plastic chair facing CNN on TV and took two of the pills. She had an hour and twenty minutes to wait for her next flight, so she set about reading all of the information, printed in inscrutably small type, on the Dramamine label. Active ingredient: Dimenhydrinate.

Sylvie pictured the pills dissolving in her stomach acid like Alka Seltzer in a glass of water. Some fizzing and bubbling, perhaps, and then the molecules of dimenhydrinate setting off on their journey to . . . where? Her brain, she suspected. The tipsy cradle in her brain that

caught the neuron-firing complaints of her inner ear that reacted to the body's uncommon ascent 30,000 feet into the sky and then back down again. She pictured multicolored crystalline pentagons of dimenhydrinate seeping through her stomach lining, hurtling through her bloodstream. She imagined that they were equipped with state of the art navigation systems and precisely timed detonators. They swam through her, perhaps reaching a dead end at say, a finger, then did an about face and kept swimming.

Sylvie imagined that she heard an electronic beeping and clicking as the platoons of dimenhydrinate forged through her. They might even push less vital molecules out of the way in the thin passages of her veins and arteries with a gruff, "Excuse me. I'm busy here." Ahead of them, they would finally see the light. Or lights. The brilliant fireworks display of Sylvie's neurons gone mad. The dimenhydrinate legions would move in, and one by one, extinguish the flashing lights. Then, kaboom! The whole show would blow up and dissolve like a spaceship gunned down in a video game. And then, Sylvie thought, propping her feet on her overnight bag and letting her head fall backward against the seat, everything would be quiet.

#

During their thirty-fourth phone conversation Richard asked Sylvie if she still looked the same.

"I guess. What about you?"

"I wear glasses now."

"And Angie? She still looks the same?" Sylvie was pulling a thread out of her quilt and wrapping it around her finger. Pulling harder. Her finger turned purple. She loosened it, then pulled again.

"Smaller hair, bigger . . . well, she's had three kids."

"Mmm." Sylvie got up and looked at herself in the full-length mirror. She shimmied off the boxer shorts she usually wore to bed. She looked at herself in bikini underwear.

"Well, I'm sure it's very rewarding to have children." Sylvie hooked her thumb into the string of her panties that stretched across her hips and tugged. She pulled the side down slowly. Her skin dipped slightly below her hipbone, smooth and white, like the subtle valleys on the surface of the moon.

"Yeah. It's a happy life."

Sylvie let the panties snap back into place. She made a face and stuck her tongue out at the phone. Then she stuck her tongue out at her own reflection. "You know, it's a funny thing . . . I can't believe I forgot to mention this. One of the authors wrote a book about bridges, and he was considering putting the picture of that bridge in Pittsburgh on the cover, so I'm going to be making a trip up there with the photographer, you know, to collaborate on the best angle and lighting and whatnot." Sylvie bit her lip.

"Which bridge?"

"The one over the river—you know." Sylvie had begun researching Pittsburgh after her conversations with Richard became more regular. She checked a couple of books out of the library and found some things on the internet. She pored over pictures, looking at little shop fronts and restaurants, wondering if he had been there. Sometimes she would just gaze

idly at the pictures of the skyline and pretend she was right there with him, seeing what he was seeing.

"Which river?"

Goddammit! Sylvie picked a sock off the floor and threw it. She looked out the window and considered the plausibility of her "cat" knocking over another plant. "Liberty Bridge!" she yelled, suddenly remembering.

"Oh, yeah. That's a nice one. But there are so many other nice bridges in the country. Golden Gate"

"Right, well, we have a pretty tight budget. We have to keep it to the east coast. So, anyway, I'll be in your neck of the woods—"

"Why not Brooklyn Bridge? That's a good one and it's on the east coast."

Sylvie banged her head against the window softly. "New York's been done too many times," she sighed. She wanted her cat to rub against her leg and soothe her.

"So maybe we could get together," he said softly.

"Maybe we could." Sylvie paused to slow her breathing. "We haven't made any final plans yet, but by next week, I should know dates and times."

"I'll give you a call next week, then." Richard took a breath and Sylvie heard a little, barely audible moan deep in his throat as he exhaled. "It'll be good to see you," he said.

"Yes," Sylvie whispered.

Sylvie hung up the phone and logged on to the internet. She had about three hundred dollars before her credit card reached its limit, and she had to find the cheapest, soonest flight to Pittsburgh.

#

"We will now begin boarding flight 4578, non-stop service to Pittsburgh."

Sylvie opened her eyes all the way. They had only been half shut, but she wasn't seeing anything. She was facing the TV, but she was aware of the yogurt stand, the planes taking off outside the window, the business man in a gray suit, and the hippie with a guitar case sitting across from her—so it was like the TV was on TV. Everything was TV. Sylvie thought she heard music in her head—maybe angels or elves or munchkins. It was nice.

She smiled drunkenly at the man ripping her boarding pass in half and walked through the carpeted tube into the airplane. Sylvie stowed her luggage in the overhead compartment and slid into seat 15A beside the window. She was right over the wing, which led her to consider how many rows there were on the plane and whether or not the seat above the wing was right in the middle. If it were, then there were probably thirty rows of seats, with five seats per row (on both sides of the aisle), which was . . . Sylvie closed her eyes . . . one hundred and fifty seats, and one hundred and fifty potential passengers, none of whom were Richard, but that's who she was going to see anyway, so it didn't hurt quite as much to miss him right then, and, that's right, this is a Boeing 747, a sevvvvven-foooooorty-sevvvvven. Sylvie let her head fall against the Plexiglas window and woke up briefly during takeoff. The engine underneath her (around her? behind her? in front of her?) screamed like a prehistoric bird, and as the long heavy tube picked up speed, Sylvie kept thinking of the word velocity, and imagined Richard pushing her back against a mattress.

When the flight attendant wheeled up with a cart of drinks, Sylvie had the urge to lean across the two empty seats beside her and whisper loudly, "I'm having an affair. Don't

say anything." But she only said, "Diet Coke, please." Sylvie took small sips and watched patches of land float by beneath her. The swimming pools were alarmingly blue.

Sylvie wondered if Richard had a swimming pool. Did he, Angie, and the kids spend Sunday afternoons playing and swimming? Was Angie a good cook? Did they just have hot dogs, or did she make roasted garlic hummus and couscous salad? Did she look good in a bathing suit? Katie, Lisa and Little Richard ran around the yard screaming. No, Angie didn't look good in a bathing suit. And it couldn't be Little Richard, that was ridiculous. Perhaps Ritchie. Is that what they did after church? Did Richard go to church? Or were Richard and Angie working off hangovers from staying up late the night before, getting drunk with the neighbors and swimming naked? Did Angie look good naked? Maybe in the dark, drunk. Did they talk? Or did they just sit out in their lounge chairs and read magazines? Angie—Good Housekeeping, and Richard . . . what? What would Richard read? Sylvie hadn't seen him in fifteen years. They had sex nine times in high school. She didn't know this man at all. She knew a teenage boy who, although Sylvie was blissfully naive and unaware at the time, might have had some premature ejaculation issues.

Sylvie was beginning to realize that Richard had a *life*. She wasn't in that life, so what was she doing? Taking a little trip, she reasoned, as was he. He was taking a little trip from his life. She was taking a little trip to wherever he ended up. Sylvie knew that there were serious moral implications to such a trip, but it seemed inevitable. Sylvie felt sick again as she thought about Angie stirring spaghetti sauce and putting garlic bread in the oven. Oh God, Angie probably wore flannel nightgowns. Sylvie squeezed her eyes shut to banish the image. She thought of the faded plaid boxer shorts and Rolling Stones T-shirt that she slept

in. She didn't even like the Rolling Stones that much. She had gotten it from some guy years ago. Sylvie didn't care for the clarity that was bleeding into her stupor. She took another Dramamine out of her purse, popped it onto her tongue, and finished her little plastic cup of Diet Coke.

#

Sylvie had had all of the information ready the next time Richard called. Richard hadn't planned on picking Sylvie up from the airport, but she explained that she was meeting the photographer at the hotel because he was taking an earlier flight into Pittsburgh in order to acquaint himself with the city before going out on the photo shoot.

"So why can't he pick you up from the airport?" Richard asked.

"You know . . . that would just be a pain in the ass for him."

"Yeah," he paused. "I know."

"So my flight gets in at 4:47."

"Got it. Five o'clock. I'll come after work. Traffic's going to be a bitch, though. Let's make it 5:30. At least."

Sylvie imagined herself having a drink in an elegant airport bar while waiting for Richard to take her off into the warm city evening to eat, sight-see, and then make forbidden love at the hotel.

"That's fine."

"Shit. What am I going to tell Angie?"

Sylvie hadn't thought of that. "Tell her you're picking up a client from the airport and going out to dinner." That was so close to the truth she wondered why Richard hadn't thought of it. Client was the only inaccurate word in that sentence.

"Okay. Five-thirty, six o'clock, then. I'll meet you at the passenger pick-up. Just stand outside and I'll loop by."

That was less romantic than Sylvie had hoped, but not a big deal.

"Be looking for me, though," he added. "It's no fun dodging all of the stopped cars on that loop."

"No problem," Sylvie said brightly, trying to maintain the appropriate offhand tone of Vacation Girl as opposed to Life Girl, or mistress as opposed to wife.

"Okay, see you then."

Sylvie watched a blue jay land on a telephone wire outside her window and begin screaming at some other bird. A little brown one. "Richard!" she yelled

"What?"

"I don't know what kind of car you have."

"A Volvo station wagon. Green."

Sylvie felt like she had just walked in on someone in a dressing room. Did he sound ashamed? The only thing to do when staring at someone wriggling into or out of some article of clothing, with a typically hidden expanse of skin glowing sickly under fluorescent lights, was to toss out a quick apology and go.

"Gotcha. Green Volvo." Sylvie swallowed. "Station wagon."

She hung up and watched the soft brown bird fly away with the angular jay shrieking after it. She was sure that her cat would have taught that obnoxious bird a lesson or two.

#

Sylvie sat in a mini TGI Friday's in Pittsburgh Airport and ordered a glass of wine. She stared at the bartender, who stared at her. Sylvie smiled. Sort of.

"Five-fifty," the bartender said, not smiling.

"Oh! Right. Sorry. I've been traveling all day." She pulled a ten dollar bill out of her wallet and slid it across the bar. The wood was so heavily lacquered that she could make fingerprints on it, like glass. "So what's there to do in Pittsburgh?" she asked.

The bartender shrugged. "It's a mess out there right now. They just started construction on the bridge and the tubes are closed."

Construction on the bridge? "Tubes?" Sylvie asked.

"The Liberty Tunnels."

Some men at the other side of the bar laughed suddenly, and it startled Sylvie, as if she had been poked.

"You seem a little jumpy," the bartender remarked.

"Jetlag," Sylvie sighed. "Maybe I should be having coffee instead."

The bartender looked at Sylvie as if she were a square stop sign—something not quite right. He shook his head, filled a little wooden bowl with pretzels and slid it over to her. "Try these."

"Oh, I couldn't. My stomach's a wreck." Sylvie gazed at a neon Bud Light sign above the bartender's head and thought it funny. It was, literally, a Bud light. Just as she was about

to share her amusing and insightful observation with the bartender, he moved on to the far side of the bar to be with the boisterous men. He kept watching Sylvie out of the corner of his eye, though. Sylvie sighed and looked up at the TV. CNN again. She wondered if global news had some sort of soothing effect on travelers. She couldn't hear what the anchor was saying, but a headline trailed across the bottom of the screen: Plane Crash in Albuquerque Kills Three, Twelve Others Injured. Sylvie made another fingerprint on the bar and wished that someone were there to appreciate that irony, along with the Bud light tidbit.

She ate a pretzel. Then another. She ate them all, then licked her finger and pressed it to the bottom of the bowl to pick up the little squares of salt that were left. She touched her crusted finger to her tongue and tried to hear the crystals dissolve. She thought she could detect a stiff creak and then a sigh. Sylvie pulled a five out of her wallet and ordered another glass of wine.

She was missing a book release party that night—a young female author whose first book, *Fairest of Them All*, was anticipated to make it to the Bestseller list. Sylvie was proud of that jacket cover, despite the difficulty in seeing it come to fruition. When the graphics department pitched their design idea to the author—a nude woman lying on white sheets (with all of the necessary parts covered)—the author complained that the model was too pretty. "This is a book about a suburban housewife. An average woman," she insisted.

"People don't want to look at average women naked," Sylvie said matter-of-factly. "We want the cover to be dreamy and fairy-tale-like, don't we? The Palmolive lady isn't going to get us there."

The author finally acquiesced, although grudgingly, and the cover turned out beautifully. The model was lying in a bed with one arm thrown across her face and the other hand clutching a white sheet. There was considerable exposure of one breast, although no nipple, and one of the woman's legs bent elegantly out from under the sheet. The author had corralled Sylvie when the project was finally done and grabbed her hand urgently, "What do you think of the book?" she asked.

"It captures so much beauty." Sylvie patted the woman's hand. "It's a brilliant look at femininity."

The author closed her eyes and sighed. "Thank you," she whispered.

Sylvie hadn't read the book.

She didn't care about missing the book release party, or the TV shows she would be watching if she had decided to skip the party. In the past six months, she had skipped several parties and evenings out with friends in favor of staying at home and waiting for the phone to ring. Richard usually didn't call until after 9:00, so sometimes Sylvie would go out with friends after work, slam down a few drinks—usually too many—and rush home, half-drunk, to wait.

If Richard did call on one of these nights, he could tell by Sylvie's voice that she was tipsy and uninhibited. "How's your sex life?" he asked one night.

"Sporadic," Sylvie said. "Unless you count all of the hours I've logged doing solo flights."

She could hear Richard inhale deeply, and that ghost of a moan deep in his throat. "Tell me all about it," he whispered.

So she did. And sometimes she did it while she was telling him about it.

"You're so far away," he would murmur.

"I know," Sylvie whispered back, thinking it was a lament. Sylvie never asked about Angie and "the kids" and Richard never brought them up.

#

At 5:42, Sylvie exited the sliding glass doors that led to the passenger pickup. She found an unoccupied bench, sat down and lit a cigarette. The sun was dropping in Pittsburgh. She took her shoes off again and examined her toes. Unsatisfied, she took a bottle of nail polish out of the purse—Corvette Red—and painted her toenails while she smoked. Haggard businessmen stood around the sand-filled cigarette receptacle, smoking and staring blankly at Sylvie. When she was done, she lifted her feet up and wiggled her toes. The men smiled and nodded.

Watching the cars go around the loop was hypnotizing. They kept not being green Volvo station wagons. At 6:05, Sylvie lay her head down on her overnight bag and pulled her legs up to the fetal position. She watched the cars go by until her eyes closed. Sylvie imagined herself and Richard in the hotel room. It was tomorrow morning. Sylvie would wake up before Richard and put on his flannel shirt. She'd pull her hair back into a ponytail and make coffee in the little coffeemaker on the table in the corner of the room. She'd tiptoe out onto the balcony with her coffee and smoke a cigarette, watching the sun rise over the city. She would come back in and watch Richard as he slept.

She liked his receding hairline, although it was one of the first things he apologized for. She studied the lines around his mouth, presuming they got there from laughing, and she

wondered what he laughed about so much. She counted the tiny lines around his eyes, thinking that he must have done a great deal of frowning about how unhappy he was in his life. She looked at his back and shoulders, still impressive, and remembered holding on for dear life in high school, hoping he knew what he was doing. She decided that he needed eggs benedict for breakfast, so she called room service. She ordered a waffle for herself. After they finished breakfast, Sylvie did a striptease, which wasn't very teasing, since she was only wearing his flannel shirt. He applauded anyway, grabbed her, and pulled her down on top of him.

At one o'clock, the Steelers came on and Sylvie ordered nachos and beer from room service. She was still only wearing the flannel shirt. They shouted things like, "Fumble!" and "Interception!" and sometimes Richard would yell something like "Drive it into the pocket!" and Sylvie would quiver with desire. After the football game, they made love by candlelight, slowly. Sylvie thanked Richard for finding her again.

"I can't believe it's been you all along—" she murmured. "We've missed so much time together."

Afterward, they got dressed and went down to the decadent lobby to have cocktails. Richard kissed Sylvie in the elevator, and she thought, this is it. This is love. Sitting at the bar, Richard with a gin and tonic and Sylvie with a glass of cabernet, she leaned over to him and asked, "What now? Where do we go from here?" she couldn't stop staring at him, couldn't stop smiling.

"Richard Frasier?" A man came up behind Richard and slapped him on the back.

Richard's eyes flew open wide, but he turned around, smiling. "Hey, Neal. Haven't seen you in a while."

"Oh, I've been busy, busy . . ." Neal said, staring at Sylvie. "And you? Busy?" He laughed loud.

"This is an old high school friend of mine, Sylvie. Sylvie, this is Neal McCallum, one of the field reps."

"Field rep, huh?" Sylvie said, smiling. "Sounds very interesting." Sylvie wondered how to rep a field.

Richard's cell phone rang. He sighed and covered his eyes when he read the number on the display, then answered. "Angie! Hey, honey! I'm just finishing up here. I'm with Neal McCallum, you remember him? Neal, say hi to Angie." Richard thrust the phone at Neal who laughed the whole way through his polite greeting. Sylvie looked away.

When Richard hung up, Neal, still laughing, said that he had to go. "Whose tail are you chasing, man? I think it might be your own." Neal erupted with laughter again as Richard slumped over in his seat.

Richard finished off his drink and stood up. "It's more trouble than it's worth," he told Neal.

Sylvie wouldn't look back at him. She couldn't.

#

Someone was poking Sylvie. Blinking lights. Green Volvo station wagon. It was dark.

"Sylvie?"

Sylvie looked up. It was him. It was Richard.

"You were . . ." he cleared his throat, "um, really sleeping."

Sylvie looked at her watch. It was 7:38. "You were really late," she said.

"You were drooling."

Sylvie wiped her face and stood up. She grabbed the cigarette can beside her for support.

"Are you drunk?" Richard asked. He was looking at her the same way the bartender did.

Sylvie watched the cars loop by. It was such an easy thing to do. "I took Dramamine."

"How much?"

"Too much, I think."

"What happened to your feet?"

Sylvie looked down. It looked as if someone had run a knife back and forth across her toes, leaving trails of blood. "I painted my toenails. I must have rubbed my feet together when I slept. I tend to do that." She frowned. Her voice sounded like it was coming from a speaker, somewhere else.

Richard opened the car door for her and she got in. As he was pulling away from the curb, he said, "Dramamine is a combination of diphenhydramine and chlorotheophylline. Researchers aren't sure why it has an antiemetic effect, but it depresses labyrinthine and vestibular function."

Sylvie stared at Richard, then let her head fall against the window. "I'm so tired."

"No kidding. Dramamine shuts a lot of things down. It's odd. It's almost like the only way to get rid of vertigo is to get rid of consciousness."

"Odd, indeed. How do you know all this?"

"I'm a pharmacist. I told you that."

Sylvie looked out at the magnificent city, full of lights, and the smear of its reflection on the river.

"So, your photographer got in safely, I presume?"

Sylvie watched a riverboat go by. People on it were dancing. "Yep. We're all set."

"The timing is terrible, isn't it? The bridge is under construction."

"Yeah, well, Tristan—that's the photographer—he likes the idea of photographing a work in progress. Bridges are there every day, but they're not being fixed every day."

"That makes a lot of sense. Well, good! I'm glad your trip to Pittsburgh won't be a waste."

Sylvie looked over at him. She did recognize him—his profile, his smile. "Richard . . ."

Richard rolled his window down and ran his hand through his hair. "Sylvie, you're in pretty bad shape tonight. Why don't I just drop you off at the hotel and you can sleep it off. Then maybe tomorrow I can swing by the hotel and we can grab a cup of coffee." He reached over and patted her hand.

Three hundred miles and six hours in airports to grab a cup of coffee in Pittsburgh.

"Actually," Sylvia said, turning away from him, "our day is looking pretty busy, and I really need to get back home as soon as possible. My cat just had kittens."

PINK

"You seem lonely," her mother said, leaning forward on the couch like someone who had come to sell insurance. Was it because Caroline had bought the couch at a thrift store and it was somehow offensive? Was it because her mother was nervous? Or had her mother always leaned forward on couches, even her own, and the girl simply hadn't noticed?

"I'm just tired," Caroline replied. She slouched in a chair opposite her mother in the dim little apartment. She suspected that her mother knew, as well as she did, that "I'm just tired" was what people said when they were lonely, sick, depressed, jealous, or scared, and didn't want to talk about it. It was what they said when they had unceremoniously peed on a plastic stick in the middle of the night, unable to sleep, thinking it all seemed like a dream. It was what they said when they went groveling back to a blank-faced one-night-stand, a bad lover, really, and demanded half the money for an abortion. It was what they said when the bad lover threw cash on the floor with a look of disgust and reiterated that he hoped he'd never see her again. It was what they said when they had driven thirty miles to a clinic, shaking; bled, cried and puked amidst posters of wispy uterine walls and tentacled fallopian tubes, and then drove home, still shaking, and hoping that the half bottle of wine from three nights ago hadn't soured.

"How's school?" her mother asked.

"Fine." Caroline hadn't been to class in days.

"Are you dating anyone?" Her mother crossed and uncrossed her legs.

Caroline shook her head absently. "I don't have time. School . . . work"

"You're a pretty young girl," her mother chided. "You shouldn't let these good years get by you."

Caroline rearranged herself on her chair and tucked her legs underneath her. Her abdomen throbbed with the memory of invasion and removal. It had become a hollow cave of phantom pain, sterile, but with the stale, pungent air of absence. It still bled—dead, useless blood that smelled like metal and rotting fruit.

"Remember how you taught me to eat macaroni and cheese with ketchup?" Caroline asked her mother.

Her mother nodded. "That's the way I always ate it."

"Well, kids at school used to make fun of me for it, so I stopped using ketchup even though I liked it. But the other day, Martha Stewart was making macaroni and cheese on her show. Her mother was the guest. Anyway, they actually put tomato paste in the macaroni and cheese before they cooked it. Martha said it gave the macaroni a lovely pink hue. But that's what used to bother me—that strange pinkishness."

"Well, if Martha Stewart says it's the thing to do . . . actually that's a pretty good idea. I might try that."

"But it's not the same, Mom," Caroline protested. "Part of the fun is squeezing the ketchup all over the pile of macaroni and watching it slide down into the crevices. Sometimes I would do a spiral, starting at the outside of the pile and circling inward. Sometimes I would do a smiley face. But the thing about the ketchup is that you don't have to mix it in. You can just eat one bite at a time, a bite of yellow macaroni streaked with red ketchup. That's how I

liked it. No stirring. No pinkness." She looked out the window. "I always liked macaroni and cheese night."

"I always had fish sticks with it," her mother mused aloud.

"You always did."

"Isn't that awful!" her mother laughed. "You always knew what went with what. I never deviated. I always made the same meals. But we were on a tight budget when you were young."

"No, Mom, it wasn't awful," Caroline said softly. "I always liked knowing."

"So I wasn't a bad mother?" Her mother laughed again and almost sat back on the couch. Her back touched the fabric briefly, but she leaned forward again, propping her elbows on her knees.

"Of course you weren't a bad mother" Caroline bit her lip and stared at the peeling paint on the windowsill.

"Someday you'll understand," her mother said. "You have to learn as you go. You just do your best. And speaking of meals, have you been eating right? You look a little drawn."

"I'm eating," she sighed. "I'm just tired."

"Well, the reason I came by this afternoon is because your father's out of town, and I wanted to see if you wanted to go out for dinner. You pick the place, my treat."

Caroline pictured herself at her favorite seafood restaurant by the river. There were outdoor tables along a boardwalk. She pictured herself vomiting shrimp scampi over the boardwalk railing as blood seeped through her maxi-pad. She pictured herself crying as she watched the embryonic shrimp float away below her, purged, broken into half-digested bits,

and eventually becoming food for some other fish. She pictured her mother hugging her, but hating her for what she had done. She pictured her hollow abdomen growing into a canyon between herself and her mother, herself and her ghost child.

"I have a lot of studying to do," Caroline said, looking at the wall above her mother's head.

Her mother shrugged. "I just thought we could spend a little time together. You know, like friends."

Caroline looked at the woman sitting uncomfortably in her living room. She took note of her silk blouse and linen pants, her neat haircut and thin hands. Caroline remembered a snapshot from her own first birthday. She was sitting in a highchair wearing a cone-shaped hat and a ruffled pink dress. A chocolate cupcake with a lit candle sat in front of her. People were all around the table, frozen in poses of hand-clapping, laughing, eating. The little girl was looking at the camera with wide, vacant eyes, not quite terrified, but lost. Her mother was leaning over her shoulder, smiling. One hand rested protectively on the child's blonde head. Her mother was right there, close enough for the Caroline to smell Chanel #5 and warm safe skin, but the little girl looked as if she didn't know it.

ANATHEMA

"Mama, I can't get warm.

"I . . . I'm cold, Mama.

"Mama?"

I am in the middle of an inky lake at night. I'm naked. I'm twelve, and the tiny breasts that have grown on my chest are unfamiliar. I look down at them breaking the surface of the water, and I am embarrassed. Grace is far away, on the shore pushing a canoe out to me. My arms and legs are tired from treading water for so long. It begins to snow. The flat crystalline flakes hit the water with little hisses. When the boat reaches me, I see that it is just a newspaper folded into the shape of a boat.

"Mama?" I call.

Mimi pokes her head out of the little boat. She fits in my hand.

"You're twenty-five, Madeleine. Grow up. And stop exposing yourself." She pulls her head back into the little newspaper boat and sails away.

"But Mama," I call, twirling around in the middle of the lake.

#

"Mama, I'm cold."

"Madeleine, wake up."

"I'm awake," I said thinly. Like a violin string. Like fishing line being cast.

"I don't think you are. Your Mom isn't here. You don't call her Mama, you call her Mimi. You must be dreaming, Madeleine. Wake up." Grace smoothed my hair away from my face.

My head smelled warm and sweet, but not the right kind of sweet. Like a rotting thing, like yeast or sour breast milk. I couldn't turn my head from the smell. It was my head. My pillow was damp. Outside my bedroom window, the purple stars of a Japanese maple tree fluttered like hundreds of little tambourines. If I watched closely enough, I could hear them. But a dog was barking, too. Then that became the only thing I could hear.

Grace put her hand behind my neck and lifted me slowly. I let my mouth fall open because it was easier than making an effort to close it. Some of the dampness had probably come from my drooling. Grace swiftly flipped the pillow over and lay my head back down.

"Cool side of the pillow," she whispered. Her eyes looked like melting ice cubes. She put her head in her hands and sighed. "Please eat, Madeleine."

"I can't."

"You're going to die."

"I know." I looked away from her and ground my teeth. I used to only do it in my sleep, but it's hard for me to tell when I'm asleep and when I'm awake now, so I grind them all of the time. I like the scraping sound in my head.

"Your hair is falling out," Grace said to the window.

"I pull it out."

"Why?" She ran her hands through her hair. She looked very, very tired.

"I like the way it feels."

"How does it feel?"

"I can't really tell if the feeling is in my head or in my fingers. There's a little pop when the hair comes out. I can't tell if I like the pop on my head, or the reverberation of it on my fingers."

"Reverberation? You sound almost lucid." Grace looked steadily at me.

"When am I ever not lucid?" My voice had become thick. The smell of my head and skin, my decomposition, was suffocating me. Grace grabbed the trashcan beside the bed and held it up to my face. How did she know?

I retched but nothing came out. Two more retches yielded a few tablespoons of yellow fluid. I spat and started to cry. "It burns," I said, my voice trapped in the plastic trash can.

"It's acid, Madeleine!" Grace yelled. "It's your goddamn stomach acid burning holes in your throat every time you do that."

I fell back on my pillow and let my eyes turn glassy and my mouth fall open again. I don't like to be yelled at.

"This, Madeleine, this is when you aren't lucid," Grace continued to yell.

But I was already gone.

#

I'm sitting beside a fountain in a crowded city. I'm wearing a short sundress, but my legs are unshaven. I'm embarrassed. Every time I look down at my legs the hair is longer and thicker. There are ugly, spotted fish in the water. I can hear them talking, but I can't understand the

words. I lean down toward the water to listen, and one of the fish raises itself halfway out of the water and licks my face. I scream and hit the fish, but I can't knock it back into the water. It skids backward, looking at me. It looks like it's standing up. It slides around the fountain backward in jerky movements.

It hates me.

It stops sliding and lifts itself in and out of the water, grunting each time it breaks the surface. It opens its mouth and yells, exposing huge, human teeth, and then disappears under the water.

#

I opened my eyes to darkness. I could hear Grace on the phone outside my bedroom.

"Look, Mimi, I've got a job, and I'm about to lose it. I've taken all of the vacation days I had left. I can't stay with her all the time. She needs serious help."

Mimi. Mama.

"It's hard to remember. I guess it's been gradual. Or she hid it really well for a long time. She's only been really sick for the past week." Something metal clanged in the sink. Running water.

"Honestly, Mimi. I can't think of anything."

Silence.

"No, she hasn't dated anyone in a while. Her job was going fine. In fact, she seemed more cheerful than usual. You know how she can get . . . she's always been moody. But for a while, she was really happy. She bought some new clothes, got her hair highlighted . . . I

don't know, she just seemed happy. I guess it started right after that. Listen, Mimi, don't take this the wrong way, but isn't there a history of mental illness in your family?"

Grace was doodling windmills on a piece of paper. I knew this because Grace had been my best friend since we were four and she always doodled windmills. Always.

Windmills.

"What do you mean, it's none of my business?" Grace yelled. "I've known you for twenty fucking years, Mimi. I might as well be family. Especially now—where the hell are you? Your daughter is dying, goddammit." I think Grace was crying.

My Gracie. I will miss her so much.

"Trying to get attention?" Something metal crashed in the sink, harder than last time. "Well, it's working. I'm scared for her life." Plastic slam.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," Grace muttered.

#

My fourth grade teacher sits down beside me. She is wearing a green pantsuit and carrying a pitcher of orange Kool Aid. She starts pouring the Kool Aid on my bare toes. It hurts. It's too hot and too cold. I tell her to stop.

She says, "Transubstantiation."

She pours the Kool Aid on my legs and the hair curls quickly and tightly. I kick and flail.

She says, "Transubstantiation."

She lifts up my dress, exposing me and splashes my crotch with Kool Aid before yanking my dress back down. She raises her eyebrows and says in Groucho Marx's voice, "Transubstantiation," waving an imaginary cigar.

I feel paralyzed. Crystallized. I creak when I move. She pours the Kool Aid on my head and I can't breathe.

"Transubstantiation."

She throws the empty pitcher at my head. It hits me and I fall.

#

I slid down onto the floor and crawled to the bathroom. I probably could have walked, but it made me so dizzy. And I kept falling down. This was just easier. I hoisted myself onto the toilet and my knees shook as I peed. They looked like doorknobs. I forced out a little trickle. I was down to six sips of water a day. That's why I didn't take showers anymore, I was afraid that some of the water might get in my mouth. Even a drop would mess everything up. When I leaned down to pull off three squares of toilet paper, the wispieness came into my head again. Like white wind. Wind that you can see. I put my arms out to catch my fall—I always fall when the wispieness comes—but the cold tile hurt my hands and I pulled them back. I knew my face would hit next so I closed my mouth. I didn't want to knock any teeth out—that would be ugly.

My cheek slammed onto the floor. The grout between the white tiles had turned grayish-green. I wondered when that had happened. I missed it. I must not have been paying attention. It used to be white.

"Madeleine!"

"Gracie, my bathroom is becoming a forest. See the lichen?" I scraped my fingernail on the porous green grout. "There will be moss soon, Grace, and tall, fat trees that talk to the sky. With roots you could trip on—be careful, Gracie. And it will be so thick you can't see the sky"

Grace pulled my nightgown back down around my legs and flushed the toilet. She put her hands under my arms and lifted me up. She shook me like I was a disobedient doll. I pretended I had yarn for hair. A permanent smile.

"Madeleine, stop this . . . please." She was crying. Shaking me. Crying.

I wanted to hug her, but she held me at arm's length, and she was stronger than me. "Don't cry, Grace," I slurred. The shaking was knocking my brain around and disorganizing my words.

"Why are you putting me through this?" she asked.

I didn't have the right answer. I sucked my thumb for a moment and tried to remember how words were supposed to go. "If no one is here when I let go, I'll have nothing to let go of." I put my thumb back in my mouth.

"Why, though? Why do you want to die?"

"I'm tired. It takes up too much time, and I never do it right. You know, the last thing I ate was a sandwich from Lorenzo's—a club—and it wasn't good. The toast was so dry and the bacon was so crumbly, and the lettuce, Grace, I won't even go into the lettuce."

Grace hoisted me up and dragged me back to my bed.

"What came first," she asked, "not eating, or going crazy?"

I stared at her as well as I could. Objects had begun to take on a disintegrated look. I had to concentrate to see a whole shape rather than a collection of buzzing atoms. "I'm not crazy."

"You've lost it, Madeleine. You're completely crazy. Insane. I'm just not sure if you had that first, or if it came as a result of starving yourself."

"Oh. I suppose it's a little bit of both," I reasoned, yanking at my hair.

"Don't you love yourself anymore?"

I pictured myself kissing myself, running my fingers up and down my back. Feeding myself chocolate ice cream at the zoo, laughing. Holding my hand. It made my stomach collapse like an empty vacuum cleaner bag. I wouldn't want to kiss myself or touch myself. I wouldn't take me to the zoo or buy me ice cream. I wouldn't be my favorite thing. I wouldn't dream about me.

"Do people really do that?" I asked Grace.

"What? Love themselves? Sure."

I opened my mouth to speak my disgust and the trashcan came flying at my face. She always knew. I gagged, but no acid burned me this time. That was something to be happy about.

"Did you get some dinner?" I asked into the trashcan.

"Chinese delivery."

"What'd you get?"

"Sweet and sour chicken. Want some?" Grace nudged me with her elbow and laughed. Then she cried. "I still love you."

"I know." I swatted at the bugs flying around my head. They flickered and buzzed.
"Get them away from me, Grace," I whispered. They were crawling on my face and into my nose.

"There's nothing there, Madeleine."

"Don't let them eat me."

"I'm calling an ambulance."

#

I am in the bathroom at the skating rink. I am eleven. I have on my new purple T-shirt and ironed jeans. I hold onto the sink with one hand while I puff up my hair with my other hand. My feet are rolling jerkily back and forth. My eyes in the mirror look like someone else's eyes. Someone who already knows what's going to happen. Grace hands me a tube of lipgloss. I put some on and rub my lips together. Grape. My teeth feel too big. There is a pulpy spot in me. Behind my purple T-shirt, my 32AA bra, and my adolescent ribcage, a mass begins to form. Maybe not a mass, maybe a hole. It's pulpy and sick.

"Come on, Maddy. Hurry! They're announcing it now!" Grace skates out the door and I clop behind her, awkward and breathing fast.

The lights dim until it's almost completely dark and colors congregate and twirl on the rink under the silver ball. For a moment I am lightened. I want to be a twirling color on that floor. The music begins, sparkly and slow, as the DJ announces, "Couple skate."

The boy is hiding behind a video game with another boy. I am stuck on the carpet. My feet won't move. A head darts out from behind the video game.

"She's right there," a voice hisses and then laughs. "Are you going to ask her? You know she wants you to."

"Mad woman? God, no."

Laughter. Laughter. Laughter.

I'm stuck. I wonder why Mimi told me to iron my jeans. They hurt that way. I imagine that my lips are sparkling in the colored light like freshly slaughtered beef. I look back over at the video game machine, and the boy whose hand I wished to hold while I spun like a twinkling light is making a hideous face. He's waving his arms in the air and cackling.

Mad woman? God, no.

I can't move.

#

"Grace, Grace, Grace," I panted when I woke up. I was so cold. So dry. Bereft.
Almost home.

"Hang on, Madeleine." Grace rubbed my hand.

It hurt.

"The ambulance will be here soon," she whispered.

"No."

"Yes, yes, Maddy. Hang on." From a million miles away, I could hear Grace screaming, "Come in, get in here!"

Stampede. Heavy, real people.

Grace was holding my head next to her chest, crumpling me, wadding me up.

I reached up and touched Grace's face. "Who loves me?" The words blacked me out and I only heard air. Then something inside of me jumped. It pushed me from the inside and jarred me. It was bigger than me and it hurt.

Grace cried onto my fingers. "I love you," she pleaded.

"Yeah, but it's too late. Me and Mimi didn't love me, so there really wasn't much hope. . . . Do you hear those tambourines? I'm a baby . . . whose baby? Grace"

Then all of the air came out—out of every tiny pore—like millions of tired balloons.

From outside the window, I could still hear her screaming, save her. I shook the tambourine tree and I could hear the sun playing the saxophone. Somewhere, far away, there was a harmonica. I had almost found it when the dog barked. It yelped in quick, clipped coughs. Its bark was monotonous, irrelevant, and absurd. Just a meaningless sound, losing meaning with every echo of itself. I approached the stupid hairy metronome. It continued to bark, its neck stretched, its nose reaching. I had never seen anything so insipid. I reached down and grabbed the dog's head. I twisted its neck quickly and heard a satisfying snap. It was the period at the end of the sentence, "Bark bark bark bark bark" I realized I was hungry. Very hungry. I turned it onto its back, rubbed the delicate skin of its belly and took a bite.

#

I'm in a glass cube in the sky. There is no sound. There is nothing below me and nothing above me. I am wearing red pajamas. I just sit in my cube and do nothing. I look around all the time. Nothing changes. I'm not scared or bored or happy. I'm nothing. The sky is very blue and the clouds are very white and my pajamas are very red. That's all I know.

JUNGLE

"You look like shit. Big night last night?" He sneered as he said it.

"Where's Miranda?" Lucy tried to look past him from her reclined position on the couch.

"She's coming. She wanted to look at the cactuses."

"Cacti," Lucy mumbled.

"What did you do last night? You look like hell. You're really getting into this divorced woman thing, huh?" Vincent was looking smug. Looking shiny and fresh and not hungover.

"I didn't really do anything . . . I just had one too many, I guess. You know, blowing off steam." Lucy stared at the TV as she talked. A woman was explaining that her family came home for dinner at all different times and she didn't know what she would do without biscuits that you just freeze and bake. The woman actually said, "I don't know what I would do without these biscuits." Lucy thought about her zany, wholesome, fake TV commercial family. They ate warm, buttery biscuits whenever they wanted to.

Her stomach churned. She'd forgotten to eat yesterday. Just beer. She felt sorry for her intestines. No wait, she had potato chips before she passed out. There were crumbs in the bed when she woke up at six to the sound of the news. She hadn't remembered turning on the TV. Five hours probably wasn't enough, but once her brain started clicking and spinning in its mad circles, there was no hope for more sleep. It was the clicking and spinning that caused her to have one more and one more and one more last night. The circles got wider and

loopier, and the clicking seemed amusing. She had started to think she was enchanted and not crazy. She could tell that Vincent still thought that she was crazy, though. She avoided making eye contact with him.

The kids in the biscuit commercial left their house laughing, waving biscuits in the air triumphantly. Lucy imagined that the wholesome neighborhood gang was waiting in the biscuit family's driveway. Some would be on bikes; one of them would be tossing a football in the air and catching it. Lucy thought of her own quiet daughter forced to live the life of a nomad since the divorce. Miranda was shuttled back and forth during the week, always with her denim backpack full of the things that she didn't want to leave in one place or the other. Lucy wasn't even sure what those things were. She figured that the least she could do after breaking up Miranda's family was give her some privacy.

The father of the biscuit family came into the kitchen looking TV-haggard—still better than most people looked on their best days—loosened his tie and closed his eyes in ecstasy as his wife handed him a steaming biscuit. He looked as if he had just been connected to a morphine drip. The wife watched her husband with eyes full of TV love, as he chewed slowly, his eyes still closed.

Lucy remembered her second anniversary with Vincent. She made crème brûlée, Vincent's favorite dessert. She actually made three batches of crème brûlée that day—the first two, disasters. The first time she tried, she added the eggs to the hot pan of milk and they scrambled immediately. She forgot about the second batch while they were in the oven. She was dozing in the bathtub when the smoke alarm awakened her. The third batch turned out perfectly, and after dinner, Lucy sprinkled sugar all over the custard and put it under the

broiler. She stood in front of the oven the whole time to make sure it didn't burn. As Lucy watched the sugar crystals turn to liquid and then bubble, Vincent came up behind her and put his arms around her waist. He thanked her for the dessert and for being his wife.

Two years into the marriage, things were still easy. They had enough money that Lucy could spend twenty dollars on crème brulee ingredients. They were young and free enough that even if she had messed up a third time, they both would have laughed about it. But Vincent never really forgave her for "forgetting" to take her birth control pills the month that Miranda was conceived. Vincent never said that he didn't want children; he simply said he didn't know when. Lucy got tired of waiting.

With a suspicious silence between them and a child to raise, bad days turned into frustrating weeks, which turned into bitter months. The evolution toward divorce was easy and natural. Vincent had been coming home from work later and later at night, and Lucy took advantage of his being at home on the weekends by spending long stretches of time out of the house. They had perfected joint custody long before the actual divorce.

Miranda shuffled up and stood behind her father, as if she were hiding.

"Come on in, baby. Come tell me about your weekend." Lucy sat up on the couch and held her arms out to her daughter.

Miranda dropped her backpack and squeezed past her father to fall into Lucy's arms. "Are you sick?" Miranda asked softly.

Vincent didn't even try to stifle his laugh. Lucy glared at him from over Miranda's head, which was resting on her chest. "We'll see you Friday, then," Lucy said, looking past Vincent and out the door to his car, wishing he were already gone.

She tried to remember how it felt when he'd first moved out. It was quiet, she remembered that. She didn't so much miss *him* as something intangible that came from having a housemate. She didn't miss any aspect of marriage, just the incessant hum of life that arose from living with someone—his body, his smell, his dirty dishes and favorite seat—all of the things that signified shared space. Before the divorce, Lucy dreamed about living alone, with only the hum of her lovely things—candles, her favorite books and CDs, nicer curtains. She was so sure that the hum would make her happy again. As it turned out, her stuff didn't hum to her. It was hers and it was lovely, just like she wanted it to be, but it was just stuff. It didn't signify anything. Sometimes she thought maybe that's why she went out on Saturdays and had one more and one more and one more.

Vincent shook his head at Lucy before he turned to leave. It wasn't even disappointment. He shook his head as if he just heard a bad joke that was almost funny.

Lucy looked away. She already knew that she was the joke. She got the divorce so she wouldn't have to be reminded every day. She figured that she could have days that were quiet and productive and that she might start to like herself again. She thought that if she didn't have to stare at the living proof of her failure to keep a promise and to succeed at a legally binding and God blessed union, that she might get better. She was wrong. Vincent wasn't there to remind her anymore, but she couldn't forget. His absence was as big a reminder as his presence ever was. At least they didn't fight anymore. She didn't have to hide anymore. She had started eating again, except for yesterday.

Miranda breathed slowly and evenly on Lucy's chest. Lucy thought she seemed sullen and needy. She thought of all the animal mothers that hunt and run with babies clinging to

them. Mama monkeys swinging through trees with little fuzzy babies clinging to their chests—new, scared, limp babies, flying through the jungle, inhaling the safe scent of mother. Miranda breathed deeply, and Lucy was thankful that she had at least managed to take a shower that morning. How disheartening it would have been to breathe deeply of mother and smell a bar—sweat, beer, cigarettes, shame, loneliness, one more, one more, one more.

"Is something wrong, honey?" Lucy asked into Miranda's soft brown hair. It was the color of a pony.

"I don't want to go to school tomorrow."

"Do you ever want to go to school?" Lucy chuckled and smoothed Miranda's hair.

"I can't go tomorrow. Please don't make me."

"Tell me why, Miranda. What happened?"

"Nothing really happened. I just know that tomorrow is going to be a bad day."

Lucy pulled her daughter away from her chest to get a look at her, but that meant that Miranda would be getting a look at her, too. Apparently Miranda had more to hide than Lucy did. She looked away and buried her head in her mother's sweatshirt again.

"Miranda, you've got to talk to me. You have to tell me what's going on. Maybe I can help you."

"I forgot to bring home my spelling homework on Friday, so I couldn't do it." Her voice was beginning to waver. "That means I won't have my homework done tomorrow, and I'll get in trouble. Mrs. Foster makes us say the homework out loud in class, so when it comes to me, I won't know what to say. I won't have the answer."

"I'll write Mrs. Foster a note, honey. I'll explain that you forgot your book. You won't get in trouble."

"But I still won't know the answer when it's my turn."

Lucy held Miranda tight and pictured her all alone in an enormous classroom, crying softly in her seat while the teacher stood at the front of the room staring at her, waiting for her to produce an answer that she didn't know. Mrs. Foster would keep waiting, and Miranda would keep crying, because there was no answer there. That must be how forever feels to a six-year-old.

Lucy flashed back to the bar last night, forcing herself to envision how ghastly she probably looked by the end of the night. Everyone did, but that wasn't much consolation in the arms of her shampoo-fresh daughter who needed a reliable mother. Lucy had swooped and swayed in front of a microphone, slurring out an old Eagles song. She told herself that everyone was slurring songs—that's the point of karaoke, but then she realized that she had a million excuses. She was drunk because everyone was drunk, she was singing badly because everyone else was, she was there in the first place because she had absolutely nothing better to do, and she was lonely . . . just like everyone else there. At the end of the night, she was shitfaced, thirty bucks poorer, still alone, and in possession of an evening's worth of memories that she would rather forget. The best she could do was keep it all hidden from Miranda, who deserved to believe that her mom knew what she was doing. How frightening it would be for a hairless little monkey to suddenly realize, mid-flight, that her mom didn't know what the hell she was doing. Didn't know how to swing properly, didn't know how to land, just didn't know.

Lucy fleetingly wondered if she should let Miranda stay home tomorrow. The homework still wouldn't be done on Tuesday, but at least she wouldn't have to suffer through the humiliation of having no answer to say out loud. Lucy wondered how much she should save her daughter. Was it better to let her take some of the knocks of life so she could learn how to deal with them? Lucy looked down at her own fuzzy red bedroom slippers and wondered if she was even capable of teaching her daughter to deal with those hard knocks.

Her hangover had subsided considerably, but a new feeling of unease had replaced it. Her little monkey clung fiercely to her. Lucy smoothed Miranda's glossy hair and wondered when her daughter became a person with worries. She wondered what day it was that she stopped being a child, and became an adult in training. Did she look up from a crayon drawing one day and see something ugly, something disturbing, something that made her not want to finish the drawing? Lucy hated that day, whenever it was. She hated the day that her baby pulled her face from her mother's neck and saw the jungle fly by—vast, tempting, and dangerous—and realized that she could no longer hide her face in her mother's chest.

"When Mrs. Foster calls on you, just say that you weren't able to get your homework done this weekend because you forgot your book. It's no big deal. Mrs. Foster will just go on to the next person."

"Everyone will look at me," Miranda whispered. Lucy couldn't see Miranda's face, but she imagined that her eyes were closed. Shut tight.

"Oh, honey . . ." Lucy closed her own eyes, fighting tears of delirium, guilt, sleep deprivation, and so much love. "It will only last a second and then it'll be over," she whispered.

It was a lie, though. Lucy knew it, and she figured that Miranda knew it, too. The moment would pass, but the memory would stay with her. Maybe forever. Someday, Miranda might be leaning over a candlelit table—beautiful, intelligent and sensitive—confiding in her date that one of her worst memories was the time she forgot to do her spelling homework in first grade. It probably wouldn't actually be one of her worst memories, but it might feel like it. Lucy knew that when Miranda's face burned with embarrassment the next day, a chord of humiliation and loneliness would be struck, and it would resonate in her always.

Miranda snuggled closer to her mom. "I didn't sleep good last night."

"Me neither. Lets take a little nap on the couch, and when we wake up, we'll go get pizza. We'll go to the place with the Jukebox. You can play some songs." Miranda nodded her head against her mother's chest.

Lucy smoothed Miranda's hair and listened to her breathing become slow and heavy. Lucy remembered that when she was in third grade, her teacher went around the room asking all of the students what they wanted to be when they grew up. Most of the boys said fireman or policeman or astronaut, and all of the good girls said wife or mother. Lucy straightened in her seat when her turn came. A Dallas Cowboys Cheerleader, she said proudly. Just saying the words conjured images of the sparkly silver pom-poms, the long smooth legs, the beautiful halter-tops and the wonderful breasts that filled them. Right there in her third-grade classroom, Lucy could hear the crowd screaming.

Lucy's father and brothers always watched football on Sundays, and Lucy would sneak into the den at half-time when they all left to get snacks or go to the bathroom. She

would stand poised in front of the TV, ready to imitate the tricky dance moves of the Cowboy's cheerleaders. As far as Lucy was concerned, it was the best job in the world.

Lucy's classmates and teacher stared at her silently after she made her statement. Lucy looked around, her cheeks burning.

"My Mom says they're bad girls," a girl called from across the classroom.

"My Dad says they're sexy," a boy yelled and then slapped his hands over his mouth to stifle his laughter.

"Lucy wants to be sexy!" someone screamed, and the entire class erupted in laughter. Lucy looked around, horrified. Sexy? Was that what it was? Was that bad? Her teacher yelled at the class to calm down and gave Lucy a stern look.

Lucy got up and stumbled to the door. "Can I be excused?" she asked, her hand on the doorknob. Her teacher nodded, and Lucy fled to the bathroom, hot tears running down her cheeks, the words pounding in her head, "Lucy wants to be sexy!"

Lucy rubbed Miranda's hand gently as she slept. Her third-grade memory wasn't nearly as painful as all of the new memories she had made since the divorce. Lucy didn't have the heart or the energy to tell Miranda the truth just then—that this wouldn't be the last time she wasn't prepared and didn't know the answer. Lucy knew that pizza and favorite songs wouldn't be enough to make either of them forget, but it was all they could do. She stared out at the bare tree limbs against the gray November sky as Miranda's chest rose and fell against her own.

RADIO FLYER

"Molly, just look at you." Aunt Sissy grabbed my shoulders and held me out at arm's length. She turned me a little to the right and then to the left, as if I were a sweater she might want to buy. "You're just as trim and pretty as you can be! Do you go to a gym, honey?"

"No, Aunt Sissy. I just forget to eat a lot."

Mother shot me a sour look. "Molly, don't be sarcastic on Christmas."

I poured a cup of coffee and sat down at the kitchen table. It was what we did every Christmas. Mother and Aunt Sissy flitted around the kitchen, constructing elaborate casseroles, basting the turkey and drinking cup after cup of coffee while Daddy and Uncle Herb watched football in the den. They drank beer and didn't talk or move around much. My Christmas was a volley between coffee and incessant chatter in the kitchen, and John Madden and Budweiser in Daddy's wood paneled den.

Mother leaned back against the counter and took a long swig of coffee. She looked pointedly over at Aunt Sissy, who was polishing silverware at the table. "Your father invited Trisha and Sam," she whispered to me. Aunt Sissy nodded gravely and continued to polish. "He says he didn't think they'd have anyplace else to go." Mother tightened her lips into a thin line. Aunt Sissy nodded again. Mother turned back to the stove, shaking her head.

"I think that's great. I haven't seen Sam in a while," I said, watching the pot of carrots on the stove boil over.

Aunt Sissy held a spoon up to the light. She'd polished it so well that the sun was bouncing off it like a headlight. I looked away until she was done firing light beams around

the kitchen. She put the spoon down and whispered, "She brings that child out everywhere she goes." She sounded as if she were telling a ghost story.

"Well, what's she supposed to do? She's a single mother," I said.

"Molly, please. Don't be controversial on Christmas." Mother rolled her eyes and stirred the creamed corn.

"What? What's controversial about that? She *is* a single parent."

"That little boy doesn't know how to behave in public," Aunt Sissy said, looking over her glasses at me.

"What are you talking about? He's six. No six-year-old knows how to behave in public."

Aunt Sissy shook her head. "I saw them at the Wal-Mart the other day. It was crowded, you know, being as how it's Christmas and all, and they had to park a ways away. Well, that little boy was stumbling along, holding his mother's hand, pointing at all of the cars and shouting. I couldn't understand what he was saying. Just shouting, though . . . and Trisha was just walking along, calm as you please. I don't know why she doesn't just park in a handicapped space close to the store."

"Because he's not crippled, Aunt Sissy. He has Down's Syndrome. He doesn't need a special parking place for that." I got up and snatched three beers from the refrigerator. Mother would surely have something to say about "my tone." I slammed the refrigerator door and left the kitchen, but not before I heard her voice trailing behind me, "Even on Christmas." I could picture her and Aunt Sissy shaking their heads sadly at one another.

"Daddy, I brought you and Uncle Herb a beer," I said, opening the can for him.

"Thanks, Princess. How's school?"

"Good. I'm going to the mountains next semester to help one of my professors with a research project." I handed Uncle Herb his beer. He nodded at me.

"What's in the mountains?" Daddy asked.

"Dialects. We're going to record the local people telling stories—old people, young people, women and men—and then compare dialect differences and changes across generations and—"

"Fumble!" My dad yelled.

I sat on the couch and sipped my beer. When any of the adults in the family asked, "How's school?" they were just asking to be polite. None of them had ever gone to college. Talk of professors, credit hours, research and theses had no meaning to them. The first time I mentioned that I had eaten lunch at the Student Union, my father squinted at me suspiciously. Unions made his job uncertain at the automotive plant. "Bunch a damn radicals," he would say.

"It's just a building, Daddy," I explained. "It's not really a union." He continued to squint, then nodded slowly.

"Miss Molly, you didn't happen to bring any chips out with that beer, did you, honey?"

"No, Uncle Herb, but I'll go get some."

He nodded again.

I went into the kitchen and headed for the pantry.

"What are you doing?" mother asked.

"Uncle Herb wants chips."

"Well, you can tell Uncle Herb that dinner will be ready in two hours and he can wait," Aunt Sissy said. "But while you're up, honey, would you pour me another cup?" Aunt Sissy held out her coffee mug, which displayed Ziggy dangling uncertainly from a tree branch. The mug instructed, "Hang in there." As I poured, I couldn't help but think that the mug would have a lot more impact if Ziggy were dangling over a pit of alligators. I took the coffee back over to Aunt Sissy and sat down at the table.

"Tell me about school," she said.

I sighed. Aunt Sissy and Uncle Herb have one son, Michael, who studied Forestry in college and promptly packed his things upon graduation and left for Oregon. Aunt Sissy was astonished that he would want to move so far away from home. I was nineteen when he left, a freshman in college. We all went to the airport to send him off. Aunt Sissy clung to Michael, crying, as he faltered under the weight of his backpack and his weeping mother. Just before he got onto the plane, Michael turned to me. "Molly, you have to get out sometime, too. Get away from here." I couldn't imagine flying to the other side of the country just to have a life, to get away. I wasn't that brave. Now, five years later, I still hadn't gotten out, and I still couldn't imagine it.

"I'm going to the mountains to help one of my professors with a research project," I told her.

"Oh God, you're not sleeping with him, are you?" Mother asked, pouring mashed potato flakes into a measuring cup.

"Mom! Of course not! Why would you even ask that?" I wished for my beer, which I had left in the den.

"Going on trips with professors? That just doesn't sound right," Mother said.

"It's not just me. There will be other graduate students."

"Is he sleeping with one of them?"

"Dammit, Mom!" I yelled. I wanted to tell her that, no, my professor wasn't sleeping with any of the students, but that I was. I wanted to tell her that I was in a meaningless sexual relationship with Paul, who studies Medieval tropes in literature and that we had sex last week in one of the library conference rooms. I wanted to say it just to be controversial on Christmas. To make her listen.

"I could do without that language," she said, glaring at me.

"How's Michael?" I asked Aunt Sissy.

"Apparently he has a special lady in his life," she said, stacking spoons.

"That's great."

Aunt Sissy sighed. "She's . . . Japanese." She was using her ghost-story voice again.

"Oh my," Mother said under her breath.

"Awesome," I replied. Guys always seem to have a thing for Asian women. Good for Michael. "I'll bet she makes sushi for him."

Mother stirred milk into the potato flakes. "Uncooked food is ridiculous," she said.

"Isn't it?" Aunt Sissy agreed. "What about you, Molly? Any special fellas in your life?"

I pictured Paul lifting my skirt up to my waist and pushing me gently onto the conference table. "Tell me you want it, little girl," he had whispered. He liked to call me little girl. I liked it, too. "I want it," I begged, unzipping his jeans.

"Not really," I said.

"How old are you now?" Aunt Sissy asked me.

"Twenty-four. I have plenty of time."

Aunt Sissy didn't look convinced. "I was married at twenty. I had a toddler when I was your age."

"I'm a long way from marriage," I said, picking at a hangnail.

"You spend too much time in the library," Mother scolded me. "You should go out on some nice dates."

Paul had put his hand over my mouth when I came to muffle the scream. I bit him.

"I remember when Herb and I were first dating, he took me to the Apple Festival. It was such fun! He held my hand the whole time, and that night was the first time he kissed me." Aunt Sissy stared at a fork fondly.

I pictured Paul bending me over a barrel of apples.

"That's sweet," I said. "I'm going to go break the bad news to Uncle Herb—no chips before dinner."

I walked back into the den and sat down on the couch beside my beer. I took a long sip.

"Where's those chips, honey?" Uncle Herb asked, crushing his empty beer can.

"Aunt Sissy says no snacks before dinner," I said, watching a purple uniformed player throw a long spiral pass. Nobody said anything as we all waited to see what would happen. It sailed right over the receiver's head. Incomplete.

"No chips, my ass," Uncle Herb mumbled, as he pulled a neatly folded stack of bills out of his pocket. "Molly, be a doll and run down to the Stop-N-Shop and get me some Salt and Vinegar chips and another twelve pack of beer. Bud. Cans." He waved a twenty at me.

"Uncle Herb, we have chips in the pantry."

"But we're not *allowed*," he whined sarcastically. "Your mom and Aunt Sissy won't come out of that kitchen till dinner's ready. They'll never know. Come on, honey. For your Uncle Herb."

I could care less about making Mom and Aunt Sissy mad, and, in fact, I thought it was a pretty ingenious idea. "Are you sure it's open?" I asked.

"It's open, honey. Arabs don't celebrate Christmas."

Just as I was thinking that this was a racist comment, Uncle Herb added, "They're smart."

I took the twenty and headed for the door. "You want anything, Daddy?"

"Chips and beer is fine, Princess," he said, flipping through the channels section of the newspaper.

The Stop-N-Shop was only a few blocks from my parents' house, but I noticed the conspicuous lack of traffic anyway. Inside the store, I was the only customer. I put the beer and chips on the counter and asked for a pack of Marlboros. After the cashier rang me up and wished me a very, very Merry Christmas in a very Middle Eastern accent, he went back to

disassembling a display at the front of the store. It was cases of some fancy Christmas flavored beer stacked in a red Radio Flyer wagon. I left the store and sat on the curb outside and lit a cigarette. It was relatively warm for Christmas—probably fifty-five degrees. It was a clear day with an alarmingly blue sky and no clouds. The naked tree branches looked stark against such a vibrant background. I put the beer and chips in the car and realized that I didn't want to go home. I went back into the store and a little bell signaled my entrance.

"Hello, hello," the clerk said. "Did you forget something?"

"How much for the wagon?" I asked. It was empty and out of place in the convenience store. It had probably looked right when it was filled with six-packs of festive beer, but empty, it looked like something left behind.

"This?" he pointed. "Not for sale."

"Well, what are you going to do with it? I'm sure the beer distributor gave it to you for the display."

"Yes. Gave."

"Do you have to give it back?"

"Probably no."

"So can I buy it?"

"I don't know price. Not part of inventory." The man waved his hand around the wagon and shook his head.

"Okay, so it's yours, then. How much do you want for it?" I really didn't want to go home.

"One hundred," he said, smiling.

"You're crazy," I said, smiling back at him.

"Fifty?"

"I don't think so."

"Not for sale."

"Thirty," I said, pulling money out of my pocket. "Thirty bucks and it's out of your store. Thirty bucks for you on Christmas."

"I make plenty money," he told me, frowning. "I don't need thirty bucks gift."

"Of course you don't. I need the wagon, though. I'll give you thirty bucks for it. No gift. Not for you, for me."

"Bah!" he cried, waving his arms. "Take wagon if you want it. Take for free." He shook his head and walked away.

I thought that I may have offended him, but I really wanted the wagon. I pulled the handle and wheeled it up to the counter. "Thank you," I said, looking at the clerk for a long time. His eyes were the color of coffee. "You've made me very happy, but here—" I pushed a ten and a twenty across the counter. "Nothing is for free."

I turned and left before he could say anything. It took me a while to get the wagon through the door, and I realized that if he had wanted to argue with me, he'd have had plenty of time. "Merry Christmas!" I yelled as I made it through the door. He didn't say anything.

I popped the trunk on my old Mazda. Inside there were British and American anthologies of literature, paperback novels, an empty Cuervo bottle, and a trash bag of clothes that I'd been meaning to take to the thrift store. There was an electric skillet and an electric blanket. Both were gifts. I couldn't remember from whom. I flipped through the

literature anthologies affectionately—I hadn't meant to leave them in my trunk. They were casualties of my last move. "Three moves equal a fire," Uncle Herb was fond of saying, meaning that the things lost, broken, or left behind over the course of three moves equal an entire house full of things gone up in flames. I had lost a lot. Forgotten a lot. I had moved four times during the last six years of school. It was at least a fire, but there was so much of it that I couldn't remember. I liked to hold onto things, but if circumstances had me lose them, I didn't mind letting go. I just didn't want to be the one to decide, the one to let go. I let life do it for me.

I got out my American lit anthology and dropped it onto the pavement of the parking lot. I shoved the wagon into the trunk and it wouldn't close. It was only a few blocks—it would be okay. I sat down on the ground with my back against the car and lit another cigarette. I flipped through the book—2049 pages—most of them unread, and found my favorite poem. I whispered the words as I smoked, exhaling poetry and carbon monoxide into the relentless blue sky. "What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why, I have forgotten, and what arms have lain under my head till morning; but the rain is full of ghosts tonight"

I finished my cigarette and climbed back into the car with my book. Daddy and Uncle Herb would surely ask what took me so long, and I couldn't blame it on traffic. I also couldn't say I was reading poetry. Not during a football game. Not on Christmas. Not ever, really. I drove back to my parents' house, the trunk lid bobbing the whole way. I opened the bag of chips as I walked in the door and handed them to Uncle Herb. I handed him a beer too and then tossed one over to Daddy. They were so lost in the game that they didn't seem to realize

how long I had been gone. I offered Uncle Herb his change but he held his hand out and shook his head. "Get you a pizza later," he said.

I wandered back into the kitchen, and was delighted to see that Trisha and Sam had arrived. Trisha kept sitting down, then standing up while Sam sat at the kitchen table drawing a picture with crayons.

"Sam! How are you?" Trisha gave me grateful look as Sam jumped out of his seat and into my arms.

"Molly!" he yelled. I picked him up and spun him around in the kitchen.

Aunt Sissy sipped her coffee, mother basted the turkey, and Trisha stood uncomfortably with her hand over her mouth.

"Merry Christmas, Sam!" I yelled. "What did you get?"

"New shoes!" Sam said proudly, sitting down again and propping his feet up onto the kitchen table. Aunt Sissy put her head in her hands, and mother continued to baste turkey. Trisha looked horrified.

"Awesome, Sam! Those are way better than mine!" I kicked my own shoes up onto the table beside his to make my point.

"Mine are better," Sam yelled, laughing and wiggling his feet.

"Yours are better!" I yelled back, wiggling my feet, too.

"Molly, why don't you set the table," Mother said.

I rolled my eyes and made a funny face at Sam.

"Sam help," he said carefully.

"Yes you will, Sam. Let's get everything together." Sam and I made our way around the kitchen collecting plates, bowls and napkins.

"Don't let him carry the dishes," Mother whispered to me.

"Sam, honey," I said. "Have Miss Sissy give you the silverware. She just polished it."

Sam trotted happily over to Aunt Sissy and she tersely pushed the forks, knives and spoons toward him.

"Sam," Trish said patiently, "remember what I taught you. Forks on the left and knives and spoons on the right. Do you remember, honey?"

Sam looked off into the distance for a while and then nodded. "I remember."

"It's important for children to know how to properly set a table," Mother said, pouring french fried onion rings on top of the green bean casserole.

"It is," Trisha agreed feebly.

Sam meticulously placed the silverware on the table while I put down the plates. When we were done, we stood back to admire our work.

"Sparkles," Sam said.

Thanks to Aunt Sissy, it did, indeed, sparkle.

"Mom, how long till dinner?" I called into the kitchen.

"About twenty minutes," she called back.

Trisha was standing in the doorway between the kitchen and the dining room. "Is it okay if I take Sam outside for a few minutes?" I asked her. She had her arms wrapped around her middle like her stomach hurt.

"Sure," she said, managing a weak smile. "He'd like that."

I smiled back at her.

"Thank you, Molly," she whispered.

I shrugged. I wasn't doing anyone any favors. I wanted an excuse to get out, too.

"Sam, you want to go outside for a little while? I have something to show you."

Sam clapped his hands and shouted, "Yes!"

I took his hand and we walked through the den to the front door. Daddy and Uncle Herb were watching the Weather Channel. "Halftime?" I asked.

"Mmmhmm," Daddy drawled. "Look at that front, Herb." Daddy pointed to the screen with the remote. "Says it's going to be sixty-four degrees on Tuesday. Sixty-four."

"Global warming," Uncle Herb sighed as Sam and I walked out the door.

I took him over to my car and led him back to the gaping trunk. He couldn't see what was inside. "Ready?" I asked.

Sam shifted back and forth anxiously. "Ready ready ready ready," he said

I opened the trunk and Sam gasped. He smacked his hands over his mouth.

"Merry Christmas. Sam!" I pulled the wagon out of the trunk. He stared at it, his hands still clamped over his mouth.

I crouched down beside him. "Do you like it?" I asked.

He nodded.

"You can talk, Sam. You can say something."

He pulled back one of his hands and said, "Mom says don't shout."

"Yeah, my mom says that to me, too. Come on, let's try it out before dinner."

My parents' house was on a corner at the top of a hill. Sam got into the wagon and I pulled him up the sidewalk to the end of the block, the very top of the hill. Sam scooted forward in the wagon and I crawled in behind him. I wrapped one leg around him and left the other one on the ground. "Okay, Sam, here's the plan. We're going to go all the way down the hill, and when we get to the bottom, we're going to roll out onto the grass in that yard on the corner, okay?"

Sam nodded slowly.

"There's no other way to stop, and we don't want to keep going right out into the street, do we?"

Sam looked around quietly. There were no cars anywhere.

I pictured us riding off into the deep orange sunset in our little red wagon, the yellow street lines extending forever in front of and behind us. Sam, too, must have seen it. He stared off into the distance, smiling just a little, as the breeze picked up pieces of his wispy hair.

"Okay, let's go, kiddo. I'm right here behind you. It'll be like we're flying. Are you ready?"

Sam pulled my arms around him and nodded. I grabbed the handle with my arms tightly around Sam and pushed off with my foot. We started out slow, so I had plenty of time to get my leg back into the wagon.

Sam's little fingers dug into my arm as we started to pick up speed. "You okay?" I asked with my head against his. He nodded.

"It's okay to yell, Sam. I'm going to."

The wind blew his soft blonde hair against my face. Bare trees and stiff winter grass sailed past us. I looked up at the cloudless blue sky and yelled. I closed my eyes for a moment and Sam yelled too. We were screaming down the hill, flying.

It was Christmas, but that didn't matter. We had to go back in for dinner when this was over, but that didn't matter either. Paul might have lost interest by the time he got back from Christmas break in Europe. Or I might.

In another year I would be done with my Master's degree, and I knew it would be time to get out. I had to.

Michael's girlfriend had lovely epicanthic folds over her eyes that made her interesting and beautiful, and Sam's slanted eyes would always make him different and less than beautiful. Mother and Aunt Sissy would always look away from such eyes.

Daddy and Uncle Herb would retire and get lost in the den while their wives stayed lost in the kitchen.

I would move again. And again and again.

Trisha would always be a single mom.

The football game would end and the coffee would run out. And still, none of that mattered. I felt the subtle crush of Sam's little body against my chest. He turned his head to the side a bit, opened his mouth and yelled. I leaned forward, my face right beside his and yelled with him. The warm evening air carried the sound away like a song, and we kept going.

REVIVAL

I stumbled down the basement stairs, my arms out to the sides, pushing me off in either direction like a pinball going through an alley. I made it to the sink in time, bent over, heaved, and became reacquainted with lunch. The sinks were huge and old fashioned, probably more aptly called *basins*, and perfect for my purposes. Not those involving vomiting, although they were quite adequate for that, too. I put my whole head under the faucet and turned on the cold water. It ran through my hair, and down the back of my neck in thin rivulets. I splashed my face, made a cup out of my hands and drank mouthfuls of the stuff.

I dried my face and head with an old dish rag and rifled through my camera bag for a pack of cigarettes. I hadn't done much smoking lately—some combination of self-discipline, a guilty conscience, and plain preoccupation kept me from indulging in a beloved, although well-controlled habit. The pack was flattened and wrinkled. I prayed that the cigarettes weren't broken. That at least one of them wasn't broken. It was, after all, my emergency pack and only God knew how long they had been in there. I shimmied a cigarette out and rolled it around between my fingers to give it back a bit of its cylindrical shape, then sifted through the packs of matches in the glass bowl on the bookshelf. The Pelican Lounge, Vic's Ristorante, Howard Johnson's. I settled on Falbo's New Years Eve 1967. I wondered if matches from 1967 would still light as I opened the aluminum screen door, and sat down on the edge of a stone planter containing geraniums. I struck a match and silently thanked Mr.

Falbo, whoever he was. I flicked my hand across the tops of the geraniums, which I never thought were the least bit pretty, and took a long drag from my flattened cigarette.

I imagined the impending conversation. “Dad, I have to come home. Now.”

“Please, Sophie, just stay a little while longer. Until the end, if you can, honey.”

“Screw the end and this whole crappy deal!” I would yell. “I have no interest in watching some old woman kick it. Especially when it takes this fucking long. If it means so much to you, get down here and take care of *your mother* yourself!”

Dad would sigh and speak calmly. He’d tell me how great I was and how he was so proud of me, and that he’d make some calls and get on the first plane. He’d thank me for doing what I could. Dad always knew when it was time to be Dad again. He was always there, right at the last minute, to scoop me up under his arm like Tarzan, sail me off to a nice restaurant, buy me something, and then leave me alone for a while. We had perfected our routine. So this would be okay. I would just tell him the truth. If I have to watch an old lady puke up red Jell-O one more time, and then help Miss Annie—whose perfume is barely more pleasant smelling than the puke—clean it up, I’ll go crazy. I’ll break stuff and maybe hurt someone. Maybe myself.

I didn’t even see my grandmother anymore in that wretched body. She looked like all of the clichéd images of ghosts and monsters – like a skeleton, I guess. It made me wonder why we think skeletons are scary. Then I remembered her face when she was in pain, her mouth open, skin stretched out over her cheek bones; and her eyes, sunken, and glassy, rolling back in her head. She’d try to yell, but only a low, gurgling came out, a sound that got lost in the cavity of her skull somehow, sounding more like an echo than an actual sound. I

had to fight the urge to vomit again, and knew, for certain, why skeletons were scary. They lacked all of the mushy pink stuff that made us love one another so much. Lips and cheeks and earlobes, bouncy breasts and smooth round bottoms.

My grandmother had become nothing more than a foul smelling monster to me. I yanked the petals off of one of the geraniums. I grabbed the feeble stem and tugged. I could feel some resistance, and then the sweet tear of the roots being separated. I would just have to tell Dad that the jig was up. There were nights that I just wanted to tiptoe into her room and hold the pillow over her face until she got the sweet release that she needed and deserved. My conscience couldn't bear that burden, though. It could, however, handle the weight of bowing out of this deal before it was officially over. I stabbed out my cigarette and went back into the basement, my only place of respite, to work. I figured I'd call Dad after dinner that night, and tell him that I wanted to come home.

#

"My baby girl, Regina, she ain't but fifteen and she fixin' to have her own child." Miss Alda shook her head. "Lord Jesus, help us."

I watched Miss Alda's mocha skin emerge—jowls, age spots, and wiry hair pulled up into a knot on top of her head. Then her old brown eyes appeared, glassy and far away. Her brow fell heavily on them. The deep creases in her face were like cracks in a dried riverbed. The image appeared like an apparition, drowning in developer.

#

My mother left when I was three, but it rarely occurred to me that I was, for all intents and purposes, motherless. I had Dad and Dad had colleagues and the colleagues had dinner parties and swimming pools. Dad always took me along, like a miniature wife, to lectures and receptions, University functions and intimate gatherings that went on into the night. His colleagues would laugh and nudge his elbow when I would remind him that he had forgotten his jacket or that broccoli didn't agree with him. I never wished for anything different.

Sometimes dad would even host a party and I would refill bowls of roasted almonds and shrimp dip. One afternoon, while preparing for one of Dad's parties, I emerged from the bathroom and ceremoniously announced to my father and visiting grandmother, "I have begun to menstruate." Dad was blank-faced and speechless when I made my announcement, but Gram ran out to buy maxi-pads, showed me how they worked, and then insisted that I choose a gift to mark my rite of passage. Ice cream was the first thing that came to my mind, but I knew better than to ask for it. Gram was big into rites of passage, since she felt that I was halfway "orphaned," and I loved Gram, so I wanted it to be important, too.

A camera, I said.

She beamed.

I shifted back and forth, getting used to the feel of the miniature diaper in my underwear. Gram marched into the kitchen where Dad was cleaning up the dishes and told him to buy me a camera. "A nice one," she said gravely. Dad nodded, perhaps thinking that every girl who got her period was entitled to a nice camera, and that this was some secret

ritual that we never revealed to men unless, as in this case, we had to. That's when I got my first camera. I was twelve.

That same night, Gram, a widow of six years, met her next husband. He was visiting Pittsburgh to see his son, a lecturer in Film Studies, and they both came to our dinner party. His name was Charles, and he was a Unitarian minister from North Carolina.

Charles died when I was nineteen and a sophomore at Pitt. I was majoring in art history, with a concentration in photography. Gram continued to live the life of a preacher's wife, despite Charles' absence, wearing the frilly dresses and bringing potato salad to Bingo night in the church hall. She would come to visit Dad and me sometimes, leaving the room with a straight back and an oppressive silence when Dad and I sat down with Manhattans and lit cigarettes, listening to Thelonious Monk.

A month ago, Dad offered to buy me new camera equipment. He splashed Vermouth and Jim Beam into two highball glasses, hit them with a little water and handed one to me.

"I don't have my period," I joked.

"Gram's been diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor and I'd like for you to go stay with her until I finish out this semester."

"Is the camera a bribe?"

Dad shrugged. "I guess so. I'm asking a huge favor of you."

"You are," I said and walked into the living room.

Three days later, with seven hundred dollars worth of camera equipment on my shoulder, I kissed Dad goodbye at the airport. He handed me a copy of Shakespeare's tragedies. "I've read them all, Dad," I told him.

"Yeah, but they never get old. Call me as soon as you get there."

I took a taxi from the airport to Gram's house. Gram was leaning on a cane when she answered the door, and her head was tilted to one side, but otherwise she looked the same. There was no frilly dress this time, but a purple velour jogging suit that I thought suited Gram quite well. I took my luggage up to the guestroom and looked around. Right then it hit me—I would be living in the home of a dying woman. And for the first time, I felt scared to be away from Dad. Scared to be the adult that he always knew me to be. Cooking was easy, doing laundry was easy, even living without a mother turned out to be easy. Watching my grandmother die in a town too far away from my own home and all of my favorite things would not be easy.

"Sophie! I ordered a pizza. Are you hungry?" Gram called that first day. I wasn't, but I went downstairs.

Gram put the pizza box in the middle of the kitchen table and poured us both glasses of Coke. I sat down opposite her. She smiled and held out her hands. I thought she wanted me to give her a slice of pizza, but they were held wide—wide enough that she could have been asking me to hand her the box. I looked around the kitchen. "Sophie, give me your hands. We're going to say a blessing."

Gram and I held our hands over the pizza box like we were playing London Bridge and she said some things about being thankful and the goodness of the Lord. She finished with "amen" and looked at me.

"Yes," I said.

"Amen," she whispered.

"Amen."

She told me that the nurse, Annie, was scheduled to arrive the next day, and that I would be free to come and go as I pleased while Annie was there. I would have to find places to go. She told me that there was a Revival in two weeks and that she really hoped she'd be able to go.

"Is it fun?" I asked.

"Well, fun may not be the right word. It's a joyous thing, though."

I nodded. Fun and joyous were not the same thing. "What do you do?"

"Pray a lot. Pray fiercely for those who need it the most. There are preachers and choirs . . . Food, oh, lots of food. It's kind of like a carnival, but religious."

I pictured signs like Skeet Shooting for God, and a barker yelling, "Step right up, my children," offering to come within two chapters of guessing your favorite Bible passage.

"Anyway, Sophie, if I'm not up to it, I hope you'll go for me. There's no telling what will happen in two weeks."

"Come on, Gram," I said. "You look great. You'll be fine in two weeks. You'll have the time of your life."

Gram smiled and daintily took a bite of her pizza.

Two weeks later, Gram was still pleasant and lucid, but she stayed in bed almost all day, except when Annie would walk her around the bedroom and up and down the hall.

Gram's doctors had decided that chemotherapy and radiation wouldn't do enough to shrink the tumor, which had already metastasized and was creeping down her spine, and opted to let her live out her remaining weeks or months without vomiting and shedding hair.

As a result, the cancer was eating her pretty quickly. Annie gave Gram regular doses of pain medication to keep her comfortable, and Gram did a lot of crossword puzzles while lying in bed.

I guess because I had been there and watched the gradual degeneration, she didn't look shocking to me, but Dad probably would have fainted dead away to have seen her. She was barely ninety pounds, ashen, and it looked like her eyes had fallen into her head. She still liked to talk, though, and every day I read to her from The Tempest, making use of Dad's parting gift. Sometimes we just played Go Fish. Aside from that, I spent a lot of time taking pictures. Gram let me set up a little darkroom in her basement. A couple of days before the Revival, Gram reminded me that I had agreed to go if she couldn't.

She had arranged for Lillian, the new pastor's wife to come and pick me up and take me to the Revival, which was in some little nearby town. There were lots of little nearby towns in North Carolina.

I went into Gram's room before Lillian came to pick me up and asked, "How do I look?"

Gram frowned. "That dress doesn't really flatter your figure."

"Gram, this is a church thing. My figure doesn't matter."

"But Sophie," Gram said, "you look like you're wearing a lacy potato sack. Where did you get that?" She didn't wait for me to answer. "I'll tell you what, as soon as I'm up to it, we'll go out to Belk's and do some shopping. I could use some things myself. We can have lunch . . . you know, have a ladies' afternoon."

I leaned down and took Gram's bony hand. "What do you need, Gram? I'll go get it."

"Sophie!" Gram said, with a girlish lilt. "I don't need anything. It's just the fun of shopping."

I swallowed hard and stared at her papery skin. "Okay, Gram, we'll do that soon."

Gram patted my hand vigorously. "All right, honey. Enjoy the Revival. Say a prayer for me."

I slumped in my gauzy potato sack that I bought at a head shop in Shadyside. "I'll pray for you the whole time, Gram," I mumbled, shuffling out of her bedroom.

"Sophie?" Gram called as I was almost to the stairs.

I walked back and poked my head in the door. "Yes ma'am?"

I had only picked up the ma'am thing since I had been in North Carolina. It didn't come naturally to me, but it made Gram happy.

"Could you have Annie bring up some applesauce with cinnamon, please, before you go?"

"Yes ma'am," I answered again, blowing Gram a kiss on my way out.

#

I swished the paper in the solution gently, and somewhere in the faint sound of trickling, I could hear Miss Alda speaking to me again.

"Now, Regina, she really my grandbaby. Her mama died when she won't but two, I think." Miss Alda paused and looked at her hands. "One day Derek, my son, come telling me he can't take care of no baby. He didn't have no job then. He was always a good boy, my

Derek, but he got himself into some trouble with the drink He said that the baby deserved a better life than he could give her, and could I help him. Regina been my baby ever since."

Miss Alda continued looking at her hands, folding and refolding them. She took a deep breath, smoothed her blue skirt and reached for the ham biscuit on her plate. I was hanging on her every word, lulled by the thick musicality of her voice, feeling certain that she could drop some much needed wisdom into my life, and simply wanting to know what happened to Regina. I was disappointed when she took a bite of her biscuit. She frowned as she chewed slowly. I knew it was rude to just stare at her while she ate, but Miss Alda fascinated me.

Finally, she reached for her iced tea, took a sip, licked her lips and let her eyes fall back on me. She cleared her throat and continued, "Well, I raised my Regina up right. Baby girl went to church every Sunday, wore her best clothes, and even sung in the choir." Miss Alda reached over and swatted my knee for emphasis.

"The choir," I echoed, afraid of saying the wrong thing—a white Pittsburgh girl with a camera around my neck, looking uncomfortable in the fellowship hall of a southern Pentecostal church.

"Yes, baby. The choir." Miss Alda smiled and sat back in her chair. But her smile slowly faded. The flesh of her face fell around her sad eyes and mouth. She looked down at the floor as if the same gravity that had pulled her face down was pulling her whole head down.

I shifted in my folding chair, wanting Miss Alda to continue. I looked down at the same patch of hardwood floor that Miss Alda stared at, hoping to connect with the woman somehow, hoping she would keep talking. I eventually turned my attention back to the table and took a bite of my own ham biscuit. The biscuit was dry and almost insufferably salty, but I chewed quietly, just like Miss Alda had, and then I reached for my glass of iced tea. The sweet tea was nearly as unpalatable as the ham biscuit, but I was willing to suffer the curious delicacies of the south to hear Miss Alda Rae get to the end of her story. I sat in the metal folding chair, slightly nauseated by the aftertaste, remembering that I had never wanted to come to this Revival in the first place.

#

Every detail of Miss Alda was materializing—flat, glossy, and submerged in fluid. I stared down at the two dimensional face, thinking of my own feeble grandmother upstairs. Every new bath I drowned Miss Alda in made her image more clear, real, and permanent; and every day of Gram's life was making her less of those things. Miss Alda was being born in the same house where my grandmother lay dying. I pulled the photograph from the tray of fixer and hung it from a line above me with a clothespin. Miss Alda looked down at me, plump, brown and weathered. I knew that she was a woman of faith, a woman of strength and courage, but would the photograph say all of that to a stranger? I wanted my pictures to say everything.

Since that first, fateful period ten years ago, my goal had been to take one picture that said everything. I believed that somewhere there was a subject, a rare collision of light and shadow, some collection of shapes curving and bending into a stunning composition that

would say absolutely everything. I knew that might have been naïve, but the hope kept me snapping and developing. I stared up at Miss Alda - her photograph wasn't the one I had been waiting for, but it was good. I could still hear her resonant, melodic voice dripping off the photograph like fluid.

#

"So, Regina sung in the choir," Miss Alda began again after a long pause. All the while I had been fiddling with a crumbly biscuit. "She did okay in school—not great, mind you, but she did all right. I just always told her, 'Baby, you do your best and the Good Lord will take care of the rest.'

"Well, she did do her best, but then the change came—you know, when a girl becomes a woman—and she started gettin' herself into mischief, just like her Daddy did. I won't sure what to do Times is always changin', and I knew the voice of her old granny won't gonna change nothing, so most times I just kept quiet. I just let her be.

"So she come home one day and she say to me, 'Granny, the girls at school are tellin' me that this boy, Travis, like me. He's cute and all, but I don't know What should I do, Granny?'

So I said to her, 'Regina, baby, you're a pretty girl. You know that, don't you? But there's more to life than bein' a pretty girl. If you like this boy, bring him by for supper some time, hold his hand, tell him a little bit about yourself. But Regina, if you're just wantin' someone to think you're pretty, and do things to you that make you feel pretty, don't waste your time. I'm old, baby, but I still know how these things work.'

"And my Regina, well, she just cut her eyes this way and that—she didn't know what to do. I reckon it's hard becomin' a woman these days. So I just prayed to the Good Lord that she would find the right way." Miss Alda took a deep breath and swished the melting ice in her tea. She looked up at me slowly and sadly. "Well, the Lord Jesus be with my dear Regina, but she come home from school one day, and she tell me she ain't had her monthly visitor three times in a row."

Miss Alda frowned at me, apparently trying to assess whether or not I was familiar with monthly visitors, or at least the terminology. I nodded gravely—the signature, feminine nod that implies all of the bothersome camaraderie born of that monthly visitor. She nodded back.

"So Regina was stompin' her foot, rollin' her eyes and eatin' a bag of chips like there wasn't no tomorrow. I knew that look. I knew that kind of hunger. I told Regina that she needed to go to the doctor, but she just roll her eyes at me again. 'Regina, if you're with child, you need to go to a doctor and take care of yourself. Is it that boy, Travis? Have you laid with him?'

"Well, Regina got all upset with me and said how I talk old fashioned, and that she was grown now and she would make her own decisions. I asked her what she meant by that and she said, 'I'm movin' in with Travis and his mama. He said he loves me and he want to take care of me, and if there's a baby, he want to take care of it too.' Then she walked to her room and started to packing. Travis' mama lives a good ten miles from me, and I ain't seen Regina since that day. I don't know why she felt the need to run away, but Lord knows, I hope she been to a doctor."

Miss Alda shook her head and lay her hands on the table. She looked back up at me. "So, that's my story. I be steady prayin' for my baby, Regina, and for her baby too." She pried stray bits of ham biscuit from between her teeth with her tongue and shook her head again. "Babies don't need to be havin' babies."

"Well," I began, "Regina was probably ashamed. She was probably sorry that she disappointed you. Maybe she left because she knew that what she had done hurt you." I looked up at Miss Alda expectantly.

"Honey, I seen so much in my day Regina don't need to be ashamed. I took care a her and I'd a done it for her baby too."

"But Miss Alda," I said gently, knowing I would have to be careful in choosing my words. "You're already a grandmother. You can't raise another baby."

Miss Alda looked at me fiercely, daring me to elaborate. I brushed some crumbs off of the paper tablecloth. I crossed and re-crossed my legs.

"We're talkin' about family," she said in a low, even voice. "You know about family?"

"Yes ma'am," I answered quickly. "I'm here in North Carolina to take care of my grandmother. She has cancer. In fact, I'm here at this revival because my Gram wanted me to come. She said she wanted family to be here She married a preacher about ten years ago, but he died. Yes ma'am, I know about family." I knew I was rambling, but I didn't want Miss Alda to be angry with me. I didn't want her to think that I didn't understand.

She reached out and took my hand. I looked down at her plump, dark hand wrapped around my own thin white one. Seeing it made me think of my Gram's bony, mottled hand lying patiently on her ivory sheets, waiting for a divine hand to either save her life or take her

away. Maybe they were the same thing. I slumped in my seat, held onto Miss Alda's strong hand and wished that I had never come to the Revival.

Haunting Gram's house as a pseudo-cheerful steward of death was hard enough, but being her proxy in that world of God, ham biscuits, and pregnant teenagers was more than I had bargained for. But there was no turning back now. I clung to Miss Alda's hand, and somewhere in the cracked skin and age spots of her brown hands I realized that I was just scared. I was scared to help Gram die. Scared of death. Her death. Scared to let go. Scared to be the one to hold onto her while she let go.

Miss Alda broke the silence. "What's your name, baby?"

"Sophie, ma'am."

"Sophie, God bless you and your granny. Livin' ain't easy, but I suspect dyin' ain't no picnic neither. God bless you, baby, for bein' with your granny when she need someone the most. It can't be easy for you. You ain't but a young'un yourself, just like my Regina."

"I think I'm a lot older than Regina, Miss Alda. Didn't you say she was fifteen? I've got ten years on her."

"Well, still . . . things just ain't easy for either of you right now. My Regina's got to give life and you got to let it go. God bless you both." Miss Alda patted my hand.

"I hope everything goes well for Regina. What I'm doing isn't easy, for sure, but I can't even imagine raising a child." I laughed nervously, and Miss Alda looked worried.

I hurried to recover. "But I'm sure Regina will rise to the occasion, just like I have." I trailed off. Any minute now, I could run out of courage and compassion and walk away, constructing elaborate excuses about why I wasn't the right one to help Gram. Regina could

do the same thing, telling everyone that she wasn't the right one to be a mother. We would both find sympathizers who would shake their heads and lament the tragedy of young people being forced to grow up too fast. People like Regina and me could bounce along from one near-miss to another, and never truly rise to any occasion. I looked back up at Miss Alda and said, "Someday Regina will see the light."

#

Staring up at Miss Alda's worn face hanging on the clothesline, I remembered her last words to me. "The Good Lord giveth and He taketh away."

She said this right before I took her picture.